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A Third Conception of Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract: Scholars of epistemology have identified two conceptions of epistemic injustice: discriminatory epistemic injustice and distributive epistemic injustice. The former refers to wrongs to one’s capacity as a knower that are the result of identity prejudice. The latter refers to violations of one’s right to know what they are entitled to. This essay advances a third conception, formative epistemic injustice, which refers to wrongs to one’s capacity as a knower that are the result of or result in malformation—the undue restriction of one’s formative capacities. The author argues that formative epistemic injustice is a distinctly educational wrong and that it brings to light important epistemic injustices that standard accounts of epistemic injustice either downplay or are unable to capture. This third conception of epistemic injustice is an important analytic tool for theorizing both epistemic injustice and educational justice.

Recent events have made all too clear the magnitude of social injustice in contemporary times. From the rise of authoritarianism and the steady decline of democracy to the political repression of marginalized populations and their subjection to extreme forms of state-sanctioned violence, social injustice is reaching levels not observed since before the modern civil rights movement. What is less apparent is that antecedent to this rapidly increasing social injustice is an out-of-control epistemic injustice. Marginalized voices are suppressed, hegemonic knowledge dominates mainstream settings, falsehoods and conspiracies propagate, and social media have created “epistemic chaos” (Zuboff 2021). This atmosphere is no doubt the result of epistemic oppression and unequal epistemic relations and processes of knowledge production, transmission, and acquisition. However, there is something unique about this form of epistemic oppression—a distinctly educational character—that does not fully fit within standard accounts

of epistemic injustice. Epistemically oppressive practices have contributed to the miseducation of large portions of the population to the point that, for many, distinguishing facts from fiction is an extraordinary endeavor. For many, reality has become distorted to a degree that they seem unable to grasp the significance of their very experiences or to process reliable knowledge even when given to them. Such distortions not only diminish those people's epistemic agency but co-opt their very sense of selfhood, infringing on their ability to regulate their self-formation and become who it is in their interest to become. The formative wrongs that accompany this form of epistemic injustice do not discriminate between marginalized and privileged groups. In fact, societies characterized by unequal power relations naturally create epistemically distortive environments (Stanley 2015) and the resulting epistemic distortions are formatively debilitating for everyone. While the formative impairments faced by marginalized and privileged groups may be of a different kind, epistemically oppressive and distortive environments erode the formative capacities of both groups.

Such is the environment in which the distinctly educational wrong of epistemic injustice reveals itself, and it is a wrong because its miseducative character is no accident. For centuries those with power have concealed or misrepresented marginally situated epistemic resources to maintain the hegemonical status of their own. The proliferation of propaganda by the media, censorship and epistemic distortion in school curricula, user manipulation for the sake of profit by social media platforms, and epistemic segregation to facilitate voter manipulation by political agencies, are but a few examples of concerted efforts to perpetuate epistemic injustice and severely infringe on people's (younger and older alike) ability to grow intellectually uninhibited, to develop a sense of autonomy, to avoid ethical and epistemic servility, and to take control of their own self-formation. While, no doubt, some carry greater responsibility for this type of

epistemic injustice (e.g., those with greater epistemic authority and/or power), it is structural in nature because it depends on each and every one of us to proliferate (Young 2011). As internet users, parents, voters, or peers we play a critical role in sustaining this epistemically oppressive environment, whether we do so consciously or unconsciously. For this reason, we ought to realize our ethical and educational responsibility to foster an epistemic environment that is formatively enabling, rather than disabling; an epistemic environment that allows one to do justice to their self-formation. This requires creating opportunities for developing one's cognitive and moral capacities and one's potentialities uninhibited; it requires securing one's right to avoid epistemic manipulation and to acquire valuable epistemic resources.

In an effort to highlight the educational ills of our epistemically oppressive environment, this essay advances a distinctly educational conception of epistemic injustice that, I argue, is better able to capture the educational nature of the epistemic injustice we observe today than standard conceptions are. This conception allows us to recognize that many of the wrongs that we see in contemporary society are educational in nature and brings front and center our collective responsibility to disrupt them. Using Christopher Martin's (2018) terminology, I call this conception *formative epistemic injustice* and classify it as a *third* conception of epistemic injustice to distinguish it from the two standard conceptions: *discriminatory epistemic injustice* and *distributive epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2013, 1318).¹ Like the other two conceptions, this third conception is a wrong of both ethical and epistemic significance. Unlike the other two conceptions, the locus of injustice is not wrongful discrimination or maldistribution but rather

¹ Note that the third conception that I talk of here refers to a whole new category of epistemic injustice. It is not to be confused with subcategories of standard conceptions of epistemic injustice. For example, the third conception I advance should not be confused with what Kristie Dotson (2012) calls a "third-order epistemic injustice" or "contributory injustice." Dotson's third-order epistemic injustice falls under *discriminatory* epistemic injustice and so is a subcategory of one of the two standard conceptions. See the next section for an account of contributory injustice.

malformation: the unjustified control of one's self-formation or undue restriction of one's formative capacities in ways that foreclose formative possibilities that it is in one's interest to pursue. Formative epistemic injustice is a distinctly educational wrong in that it is concerned with how one's capacity as a knower enables or interferes with their personal development and self-formation.

The argument proceeds as follows: first, I provide a brief account of the two standard conceptions of epistemic injustice to set the background of my analysis; second, I introduce formative epistemic injustice and discuss its distinctly educational nature; third, I show that standard conceptions of epistemic injustice are unable to sufficiently address the formative considerations that formative epistemic injustice highlights; fourth, I conclude by highlighting implications regarding our responsibility *qua* educators. By the very end I hope to have provided a persuasive argument for why formative epistemic injustice is essential for theorizing both epistemic injustice and educational injustice.

