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Epistemic Injustice and Violence

Exploring Knowledge, Power, and Participation
in Philosophy and Beyond

[transcript]

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Abundant Supply of Reasons

Tracing the Inherent Classism of Philosophy

Lars Leeten

1. Reason as privilege

Reason – the pride of philosophy – claims a standpoint of the neutral, the impartial, the innocent. It is made to reduce the biases of thought and the injustices of this world and it is supposed to be above these biases. That this claim is problematic is abundantly clear today. Philosophical rationality is not innocent. It is in many ways male-biased; it is Eurocentric; it has absorbed the racism of Western history. But what about bias based on *class*? Does philosophical rationality also carry traces of class prejudice? Does it maybe even represent the point of view of a privileged class? And if so, what would that mean for the possibility of unbiased philosophical reflection?

If one considers the *institutional* reality of philosophy, there are fairly simple answers to these questions. It is no secret that there is classism in academia; and philosophy is no exception to this rule. Access to universities is socially highly selective, and the participation in knowledge production is even more so. Professional academics from the working class or poverty class are scarce; and many of them will have experienced their share of classist discrimination, be it personal or structural. Many others, of course, leave academia at an early point because of an environment where members of lower classes are disadvantaged; in much the same way that many women leave academia at an early point because of patriarchal structures. The mechanisms are subtle, but their effects are palpable: there is no equality of opportunity in academia. In Germany, professorships are disproportionately awarded to male candidates – roughly 75% – and disproportionately awarded to members of the upper classes. In the course of the last decades, this tendency has even increased.¹ Despite all talk of ‘diversity’, academia seems to be in danger of becoming more and more dominated by a small fragment of our society who position themselves as epistemic aristocrats.

1 For Germany see e.g. Blome, Frerk/Möller, Christina/Böning, Anja: Open House? Class-Specific Career Opportunities within German Universities, in: Social Inclusion 7 (2019) 1, 101–110.

The unequal participation in knowledge production is an epistemic injustice of its own. It is problematic in a moral respect, and it also leads to one-sided perspectives and epistemic failure. Nevertheless, one might think that the problem of social closure is institutional only. Or does it run deeper? Let us begin by stating that it is by no means a new phenomenon. Academic discourse has been systematically distorted by class inequalities since its very beginnings. In the 4th Century B.C., Aristotle took it for granted that philosophy – at that time synonymous with ‘science’ – is for ‘free men’, i.e. male citizens who belong to a particular class. When he recommends the ‘theoretical life’ (*bios theoretikos*) as the happiest form of life he is thinking of those who are not engaged in labor, production or care work. For Aristotle there was no doubt that philosophy, as the noblest human activity, has its place where the necessities of life are taken care of, i.e. where one has plenty of *leisure time*, in Greek: *scholē*. Striving for wisdom is an end in itself: “as a man is called free (*eleutheros*) who is free for his own sake and not for the sake of another, so this knowledge alone is free among all.”² In this view, those who work with their hands are excluded from philosophy from the outset: the ‘unfree’ man (*aneleutheros* – the word can also mean ‘low’ or even ‘stingy’ and ‘penny-pinching’) is *by nature* not suited to free reflection. Philosophy is not for small-minded, ordinary people who are absorbed by little everyday things. It is the business of those who, due to their social background, do not need to do any manual work and can afford to spend their time inquiring about things. In a certain sense, the original idea of ‘philosophical reason’ itself reflects a privileged social position.

One might lament these inequalities and injustices as a moral failure; and one might lament the epistemic deficiencies that result from it. It is however tempting to believe that they will not affect what philosophy and science are built on, namely the underlying concepts of knowledge, reason, justification, argumentation and truth. At first glance, the elitism of philosophy seems to mean only that many are excluded from *participating in* philosophical rationality; it does not seem that *philosophical rationality itself* is affected by classist prejudice. In this view, ‘free knowledge’ is not for everyone, the very idea of such free knowledge however remains valid. But can we really be so sure? Is there really an inner core of philosophical rationality that is immune to classism?

