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An Interview with Miranda Fricker

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*Miranda Fricker's research carefully negotiates the fields of ethics and epistemology, and the places and points where they overlap and intersect. Her 2007 text *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* is particularly noteworthy in this regard. It seamlessly integrates these research areas and, in so doing, turns a critical eye on the common assumption that feminist epistemology, characterized by its focus on the role of gender oppression within knowledge practices, is a marginal field of social epistemology. Fricker challenges her readers to consider the thesis that social and feminist epistemologies are more thoroughly interconnected than is traditionally assumed.*

Keywords: Miranda Fricker; Epistemic Injustice; Ethics

The interview that follows was conducted in the spring of 2011, four years after the publication of *Epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007). While the text has received no shortage of attention for the unique language and revolutionary perspective it offers, the aim of this discussion is to give readers the opportunity to step back from the text. This interview seeks to present Fricker's work in a broader context, so that both new and seasoned readers might look around and through the text to find new insights to appreciate, new vantage points to consider, and new paths to follow.

Q: I'd like to start by asking about the context in which your book *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* is situated. It seems to me to be, in the first place, a contribution to the field of social epistemology. How do you understand or define this relatively new field of philosophical inquiry?

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A: The best way to answer that question is anecdotally, in relation to where I was coming from when I first started thinking in terms of epistemic injustice. As a student doing an interdisciplinary Master's in Women's Studies I had been introduced to feminist philosophical ideas about situated knowledge, standpoint theory, and more generally the relations between rationality and power. I found the questions that feminists were asking intensely interesting, but I felt frustrated with the philosophical frameworks in which they were then being discussed. Most of all, I thought there must be ways of treating these issues that did not presuppose any general idea of philosophy, let alone reason more generally, as gendered. I was always impressed by the brilliant historical cases made by some feminists to the effect that philosophical and cultural *conceptions* of reason were masculinist; but I remained utterly committed to the separation of such claims from more radical, and I think ultimately disastrously sexist, claims made by others to the effect that the activity of philosophy itself, or still worse, reason itself, is masculine. The power of reason is a natural phenomenon, a complex human ability, and it is not to be conflated with historically specific conceptions of it. (Apart from anything else, the conflation always struck me as grotesquely intellectualist.) Women are rational beings, I reasoned, so reason *per se* is as much ours as anyone else's. Philosophy too is *ours*, or it can be; and if historically it has not been much shaped by women, then let us have more women doing it and see what happens.

An interest in the (as I saw it) misguided postmodernist approach to the relation of reason and power led me to doctoral work advancing what I called "perspectival realism." I exploited the visual metaphor of a perspective to argue that the very idea of there being many perspectives in which the world may reasonably be viewed presupposes the unity of the world so viewed. But my attraction to epistemic pluralism—which I was considering specifically in relation to the social world—took me to the idea that when one social group's epistemic perspective is eclipsed by that of another group, typically a more powerful one, there is some kind of injustice going on. This was the phenomenon I first described in my doctoral dissertation as epistemic injustice (roughly it is what I came later to specify in terms of hermeneutical injustice). At that time, these sorts of issues—obviously Marxist in origin—were being discussed in feminist philosophical circles, but not really anywhere else in English-speaking philosophy. I drew a lot of inspiration and support from those feminist discussions and I hope ultimately to have made some kind of contribution to them. But my own emphasis has always been on the "philosophy" in feminist philosophy, if you see what I mean. That is, I conceive of the ideas I have wanted to promote as entirely continuous with fairly universal, barely theoretical ideas about what discrimination or unfairness consists in, for instance, and in this sense the ideas presuppose no broader theoretical feminist philosophical commitments—certainly none regarding the allegedly gendered nature of philosophy, for instance. (In this way, I think of the category "feminist philosophy" as crucially different from a category such as "Marxist philosophy," whose ideas cannot so easily be separated from the weighty body of historical materialist theoretical commitments.)