Two Standard Conceptions of Epistemic Injustice: Discriminatory and Distributive

I will begin with a cursory description of the two standard conceptions of epistemic injustice—discriminatory epistemic injustice and distributive epistemic injustice—to provide a point of reference for the conversation that follows.

Discriminatory epistemic injustice refers to “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007, 1). This wrong occurs as a result of prejudice against the identity of the person on whom the injustice is inflicted. Discriminatory epistemic injustice is further subdivided into *testimonial injustice*, *hermeneutical injustice*, and *contributory injustice*. Testimonial injustice refers to cases where “prejudice on the hearer's part causes him to give the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given” (4). Testimonial injustice

dehumanizes a speaker by compromising their essential human capacity to give knowledge and compromises a prejudiced listener's ability to receive important knowledge. Hermeneutical injustice refers to "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization" (158). Hermeneutical marginalization here refers to the "unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience" (153) that members of marginalized groups contend with as a result of prejudicial exclusion from common epistemic resources. The lack of intelligibility of epistemically marginalized populations that results from hermeneutical injustice renders their hermeneutical marginalization even more profound, begetting further hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Finally, contributory injustice refers to cases where "an epistemic agent's willful hermeneutical ignorance [i.e., refusal to acknowledge and/or use marginally-situated epistemic resources] in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower's ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency" (Dotson 2012, 32).² In cases of contributory injustice there is no obscurity or lack of understanding on behalf of the marginalized individual whose epistemic contribution is rejected. The rejection of their contribution is epistemically unsubstantiated on all grounds and the result of an unwillingness by privileged individuals to acknowledge the faultiness of dominant epistemic resources.³ Contributory injustice not only compromises the epistemic agency of marginally situated

² The term willful hermeneutical ignorance was coined by Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (2012).

³ Critics of Fricker's account of epistemic injustice such as Dotson (2012), Medina (2013), and Pohlhaus (2012) observe, correctly in my opinion, that dominant epistemic resources are wrongly perceived as "common" by dominant groups (including Fricker whose account of hermeneutical marginalization is premised on the existence of a "common pool" of epistemic resources) when in fact multiple marginalized epistemic resources exist that are purposely disregarded by dominant groups. This purposeful disregard lies at the heart of Pohlhaus' (2012) "willful hermeneutical ignorance" and Dotson's (2012) contributory injustice.

knowers but also allows faulty dominant epistemic resources to remain unchallenged and, in turn, privileged epistemic agents to maintain their privileged status over marginalized ones.

The second standard conception of epistemic injustice is distributive epistemic injustice. Under this conception, epistemic injustice is conceived as the unjust distribution of “degrees of confidence” in truths that one is interested in or has an interest in knowing (Coady 2010, 104). While unjust distribution along these lines is what qualifies this phenomenon as an injustice, it remains at heart an epistemic injustice (as opposed to merely a distributive injustice) in that it violates one’s “right to know” (105). It entails withholding from someone an epistemic good that is intrinsically, rather than merely instrumentally, valuable. Intrinsically valuable epistemic goods include knowledge (as in true belief), information, or education (as it pertains to epistemic considerations). If being provided with appropriate knowledge according to one’s interests is epistemically just, then epistemic injustice of this distributive kind includes two distinct wrongs: *unjust ignorance* and *unjust error*. The former refers to cases where one is “unjustly put (or left) in a position in which they are ignorant of something that they are entitled to know” while the latter to cases where one is “unjustly put (or left) in a position in which they are wrong about something they are entitled to be right about” (109).

A Third Conception: Formative Epistemic Injustice

Having outlined the two standard conceptions of epistemic injustice, I will now present the third, distinctly educational, conception of epistemic injustice that I referred to as formative epistemic injustice. Of course, all conceptions of epistemic injustice carry educational significance as attested by the rich philosophy of education scholarship on epistemic injustice.⁴

⁴ Some examples include Applebaum 2015, 2020, Frank 2013, Haslanger 2014, Kotzee 2013, Murriss 2013, Nikolaidis (2020), Taylor 2018, and Thompson (2018). See also Kotzee’s (2017) contribution to *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*.

However, the exclusive emphasis of standard conceptions on discriminatory and distributive wrongs leads to a disregard of important educational wrongs. In contrast, the emphasis that formative epistemic injustice places on formative wrongs foregrounds the distinctly educational wrongs of epistemic injustice. In this section, I expound the notion of formative epistemic injustice by focusing on the wrongs it entails.

Malformation

I begin my analysis with Robbie McClintock's (2016) notion of *formative justice*. Formative justice emerges as a response to human inability to accomplish multiple and often conflicting ends given limitations in resources, such as time, effort, ability, or even money. This inability forces humans to prioritize and organize their living conditions based on their ultimate aims, abilities, values, and more. Formative justice, therefore, entails making the best possible choices that will lead to the best possible outcome. Formative justice can be thought of as "a uniquely educational genre of justice" (Thompson 2016, 3). It is uniquely educational in that this careful use of limited resources to achieve the best possible outcome is a central predicament of education. Students have multiple talents, abilities, and opportunities but little time and resources to cultivate them all. A selection must be made and there are better or more just selections and worse or more unjust, the latter being choices that waste the child's potential in less meaningful, less fulfilling, and less rewarding occupations. Though formative justice clearly raises distributive considerations—such as the judicious distribution of resources toward different tasks—it is not reducible to distributive justice. While distributive justice addresses issues of equitable distribution, formative justice addresses issues of self-formation; the question "how should I distribute my resources?" is secondary to and contingent on the primary question "who should I become?" The primary concern is not to determine a just distribution of resources but

rather to weigh different potentialities and decide which of them would be the best to pursue (Thompson 2016).