In this essay, I will attempt to question this very assumption. Just as our ideas of rationality are influenced by patriarchal and colonial patterns of thought, they might also be influenced by patterns of thought generated by class privilege. If so, we would have to spell out how our concepts of philosophical rationality – which have characterised philosophy and science more broadly to this day – are shaped by class prejudice. We would have to ask: In what sense could our concepts of truth, knowledge, reason, justification and argumentation itself be susceptible to classist

2 Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, London/Cambridge Mass. 1913, 982b (my own translation).

thinking? What would that even mean? What would it look like if the claims of rationality, so central to philosophy, reflect the perspective of a ruling class? Since these questions have hardly ever been discussed we have to restrict ourselves here to some preliminary and tentative considerations. In the following sections, I will try to give a plausible initial account which could serve as a guide for further research.

2. Denaturalising the ability to 'give reasons'

Compared to other forms of discrimination such as sexism or racism, classism seems to be less conspicuous. Sometimes it is almost invisible. In societies that see themselves as meritocracies, where class differences are not only accepted but even welcomed by many, it is often not easy to decide where ordinary behavior corresponding to social status ends and where discrimination based on class begins. What some will see as classist humiliation, others will see as a justified claim to social privilege. Some will try to remind us that class differences are unavoidable because they correspond to different levels of productivity and performance. An unequal distribution of reason could be explained in much the same way: it is the upper classes, one might say, that have the education and intellectual resources that make a certain level of rational reflection possible. That members of the lower classes lack this capacity is perhaps regrettable, but it is a fact we have to live with. It certainly does not mean that we should involve those less cut out for philosophical debate. In any case, there is nothing wrong with philosophical reason itself.

To make some headway in this muddled situation, I will start with the following working hypothesis: class privilege comes with a set of *epistemic privileges* that can easily be *misinterpreted* as 'rationality'; while the *epistemic disadvantages* that result from belonging to a disadvantaged class can easily be misinterpreted as a lack of rationality or even 'irrationality'. To spell out these problems in some detail, we will look at the capacity that has been considered the core of human rationality since Plato's time: the capacity to 'give reasons'. We will assume that being able to give reasons in a certain required form is not a natural ability that distinguishes people as human beings, but in fact a possibility conditioned by a social position. Giving reasons is not a human capacity *per se*, given by nature. It is a practice the specific form and even the possibility of which is influenced by power inequalities. Those who judge a person's rationality by his or her ability to give reasons therefore run the risk of mistaking that person's social position as a natural capacity of rational reflection. This means that they will evaluate persons who cannot give reasons not as socially disadvantaged but as less rational, and that they will be blind to the fact

that the ability to ‘give reasons’ is rooted in a social position.³ Talk of ‘human reason’ can thus easily become a form of *naturalising* social inequality.

Of course, some of what has been said here about epistemically privileged or marginalised positions could be equally applied to disadvantages based on gender or ethnicity; and these forms of disadvantage will intersect. Consequently, it will also be a task to work out what disadvantages are *specific* to classism. We may assume that the lack of capital will be the starting point of such investigations, i.e., as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, of financial, social and cultural resources. For now, however, it will suffice if we confine ourselves to the basic point that disadvantaged classes are to a much greater extent occupied in providing for the necessities of life. They are, by definition, less equipped with resources and thus have to expend much more to get to the point where they can have the kind of intellectual engagement that finds recognition among the ruling class. They lack leisure time or, to use the classic Greek expression: *scholē*. It has even been claimed that the standpoint of philosophical reflection is constituted by forgetting how much it is conditioned by *scholē*.⁴ Accordingly, the point of view of those who are epistemically disadvantaged because of their social background can as a first approximation be characterised by the lack of leisure time. Their situation is strained, and the privileged person, unencumbered by life’s necessities and unaware of the challenges of a working class or poverty class life, will always be at risk of misinterpreting the behavior associated with such situations of strain. Why does this person not behave in a reasonable way? This is the perspective from which forms of oppressed thought that (due to class disadvantages) are *not already* in the position of being able to give reasons appear as ‘less rational’, while an *ongoing* practice of giving reasons (facilitated by class privilege) will erroneously appear as expressing ‘rationality’. Our question must ultimately be whether such misperception has become entrenched in the common notions of reason, truth, justification or argumentation. And one of the tasks here is to work out how this would become manifest. We have to explore possible starting points for a closer analysis by looking at particular elements of what it means to be epistemically privileged or disadvantaged specifically due to class.

