

Hermeneutic Injustices: Practical and Epistemic¹

Luis Oliveira
University of Houston

This essay is an exercise in applied and generalized hermeneutics. It is generalized hermeneutics since its focus is not on the interpretation of texts but rather on the interpretation of experiences. It is applied hermeneutics since it examines some of the social implications of this kind of interpretive activity. My aim is to identify one way in which our hermeneutic activities, considered in this way, can lead to social injustices of both a practical and epistemic kind.

My guide is Miranda Fricker's work on *hermeneutical injustices*: injustices that occur "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker 2007, 1). For Fricker, the relevant injustice in these cases is the very lack of knowledge and understanding experienced by the subject. In this way, hermeneutical injustices are instances of what she calls *epistemic injustices*: the kind of injustice that "wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge" (Fricker 2007, 5). All of this is correct and important, and I will draw from it extensively in what follows. But Fricker will also be my contrast. I will identify different means by which our hermeneutic activities lead to social injustices, and I will identify different ways in which those injustices manifest themselves. This provides contrast, notice, but not tension. And since Fricker's use of the notion of "*hermeneutical injustices*" to denote a well-defined kind of injustice is rightfully well-established, I will here refer to the more general kinds of injustices I have in mind as "*hermeneutic injustices*" instead.

I begin, in the first section below, with a succinct presentation of Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustices. My presentation is intentionally selective, of course, highlighting the elements of her view that will be presently relevant. In the following three sections, I then introduce the elements that, on my view, give rise to hermeneutic injustices instead. In the fifth and final section, I discuss two central cases of hermeneutic injustices, taken from Fricker's work, comparing and contrasting the successful application and explanatory power of our views.

¹ I'm grateful to René van Woudenberg for inviting me to present an early version of this essay at the 2019 Summer Seminar on *Hermeneutics as a form of Epistemology*, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. For discussions and comments, I'm grateful to the other speakers and the participants at the seminar, as well as to Hilary Kornblith, Josh DiPaolo, Johanna Luttrell, Timothy Perrine, and Justin Coates.

1. Fricker on Hermeneutical Injustices

Consider Fricker's (2007, 148) overview of the source and nature of hermeneutical injustices:

One way of taking the epistemological suggestion that social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understanding is to think of our shared understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups, and to entertain the idea that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible.

Fricker is here describing a relation of cause and effect. The effect is a social environment wherein the powerful are able to understand the social experiences that matter and affect them, while the powerless are not. The cause is the unequal social power that characterizes some groups as powerful and some as powerless in the first place. The resulting injustice is hermeneutical in nature, of course, since it harms the powerless precisely in their interpretive capacities: their capacities to understand their experiences.

According to Fricker, however, not just any imbalance in social power leads to hermeneutical injustices *per se*. It is crucial that the relevant imbalance leads first to unequal participation "in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated," which "are those sustained by professions such as journalism, politics, academia, and law..." (Fricker 2007, 152). When a group suffers from unequal participation in these meaning generating practices, owing to already suffering from a more general power inequality, they then experience what Fricker (2007, 153) calls *hermeneutical marginalization*:

Let us say that when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are *hermeneutically marginalized*. The notion of marginalization is a moral-political one indicating subordination and exclusion from some practice that would have value for the participant.

So while the ultimate cause of hermeneutical injustices are the more general relations of unequal power that give rise to the categories of "powerful" and "powerless", their proximate cause is hermeneutical marginalization. In principle, at least, the former can occur without the latter, in which case the hermeneutical bits of injustices, in particular, perhaps can be prevented.

Yet one can experience hermeneutical marginalization in an incidental or systematic way, leading to correspondingly incidental and systematic injustices. Together with Fricker (2007, 155), I am here interested in the systematic kinds:

What is bad about this sort of hermeneutical marginalization is that the structural prejudice it causes in the collective hermeneutical resource is essentially discriminatory: the prejudice affects people in virtue of their membership of a socially powerless group, and thus in virtue of an aspect of their social identity. It is, then, akin to identity prejudice.

After identifying the ultimate and proximate causes of hermeneutical injustices, Fricker is here identifying a structural cause as well: identity prejudice. It is in part because power inequalities and marginalization together constitute prejudice, that the resulting harmful lack of understanding is properly classed as an *injustice*.

