

***On Subjects, Objects, and Others***  
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In [her response](#) to my essay, “[Discerning the Primary Harm in Cases of Testimonial Injustice](#),” Ann Cahill raises a number of insightful objections to some aspects of my characterization of the primary harm of testimonial injustice. The first set of objections concerns my use of Beauvoir’s Subject/Other frame in contrast to which Cahill recommends a more thoroughly Irigarayan approach that recognizes “all subjects must be understood as other-to-another” (Cahill, 67). The second set of objections attends to places where I imply that subjects and objects are on opposite ends of a continuum, thereby suggesting that subjects are not objects, or material beings. In closing, Cahill provides some additional thoughts on how attention to the derivatizing effects of testimonial injustice might be important for thinking through the ethics of encouraging sexual assault survivors to provide testimony to law enforcement and judicial systems.

For the most part, I am in agreement with what Cahill says and insofar as this is the case, I think the issues she raises primarily concern whether the language I use can say what I want it to say. Nonetheless, I also think that the epistemic tools we use to know the world (including the language we use to formulate our claims) guide our attention to the world, create embodied habits of mind with which we know, and so contribute not only to what we can say, but also to what we can think and do within the world.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, for those places where we are in agreement, Cahill’s concerns offer me the opportunity to reformulate some important points and also remind me how entrenched are those habits of mind that pull philosophical thinking (or, at the very least, my own) away from the very things I wish to say: that epistemic agents are wholly material beings whose distinct embodied subjectivities ought to be recognized as unique in relation to one another. In what follows, I refine my own language in ways that I hope are adequate to address the concerns I share with Cahill while I also pinpoint some *possible* places of disagreement.

**On Subjects and/as Objects**

I begin with the second set of objections, not only because I think they will be easier to remedy than the first, but also because I think part of what I have to say about subjects and objects will lay some groundwork for what I will later say about subjects and others. With regard to subjects and objects, Cahill voices concern at places where I say that testimonial injustice occurs when an epistemic agent is allocated a status (or is perceived as being) somewhere between an epistemic subject and an object. The implication that subject and object are on opposite ends of a continuum does two things that, within the

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<sup>1</sup> I do not want my claim here to be mistaken for the view that we can only know that for which we have words. While our epistemic resources *include* language, they are not *limited* to language. Importantly, for example, our lived bodies can be crucial epistemic resources, alerting us to aspects of the world that require attention for which fast and ready language does not yet exist, but may consequently be developed. See, for example, Alcoff and Mason.

history of European philosophy, have often worked in tandem and to which Cahill, rightly, objects: 1. It suggests that epistemic subjects are not material beings in the way objects are (or that epistemic subjects have less materiality than epistemic objects) and 2. It hierarchizes subjects over objects where “to be a subject is to be better than an object; to be in between the two is not as good as being clearly and incontrovertibly subject” (Cahill, 68). The former obscures “the crucial ways in which embodiment is central to subjectivity” and, I would add, to knowing (68). Moreover, I would also add that the latter is tied to an understanding of epistemic objects that I want to reject: that epistemic objects are passive, inert, and/or make no claims on epistemic subjects. Indeed, to the extent that I posited the treatment of testimonial injustice still along lines that construe subjects and objects in this manner (as opposites along a continuum and hierarchically conceived) I did not successfully jettison the model of objectification I wish to replace with Cahill’s model of derivatization. Consequently, I am happy to make the emendation that testimonial injustice *does not* treat epistemic agents in a manner that places them between subjects and objects; moreover, part of the wrong involved in cases of testimonial injustice is precisely in the way it denies the other’s material distinctness. Consistent with this emendation is my claim that within the epistemic context one *cannot* unobjectionably<sup>2</sup> regard epistemic objects in the manner in which an epistemic agent is regarded in cases of testimonial injustice (Pohlhaus, 4-5).

Part of what it means to seek to know the world is to be open to the world being other than one had thought or expected it to be.<sup>3</sup> This kind of openness to the material world is lacking in cases of testimonial injustice. In such cases, the embodied other is prevented from disrupting expectations in at least two senses: 1. She is regarded as a kind of material that is not distinct from the perpetrator (she could not possibly know something that extends epistemic attention beyond the perpetrator’s subjective experiencing of the world); and, so 2. Her epistemic contributions are made to conform to and reaffirm the perpetrator’s own embodied, situated, subjectivity (where anything that escapes the perpetrator’s subjective experiences of the world is dismissed as an incapacity or deception on the part of the perceived victim). In other words, to enter a knowing relation with an epistemic object is, to a certain extent, to allow oneself to be epistemically materially moved by that object (albeit often with the help of other

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<sup>2</sup> While it is certainly possible to perceive epistemic objects in ways that confirm one’s expectations, ignoring or passing over what would counter one’s expectations, this kind of behavior is epistemically objectionable. The possibility of such an epistemic violation going unnoticed (by the knower herself and other knowers around her) poses a kind of skeptical challenge for both individuals and communities: is it possible that I am or we are not perceiving something I/we ought? Philosophically speaking, I am not sure there is a way to avoid or finally answer this challenge. However, practically speaking, there are ways we can be circumspect both as individuals and as communities. See, for example, Longino and Medina.

