

***Reply to Laura Beeby***  
**José Medina, Vanderbilt University**

I am grateful for Laura Beeby’s clear and perceptive critical commentary of my article “Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism”. Although I agree with a great deal of Beeby’s analysis, in my reply I will focus on two areas of disagreement: one concerning her remarks about hermeneutical resources, and the other concerning her remarks about shared responsibility for hermeneutical injustice.

In the first place, far from trying to shift our attention away from hermeneutical resources, my polyphonic contextualism and my argument in the paper under discussion try to show precisely that we need to pay attention to expressive and interpretative resources in a more pluralistic and situated way, taking into account not only those resources that are widely or universally shared, but also those that are only shared by subgroups in virtue of their distinctive experiences, and even those nascent meanings that only some individuals (who do not yet constitute a well-formed public) are struggling to articulate. I argued that there are typically more hermeneutical resources than those shared by *all* the members of a collective. My argument was not an argument against shared hermeneutical resources in general, but an argument against Fricker’s use of the notion of “the collective resource” *in the singular*. According to my polyphonic contextualism, such notion is a problematic analytical tool that can easily lead to distortions, for it captures at best *only* the hermeneutical resources of mainstream culture or of the established social imaginary. My polyphonic contextualism underscores that a collective is often heterogeneous and contains subgroups and diverse standpoints, and that although it is important to identify the hermeneutical resources that are shared within a collective, we always need to ask “shared *by whom?*”, so that we can properly understand how shared and non-shared resources can be used in situated communicative dynamics among particular subjects. In other words, any appeal to hermeneutical resources in our analysis has to be properly contextualized by taking into account what is shared and what is not shared by subjects, groups, and entire collectives. My polyphonic contextualism does not try to fracture understanding and interpretation to the point that nothing is antecedently shared and we are left with idiolects à la Davidson; it simply tries to bring our hermeneutical analyses in synch with the inner diversity and heterogeneity of interpretative communities and subcommunities.

In the second place, I fully agree with Beeby’s remarks about *shared responsibility* in the concluding paragraph. I am grateful to Beeby for identifying a key area of convergence between Fricker’s views and mine. Both of us agree that “we are all responsible for the epistemic virtue and vice present in *our* social and political institutions.” But this is not at all incompatible with also taking responsibility for what we say and do in particular communicative contexts. In fact, on my view, these areas of epistemic responsibility are interconnected and do not function independently, as Beeby and Fricker seem to think. Following Fricker, Beeby writes as if changing “structures” and changing “the hearts and minds of individual communicators” were independent tasks. On my view, institutions can only display hermeneutical virtues when and because individuals and communities

have developed fair patterns of communication, and have learned to speak and listen to each other. Institutions cannot approximate the virtue of hermeneutical justice without improving the sensibilities of the subjects who are part of those institutions. For example, for the police force or the immigration authority of a country to become epistemically virtuous, police officers and immigration officers would have to learn to give a more fair hermeneutical treatment to those they interact with; and for this to happen, it is not enough to formulate the right protocols: the subjects following those protocols need to have the appropriate sensibilities and their “hearts and minds” have to be in it. On the other hand, I do not think that the mitigation of hermeneutical injustices and the achievement of hermeneutical virtue are things that individuals can do *by themselves*, for they certainly need institutional support and changes in the structural conditions of their interactions. If I called special attention to individual and interpersonal aspects of our epistemic responsibility with respect to hermeneutical injustices, it is because these elements are missing in Fricker’s account, not because I do not think that such responsibility has also a crucial collective and structural dimension. I think it would be a mistake to fall into a false dichotomy between individual and collective responsibility in our discussions of epistemic justice, as if the achievement of justice had to be left entirely in the hands of individuals, or entirely in the hands of institutions and structural conditions. In my new book *The Epistemology of Resistance*,<sup>1</sup> I argue for a *social connection model* of epistemic responsibility. What has primacy in this model is neither individual nor collective responsibility, but *shared* responsibility — that is, the responsibility of interconnected individuals in social networks. Leading political theorists such as Iris Marion Young<sup>2</sup> and Larry May<sup>3</sup> have also put the emphasis on shared responsibility in recent discussions of community responses to injustice. My own contextualist model of shared epistemic responsibility is inspired by these theorists. I could not be happier to see that Beeby’s concluding remarks also put the emphasis on the *shared* aspects of epistemic responsibility.

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> Medina, José. 2012. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming December, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Young, Iris M. 2011. *Responsibility for justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> See May, Larry. 1993. *Sharing responsibility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; May, Larry. 2005. *Crimes against humanity: A Normative Account*. New York: Cambridge University Press; May, Larry. 2010. *Genocide*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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