We can now pull these elements together into a more explicit definition:

Hermeneutical Injustice: If (a) there are unequal relations of power between subgroups g_1 and g_2 within group G , and (b) if these unequal relations of power prevent members of g_2 from participating on equal terms with members of g_1 in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated, and if (c) this unequal participation creates a social environment wherein members of g_1 , but not members of g_2 , have hermeneutical resources appropriate for understanding their social experiences, then members of g_2 are suffering from hermeneutical injustices.

As I've said, Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustice is both correct and important. Yet it does not exhaust the ways in which hermeneutics and injustices interact. In what follows, then, I will articulate a broader notion of *hermeneutic injustice* that aims at capturing these other interactions as well. In the end, three differences will become salient. First, my notion of injustice is not just about harms to a subject's capacity to understand their experiences. Someone can suffer hermeneutic injustices of practical as well as epistemic kinds. Second, my notion of injustice does not actually require an absence of understanding on the subject who suffers it. Someone can suffer hermeneutic injustices even if they (and their social group) understand their experiences full well. Third, my notion of injustice does not identify power relations, marginalization, and identity prejudice, as the ultimate, proximate, and structural causes of the relevant harms. As we will see, someone suffers hermeneutic injustices as a result of the inevitable cooperation between ordinary features of human psychology and blind social forces. As I will highlight in the concluding section, this is not merely an academic exercise in drawing ever finer distinctions without a difference. There are real implications for the pursuit of social justice in the offing.

2. Our Basic Hermeneutic Activity

I want to begin with what I hope will be somewhat uncontroversial observations about our psychology. What I will call our *basic hermeneutic activity* is our conceptual engagement with our experiences, or the activity of seeing X *as* Y. This engagement comes structured in levels of fundamentality. Most fundamentally, there are activities such as categorizing experience X (described in phenomenal terms) as an experience of Y (described in physical or material terms). For example, I am by now quite used to categorizing my experience of certain phenomenological patches of colors and shapes and angles as an experience of “chairs”. This is the kind of conceptual activity, as simple as it is, that traditional epistemologists have struggled to defend against skeptical worries. Today, happily, we can set aside that concern. What matters here is just the fact that we engage the world conceptually in this way and that this engagement already constitutes a kind of interpretative activity.²

This kind of interpretative activity moves from this most fundamental level all the way up. Persons A and B, for example, may have the shared visual experience of person C raising a fist and moving their arm very quickly towards person’s D’s face, followed by the visual experience of D’s head moving abruptly backwards, of D’s face displaying various unusual muscle configurations, and eventually of D’s entire body falling to the ground. This shared visual experience is already the result of a coordinated interpretation of a phenomenological. Nonetheless, A and B may further conceptualize this shared visual experience in different ways at a higher level. While A may categorize this experience as “C harming D”, or “C assaulting D”, or “C bullying D”, and so on, B may categorize this experience as “C pretending to punch D”. Here the difference between the experiences of A and B is a difference traced back to what I will call their *hermeneutic resources*: either the concepts they possess or their dispositions for conceptual application. Person A might be a small child and not yet have the concept of “pretense”; they might also be an adult whose fears prevented them from noticing the clear signs that a live performance was going on.³

Once we think of our interpretative engagement with our experiences in this way—as a function of concepts and dispositions for their application—we begin to see hermeneutic activity everywhere. Aside from material objects and the like, we also categorize events as ominous or promising; we

² There’s quite a bit of philosophical debate about the very nature of “concepts.” I’m not going to assume any particular approach to that issue, but I will assume that many of our concepts are learned through socialization (as opposed to being innate). For a sample of the relevant issues, see Fodor (1975), Peacocke (1992), Clark (1993), and Millikan (2000).

³ A 2016 survey by the NY Times, based on the work of Seth W. Stoughton, examines how people’s antecedent attitudes towards the police affect their interpretation of what is happening in footage from three simulated interactions. The correlations are striking, specially given the more than 70 thousand respondents. See <https://nyti.ms/2kcSmRO>.

categorize internal conative states as fears or desires; we categorize behavior as evil or praiseworthy; and so on. Human culture, in general, has developed a wealth of shared hermeneutic resources: concepts and dispositions that are widely shared between members of a group and which are passed down more or less uncritically through socialization—“meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else” (Fricker 2016: 163). To be very clear, these and other everyday examples of conceptual engagement are not examples of conscious inference. Most of us don’t go around consciously categorizing things with the help of syllogisms. Nonetheless, our basic hermeneutic activity is the means by which we understand ourselves, our place in the world, our place and role in society, and so on. Our basic hermeneutic activity, in other words, is the most central tool in the formation and maintenance of our self-conception, and it is at the same time mediated by the concepts and dispositions that we imbibe from the social pool.⁴

