

***How is hermeneutical injustice related to 'white ignorance'? Reply to José Medina's "Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities"***

**Miranda Fricker, University of Sheffield**

I have learned an enormous amount from all the discussions of epistemic injustice in the *Review and Reply Collective*, and I have found it virtually impossible to know how to intervene. However, something in José Medina's discussion of hermeneutical injustice and, in particular, its relation to the phenomenon that Charles Mills has termed 'white ignorance', has opened up an issue to which I feel I can make a contribution. That is, despite being unsure about how best to relate the phenomenon I wrote about under the head 'hermeneutical injustice' to the phenomenon of white ignorance<sup>1</sup> (something Gaile Pohlhaus has also written about under the more generic label 'willful hermeneutical ignorance'), I am inclined to express some disagreement with the direction Medina wants to take the category 'hermeneutical injustice'.

The issue, as I see it, will turn on the more general question how far it is appropriate to cast the interested 'ignorance' of a given dominant group or class as any kind of hermeneutical injustice, or whether it is better conceived as a separate kind of injustice. I suspect the latter, whereas Medina argues for an expanded concept of hermeneutical injustice that would include white ignorance. Terms are mere terms, of course, and anyone can define them as they see fit. If there is any real disagreement between us on this therefore (and I think perhaps there is) it will not be about how to use the term, but rather about the underlying question of how best to classify different kinds of injustice — which ones belong together, and which ones should be classified independently.

Forms of motivated ignorance such as 'white ignorance' form an important and distinctive class of injustices within our epistemic practices, and my own view is that to bring these under the concept of hermeneutical injustice would entail a very significant expansion indeed. I had not intended the label 'hermeneutical injustice' to cover such cases, for I believe they are on the whole different in kind.

My aim in coining the label 'hermeneutical injustice' was to theorize a particular phenomenon, one where for unfair reasons (reasons of local or global hermeneutical marginalisation) someone might be unable to make sense of a patch of their own experience that it was non-trivially in their interests to make sense of — either in their own mind, and/or in its communication to at least some significant social others (such as an employer, or a social worker, or a jury...). My hope in exploring such examples was to illuminate a sub-category of genuine hermeneutical inabilities: those that are structurally unjust, so that they are wrongful even while they are *epistemically non-culpable*. That lack of epistemic culpability was essential to the phenomenon I was trying to identify, and it is partly that which, I take it, makes it different in kind from most cases of white ignorance.

A different and broader project from my own in the domain of the hermeneutical would be to identify or categorise the range of epistemic practices that are *wrongful*

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaile Pohlhaus makes a similar point in 'Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a

*and epistemically culpable*, owing to some epistemic fault or vice such as wishful thinking, denial, self-interested selectiveness as regards the evidence, suppression of historical context, and so on. Such wrongful epistemic practices would include all those that allowed privileged self-interest to influence what evidence is or isn't attended to, or which interpretations gain assent and are integrated into the motivational system that governs a person or group's agency. Among such wrongful and epistemically culpable epistemic practices we would surely find those pertaining to white ignorance.

White ignorance names a certain kind of individual or collective *motivated cognitive bias* in what evidence and/or social interpretations relatively privileged groups attend to and/or integrate into the rest of their beliefs and deliberations—specifically applied to the context of the USA it names the motivated bias on the part of white citizens taken as a group that leaves them 'ignorant' (in this special sense) of the situation of black citizens taken as a group. We might say it names a form of collective *denial* in the white community about some uncomfortable truths.<sup>2</sup> (And there will doubtless be analogue cases in the UK as elsewhere! with each taking its own specific form.) As Rebecca Mason has put it: 'white ignorance is a kind of epistemically culpable and morally noxious *miscognition* that facilitates the maintenance of the status quo.'<sup>3</sup> This is clearly a wrongful epistemic dysfunction, but it is not at all obvious we should categorize it as a kind of hermeneutical injustice. I doubt that we should. Let's remind ourselves of some of the different forms it takes, so that we might assess the possibilities of fit.