Later, when I started work on material for the book *Epistemic injustice*, there were shifts taking place in epistemology that generated new possibilities for conversation. Gradually, virtue epistemology and social epistemology were gaining pace (or, at least, I was becoming more cognizant of the considerable possibilities represented by these new frameworks), and by the time I was finished I felt I was part of three or four different philosophical conversations instead of only one. Not only feminism now, but virtue ethics, virtue epistemology, and social epistemology. And certain connections with political philosophy were beginning to clarify themselves in my mind too. This new sense of connectedness was and is a very positive thing for me intellectually. (Not least, because for a long time I simply did not know how to explain to others what I was working on, which sometimes had me wondering whether I was really working on anything at all.)

So—to answer your question at last—yes, I would situate my work on epistemic injustice in social epistemology; although not exclusively so, and only where the field is understood to naturally incorporate a fully socialized conception of knowers and inquirers in their relations of power and social identity. It would make no sense to situate my work in something called social epistemology unless it were understood in this suitably capacious way.

Q: What do you think the promises, or possibly the pitfalls, of social epistemology might be?

A: Let us think about the different sorts of work that social epistemology gives rise to. One is the more empirically informed social epistemological work that is now burgeoning, and I think of Alvin Goldman as a trail-blazer in this connection—indeed his work has been crucial in carving out a niche for social epistemology quite generally. So there is an obvious connection with partly technical work that models epistemic practices with a view to assessing how truth conducive they are and so on. But it would be a mistake to think that all social epistemology needs to be of that type. Increased philosophical attention to the reality of epistemic practices can be achieved in different ways. We can also do it through the lens of an interest in the ethics and politics of the epistemic relations that are played out in this or that practice. That is the approach I take. Speaking personally, when it comes to philosophical method my preference is for a certain non-scientific naturalism—naturalism in the broadest sense, signaling the importance of close observation of human practices and the attempt to explain them. I like being able to look at the world through a lens that is maximally informative about the human relations in play (epistemic, ethical, social, political ...), and then see if we can bring philosophical structure to bear in order to help explain what those relations are, and how they are, or are not, interwoven.

I think it is fair to see this as a naturalism of a broadly Humean kind. You look and see how the world is, and then you put philosophy to work to help explain and understand it. Of course, this is very different from what naturalism sometimes means, because sometimes it goes along with a reductive ambition,

where social and other phenomena are all reduced to the physical. But part of what I take from feminism is that the lens through which you view the social world is a lens shaped to reveal relations of power and powerlessness. This does not mean there is anything wrong with doing social epistemology with a different lens, but the lens that reveals the things I am most interested in is one that can detect relations of power in the practices we are observing and hoping to illuminate.

This connects with an independent methodological habit which I find very productive, and which I derive from feminism: to look and see what goes on when a practice is *dysfunctional*, rather than primarily observing it in its functional mode. To investigate justice by implied contrast with forms of injustice, for instance. That is why I framed the book in terms of epistemic *injustice*. Because, while I do not doubt there are many subjects that can be perfectly well illuminated by looking at the functional case, I think there are some subject areas that do not come to light properly unless you look at what is going on in the dysfunctional case, and especially the dysfunctional case from the point of view of those who are at the losing end. I regard this as a permissive methodological principle. It is of course not compulsory to proceed in this way, but it is a good thing to give it a go, and see what insights it may throw up.

Q: Now that we have established the context and the methodology of the book, for readers who might not be familiar with *Epistemic injustice*, could you provide a brief overview of what you say in the book?

A: In the book, I try to explore the relation between epistemic participation and relations of power in slightly different ways. I look at two basic kinds of epistemic injustice. The first is what I call testimonial injustice, which I always intended to be a fairly broad category, covering not only all cases of telling, but other kinds of assertion which are not quite telling—making a suggestion, or an argument, airing an idea, putting forward a hypothesis, or trying to persuade. Sometimes I wonder if I ought to have called it plain “credibility injustice” or “assertion injustice” or something. But I had methodological reasons in the book for focusing on testimony, reasons that are connected with a view of Edward Craig’s I explore there which puts testimony at the heart of what it is to know. This explains the slightly over-specific label “testimonial injustice.”¹ At any rate, testimonial injustice happens whenever prejudice on the part of a hearer causes them to attribute a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.