What we imbibe, however, is not exactly a simple and unified instructional manual for navigating the world. To various extents, the hermeneutic resources we acquire through socialization (as well as those that we ourselves develop) are actually influenced by our interests. What I mean by this is not that we choose which concepts to have, and when to use them, by direct and conscious reference to our desires and to what is instrumental to their satisfaction. I mean something less conscious once again: the concepts we happen to acquire, and the dispositions we happen to develop, tend to cohere with ways of seeing the world that are beneficial to ourselves in both personal and social ways. If it benefits person A to think poorly of person C, then A will tend to conceptualize the aforementioned punching experience in ways that reflect poorly on C’s character: negative concepts will more readily spring to A’s mind, disconfirming signs will struggle to grab enough attention, and so on. This is not to say that A will be incapable of seeing things in a different way; it’s just to say that A has a bias towards the application of certain concepts in certain situations: there is a greater chance that A will conceptualize C’s behavior negatively than not, a difference that is partly explained by what does and does not benefit A in both personal and social ways. This is not a new or surprising suggestion, of course. It’s rather the kind of phenomena that social psychologists and philosophers have explored extensively in recent years. But the particular details of how this works won’t matter to us here. What matters is just the fact that, to various extents, our basic hermeneutic activity is indeed somewhat biased in this way.⁵

⁴ Is there a uniquely correct fundamental way to conceptualize the world? Are there multiple correct ways to conceptualize reality at any level? I won’t address these interesting questions here. For a sample of the issues and positions in these debates, see Goodman (1978), Putnam (1990), Haslanger (2012), and Chalmers (2012).

⁵ There is a large psychological and philosophical literature on the influence of biases on perception. For a sample of the issues, see Brownstein and Saul (2016), Siegel (2017), and Brownstein (2018).

3. Hermeneutic Resources and Social Dynamics

My central point in the previous section was about individuals and their interpretative activities: our experiences are partly the product of the somewhat biased deployment of hermeneutic resources acquired through socialization. I now want to make some observations about how our individual interpretative activities impact, and are impacted by, broader hermeneutic dynamics within a social group.

I begin with a simple example. In a society that lacks the concept of bacteria, for example, no one experiences anything as a bacterial infection (though they of course experience things that are, as a matter of fact, bacterial infections—they are just not conceptualized as such). Once the concept is developed, a small group of individuals begins to see things as bacterial infections. And once seeing things in this way proves useful enough to an influential enough group of people, the concept of bacteria begins to spread via what I will call, echoing Fricker, *meaning generating social channels*: the professions, media, and practices that play central roles in creating and propagating new and old hermeneutic resources within a group. So talk of bacteria starts to appear in scientific communications, in specialized education, in journalism, in legal studies and practice, and eventually it reaches basic education and popular culture. Soon enough, any minimally educated adult in this society will have the concept of bacteria and will have had ample opportunity to learn how to apply it reasonably well—all of this, of course, without reserving a single thought to the hard-won hermeneutic achievement that stands behind them.

But things are quite a bit more complicated than that. Within any large enough group (such as a society) there are various interwoven subgroups.⁶ And while some of the shared hermeneutic resources within the larger group are truly serving the interests of all or most subgroups (think here of our use of concepts such as “bread” and “chairs”), many other concepts and dispositions are useful only, or primarily, to some. Consider some of the concepts from the scientific community: “bacteria,” “dark matter,” and “null hypothesis,” for example. One of these concepts is widely shared and widely well used by those outside of the originating subgroup; one is somewhat well shared but not widely well-used; and one is neither widely shared nor widely well-used. Though the existence of

⁶ The notion of a “group” here is admittedly vague. Though characterizing this notion more precisely is important for more technical discussions, what matters for me presently is only the idea that members of a group share common interests, particularly in the sense discussed below. For discussion of these issues, see Sheehy (2006), Ritchie (2013), Effingham (2010), and Thomasson (2019).

these concepts, and their good use by the scientific community, is in the interest of all, the possession and proper application of these concepts by all is not that important to most people. These differences have social implications. What I will call the *basic hermeneutic group dynamic* is thus the fact that asymmetries in how much a certain hermeneutic resource benefits g_1 and non- g_1 members of G tend to create asymmetries in how widespread that resource is within g_1 and how widespread it is within the broader G . If the widespread good use of a certain hermeneutic resource serves the interests of members of g_1 but does not serve the interests of non- g_1 members of G , then it will be comparatively more difficult for this resource to spread widely through G since non- g_1 members of G will have little to no incentive to take it up. Instead, the use of this resource will tend to remain restricted to, or near the boundaries of, g_1 . Consequently, most members of G just won't think of, talk about, or see the relevant experiences affected by this peripheral concept in the same way that members of g_1 do.