Winston Thompson (2016) utilizes the notion of formative justice to develop a distinctly educational principle of educational justice, what he calls *the principle of the preservation of potentialities*. The principle states:

The selection of [educational] principles and pursuits ought to be engaged such that the greatest number of potentially valued possibilities remains intact. This goal can be compromised in the event of compelling evidence that a selection, which collapses other possibilities, will increase fulfillment relative to foreseen alternatives. (13)

According to this principle of educational justice, educators ought to preserve students' formative capacities toward as many directions as possible at any given time unless they have a good and educationally pertinent reason not to do so. The principle of the preservation of potentialities is the guiding principle behind a liberal theory of educational justice that Thompson dubs "justice as preservation," the educational equivalent of Rawls' "justice as fairness" (13). Unlike other, incidentally educational, theories of educational justice, Thompson's theory is distinctly educational in that it is premised on the demands of formative, rather than distributive, justice. Justice as preservation is informed by the quite literal original position behind a veil of ignorance that all people find themselves in with regard to their educational possibilities. No student knows exactly what they will be doing after they graduate from school, college, or graduate school. With this in mind, Thompson, following McClintock, notes that "in a very undeniable sense, the veil does exist" for those invested in questions of educational outcomes (12). This suggests that our educational endeavors must be characterized by humility and must not presume what a good life is or direct learning toward outcomes that align with those presumptions. Thompson concludes that to preserve formative justice in

education we must avoid shutting down possibilities for future growth toward unforeseen directions unless we have a good reason for doing so.

The concept of formative justice provides the basis upon which we may establish the educational wrong of formative epistemic injustice, namely, formative *in*justice or malformation. Being the opposite of formative justice, formative injustice can be theorized as a violation of the principle of preservation. Accordingly, one suffers a formative injustice or malformation when one's opportunities for development are unduly constrained by an agent, collective, or structure in ways that direct growth toward particular educational goods and preclude others and/or in ways that may conflict with one's current or future interests. Malformation is an infringement on a variety of developmental opportunities and impedes one's ability to flourish as a human being. Important developmental opportunities include, but are not limited to, the cultivation of one's potentialities to develop important professional, vocational, or recreational skills, the development of one's economic, moral, intellectual, political, and other capabilities, and the cultivation of one's regulative capacities to meaningfully coordinate one's endeavors and to manage one's material and immaterial resources prudently. Such developmental opportunities are necessary for one to make the most of their potentialities and to lead a flourishing life that aligns with their personal disposition. This renders malformation an educational wrong with severe consequences. Given the broadness of formative justice and the principle of preservation, malformation encompasses multiple educational wrongs including some that have been extensively theorized, such as, indoctrination. This broadness reflects Thompson's (and McClintock's) aim to establish formative justice as an essential category of educational justice that guides educational endeavors.

Epistemic Oppression

Malformation is not the only component of formative epistemic injustice. For a wrong to constitute a formative epistemic injustice, as opposed to merely a formative injustice, it must also entail some form of epistemic injustice. In general terms, an epistemic injustice is a wrong done to someone *qua* epistemic subject. However, what constitutes a wrong to an epistemic subject can be interpreted differently as becomes apparent from the differences between the two standard accounts. On the discriminatory account, epistemic injustice is defined as epistemic oppression whereby marginalized knowers are impeded from contributing knowledge. On the distributive side, it is defined as being unjustly ignorant or wrong about something whereby knowers (either marginalized or privileged) are denied knowledge that they have a right to know. I consider the discriminatory account of epistemic injustice to be more fundamental than the distributive given that injustice in the distribution of epistemic goods is also, directly or indirectly, a result of epistemic oppression. Either one is denied knowledge that is readily available to others because they are epistemically excluded or marginalized—or the knowledge denied is readily unavailable because the epistemic contributions of those who are marginally situated are rejected and/or replaced by those of dominantly situated knowers, a form of epistemic imperialism. Furthermore, insofar as it is possible, the production of true or objective knowledge—the standard upon which the veracity or error of one's beliefs is to be evaluated—necessitates equality of epistemic participation and is hindered by epistemic oppression (Anderson 1995, Fricker 1998). Epistemic justice therefore indicates equality of epistemic participation and epistemic injustice indicates epistemic oppression. Epistemic oppression is, thus, the foundational epistemic wrong of formative epistemic injustice. Being a diverse category, epistemic oppression includes a variety of epistemic wrongs including epistemic exploitation, epistemic marginalization or exclusion,

epistemic powerlessness, epistemic domination or imperialism, and epistemic violence.⁵ To the extent that any of these forms of epistemic oppression carries malformative implications then it constitutes a form of formative epistemic injustice.

Equating epistemic injustice to epistemic oppression, might seem to jeopardize the significance of formative epistemic injustice as a distinct third conception of epistemic injustice. If formative epistemic injustice is an educational form of epistemic oppression and thus the result of inequality in epistemic participation, is it not merely a subspecies of discriminatory epistemic injustice? Not quite. While the existence of epistemic oppression is a necessary condition for formative epistemic injustice, the victim of formative epistemic injustice need not be discriminated against, though they certainly may be. While discriminatory epistemic injustice is a wrong that affects only those who are attributed less epistemic authority than they deserve, formative epistemic injustice affects all those whose formative capacities are compromised as a result of the epistemic oppression of some. For instance, the marginalization of non-dominant epistemic resources which constitutes a discriminatory epistemic injustice against marginalized knowers, impedes the development of both marginalized and privileged knowers. The formative wrong to marginalized and privileged knowers may be identical or different in kind. When identical, both marginalized and privileged knowers may be wronged by not being able to develop their cognitive capacities and to avoid cognitive disablements that obscure the true nature of the world and of their experiences from them. When different, marginalized knowers may be harmed by not being able to develop their epistemic agency and related capacity for knowledge contribution while privileged knowers by not being able to develop their moral capacity and ability to avoid engaging in oppressive conduct and becoming complicit in social

⁵ This account of epistemic oppression is the epistemic equivalent of Iris Marion Young's (1990) five faces of oppression.

injustice. In either case, the developmental character that these epistemic wrongs share in common renders them all formative epistemic injustices—though, of course, some may also qualify as discriminatory. Moreover, though dominant groups are epistemically more powerful than marginalized groups, no single member of a dominant group is epistemically powerful enough to influence the content of dominant epistemic resources. Privileged individuals, rather, are likely conditioned by their distorted epistemic resources to a point where discerning reality from fiction can be difficult—a conditioning that usually happens at a young age where one is epistemically disadvantaged. If they are able to escape the grip of dominant epistemic resources, privileged individuals remain unable to effect change with regard to the content of these resources. In either case, members of dominant groups may themselves experience a form of epistemic powerlessness, albeit milder than the epistemic powerlessness experienced by marginalized groups. This last point further emphasizes the structural nature of formative epistemic injustice which is hard to escape regardless of one's status.