Writing in the social-political context of the U.S., Charles Mills characterises white ignorance in relation to what he calls 'racialized causality' — that is, there is a phenomenon of whites not grasping certain facts or holding certain truthful interpretations of their social world where a significant part of the explanation why not is *race*. Such racially caused ignorance might take the form of an individual's active racism blocking certain truths, or it might be more structural in form. Mills says in this connection:

[T]he racialized causality I am invoking needs to be expansive enough to include both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation, which may be operative even if the cognizer in question is not racist... But in both cases, racialized causality can give rise to what I am calling white ignorance, straightforwardly for a racist cognizer, but also indirectly for a nonracist cognizer who may form mistaken beliefs (e.g., that after the abolition of slavery in the United States, blacks generally had opportunities equal to whites) because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge, though without prejudice himself.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In Mills' list of elements it is clear that various forms of motivated irrationality, denial, or other forms of epistemic culpability characterize the phenomenon. He says, for instance: 'the dynamic role of white group interests needs to be recognized and acknowledged as a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance' ('White Ignorance', in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (NY: SUNY Press, 2007) p. 34).

<sup>3</sup> Mason, 2011; p. 302.

<sup>4</sup> Mills 2007; p. 21

In the case of the straightforward 'racist cognizer', there is clearly epistemic culpability: depending on quite what form the racism takes, he or she is presumably allowing hatred (or some such emotional state) to distort the perception of the social world — a textbook case of motivated irrationality, and motivated irrationality is always epistemically culpable. This kind of white ignorance, then, is not at all the same thing as hermeneutical injustice. First, this white ignorance is epistemically culpable, whereas the person who suffers hermeneutical injustice is not (and nor is anyone else in the vicinity). But also, second, there is the question of the requisite hermeneutical lacuna: in the case of the straightforward racist's white ignorance there is no hermeneutical lacuna, indeed no poverty *of concepts* at all, for the white racist's ignorance is not caused by any lack of conceptual-interpretive resources. Let all the hermeneutical resources stand available to him, what he lacks is the epistemic self-discipline to apply the extant resources in an epistemically responsible way so as to achieve cognitive contact with reality. Given these features, the white ignorance of the straightforward racist cognizer is not any kind of hermeneutical injustice. I am not sure what Medina would say about this, but it is certainly open to him to simply agree.

Let us therefore look to the other sort of case that Mills gives us. This is the 'more impersonal, social-structural' case of the non-racist cognizer who nonetheless 'may form mistaken beliefs...because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge, though without prejudice himself'. In this sort of case the individual may not be at any epistemic fault, and in that sense the white ignorance might be epistemically non-culpable. This introduces a structural affinity with hermeneutical injustice and is thereby more inviting to the possibility that it might properly be conceived under that head.

But what about the other key feature of hermeneutical injustice, namely that the person suffering the injustice is affected by *objectively inadequate hermeneutical resources*, a hermeneutical lacuna? Well, it depends. On the one hand, one can imagine cases in which the 'social suppression of the pertinent knowledge' did not involve any real loss of interpretive concepts, so that the whites in question continued to have available to them perfectly adequate conceptual resources for knowing that X, and yet failed to know that X owing to the suppression of the requisite knowledge itself—a dysfunction at the epistemic level. If so, then once again we are looking at a kind of white ignorance that surely has its own distinctive form, for it captures an injustice occurring at the *doxastic* level, rather than at the prior level of *conceptual repertoire*. As characterised, this more structural kind of white ignorance, then, should not be classified as a kind of hermeneutical injustice either.

By contrast, however, one can also imagine structural cases where the 'social suppression of the pertinent knowledge' *has* included suppression of the very concepts and/or interpretations in which that knowledge was couched, albeit only for the privileged group, with the result that an unfair *deficit in hermeneutical resources* was created. In such cases it seems to me that white ignorance *is* taking (more or less) the form of hermeneutical injustice, because the ignorance is caused by the trademark hermeneutical deficit — an unfair deficit of concepts or interpretive tropes. Thus far

this kind of white ignorance seems like it might fit, without distortion, into the category of hermeneutical injustice. It is white ignorance at the level of conceptual repertoire.