What I'm suggesting here, of course, is that group interest is a major factor in our understanding of hermeneutic social dynamics. Importantly, by "group interest" I simply mean those things that are beneficial, in the ways already discussed above, to the members of a group, and not necessarily those things that the members of that group consciously represent to themselves as personally desirable. In this sense, the wide uptake of a certain hermeneutic resource within G serves the interests of some group when it produces an environment in which the members of that subgroup have better access to opportunities for, and better chances to succeed in, the pursuit of their personal, professional, and political interests. So even if applying concept X in circumstances C is abhorrent to a particular member of g_1 , it can nonetheless be the case that the widespread disposition to apply X in C serves their interests. One can benefit from racism, for example, without being a racist. The basic hermeneutic group dynamic, in other words, is simply the claim that hermeneutic resources originating within g_1 have a better chance of spreading through G in direct proportion to the number of subgroups within G that can come to benefit, in these ways, from that spread.

This dynamic, however, has material consequences. Every subgroup within G has developed hermeneutic resources that primarily serve their interests, and which have more or less widespread currency, depending on how well they come to serve the interests, in the sense above, of those outside the originating subgroup. But if there is very little uptake within G of hermeneutic resources amicable to the interests of a certain subgroup, then it will be, in turn, comparatively hard for members of that subgroup to pursue their own interests within G . Upon inspection, this is unsurprising. If large portions of G do not share my hermeneutic resources (either do not have my concepts or do not apply them as I do), then there is a large proportion of people in G who do not

see things as I see them, who do not think of them as I think of them, and who do not talk as I talk; the more this is the case, the harder it will be for me to communicate throughout G, for me to understand others and be understood by them, and for my behaviors to be widely taken as reasonable and legitimate. A philosopher who works with concepts not widely shared even within the philosophy subgroup, for example, will have comparatively more difficulties getting and keeping a job, publishing in the professionally prestigious places, getting promoted, and so on. Even worse for entire academic subfields whose hermeneutic resources are poorly represented in academia. It is almost always in the best interest of a subgroup, consequently, to further spread their hermeneutic resources within G.

There are two central ways, then, in which our individual interpretative activities impact, and are impacted by, the broader hermeneutic dynamics within a social group. On the one hand, our individual interpretative activities influence the degree to which a certain hermeneutic resource spreads throughout the group. Once strengthened by the numbers in a subgroup, they produce a social force or tendency that favors and disfavors a variety of concepts and dispositions for their application. On the other, the operation of these social forces influences the degree to which we can all pursue our own interests within the group. If the forces create an environment that is hermeneutically fitting for my own hermeneutic activities, then my subgroup will thrive; otherwise it won't.

3. Hermeneutic Injustices

The dynamics I've been describing might seem at first to be efficient and fair. It can't be that all subgroups enjoy equally wide uptake of hermeneutic resources that serve their interests, and it seems like the most beneficial resources overall are simply winning the competition and rising to the top. But this is a fairly naive and self-congratulatory version of the story. We are now in a position to consider how hermeneutic group dynamics can and do give rise to injustices.

Given the features of our hermeneutic activities discussed in section 1, and the consequential social dynamics discussed in section 2, any large enough group will be subject to another social force or tendency that I will call *downstream hermeneutic pressure*: asymmetries between subgroups regarding their influence on the meaning generating social channels will tend to lead to downstream asymmetries in their members' capacities to pursue and advance their personal, professional, and political interests. Recall that the hermeneutic resources produced and disseminated by the meaning generating social