The second kind of epistemic injustice I explore is related not quite to credibility, but rather to intelligibility, and I call it hermeneutical injustice. That is because it relates to our powers of interpreting the social world and in particular interpreting our own social experiences. Hermeneutical injustice is unlike testimonial injustice in the sense that testimonial injustice has a perpetrator. If somebody suffers testimonial injustice, then it is because someone has done it to them. But if somebody is suffering from hermeneutical injustice, it is not the case that anybody in

particular will have done it to them; rather it is a structural phenomenon. It happens when a certain group is hermeneutically marginalized—that is, members do not get to participate fully in those social processes of meaning-making through which shared concepts and modes of interpretation are formed for us to draw on in interpreting the social world. Members of such groups are more likely than others to be in a position where they have a certain social experience for which they do not have the concepts or interpretive tropes to be able to render it intelligible to others, or possibly even to themselves.

Let me round off with an example of each. An example of testimonial injustice can be found towards the end of Harper Lee's *To kill a mockingbird* when Tom Robinson is not believed by the all-white jury. They perceive him as less than trustworthy in what he is saying, because he is black. More specifically, their prejudice about black men's trustworthiness when it comes to their sexual conduct in relation to white females massively deflates the level of credibility that he receives, and they find him guilty of rape. An example of hermeneutical injustice is found in the case of a woman who experiences sexual harassment at a time prior to that concept's being in use to enable her to communicate or even herself fully understand her experience. In so far as the absence of the concept "sexual harassment" is the result of people like her being hermeneutically marginalized—under-contributing to the generation of collective meanings—then the conceptual lacuna which handicaps her as an interpreter of her experience entails a hermeneutical injustice.

Q: Under the heading of hermeneutical injustice, you make an interesting content–form distinction, according to which an injustice can arise as a result of either what is said, or the style in which it is said. Could you explain that distinction a little further?

A: The thought is that the category of hermeneutical injustice should not just apply to cases where the content is communally unintelligible. A speaker's performative style—their style of speech and body language—can be insufficiently collectively understood too, and in a way that presents a case of hermeneutical injustice which mirrors the content-centered version. Where someone has a style of communication which, owing to hermeneutical marginalization, is not sufficiently collectively understood, he can be at general risk of being unjustly misunderstood—for instance, taken as aggressive when he is not expressing aggression, or taken as shame-faced when in fact his eyes are cast down as a sign of deference. This might apply to certain ethnic minorities. And it can apply to gender, where women's style of communication is such that in many contexts it lacks authority compared to men's. In recent British political history, one finds the example of Margaret Thatcher who was famously trained to lower her voice by a couple of octaves in order that she might assume more gravitas in parliamentary debates. In short, I think that lacking a collectively accepted style for an attempted communication can be as disadvantageous as lacking the requisite content. And where the difficulties

originate in the fact of hermeneutical marginalization, they seem relevantly similar phenomena to both count as cases of hermeneutical injustice.

Q: It seems that there is a lot to be said about hermeneutical injustice, and that the concept is rich with resources and topics to be explored. Why is it that you spend less time investigating it in *Epistemic injustice* than you do testimonial injustice? Is it because testimonial injustice is more fundamental or primary than hermeneutical injustice? And if they are related, how so?