<sup>3</sup> I would note that in the primary cases Fricker treats it is important that violators seek to know something about the world and in their investigations to discern the truth about some matter (the disappearance of a son, an attack of a woman), *misperceive* other material subjects as lesser versions or extensions of themselves rather than as materially distinct in ways that could uniquely inform. While remaining open to all aspects of the world at all times puts too hefty a constraint on knowers, systematically remaining closed to unexpected results of one’s knowledge pursuits seems clearly to violate what it means to be a good knower.

epistemic agents, about which I will say more below); whereas to commit testimonial injustice is to perceive another in ways that are *precisely* closed to the possibility of allowing her distinctly material, situated subjectivity to (in)form one's own.

### **On Subjects as/and Others**

Cahill's first set of objections concern my use of Beauvoir's "subject/other" frame to discuss testimonial injustice, particularly in light of Irigaray's diagnosis of the problem of sameness. Specifically, Cahill notes that for Beauvoir otherness is a problem, the solution to which is a subject/subject relation; whereas for Irigaray, otherness is not a problem, but a solution to the *real* problem of the relation between men and women, which is that of sameness, or a failure to recognize others<sup>4</sup> as fundamentally distinct from, different than, and irreducible to oneself. Given Irigaray's explicit formulation of the problem of regarding others as fundamentally the same as (while simultaneously "lacking" in comparison to) dominant subjects, Cahill cautions against using the subject/other frame to describe testimonial injustice for at least three reasons. First, it suggests that the person subjected to testimonial injustice is already regarded as wholly distinct ("other"), so that, second, it obscures the problem of sameness, thereby, third, suggesting the remedy for testimonial injustice is "moving toward recognition of in-relevant-ways-similar subjects" (Cahill, 67), which re-inscribes the problem of sameness. In other words, if we take the problematic relation in testimonial injustice to be that it relegates an epistemic agent to the position of "almost but not quite the same as a dominant knower,"<sup>5</sup> then the solution is to reinstate the agent as just the same as any dominant knower. Such a move would further entrench the problem I hope to diagnose and remedy: that some epistemic agents are expected to contribute their epistemic labor to tasks that enrich and affirm the experienced worlds of dominant knowers while also being prohibited from troubling dominant epistemic subjectivities in any fundamental way (*specifically* in ways that emanate from distinctly situated and embodied lives that are non-dominant).

It seems to me that there are (at least) two ways in which sameness can be thought that may be elided here and which I would like to keep separate. On the one hand, I absolutely agree that epistemic subjects ought not be regarded as copies, or less than ideal copies, of oneself where one's own embodied and situated subjectivity is held as implicit standard guiding our interaction.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is one (although not the only) reason why

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<sup>4</sup> While there is debate as to how much Irigaray's notion of difference relies upon a notion of sexed difference, Cahill's own work does not rely on the binary "man/woman" but rather recognizes that those who are "not me" are fundamentally more than and irreducible to me; indeed others are more than and irreducible to "not me" as well (a locution that still defines another in terms of "me"). In addition, I wish to leave open, at least for the time being, the question of whether within the epistemic context, "others" need be other knowers.

<sup>5</sup> Here we can sense an affinity with the problem of construing testimonial injustice as "somewhere between subject and object." I agree, however, that the two problems are nonetheless different/distinct.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally I think Beauvoir shares this concern, even while I agree that her disdain for bodily immanence is at odds with it.