By addressing the epistemic powerlessness of both privileged and marginalized knowers, I do not intend to completely erase the epistemic agency of either. For one, privileged knowers often purposively ignore marginally situated knowledge that is otherwise within their reach thereby willingly sustaining their malformation and the privilege it affords them. Also, those who are epistemically powerless to greater or lesser degrees can and often do take action to resist epistemic oppression and fight societal malformation. Privileged knowers who are sensitive to considerations of epistemic injustice, for example, can yield substantive change in dominant epistemic resources, even if this change is limited in scope. Marginalized knowers can develop, and have historically done so, alternative epistemic resources that are crucial in exercising their epistemic agency and resisting epistemic domination and the malformation it begets (Dotson

2012, Medina 2013, Mills 1997, Mills 2007, Pohlhaus 2012). Given the presence of individual epistemic agency a case can be made regarding an individual's responsibility for the formative epistemic injustice they themselves experience. However, my emphasis here is on how structures may facilitate or impede efforts to resist epistemic oppression and malformation. One's education, whether it takes the form of formal schooling or informal socialization within one's community, may facilitate or disrupt the preservation of epistemic oppression and the ignorance it begets, whether willful or not. As such it may facilitate or disrupt the preservation of malformation. Thus, while I acknowledge that all hold individual responsibility for their role in sustaining conditions of epistemic oppression and reinforcing their own malformation, and, relatedly, that all can take action to some extent to discharge their responsibility for epistemic justice and formative justice, I want to emphasize that our collective educational action and inaction is crucial for the fight against epistemic oppression and malformation. This renders everyone in their capacity as educators responsible for opening up viable avenues of self-formation that align with the aims of justice—i.e., for preserving or expanding potentialities for just action and facilitating the formation of just individuals within an otherwise unjust society.

The Wrongs and Harms of Formative Epistemic Injustice

We have arrived now at a point where we can define the distinct wrong of formative epistemic injustice. Since it involves a conceptual synthesis of formative injustice and epistemic injustice, the distinct wrong of formative epistemic injustice is a combination of the wrongs of formative injustice and epistemic injustice. In broad terms, then, we can define a formative epistemic injustice as *a wrong against someone in their capacity as a knower which occurs as a result of or results in malformation*. Thompson's principle of preservation provides the basis for establishing the presence of formative epistemic injustice such that its violation is an indication

of the distinctly educational character of an epistemic injustice. In other words, adherence to or violation of the principle is the criterion by which to determine whether a case of epistemic oppression is also a case of malformation.

As the broadness of the definition suggests, the distinct wrong of formative epistemic injustice can be divided into multiple kinds of wrongs, similar to discriminatory epistemic injustice (testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory) and distributive epistemic injustice (unjust ignorance and unjust error). All the wrongs that fall under the scope of formative epistemic injustice have in common that they are epistemic wrongs caused as a result of or that result in malformation but can differ with regard to some other aspect. For instance, similar to Miranda Fricker (2007), one might identify an agentive aspect (e.g., epistemic manipulation or brainwashing) and a structural aspect (e.g., social conditioning) of formative epistemic injustice. As has already been suggested, I consider the structural aspect to be much more insidious and difficult to overcome and thus deserving of more attention. It is easy to, at least in theory, determine an individual's culpability for intentionally inflicting a formative epistemic injustice on someone, say, for brainwashing their child and in doing so compromising their child's epistemic agency, autonomy, and formative potential. However, at a structural level it is not easy to determine one's degree of culpability for, say, hastily reposting content that they did not spend enough time reading or vetting and by doing so contributing to the development of a chain of misinformation. Yet such instances feed the formative epistemic injustice that pervades contemporary society.

In any case, my aim in outlining an agentive and structural aspect of formative epistemic injustice is not to be exhaustive but to open the possibility of different kinds of formative epistemic injustice. Moreover, it is to open up the possibility that formative epistemic justice

may function as a definitive category of educational justice that can guide educational endeavors (Nikolaidis forthcoming) and that, like formative injustice, formative epistemic injustice is broad enough to encompass a variety of educational wrongs theorized in the philosophy of education literature. Grouping important educational wrongs under formative epistemic injustice would allow us to create a common point of reference for theorizing educational wrongs. Moreover, it would also make it easier to theorize intersections of epistemic injustice with educational wrongs. Formative epistemic injustice may intertwine with or incorporate other kinds of epistemic injustice such that we may have cases of epistemic injustice where the victims are wronged in more than one way: malformation (violation of the principle of preservation), discrimination (identity prejudice), and/or maldistribution (violation of the right to know). Being able to discern subtle differences between these types of wrongs would add nuance to our understanding of both epistemic injustice and educational injustice.

With regard to the harms of formative epistemic injustice, they can be divided into two distinct categories: *formative harms* and *practical harms* (Nikolaidis 2021). Formative harms are the educational harms of formative epistemic injustice and, as the name suggests, they are also its primary harm. Formative harms are harms inflicted on one's formative capacities. A person might experience a formative harm, first, if their formative capacities are restricted in ways that harm them in their capacity as a knower or, second, if their capacity as a knower is harmed to the extent that they are unable to grow in ways that would be in their interest. These two cases, though conceptually distinct, may (and usually do) coexist in instances of formative epistemic injustice. For instance, epistemic manipulation or brainwashing is an example of malformation that harms one in their capacity as a knower *and* a harm in one's capacity as a knower that leads to malformation.