A: The main explanation for the unequal length of treatment in the book is simply that so much of what I needed to say about epistemic injustice in general was already explained in relation to testimonial injustice (the background power relations, the nature of the wrong, the epistemic and ethical hybridity of the corrective virtue, etc.). This meant that most of the explanatory background had already been given by the time I came to explain the independent but equally important phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice. A second factor, which I mentioned briefly earlier, is that in the context of writing the book, one of the organizing ideas was (Edward Craig's idea) that testimony is absolutely fundamental to the concept of knowledge, and this also influenced the order of exposition, and the sheer quantity of material I wanted to present in relation to testimonial injustice. Away from the book, one might want to present things differently. For instance, one might want to say that hermeneutical injustice is prior to testimonial injustice, in so far as unjustly lacking the conceptual and interpretive tools you need to understand some significant patch of your social experience is prior the difficulties of getting your word received without prejudice once you have put your thoughts together in intelligible form. So you can think of one or the other kind of epistemic injustice as more basic depending on what sort of priority you are looking to. But, I would not want to insist that one is more important than the other. They are equally important phenomena, it seems to me.

There is another slight shift of emphasis I would like to register since finishing the book. While I still think that the concept of epistemic injustice is correctly captured in the idea of someone's being wronged in their capacity as a knower, I would prefer now to emphasize that "epistemic injustice" is intended as a thoroughly generic term. In the first instance, we should think of there being two fundamental species of epistemic injustice, namely distributive and discriminatory. Testimonial and hermeneutical injustice belong to the discriminatory species of epistemic injustice, but there are of course cases of sheer distributive epistemic injustice that are extremely important. Unfair inequalities in the distribution of epistemic goods—education, information—is obviously a very important form of injustice.² The reason I set it aside at the start of the book is not because I thought it was less important, but because I thought it was already well understood. The structure of it is obvious—it fits with the familiar distributive paradigm—and most people will have often had the thought that access to education or to the internet is something that ought to be equal, or is in some ways susceptible to

unfairness. That is why I focused exclusively on the two kinds of discriminatory epistemic injustice in the book. But I think it would be useful to think of the general label of epistemic injustice as being this maximally broad category which subdivides into discriminatory forms on the one hand and distributive forms on the other.

Q: Keeping with the discriminatory forms of epistemic injustice you discuss in the book, you suggest that virtuous hearing would be a way to remedy or combat epistemic injustice. How does virtuous hearing help us out?

A: It is a good idea to address the question of what can be done to avoid epistemic injustice or mitigate it when it happens. In the case of testimonial injustice, it is a specific agent—either an individual or a collective body—that inflicts the injustice on someone. This means that the hearer could in principle develop a corrective virtue according to which they reliably neutralize the influence of prejudice on the credibility judgments they make. Now, neutralizing the influence of prejudice can be a matter of actually rethinking, on the hoof, the credibility judgments that you are making, because you are sensitive to the possibility that in certain contexts prejudice is likely to be depressing the level of credibility you spontaneously attribute to a speaker. So you take corrective action. Alternatively, if that is too difficult, or if the whole business is too indeterminate, it can be a matter of the virtuous hearer just suspending judgment; or, if they have a special responsibility to make a judgment (and assuming they have the time and resources to do so) then they had better seek further evidence, and so on. Like most virtues, the form that testimonial justice can take as a virtue of hearers will vary, depending on the context.

In the case of hermeneutical injustice, we have to look to what virtue on the part of the hearer is going to mitigate things, because the injustice itself is structural and there is no agent who is doing the injustice. But the injustice will of course *show up* in attempts at communication that fail or are less successful than they otherwise might be owing to the background fact of hermeneutical injustice. So, taking the sexual harassment case from the 1960s example that I give in the book, the person who wants to protest or at least describe the experience she is having of what we would now call sexual harassment, is put at a communicative disadvantage so that she is very likely to encounter testimonial injustice as well when she tries to render this hard-to-communicate thought communicable. That means that the burdens on the hearer are doubly difficult. What the hearer needs to be able to do if she is to be a virtuous hearer in those circumstances is display sensitivity to the possibility that the reason this person is not making much sense is not the speaker's shortcoming but rather something objective—a shortcoming in the collective store of communicative resources—and try in some way to correct for that.