Let us try to work out the broad outlines of such a perspective. Our premise now is that being able to give reasons cannot simply be regarded as a natural capacity. Rather, it is a social position, which here is meant to denote not only a socioeconomic position but also endowment with cultural and social capital. This implies that one can only give reasons when certain *epistemic groundworks* have already been cared for;

3 How difficult it is to recognize one’s own privileges *as privileges* is shown by Friedman, Sam/O’Brien, David/McDonald, Ian: Deflecting Privilege. Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self, in: Sociology 55 (2021) 4, 716–733. In fact, members of privileged classes often misidentify their class backgrounds as ‘working class’.

4 See Bourdieu, Pierre: Pascalian Meditations, Cambridge 2000, particularly the first chapter.

i.e. if one can fall back, for instance, on a functional language, on established concepts, on seemingly unambiguous interpretations of situations, on a stock of prevailing opinions, on a system of seemingly self-evident assumptions, on ready-made patterns of explanation. Not least, it involves a certain epistemic *self-confidence*, i.e. a conviction that my own beliefs will be seen as ones that are worth being justified in the first place. (Isn't the self-confidence that comes from a privileged social position even a prerequisite for someone to *make claims*?) Giving reasons requires a well-functioning system of clear meanings and firmly established premises. In a world without doubt, without ambiguity, reason-giving will proceed like a well-oiled machine. Generally, we can assume that the epistemic ground is prepared in this way for those who already are in a privileged position. Only from this perspective the possibility of giving reasons can be taken for granted so that it appears as a general human capacity.

In contrast, members of socially marginalised classes must first position themselves to be able to give reasons by doing the necessary epistemic groundwork and attending to articulation, interpretation, cognitive coping, preliminary clarification or rejection of dominant reasons. Metaphorically speaking, the privileged have an *abundant supply of reasons*, while the disadvantaged always have to make cognitive preparations in order to be able to present reasons. If we assume that members of the working class or the poverty class have fewer resources, in terms of time and energy, that they live in a situation of strain, we obviously have to presuppose that in most cases it is not possible for them to participate in the game of reason-giving as played by the privileged. But let us consider only the case where they do enter this game. Then, from the point of view of the ruling class, their rational activity will not manifest itself immediately as one of 'giving reasons'. Rather, the reasons must first be *formed*. In order for the required form of reasoning to become possible, the necessary work of preparation mentioned above – what we called epistemic groundwork – must take place. Just as in other areas of life the necessities are not already provided for, so here too the minimal conditions have to be established.

One could understand this intellectual work as a form of *coping*, which is necessary where one can no longer assume that the world is already interpreted in the sense of one's own interests and purposes – where one comes under the influence of other interpretations, which predominate in the social balance of power. Efforts have to be invested in the language and possible descriptions to be used, in interpretations of situations, in premises more friendly to one's own life orientation. Also, one has to cope with the fact that the ground one stands on is less firm, while at the same time the demands in the game of reasons seem to be higher. One has to take care of one's basic premises, where those in a position of social power can directly fall back on theirs. Where resources of time and energy are lacking, the full extent of this problem will become apparent. It will take considerable intellectual efforts to even *question* the tacit assumptions of dominant classes which are unconsciously shared

by society, the apparent self-evidences of privileged persons, their ready-made patterns of explanation – and these efforts will take the form not of giving reasons but of disordered doubting, random queries, of questioning what seems self-evident, of searching for words, occasionally even of stuttering or stammering.

If what has been said is right, the notion that any rational activity will become manifest as a case of ‘reason-giving’ in a narrow sense is itself a classist notion. At the same time, we would have to admit that the common understanding of philosophical rationality itself is indeed affected by classist prejudice. The central prejudice is that, for rational beings, there is always an abundant supply of ‘reasons’. But what Aristotle called the ‘free knowledge’ of philosophy is in fact a social situation that brings with it a freedom from intellectual worry: the privilege of no longer having to provide for the foundations of one’s judgments. One will have to ask to what extent all that is associated with this understanding of rationality – the long-established ideas of truth, of justification, of knowledge – is also biased in this way. Our next question has to be how this could look like.