channels within G are a major force behind which hermeneutic resources are possessed by, and can be used successfully by, members of G. A large part of our concepts and dispositions for conceptual application are imbibed from the social pool. So if members of g_1 are over-represented in science, journalism, the legal profession, politics, education, pop culture, and so on, the hermeneutic resources amicable to the interests of members of g_1 will more easily be produced and widely disseminated throughout G *even if they do not serve the interests of very many other subgroups*. As a result, it will be easier for members of g_1 , relative to non- g_1 members of G, to pursue and advance their interests within G. In this way, prior asymmetries in influence introduce a distorting force into the “fair and efficient” basic hermeneutic group dynamic just discussed: excessive exposure tends to overwhelm the regulative operation of group interest. None of this requires any malice. It’s just that the things that members of g_1 generally care about, and pay attention to, naturally affect the concepts and the dispositions for conceptual application that they produce, discuss the most, and pass along. If I am a lawyer, I will think and talk like a lawyer and I will inevitably import those ways of thinking and talking into my thought and speech in any of my areas of influence. And if too many of us lawyers are influential, then some of these ways of thinking and talking will eventually become so widespread that anyone socialized within G will struggle not to inherit them. But since these ways of thinking and talking are originally and disproportionately beneficial to lawyers and their interests (in the sense discussed above) and much less so to non-lawyers and their interests, the production and widespread uptake of these hermeneutic resources gives them a leg up in the pursuit of their interests in the social sphere—a leg up that has nothing to do with how much their resources are beneficial overall.

Downstream hermeneutic pressures are obviously only one force among many other social forces, including the basic hermeneutic group dynamic. It may or may not have a large impact within a certain group and, even so, it certainly can be overcome. Nonetheless, suppose a group has asymmetries in its meaning generating social channels that indeed result in asymmetries in the capacities of various subgroups to pursue their interests. Is this situation already unjust? Perhaps. But what I want to more clearly call unjust obtains under three further conditions.

First, the explanation for the prior asymmetries in influence—the asymmetries that lead to the asymmetries in social benefits—matters. It matters whether the members of g_1 are disproportionately represented in the meaning generating social channels because they are, by virtue of being members of g_1 , the most qualified to truly serve the interests of all within G, or perhaps because they have each earned it fairly and squarely in a competitive environment fully accessible to non- g_1 members as well (where this partly means that non- g_1 members have had an equal opportunity to become competitive

in the first place). Second, the overall impact of this lack of influence on the amount of beneficial hermeneutic resources matters as well. It matters whether the unfair asymmetries in influence in fact prevent the timely production and/or the wide uptake of hermeneutic resources amicable to the interests of members g_2 , as opposed to being inconsequential or minorly relevant. Third, it matters how disadvantaged in the pursuit of their personal, professional, and political interests one really is by virtue of the lack of beneficial hermeneutic resources caused by the lack of influence. It matters whether the widespread hermeneutic influence of lawyers, for example, leads to a hermeneutic environment that is in fact beneficial to the less influential non-lawyer members of G . So while not all cases of downstream hermeneutic pressure may lead to injustices, those cases that satisfy these three further conditions certainly do.⁷

Here then is my attempt to capture the ideas in our discussion so far into a notion of what I will call *hermeneutic injustice*:

Hermeneutic Injustice: If (a) there are unfair asymmetries between subgroups g_1 and g_2 regarding their influence on the meaning generating social channels within group G , and (b) if some of these unfair asymmetries prevent the timely production and/or the wide uptake of hermeneutic resources amicable to the interests of members of g_2 , and if (c) this general failure of production or uptake significantly disadvantages members of g_2 in their pursuit of interests that are central to their wellbeing, self-conception, and social opportunities, then members of g_2 are suffering a hermeneutic injustice.⁸

Let me note three features of this notion. First, notice the obvious fact that this definition is entirely conditional. It merely tries to identify the conditions under which there would be an injustice in G that is mediated by our hermeneutic activities; the definition is completely silent on whether there actually are any and where and how they actually materialize. Second, notice that there are two kinds of possible injustices here: one practical and one epistemic. The practical injustice is simply the fact that the relevant social forces are unfairly disadvantaging members of g_2 in their pursuit of their personal, professional, and political interests. The role of hermeneutics here is in mediating how this is done. The epistemic injustice, however, is the fact that the social forces are here unfairly disadvantaging members of g_2 in their capacities as knowers. *Hermeneutic* injustices, in other words, can lead to the kind of *hermeneutical* injustices that Fricker has discussed as well. There are various propositions that members of g_2 are not in a good position to know precisely because they lack

⁷ I am making fairly minimal assumptions here about the nature of injustice. In Rawlsian terminology, I am assuming that group dynamics can sometimes be *procedurally* unjust and that they can, for that reason, sometimes lead to outcomes that are *substantively* unjust as well. For a sample of the relevant issues, see Rawls (1971), Nozick (1974), Cohen (1995), and Mills (1997).