Practical harms constitute the material harms experienced by victims of formative epistemic injustice. They include harms such as economic damages, decreased quality of life, health deterioration, and the like. Practical harms are the secondary harm of formative epistemic injustice. Secondary here refers, not to the severity, but to the causal priority of the harm. That is to say, practical harms (the secondary harm) come as a result of formative harms (the primary harm). In cases of formative epistemic injustice, it is one's inability as a knower to do justice to their potentialities (primary or formative harm) that may lead to decreased economic gains (practical or secondary harm). For instance, a student of color who internalizes the white supremacist deficit discourse that students of color are less academically capable than white students and, for this reason, chooses to pursue a less academically demanding, and less profitable, career option than they would have chosen had it not been for their internalization of this deficit discourse, suffers a formative harm (i.e., internalization of deficit discourse) which in turn leads to a practical harm (i.e., lower income and quality of life). Causal priority aside, practical harms remain substantially more severe given that they are often more intensely felt and may pose a direct threat to one's survival and livelihood. As such, practical harms provide the more compelling, though not the only, reason for taking formative epistemic injustice seriously and for taking action to disrupt it.

Two Accounts of Formative Epistemic Injustice

When first introducing the concept of formative epistemic injustice, I mentioned that in calling this third conception formative epistemic injustice I am making use of Martin's terminology. Given substantive differences between Martin's account and my own, I should briefly mention what differentiates the two accounts. Martin builds his account of formative epistemic injustice on an argument advanced by Fricker (2013) where she maintains that

epistemic justice is a necessary condition for successful democratic deliberation and political contestation. Examining this condition in relation to questions regarding the inclusion of children in democratic deliberative processes, Martin (2018) argues that even when adults are justified in “being circumspect about children’s claims” during deliberation—given children’s lack of experience and proneness to error—they are obliged to ensure that they treat children in a way that does not undermine their ability to develop deliberative skills. Failure to do so constitutes a formative epistemic injustice, namely, “treatment that undermines the development of competences necessary for individuals and groups to successfully contest norms and policies within deliberation” (9).⁶ Such failure, Martin contends, is a formative epistemic injustice because it need not be the result of discriminatory treatment on behalf of the adult. An adult might simply be inconsiderate or lack the patience necessary to meaningfully engage with a child in deliberative circumstances. In Martin’s words, “the injustice in question is not so much a form of discrimination as the denial of an educational opportunity” rendering the injustice distinctly formative in nature (9).

The account of formative epistemic injustice that I present here, and have also presented elsewhere (Nikolaidis 2021, Nikolaidis forthcoming), differs from Martin’s in two fundamental respects. First, the scope of consideration in my account is much broader than Martin’s. Given Martin’s focus on democratic deliberation and his belief in the justifiability of being circumspect of children’s claims within deliberative situations, it is unreasonable to expect every deliberator and deliberative institution to pay close attention to children’s claims so as to avoid stunting their deliberative development. Such a responsibility falls primarily, though not exclusively, on deliberative institutions with educational bearing, such as schools. This implies that, from a

⁶ Elsewhere Martin (2016) provides a Habermasian account of formative epistemic injustice, referring to it as *developmental coercion*.

formative epistemic justice perspective, schools ought to treat children as “equal epistemic members of a deliberative community ... to provide children with important formative experiences relating to being treated as an independent and *credible* source of reasons” (9, emphasis in original). My account, on the other hand, addresses formative epistemic injustice as an all-encompassing category of educational justice which accounts for all educational wrongs that involve malformation and epistemic oppression—including Martin’s to the extent that it represents a case of epistemic oppression and malformation. As such, formative epistemic injustice is not limited to the confines of formal educational institutions (e.g., schools) and responsibility for formative epistemic justice extends to all members of society.

Second, the theoretical basis of my account is different than Martin’s and, as a result, so is the priority given to the educational wrong of formative epistemic injustice. Martin interprets formation exclusively through the lens of democratic deliberation; the formative component pertains to “the development of one’s agency as deliberator.” This makes Martin’s account primarily political and secondarily educational. The suppression of deliberative development, for Martin, is not important in its being a suppression of development *per se* but rather because of its negative effects on people’s ability to deliberate and contest policies and norms when they grow up. It is the need for participatory parity in political contestation that suggests a need for all people to develop their deliberative capacities and since participatory parity in political contestation presupposes the existence of deliberative capacities it implies their prior development. In other words, for Martin, even though formative justice (understood as the development of deliberative skills) is causally and temporally antecedent to political justice (understood as participatory parity in democratic deliberation), political justice predicates the need for formative justice which gives the requirements of political justice priority over the

requirements of formative justice. For my account it is the inverse: formative justice is the ultimate end and its demands receive priority over non-educational demands of justice, political or otherwise. For instance, if developing the capacity for democratic deliberation impedes other important formative aims it can justifiably be sidestepped on formative grounds. My account is, thus, primarily educational (the primary harm is the formative harm) and secondarily non-educational (the secondary harm is the practical harm, whether political, economic, moral, or otherwise). It is in this sense that my account is a *distinctly* educational account of epistemic injustice.⁷

Formative Considerations in Standard Conceptions of Epistemic Injustice

Before establishing the need for the distinct conception of formative epistemic injustice and the wrongs that it encompasses, it is important to address how standard conceptions of epistemic injustice fail to account for educational wrongs even when they entail formative considerations. In this section, I argue that the educational wrongs of standard conceptions are sidestepped unless they coincide with patterns of discrimination and/or maldistribution. When they do coincide with patterns of discrimination and/or maldistribution, educational wrongs tend to be subsumed under them instead of being afforded the status of wrongs in their own right. This gives the impression that educational wrongs are less important or incidental outcomes of non-educational wrongs; that they do not qualify as wrongs *per se*. Moreover, it implies that the educational harms of epistemic injustice are incidental outgrowths of discrimination and maldistribution. For this reason, standard conceptions of epistemic injustice are limited in their ability to account for educational wrongs. For the sake of brevity I will focus on Miranda

⁷ Interestingly, like Martin's account of formative epistemic injustice, Fricker's account of discriminatory epistemic injustice is also secondarily educational since it holds formative implications with regard to identity formation (see next section).