3. Being – and not being – epistemically prepared

Let us assume that we got the general outlines of our picture right. We have an idea of what it might look like if social privilege enters into the understanding of reason itself. Of course, it is only an abstract idea so far, not more than a starting point for further investigation. The next step would be to describe in more detail the elements of classist bias in the philosophical concept of rationality itself. For this purpose, the distinction between ‘being in the position to give reasons’ on the one side and ‘doing the groundwork for being able to give reasons’ on the other side would have to be more finely broken down. In conclusion, an attempt will be made to at least outline a possible research program.

The focus must apparently be on the contrast between the person who lives in a socially unburdened situation that facilitates giving ‘reasons’ in the required form and the person who first has to get into the position to be able to participate in the game of reasons as played by the privileged. The contrast could be described as one between *being prepared* and *having to catch up*. And the question will have to be what exactly it means, epistemically, to be prepared or to have to catch up. Clearly, there are many aspects at play here, some of which may be typical of classist disadvantage, others of forms of oppression more broadly. Without going into these fine distinctions here, we will outline a few aspects in an exemplary manner.

We will first look at the aspect of *time*. The ‘free’ pursuit of wisdom traditionally arises from a situation of leisure, *scholē*. It is a situation without time pressure, where deliberation can go on indefinitely. This situation is of course fictitious, there is no space of reasons outside of time. Nevertheless, it seems clear that class priv-

ilege typically entails having sufficient time resources available for intellectual engagement. And this would imply that there will be such engagement even when the actual giving of reasons has not yet begun. Social privilege also means that there is room for playful debates and argumentative exercises that *prepare* you for the game of giving reasons. It implies a cultural capital that consists in the fact that some of the time required for thorough reflection has already been invested, that words have already been found, basic premises have already been articulated, that the integration of one's beliefs into a sociocultural network has already taken place. Those who can draw on this capital in the game of reasons are undoubtedly at an advantage over those who have yet to invest the time to make these preparations. This is the difference between those who already have enough reasons and can play them out like tokens, and those who first have to form their reasons in the required form, who are behind in the game of reasons from the outset.

The effect of this difference will be that, in the ongoing game of reasons, those who have had enough time and leisure will be *faster*, while the socially disadvantaged will need *more time*. (One is reminded of how Sextus Empiricus characterises the skeptics: while the dogmatists have already found the truth – or are certain that it cannot be found – the skeptics are those who are 'still searching'.⁵) And yet it would be a misunderstanding – an optical illusion, as it were – to think that those who are not prepared for reason-giving in the same way as those who have had enough *scholē* are in any way less rational. Perhaps, the only difference is that they begin the necessary intellectual work here and now, while others were privileged enough to have begun it long before. While some can make provisions, others do not have the opportunity to do so. Whoever understands giving reasons as the epitome of all rational activities narrows them down to their final phase and forgets how deeply they are ultimately anchored in the ordinary practice of life with all its worldly necessities. Wherever a reason is given, infinite things in the realm of thinking are already taken care of.

The second aspect follows directly from the first. The process of forming reasons requires that you get some overview of what is involved in the particular issue at hand. Some order needs to be established, interpretations of the situation need to be created, concepts need to be sorted so that the subjects can orient themselves at all. Someone still in the process of articulating reasons will therefore be much more occupied with the particular situation than someone who has already been able to do this work of interpretation and orientation. This work, in fact, consists to a large extent in subsuming things under rules; available time resources will, in other words, go into operations of *generalization*.