⁸ My account here, following Fricker, abstracts away from the obviously true, and obviously complicating, fact that individuals belong to a variety of overlapping groups. See Medina (2012) for a discussion of the implications of this fact.

certain concepts or dispositions for conceptual application, and some of these are consequential to their well-being by pertaining to how they understand themselves, their place in the world, their place and role in society, and so on. If there were enough people in the meaning generating social channels that cared and paid attention to the things that they themselves care and pay attention to, then these important hermeneutic resources and the correlated bits of important knowledge would be more quickly produced and more readily available to them.

Finally, notice that my notion abstracts away from the social-political notions of “power relations”, “marginalization”, and “identity prejudice”, as well as from the concerns of any particular social group. Without taking a stand on anything of political substance, what I am trying to show is that fairly standard commitments in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind, together with fairly standard commitments in political philosophy, together with fairly pedestrian observations about individual psychology and social dynamics, suggest that hermeneutic injustices are live possibilities in any social group that is large enough to contain multiple subgroups with varying interests. In principle, Christian conservatives *can* suffer hermeneutic injustices just as much as godless progressives. In principle, rural white males *can* suffer hermeneutic injustices just as much as urban black females. And so on. Nothing in the notion of hermeneutic injustice itself pushes us in the direction of favoring the political claims of any of these or other subgroups. Instead, with the notion in hand, we must then *look and see* the actual dynamics produced by these forces within any specific group.

4. Two Cases of Hermeneutic Injustices

I now want to discuss two concrete examples of hermeneutic injustices, both extracted from Fricker’s discussion of hermeneutical injustices. My aim here is highlighting the complementing contrasts between our notions. I want to highlight how her examples satisfy the conditions in my definition just as well they satisfy the conditions in hers.

The first example involves the concept of “postnatal depression”. Fricker tells us the story of Wendy Sanford, a woman battling depression after the birth of her child in the late Sixties. While visiting a workshop on women’s medical and sexual issues, Sanford hears about the medical condition of postnatal depression for the first time. “In that one forty-five-minute period,” Sanford says, “I realized that what I’d been blaming myself for, and what my husband had blamed me for, wasn’t my personal deficiency.” As Fricker (2007, 149) then puts it, this “is a story of revelation concerning an

experience of female depression, previously ill-understood by the subject herself, because collectively ill-understood.” In this way, Sanford suffered a hermeneutical injustice: she was harmed in her capacities as a knower. Because the concept of postnatal depression was not available to Sanford, she couldn’t know, for example, that her condition was not her fault, that she needed medical assistance for it, and that she had good hopes to overcome it. For Fricker, this lack of knowledge is itself the primary site of the injustices she calls hermeneutical, even if they are also the vehicle by which subsequent social injustices ensue.⁹

Fricker is entirely right in her analysis, and I won’t here elaborate on how and why each of the conditions on her definition are satisfied. What I want to show, however, is that Sanford’s is also a case of hermeneutic injustice. Recall the conditions for the possibility of hermeneutic injustices:

- (a) There are unfair asymmetries between g_1 and g_2 regarding their influence on the meaning generating social channels within G .
- (b) Some of these unfair asymmetries prevent the timely production and/or the wide uptake of hermeneutic resources amicable to the interests of members of g_2 .
- (c) This general failure of production or uptake significantly disadvantages members of g_2 in their pursuit of interests that are central to their wellbeing, self-conception, and social opportunities.

In Fricker’s example, the first condition is satisfied since not enough women were participating in the meaning generating social channels in the Sixties, and because this lack of participating was not overall beneficial nor the result of a levelled competitive environment. The second condition, in turn, is satisfied since this lack of influence prevented concepts amicable to the interests of women from being disseminated widely and in a timely fashion. Not enough scientists cared for, or had incentives to study, the psychological conditions of women after birth; not enough journalists cared for, or had incentives to report and discuss, the phenomena; not enough lawyers and politicians cared for, or had incentives to pay attention to, the few scientists and journalists who were behind the slow spread of this new hermeneutic resource; not enough teachers and artists cared for, or had incentives to incorporate this new idea; and so on. Consequently, it was very hard for an ordinary American woman in the Sixties to receive the helpful concept of “postnatal depression” in the ordinary way they’d received, for example, the unhelpful concept of “hysteria.” Finally, the third condition is also satisfied since the possession and proper application of this concept was central to women’s pursuit of interests that are central to their wellbeing, self-conception, and social opportunities. Without the