As in the testimonial justice case, quite what it takes to count as having this virtue, the virtue I call hermeneutical justice, is going to vary from case to case. It might just be that you think fleetingly: “I can't really understand what this person

is trying to tell me. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe it's their fault. Maybe it's nobody's fault. But I'm not going to judge them negatively; I'm just going to leave it there." Or maybe if you have a special responsibility in this case to learn what she is trying to tell you—maybe you are her teacher, or her social worker, or her friend—then you would need to take more positive action and perhaps ask some helpfully open-ended questions, or ask her if she has talked to anyone else about this or to tell you a bit more about what happened and how it made her feel and so on. That would be a more active way of displaying or at least approximating the virtue.

Q: You provide an ethical response to a situation of injustice. Traditionally, there is a distinction between political philosophy, which deals with justice, and ethics, which deals with morality. You use both terms: how do you see the two areas overlapping?

A: I think it was right to proceed in explicating (discriminatory) epistemic injustice by first looking at the ethics and the epistemology of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, because I think we need first to understand the nature of the ethical wrong that these kinds of injustice do. And I wanted to explore the close entanglement of the ethical with the epistemic in these phenomena. But by the end of the book I try to indicate that the solutions to these problems will not only be ethical, but political. That is, they must involve structural social change—most obviously in the relations of power that underlie both kinds of epistemic injustice—rather than merely individual change in terms of increased discursive virtue. Furthermore, it became obvious to me that some of the most important cases, certainly of testimonial injustice, concern the agency of institutional bodies. For instance, cases of testimonial injustice where the prejudiced hearer is not a private individual but rather a jury, a tribunal, an employer, or the State. And so what I am trying to start thinking through now is the role of both testimonial and hermeneutical justice in the democratic polity—in securing, for instance, political legitimacy, or freedom of speech, or even political freedom. In this last connection, for example, any view of political freedom—and I have the republican conception principally in mind—that gives an important role to the citizen's power to *contest* an infringement implicitly requires that there be testimonial justice in the system so that you do not get unfairly disabled contesters. If, for example, you are subject to testimonial injustice on the part of an industrial tribunal in the case where you attempt to contest an "interference" such as your being sacked without due reason, then in so far as the testimonial injustice means you fail to contest, you are in that degree politically unfree on the republican conception. This to me is a very interesting result, and I hope to pursue the connection between testimonial justice and the republican conception of political freedom. Seeing the connection helps put a spotlight on the risky nature of the epistemic stratum of political freedom which I think is often missed.

Pursuing connections between forms of epistemic injustice and different political values is one aspect of taking a more political approach toward matters of epistemic injustice. The other aspect is that one can simply direct philosophical attention to what institutional bodies get up to, and try to theorize how an institutional body might possess the virtue of testimonial justice, or the vice of testimonial injustice. That is something I have started work on by thinking about what it is for institutional bodies to have virtues and vices at all.⁴ I hope to try and develop both lines of thought together, as part of an attempt to develop questions of epistemic injustice squarely in the political frame.

Q: A number of commentators on the book have raised this question about the political dimension, so it is exciting that you will be exploring these issues yourself. I would also like to know what you think the work you do in this book enables *other people* to do, either within philosophy, or if there is interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work you would like to see emerge from the work that you have done in *Epistemic injustice*?

A: I am really just so pleased that people are reading it and writing about it. If I had a self-indulgent wish list, one thing I would have on the list—because I would find it really helpful—is that there should be more empirical work on how prejudice affects attributions of credibility. Within philosophy, I would love to see developed the connections between epistemic justice and the various political values I have already mentioned, but also the significance of epistemic justice for public deliberation quite generally. I feel there are a lot of connections to be made in political philosophy, and since I am a newcomer to political philosophy, I could frankly use all the help I can get. Once anyone writes a book, the ideas in it become public property, and I am thrilled that issues of epistemic injustice are now, in that sense, public. It means there is a much better chance that the philosophical connections I believe are there to be made will in fact be developed.

Notes

[1] See Craig (1990).

[2] I am indebted to a paper by David Coady on this point. See Coady (2010).

[3] See Fricker (2010).

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