I think we are also now closer to the spirit in which Medina makes his suggestion about expanding the concept of hermeneutical injustice. For what he wants above all, I think, is more emphasis on the broadly ideological pressures on the practices of meaning making. The thought is that hermeneutical lacunas are typically *made* rather than found (and, as he also wants to emphasize, they can be actively filled in too). For my part I tried to incorporate precisely this thought within the broader condition of *hermeneutical marginalization*: hermeneutical injustices come from interpretive gaps that result from a group's not getting to participate fully in those practices whereby social meanings are made. Ideology, and other kinds of privileged interestedness, are surely chief among the causes of hermeneutical marginalization; but I did not want to limit hermeneutical marginalization to such cases. It seems to me that there can be unfair forms of hermeneutical marginalization that are explained more straightforwardly as forms of social powerlessness, and that there can sometimes be hermeneutical gaps that are more like unintended consequences of social flux. (Maybe an example might be the kind of hermeneutical marginalization that teenagers in the early Sixties rebelled against? They didn't get much of a look in to the processes of meaning making before that, but they found a noisy way of demanding to make those meanings, create some cool concepts, and interpret their experiences and relationships accordingly. If we imagine early-Sixties teenagers trying and failing to convey to their parents what's great about rock'n'roll and everything it stands for, maybe we confront a case of hermeneutical injustice of the more historically contingent kind I wanted to leave room for in my definition.)

However, white ignorance at the level of conceptual repertoire has a further feature that I believe seriously undermines the idea that we should conceive of it as a kind of hermeneutical injustice. In this kind of case, whites come (without individual epistemic fault) to lack the concepts needed for a proper understanding of their social situation, but still it doesn't look at all like a normal case of hermeneutical injustice. This is because (as Medina is careful to note) it is not whites who are broadly disadvantaged by the hermeneutical lacuna — they are epistemically disadvantaged, but their lack of conceptual tools with which to know their own social world plays to their general social advantage in terms of maintaining privilege without guilt.

In this aspect the phenomenon of white ignorance is analogous to the case of Carmita Wood: the *sexual harassment* of a woman at a time before any such workable formulation was in circulation. In that case, the purely epistemic disadvantage was (also) on the part of the harasser, and so I had a job of work to do to explain why it is only Carmita Wood, the harassee, to whom a hermeneutical injustice is done. The answer lies in the fact that only she is more generally disadvantaged by it; only of her is it true that it's strongly in her interests that this patch of the social world come to be more widely properly understood, widely enough so that she can complain to her employer about it and have the complaint function properly as a complaint (be understood, taken up, investigated, and so on). I am inclined to think this is worth hanging on to as a condition of hermeneutical injustice, because injustice is above all

Fricker, Miranda. 2013. "How is hermeneutical injustice related to 'white ignorance'?" Reply to José Medina's 'Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities'." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (8): 49-53. <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-SC>

a protest concept, and I would find it odd to insist that a group X that broadly *benefits* from some local hermeneutical impoverishment nonetheless thereby suffers an epistemic injustice.

Given this, I tend to conclude, at least provisionally, that white ignorance is best understood not as a kind of hermeneutical injustice, but rather as a neighbouring category of injustice within the epistemic.

**Contact details: [m.fricker@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.fricker@sheffield.ac.uk)**

## **References**

- Mason, Rebecca. 2011. "Two kinds of unknowing." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 294-307.
- Medina, José. 2013. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, Charles. 2007. 'White Ignorance', In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11-38. New York: SUNY Press.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile. 2012. "Relational knowing and epistemic injustice: Toward a theory of *Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance*." *Hypatia* 27 (4): 715-735.
- Tuana, Nancy Shannon Sullivan, editors. 2007. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. New York: SUNY Press.