Fricker's and David Coady's accounts, though other non-educational accounts of epistemic injustice certainly face similar limitations.

Overlooking Formative Considerations

The first and main problem with standard accounts of epistemic injustice is that they focus on the wrongs of discrimination and maldistribution, not malformation. As a result, formative wrongs are overlooked unless they coincide with non-formative wrongs. This becomes clear in the work of one of Fricker's critics, Laura Beeby. Building on Fricker's example of the sexual harassment movement, Beeby (2011) argues that Fricker problematically reserves the term hermeneutical injustice for describing the interpretive gap experienced by the person who was harassed, Carmita Wood, and does not use it to describe the interpretive gap experienced by the harasser. Though Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as an inability to understand one's experiences due to a gap in collective interpretive resources, and although she admits that both Wood and her harasser were experiencing the same interpretive gap, it is only Wood who suffered a hermeneutical injustice. For Beeby, this is problematic because it locates the injustice "in the *background social conditions* of sexism, and not in anything distinctly epistemic" (483). In response, Fricker (2016) argues that while it is true that Wood and her harasser were experiencing the same interpretive gap, only Wood was treated unfairly. The harasser's cognitive disadvantage, while epistemically and morally harmful to him, was in his interest by allowing him to continue harassing Wood. For Fricker, then, the (epistemic and moral) harm is conceptually distinct from the (discriminatory) wrong and, while both are necessary to experience a hermeneutical injustice, it is the wrong that renders it an injustice in the first place, not the harm. In Fricker's (2007) words, "her unequal hermeneutical participation [which is a result of discrimination against her identity] is the deeper reason why Carmita Wood's cognitive

disablement constitutes an injustice” (153). While Wood’s harasser is indeed harmed as a knower, only Wood is wronged as a knower. It follows that Beeby erroneously equates the harm with the wrong in Fricker’s account of epistemic injustice.

Notwithstanding Beeby’s (2011) conflation of the wrong and harm in discriminatory epistemic injustice, she identifies the educational component of epistemic injustice that Fricker misses because of her emphasis on discrimination. She suggests that had the harasser known the implications of living in a patriarchal society which exploits and objectifies women he may have acted differently, have felt differently, or have become a more just person (484). It is to the extent that his epistemic and moral formation was restricted due to his cognitive disadvantages that he suffered a distinctly educational wrong.⁸ Given its emphasis on malformation, a formative epistemic injustice account is capacious enough to capture the wrong that Beeby talks of even though Fricker’s account fails to do so. More importantly, emphasizing discrimination as the exclusive wrong of epistemic injustice dismisses the fact that Wood also suffered a distinctly educational wrong to the extent that her cognitive disadvantage somehow inhibited her self-formation. In fact, the formative epistemic injustice experienced by Wood was much more severe and morally weighty than the one experienced by her harasser for two reasons. First, Wood experienced materially significant formative limitations (e.g., with regard to professional development or lifestyle choices) that women as a marginalized group are routinely subject to. Second, unlike the harasser who had more of a choice (even if not always viable) to alter the course of his distorted formation as a dominant member of society, Wood’s powerlessness shut her out of substantive opportunities to alter the course of her formation. Though Fricker’s

⁸ That Beeby (2011) has in mind such an educational wrong becomes apparent when she suggests that an account of hermeneutical injustice that place capabilities at its center would be more promising (485). Her reference to capabilities is based on Sen’s (2000) and Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach.

account hints to the formative implications of epistemic injustice, the emphasis on discrimination as the only wrong obscures or undermines the severity of the educational wrong which may have been as severe as the discriminatory wrong that Wood suffered.

Subsuming Formative Considerations

This brings me to the second problem with standard conceptions of epistemic injustice which is that, even when formative considerations are raised, they are subsumed under non-formative considerations making it difficult to tackle educational wrongs.

Consider again Fricker's account. With regard to testimonial injustice, Fricker (2007) notes two types of harms with formative significance. The first is loss of confidence in one's beliefs or "in her intellectual abilities to such an extent that she is genuinely hindered in her educational or other intellectual development" (47–48). Such loss of confidence then translates into knowledge loss; "some piece of knowledge he possesses is washed away" either in a one-time encounter or through "prolonged erosion of epistemic confidence ... repeatedly failing to gain items of knowledge he would otherwise have been able to gain" (49). One might be convinced that they did not know what they thought they knew or that they are incapable of trusting their epistemic capacities. This loss of knowledge may hinder someone's intellectual, or more broadly educational, development. The second type of harm is interference with identity formation (53). Testimonial injustice may prevent a person from participating in meaningful interactions which are essential for identity formation. Problematic interactions may also lead to skewed conceptions of identity, self-doubt, or internalization of external views of oneself through self-fulfilling prophecies (54–55). "Persistent testimonial injustice," Fricker states, "can indeed inhibit the very formation of self" (55). Hermeneutical injustice may also interfere with one's self-development or identity formation (163). In Fricker's words,

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, then, is to be understood ... also in terms of the very construction ... of selfhood. In certain social contexts, hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be. Thus ... they may be prevented from becoming who they are. (168)

It is apparent then, in Fricker's account, that the formative harms of discriminatory epistemic injustice, though not the only harms, are grave wrongs in themselves. Inhibiting one's ability to acquire important knowledge that is necessary for their self-formation is a grave formative wrong—a resounding case of malformation. While it is certainly important to keep in mind how discrimination is an important factor when it comes to the formative injustice that Fricker talks of, exclusive emphasis on discrimination as the only wrong detracts from the fact that such wrongs are distinctly educational wrongs that ought to be taken seriously in their own right, not just because or only if they happen to coincide with discriminatory wrongs. Attending to such wrongs, in other words, is not only a matter of social justice but also of educational justice.