One can bring into play here the difference of *particulars and universals*: Philosophy has always understood itself as dealing with the general and abstracting from

5 Sextus Empiricus: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Cambridge Mass./London 1933.

the particular. In light of what has been said, we may surmise: It is the luxury of the unencumbered, intellectually carefree situation that makes this view possible. Those who can give reasons as required by philosophy are, so to speak, masters of the situation; they can already base their judgments on rules of interpretation. At the same time, they seem to have at their disposal a clarity and decisiveness that is not possible for those who are still searching for such rules, who are still busy bringing particulars under general forms. To be intellectually privileged is to be in the position to speak on the basis of *pre-established universals*.

The difference could also be presented as one of strategy and tactics. Where action follows a *strategy*, it is a well-planned approach based on long-term analyses of possible situations; *tactics*, on the other hand, are associated with situational, rather reactive behavior. Given this distinction, it is the privilege of one who is socially better positioned to act strategically, while someone from a more socially precarious position is on the defensive and has to rely on tactical action. In other words: reasons indicate the presence of a strategy. Where someone is busy with intellectual coping, tactics are called for. Here, concepts have to be invented, explanations have to be designed, and rules have yet to be formulated. In the game of reasons, under pressure to justify, there will also be the temptation to give *ad hoc* reasons that, on closer examination, prove to be hardly tenable. Those who have an abundance of reasons, who have them ready before the argumentation even begins, may frown on this behavior. But such behavior does by no means show a lack of rationality: it is *rationality under pressure*, under conditions of lack of time, a rationality that is seeking orientation, is preoccupied with particulars, and is therefore forced to proceed tactically.

Finally, to trace the inherent classism of philosophy we might ask how the *purposes* of rational activities are represented. Here the classical view is that true theory (*theoria*) has no specific purpose at all: that philosophical knowledge is 'free' also means that it is free from purposes. John Dewey speaks of the 'spectator theory' of cognition: the subject of knowledge is passive and receptive to the events in the world, it does not participate in them.⁶ And, indeed, the question of what practical intentions are associated with knowledge and truth continues to embarrass us to this day, as the debates about pragmatism show.

In view of what has been said here, however, we must ask whether the notion of purposeless theory is not a self-deception, possible only where there is no longer any reason to worry about practical purposes. Doesn't the idea of a purely intellectual apprehension reveal the fantasy of a subject whose purposes are fulfilled so easily and unobtrusively that it is no longer even aware of pursuing purposes at all? If this is so, then it seems to be a fantasy of the privileged who have already been

6 See, e.g., the first chapter of Dewey, John: *The Quest for Certainty. A Study on the Relation of Knowledge and Action*, New York 1919.

able to put their world into a purposeful, regulated order. Philosophical rationality, seemingly the highest form of knowledge, is not without purpose; only it does not easily become aware of its purposes because they are already provided for. The one who thinks without following purposes is the one who dwells in the realm of the universal, where one no longer has to take care of particulars – and who therefore forgets how much thinking is rooted in these particulars. The freedom that reason traditionally promises is built on very different, much more mundane premises than usually acknowledged. Philosophy therefore runs the risk of confusing established privileges with what is universally valid. Like all human reasons, the reasons of philosophy are full of hidden intentions, practical interests, one-sidedness, bias. This does not necessarily diminish the value of reasons; but it does mean that the idea of a pure, purposeless, neutral capacity for giving reasons is highly problematic, as it blocks critical reflection on these issues. Those who could already bring the world under general forms, who no longer have to wear themselves out realizing practical purposes and now have reasons in abundance, have not thereby arrived in the realm of pure rationality. Perhaps the social conditions only happen to be favorable for my way of thinking.

It is obvious that what has been said can only be very preliminary and more detailed discussions would have to follow. I have presented only a brief sketch of a far-reaching topic. It is not easy to avoid stereotypes in this matter. But given the extended feminist and postcolonial discourses around the implicit biases of philosophical thought, it is striking that the question of class is hardly ever brought into play in this way. As we have seen, there are many similarities to sexism and racism, but there are also peculiarities of classism that need to be better understood. In fact, we must assume that this form of discrimination and oppression has also been constantly effective in various ways throughout the history of ideas. And we must assume that in modern society, which sees itself as a meritocracy, classism will have an influence on what we understand as rational as well. This influence needs to be tracked down. The idea of an inner core of reason immune to classism is better seen as an empty dream.