⁹ After identifying the epistemic harms as “primary”, Fricker (2007, 162) then says: “Is there also a secondary kind of harm (caused by the primary one) that may be usefully distinguished? Yes, for the primary harm of situated hermeneutical inequality must, by definition, issue in further practical harms—those harms which render the collective hermeneutical impoverishment asymmetrically disadvantageous to the wronged party.” The practical harms I am here calling hermeneutic, however, are not dependent on, or mediated by, and therefore not secondary to, the epistemic harms.

concept of postnatal depression, the women suffering from that condition, as well as their families and friends and doctors, could do little more than blame the victims for what they mistakenly perceived as an avoidable and abhorrent personal shortcoming. It is hard to overstate the damage done. This damage was in part a hermeneutical injustice, no doubt, but it was a hermeneutic injustice as well.

The second example involves the concept of “sexual harassment.” Fricker considers the story of Carmita Wood, a former administrator at Cornell University who was repeatedly harassed by a distinguished professor in the mid Seventies. Initially, the professor “would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he’d deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers.” But his meager restraints eventually gave way: “one night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on her mouth.” Given the work-place stress and related physical symptoms (chronic back and neck pains, for example), Wood eventually quit. There are obviously many ways in which this instance of sexual harassment harmed Wood. But one in particular is hermeneutic in its nature. When Wood applied for unemployment insurance, there weren’t widely used and widely understood conceptual resources to clearly describe her situation: the concept of sexual harassment was not yet available, and her insurance claim was denied. Only after encountering a large group of women with similar experiences, and only after retaining legal counsel for an appeal on her insurance denial, did the matter of organizing the shared experiences under a suitable concept even come up. “We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors,” she said. “Somebody came up with ‘harassment.’ *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was.” Much like in the previous example, this is was a moment of hermeneutic breakthrough. And, for Fricker, the lack of understanding experienced by Wood before the development of this concept was a hermeneutical injustice as well: Wood was particularly harmed in her capacities as a knower.

But Wood’s is also a case of hermeneutic injustice. The first condition is satisfied in the same way as before: not enough women in the Seventies were participating in the meaning generating social channels, and this lack of participating was not beneficial or the result of a levelled competitive environment. The second condition is satisfied since this lack of influence prevented concepts amicable to the interests of women from being produced in a timely fashion. This is no surprise. While seeing certain work-place experiences as sexual harassment served the interests of women, seeing them that way did not serve the interests of men—even well-meaning and well-behaved men. So women’s lack of influence on meaning generating social channels meant that little attention was paid to these kinds of experiences from the perspective of those who had an interest in seeing them

that way, which in turn meant that the emergence of this concept, let alone its spread, was substantially delayed. Finally, the third condition is also satisfied since the possession and proper application of this concept was central to women's pursuit of interests that are central to their wellbeing, self-conception, and social opportunities. Without the concept of sexual harassment, the women experiencing it had very little recourse to its prevention (nothing normative with which to accuse the harassers, nothing to ground a social cost to that behavior, etc.) and very little recourse to redress for its harms (no means to issue formal complaints, no terminology to unify the relevant work-place prescriptions and sanctions, etc.). Once again, it is hard to overstate the damage done. This damage was hermeneutical inasmuch as it prevented women from properly understanding their experiences, and it was hermeneutic inasmuch as the hermeneutic activities of their social group were the vehicle producing the many harms.¹⁰

There is a common thread behind my analysis of both of these examples from Fricker. Since not enough women were participating in the meaning generating channels, not enough people were paying attention to, or caring about, the production and/or dissemination of concepts and dispositions for conceptual application that were amicable to their interests. The same, no doubt, can be said of many other social groups, then and now, including subgroups within the group composed of American women. And while Fricker is right in noting the essentially epistemic character of some of the injustices suffered in these cases, those are not the only bits of unjust harm that were mediated by our individual and social hermeneutic activities. With the broader notion of hermeneutic injustices in hand, therefore, we can make sense of a much larger set of related injustices befalling uninfluential social groups.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with some brief remarks about the relevance of the discussion above. As José Medina (2017, 45) has noted, there is more than just an academic exercise behind this debate:

There is no doubt that there is something conceptual at stake in these debates: how to understand the phenomenon, how to diagnose it and analyze it, etc. But it is important to notice that there is also (and perhaps more fundamentally) something practical at stake—how to fight hermeneutical injustices, how to prevent them before they occur, and how to repair hermeneutical practices and dynamics when they occur.