The same can be said about the formative wrongs of distributive epistemic injustice. Coady (2010), for instance, tangentially discusses formative wrongs of distributive epistemic injustice, such as inability to develop as a citizen or professional in ways that are in one's interest to develop. He states:

The victims of unjust ignorance or error are likely to be ignorant of or in error about propositions knowledge of which would allow them, individually or collectively, to become more socially empowered. For example, at an individual level, they may be denied knowledge that would allow them to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or an

academic. At a collective level, they may end up voting in ways that are contrary to their interest because they have been fed falsehoods or had truths withheld from them. (111)

These examples are direct manifestations of how the presence or absence of knowledge can be formatively significant. They show how the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge opens up opportunities that allow people to develop in particular ways that are beneficial to them. Insofar as the lack (or denial) of such knowledge—in the form of unjust ignorance or error—forecloses possibilities for growth and flourishing, it constitutes a formative harm. However, Coady's account subsumes the malformation that is evident in his account under the wrong of maldistribution. This subsuming draws attention away from the educational wrong and places it on the distributive wrong. The educational wrong is thus reduced merely to an educational harm that happens to be an outgrowth of maldistribution. More importantly, this subsuming makes the educational wrong contingent on the presence of maldistribution such that if epistemic resources are distributed appropriately there can be no case of malformation.

Dismissing Formative Considerations

This brings me to the final problem with standard accounts of epistemic injustice, namely, their tendency to completely dismiss educational wrongs unless they coincide with discriminatory or distributive wrongs.

Consider again Fricker's (2007) account. Fricker describes cases of epistemic bad luck, where someone suffers the same epistemic harm that we would attribute to epistemic injustice, but the harm is not the result of prejudicial treatment. The lack of prejudicial treatment inclines Fricker to refrain from categorizing such cases as epistemic injustices.⁹ Such is the case with

⁹ Medina (2012, 213–214; 2013, 107) rejects Fricker's claim that the hermeneutical lacuna of a privileged person is merely a case of epistemic bad luck, when it leads them to commit an injustice against marginalized individuals. Rather, he claims, that it is a case of hermeneutical injustice because, even though the person who suffers from the cognitive disablement is not the same as the one who suffers the injustice, the injustice is committed as a result of the cognitive disablement. Notice that Medina's account of epistemic injustice also falls under discriminatory

Carmita Wood's harasser discussed above, in which the formative epistemic injustice suffered by him is disregarded for not involving discriminatory treatment. In another example, Fricker argues that when a listener mistrusts a shy, yet truthful, speaker whose behavior resembles that of a liar (avoids eye-contact, frequently pauses to think, etc.), they are following "an empirically reliable rule" that people who are honest maintain eye-contact and do not have to overthink what they will say (41–42). However, this may have formative repercussions for an individual. An insecure shy person who often experiences mistrust may doubt their ability to make valuable epistemic contributions in conversations and, thus, forfeit participation in conversations or other activities of educational import. This is clearly a case of malformation. Dismissing the non-discriminatory rejection of one's epistemic contribution on epistemically irrelevant grounds, problematically enables us to relinquish educational responsibility for formative preservation. This is especially important when it comes to children. A teacher who is not prejudiced against their students may still be a perpetrator of formative epistemic injustice if they privilege some students over others on the basis of epistemically irrelevant considerations (e.g., a student's confidence). The same can be argued about teachers who structure learning environments in ways that privilege some students over others in their capacity as knowers—such as conversation-based classes that privilege the outgoing over those less inclined to participate.

Fricker (2007) also precludes cases of credibility excess as epistemic injustices. Though she acknowledges the epistemic harms of credibility excess, such as developing "an epistemic arrogance ... [or becoming] closed-minded, dogmatic, [and] blithely impervious to criticism" (20), it is the accumulation of credibility excess that harms one as a knower, not each individual

epistemic injustice in that the locus of injustice is discrimination. The privileged person's hermeneutical disadvantage is a wrong but not to themselves; it is a wrong to the marginalized person who is unjustly discriminated against by the hermeneutically disadvantaged privileged person. Medina's account thus also dismisses cases of malformation.

case (21).¹⁰ Credibility excess, however, can have severe formative implications. A student's credibility excess, for example, might encourage them to exert less effort in their studies because they assume that they are capable of succeeding without hard work. The lack of effort or motivation to acquire further knowledge, the underdeveloped work ethic, and the intellectual pride or arrogance that result, could eventually cost the student opportunities for development or minimize their job prospects by leaving them unprepared to take advantage of opportunities that come up. Moreover, as José Medina (2011) argues, the "long-term effects of credibility excess [e.g., arrogance or dogmatism] can actually appear in the course of a testimonial exchange if this exchange is complex enough and goes for long enough" (17). As such, singular cases of credibility excess can constitute a formative epistemic injustice. This is especially so if the person ascribing the credibility excess is a person of epistemic authority (e.g., a teacher).