I turned to Cahill's notion of derivatization to think about the primary epistemic harm in cases of testimonial injustice: because it captures precisely the way in which one might regard another as a lesser (i.e. less capable or less trustworthy) version of oneself, thereby allowing one to disregard any aspects of their epistemic interaction that speak to the other's embodied and situated *distinctness*, while simultaneously allowing the perpetrator to rely upon the other's epistemic labor. On the other hand, I think epistemic agents ought to regard one another in a similar fashion in at least this sense: that each is capable of *uniquely* contributing to shared pool(s) of knowledge and to collective epistemic resources in ways that may affect epistemic agents by challenging embodied habits of mind, possibly even redirecting epistemic comportment(s) within the world thereby *informing* embodied knowers in ways that they could not have done on their own or even predicted. This is a kind of sameness of regard, but it is a sameness of regarding others as not the same as, but rather distinct from and irreducible to, oneself.<sup>7</sup>

There is perhaps one other kind of sameness to which (for now at least) I am committed within the epistemic context. Elsewhere I have distinguished between two types of sociality to which feminist epistemologists have called attention: the sociality of situatedness and the sociality of interdependence.<sup>8</sup> I think the importance of recognizing the sociality of situatedness is described well with Cahill's Irigarayan ethics of irreducibility.

Epistemic agents are embodied and so socially and historically situated within the world uniquely. This is part of what it means to be a "minded body" — I am a material being that has been epistemically shaped and habituated over the course of a particular history in relation to others who are differently situated and socially positioned; it is as this particular embodied agent, with my history and social position, that I move epistemically through and toward the world. Consequently, my embodied habits of attention have been honed through my lived history and will reflect my interests (both in the sense of "what I need to know in order to survive" and in the sense of "that to which I have committed myself through practice and repeated actions over time"). This point will be familiar as one that has been made by standpoint theorists.

On the other hand, knowing also takes place within another type of sociality, what I call the sociality of interdependence. While I am uniquely embodied and situated within the world, I cannot know a great many things about the world without the help of others, particularly with regard to the constitution and maintenance of epistemic resources such as language, concepts, and criteria for evidence. This point I take to be a Wittgensteinian one, consonant with Lynn Hankinson Nelson's claim that epistemic communities precede epistemic individuals and with Loraine Code's claim that knowing people is more fundamental than knowing objects. In other words, while it is *as* this body that I know the world, part of what it means to know is to direct myself toward and respond to the

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<sup>7</sup> Iris Young's notion of "asymmetrical reciprocity," which draws on both Arendt and Irigaray, might be akin to what I am thinking here.

<sup>8</sup> See Pohlhaus 2012.

world in ways that are epistemically justified, where justification is made possible by epistemic communities from which I draw (and to which I ought to be able to contribute) epistemic resources. The relation between epistemic situatedness and epistemic interdependence is complex and, I suspect, multiple. Nonetheless, I would not want to emphasize the distinctness of epistemic situatedness in ways that would lead us to forget the degree to which epistemic agents are interdependent, where epistemic interdependence includes the maintenance of a shared (albeit changing and dynamic) set of epistemic resources. At the same time, epistemic interdependence ought not be emphasized in ways that lead us to forget that we are distinctly embodied and situated. While epistemic interdependence can be (and sometimes is) leveraged in ways that erase or obscure epistemic differences of situatedness, this need not be the case. Moreover, keeping in mind that epistemic agents *are* interdependent can help bring into focus certain kinds of injustices that arise from honing our epistemic resources on the experiences of only one set of embodied epistemic subjects.

### **Embodied Knowers and Sexual Violence**

Cahill's attention to embodiment has pushed me to think carefully about the materiality of knowing as well as the ways in which philosophical habits of mind can lead us to forget, deny, and/or disparage the embodiment of (particular) subjects. These attitudes toward embodiment (whether implicit or explicit) are particularly troubling when considering the matter of sexual violence. For example, if proper recognition of epistemic authority is defined in terms that require us to *disregard* our embodiment as knowers, this puts the survivor of sexual assault in a double-bind with regard to her own status as a knowing subject: she may be viewed either as too bodily "as traumatized, because sick (emotional, hysterical), and thus not credible" or not bodily enough "calm and reasonable, and thus clearly not traumatized, and so not credible" (Brison, 70-71).

Even if we do not disparage embodiment, but simply neglect to remember that knowing is always embodied, one could miss the ethical issues concerning the reporting of sexual violence that Cahill considers at the end of her response to my essay. If one were to neglect the fact that it is embodied subjects who know, one could see the matter of reporting sexual assault simply in terms of "inert" information that an epistemic subject has and that she ought to report, adding, as it were, to our "collective pool of information" as knowers. Or perhaps, more charitably, one might see the matter of reporting as something a survivor has a right to decide for herself since the information she has concerns an experience she has endured. Both options do not sit well with me. In neither case is attention given to the structural conditions that create silences<sup>9</sup> or to the survivor herself in her embodied particularity. While I am not sure what the best solution is, I do think that any solution will need to pay close attention to our material embodiment as knowers as well as to the networks of embodied relations within which knowers know.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Dotson on epistemic smothering.

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