¹⁰ See Farley (1978) and MacKinnon (1979) for early discussions of the emergence and applications of the concept of sexual harassment.

Aside from any classificatory benefit, it is therefore important to bring to mind how the broader notion of hermeneutic injustice lays open new strategies for ameliorative and restorative action.

It is easy to see this at play. With her notion of hermeneutical injustice in mind, Fricker (2007, 169) outlines strategies that naturally target the particular kind of epistemic harm at stake:

The form the virtue of hermeneutical justice must take, then, is an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one's interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources.

But we have now seen that an interlocutor may suffer hermeneutic injustices that are not epistemic, that occur without there being any collective gap in hermeneutic resources, and that are suffered without there being any (innocent) failure on the part of the communicator. And as the varieties of hermeneutically mediated harms multiply, the strategies necessary for redress must multiply as well. Fricker's tools are useful, but they don't fit all.¹¹

I won't, however, presently address myself to the details of these further strategies. But I want to mention one particular way in which the broader notion of hermeneutic injustice allows us to envision the need for social action when the narrower notion of hermeneutical injustice does not. The cases I have in mind emerge once we note that hermeneutic resources that *are not* beneficial to our interests, in the social sense articulated above, often do allow us to make sense of our experience just as much as those that are. Joining a fringe cult—to take an extreme example—often allows one to make sense of their experiences, their identity, and their place in the world, all of this independently of the correctness of the group's central tenets.¹² The hermeneutic resources one acquires in these cases may indeed fill what was previously a hermeneutic gap, such that there may be no experience that the subject is now unable to understand, and therefore no hermeneutical injustice to be suffered as a result. Yet some of us may nonetheless be tempted to identify something harmful going on here by way of hermeneutics, something to be addressed in a social group and prevented in our families. The broader notion of hermeneutic injustices, it seems to me, fits that bill.

¹¹ See Anderson (2012) for another sympathetic but critical improvement on Fricker's ameliorative suggestions.

¹² The issue here is not just the possibility of equally acceptable interpretations (cf. Fricker 2007, 170) but also the very facticity of understanding. For arguments suggesting that understanding is possible with and through falsehoods (and, indeed, sometimes *only* through them), see Zagzebski (2001) and Elgin (2017).

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth (2012). "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions" *Social Epistemology* Vol. 26 (2): 163-173.
- Brownstein, Michael (2018). *The Implicit Mind: Cognitive Architecture, the Self, and Ethics*. Oxford University press.
- Brownstein, Michael and Saul, Jennifer (2016). *Implicit Bias and Philosophy Vol 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, David (2012). *Constructing the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Clark, Andy (1993). *Associative Engines: Connectionism, Concepts, and Representational Change*. MIT Press.
- Cohen, G.A. (1995). *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Effingham, Nikki (2010). "The Metaphysics of Groups" *Philosophical Studies*, 149(2): 251–267.
- Elgin, Catherine (2017). *True Enough*. MIT Press.
- Farley, Lin (1978). *Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job*. McGraw-Hill
- Fodor, Jerry (1975). *The Language of Thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Fricker, Miranda (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Goodman, Nelson (1978). *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett.
- Haslanger, Sally (2012). *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine (1979). *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A case of sex discrimination*. Yale Fastback Series.
- Medina, José (2012). "Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities," *Social Epistemology* Vol. 26 (2): 201-220.
- Medina, José (2017). "Varieties of Hermeneutical Injustice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. Routledge: 41-52.
- Millikan, Ruth (2000). *On Clear and Confused Ideas*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, Charles (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press.
- Nozick, Robert (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Basic Books.
- Peacocke, Christopher (1992). *A Study of Concepts*. MIT Press.
- Putnam, Hilary (1990). *Realism with a Human Face*. Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, John (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.

Ritchie, Katherine (2013). "What Are Groups?" *Philosophical Studies*, 166(2): 257-272.

Sheehy, Paul (2006). *The Reality of Social Groups*. Ashgate.

Siegel, Susanna (2017). *The Rationality of Perception*. Oxford University Press.

Thomasson, Amie (2019) "The Ontology of Social Groups," *Synthese* 196, 4829-4845.

Zagzebski, Linda (2001) "Recovering Understanding," in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup. Oxford University Press: 235-252.