Coady's (2010) account of distributive epistemic injustice also dismisses cases of malformation that do not fall under the scope of maldistribution. It implies that as long as one is provided with adequate epistemic resources, they have no further grounds for claiming epistemic injustice, at least not of the distributive kind. This problematically assumes that the presence of knowledge is sufficient for people to make good use of it, which is not necessarily the case. For instance, providing high-quality content to marginalized students is not always sufficient for them to have high-quality educational experiences. This reasoning problematically equates equal opportunity to learn with equality of access to high-quality content, even when the surrounding educational environment is not conducive to taking advantage of the content knowledge one is offered (Timberlake, Burns Thomas, and Barrett 2017). Moreover, even when the environment is

¹⁰ Similar with his critique of Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice, Medina (2011) argues that the credibility excess of a speaker may constitute a testimonial injustice for their interlocutor whose credibility could, by relation, be deflated. Again, testimonial injustice here is the result of discrimination.

conducive to learning (say we include “good learning environment” in our list of epistemic goods to be distributed) substantive access to epistemic goods cannot alone guarantee that one will do justice to their formative capacities. Consider Paul Butler, a law professor at Georgetown, whose ivy league education, career opportunities as a lawyer and prosecutor, and high social status attest to his being given a proper share of epistemic goods and formative opportunities. Credentials notwithstanding, it took getting arrested under false accusations and being mistreated by the police as many black men like him are treated on a daily basis to realize that working for this system was making him part of the problem rather than the solution (Butler 2009). Butler’s experience is an example of malformation; he internalized faulty ideologies that impeded him from fully grasping the meaning of his experiences and become who he aspired to become.

Coady’s (2010) account also disregards the formatively debilitating effects of ideology. Often people act or vote against their interests not because of ignorance but to preserve their worldview and sense of identity. Jonathan Metzl (2019) for instance describes the case of a poor white cab driver from Tennessee dying of liver cirrhosis and lacking health insurance who opposed the Affordable Care Act because he “would rather die” than support a program that is beneficial for people of color (3–4). Now certainly all racist beliefs are premised on the distribution of falsehoods about racial hierarchies. Nonetheless, the ideological nature of such beliefs ties them to their adherents’ sense of identity, rendering them difficult to abandon even in the face of proof of their erroneousness. Since such ideologies are “epistemologically disabling,” they “prevent us from gaining knowledge about features of reality” (Stanley 2015, 198). The problem therefore is not the lack of knowledge but rather the harm in one’s ability to acquire knowledge, even if said knowledge is readily available. Moreover, the power of ideology is often

strong enough to be impervious to rational deliberation and has a habitual hold over us (Sullivan 2006), rendering even the distribution of epistemic skills like critical thinking pointless. The problem here is, therefore, not one of maldistribution but malformation. People who have suffered malformation have been harmed as knowers in a way that prevents them from learning to think differently. This problem can only be resolved by restoring their formative capacities, a far more complex remedial measure than the redistribution of epistemic resources. Of course, malformation is not an insurmountable barrier as attested by those who manage to escape the grip of ideology. Yet it compromises the epistemic agency of its victims and, in doing so, makes the task of overcoming formative epistemic injustice ever more formidable.

Conclusion: Responsibility for Formative Epistemic Injustice

I have argued that formative epistemic injustice is a distinctly educational form of epistemic injustice. It is a conception of epistemic injustice that accurately reflects the formative wrongs that epistemically oppressive environments engender. While formative epistemic injustice places great weight on the educational injustices committed by epistemic authorities of all kinds, it, importantly, also shows that we all bear educational responsibility simply by virtue of interacting with others, transmitting our beliefs and knowledge, and participating in epistemically oppressive practices. We ought to become more responsible people *qua* educators—parents, teachers, authority figures, friends, peers, etc.—with an ethical duty toward everyone we are called on to educate, formally or informally. We ought to identify and critique injustice, to refrain from supporting epistemically oppressive structures, and to remain open to knowledge from all sources. Formative epistemic injustice compels us to recognize our influence and be careful and considerate about the way that we interact with others, about what we choose to expose others to, and about the epistemic practices we engage in. Most importantly, however,

formative epistemic injustice allows us to see that many social injustices are likely the result of educational injustices that occurred prior to them. Many practical harms are the result of antecedent formative harms. Accordingly, many forms of social oppression could be mitigated by developing conditions of formative epistemic justice.

Although formative epistemic injustice is primarily a structural form of injustice, it does not erase individual responsibility and does not exonerate privileged individuals from unjust acts they perform out of ignorance. One can be a victim of injustice and still remain blameworthy for injustices they commit. As epistemic agents we are all responsible for the knowledge we seek out and the choices we make about who to consider a credible source of information. Relatedly, as moral agents we are responsible for our conduct and who we become. However, if we are to take seriously the problem of educational injustice as it manifests in today's information age, we must not downplay its structural nature. If anything, doing so will inevitably contribute to the perpetuation of a toxic epistemically oppressive environment. Formative epistemic injustice shows that we are all (and most of all privileged individuals), to some degree, responsible for and complicit in many social injustices even if they are not committed by us. In other words, formative epistemic injustice expands and amplifies responsibility for injustice without reducing the responsibility or blameworthiness of perpetrators of injustices. It emphasizes that we must all do our part to disrupt epistemic oppression and malformation.

Finally, and most importantly, I wish to highlight the vulnerability of children to formative epistemic injustice and to emphasize the need of assuming greater educational responsibility for the formative experiences of children. While adults also suffer from cognitive disablements and can be victims of formative epistemic injustice, children—whose sense of selfhood is relatively unformed—are more vulnerable to malformation and identity suppression,

more impressionable and susceptible to manipulation, and more sensitive to feedback about their abilities. Malformation at a young age can moreover impede formation toward desirable directions and harm one's capacity as a knower in ways that severely compromise their epistemic agency as adults. This is especially important to heed given that children are likely to experience multiple types of epistemic injustice: formative because of their more fluid sense of selfhood and lack of experience, discriminatory because they are disadvantaged at least on the basis of age (Murrin 2013), and distributive because they are likely to be given less information than most adults. As a truly educational category of epistemic injustice, then, formative epistemic injustice foregrounds the wrongs and harms of epistemic injustice to children.

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