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Speaking Silences: A Wittgensteinian Inquiry into Hermeneutical Injustice

Abstract

Miranda Fricker's account of what is involved in cases of hermeneutical injustice has been criticised for neglecting the existence of alternative hermeneutical resources developed by non-dominant groups, and consequently overlooking its members' cognitive agency. I argue that this critical strand might be extended to take into account what I call "uncontroversial cases of hermeneutical injustice", i.e. cases in which no alternative resources are available, but marginalised subjects can still be said to resist dominant interpretations of their experiences. Following Alice Crary, I trace the limitations of Fricker's original account of hermeneutical injustice back to her reliance on a neutral conception of reason, and argue that widening the realm of rationality to accommodate affective responses authorizes a revaluation of marginalised subjects' agency under ideological systems. To illustrate this point, I indicate how Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on hinges present a notion of objectivity that serves liberatory projects and might guide a more adequate response to cases of hermeneutical injustice.

Keywords: social epistemology, hermeneutical injustice, cognitive agency, hinge epistemology, objectivity

1. Introductory Remarks on Epistemic Injustice

In her ground-breaking 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice: Ethics and the Power of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker coins the term "epistemic injustice" to account for a distinctively epistemic form of injustice that occurs when someone is specifically harmed in their capacity as a knower (2007: 1). According to Fricker, there are two forms of injustice that

are distinctively epistemic in kind, namely *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. While testimonial injustice "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word", hermeneutical injustice accounts for a more structural phenomenon, one which takes place at "a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (2007: 1). Fricker's purpose in distinguishing between these two different forms of epistemic injustice is to account for the way "identity prejudice" (2007: 27) works to shape how we engage in two basic everyday epistemic practices: conveying knowledge through a practice of testimony and making sense of our experiences.

Notwithstanding the significance of Fricker's introduction of the term "epistemic injustice" into the jargon of critical studies, her original account of what is involved in and how to overcome cases of epistemic injustice has not been immune to criticism within the field of social epistemology. The underlying reason for this criticism seems to be connected to Fricker's attribution of the relevant forms of epistemic injustice to what she describes as "identity prejudice", an assumption that results problematic in a number of ways. In Fricker's parlance, prejudices are "judgements, which may have a positive or negative valence, and which display some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counterevidence owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject" (2007: 35). By the same token, identity prejudices "with a negative valence [and] held against people *qua* social type" are charged with producing testimonial injustice by affecting our personal credibility judgements about members of a particular social group (2007: 35).

To remedy the testimonial injustice that arises from identity prejudice, Fricker turns to the tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which she resourcefully endows with an epistemological dimension. In her innovative account, the morally virtuous agent ought to cultivate some epistemic and perceptual capacities that afford them the necessary sensibility to correct for testimonial prejudice (2007: 71). Accordingly, Fricker convincingly argues for a more intimate relationship between our moral and epistemic practices, which

further entails that cultivating the relevant moral virtues will have significant epistemic consequences. But there is also an immediate concern regarding whether it is plausible that virtues alone can respond to structural, historical inequity. As Rae Langton writes, "there is a real question about whether, and to what extent, well-meaning individual efforts can remedy the problem and correct for the bad education we start out with" (2010: 462).

Furthermore, given Fricker's characterisation of prejudice as an individual judgement, the relation between identity prejudice and hermeneutical injustice – the second, more structural form of epistemic injustice – is not immediately clear. Later in her book, Fricker explains that a collective hermeneutical resource is structurally prejudiced when it cannot account for the experiences of a certain social group, due to the group's "persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalisation" (2007: 155). But once again, structural prejudice in our collective hermeneutical resources is to be resisted through the cultivation of individual virtues that instil the virtuous agent with the necessary sensibility to correct for whichever cases of hermeneutical injustice they might be confronted with (Fricker 2007: 169). Now Fricker warns us that she is aware that hermeneutical virtue can only "mitigate", rather than "pre-empt", the unequal relations of social power that give rise to marginalisation in the first place (2007: 174). And indeed, if, as Langton suggests, individual efforts are an ineffective corrective for our personal identity prejudices, they seem to fall far short of correcting for structural injustice.

In what follows, I indicate how Fricker's attribution of hermeneutical injustice to a matter of prejudice surfaces in one prominent strand of criticism of her original account, which I expand to reveal a fundamental missing link within her portrayal of liberatory practices. Following Alice Crary (2018), I will then argue that the limitations just identified are the result of a more ubiquitous problem with Fricker's treatment of epistemic injustice, which arises from her reliance on a neutral conception of reason. I suggest that this conception should be abandoned in favour of one where affective and non-epistemic forms of thinking are considered. Finally, I argue that Wittgenstein's reflections on "hinges" speak for

a desirable account of objective thinking that serves liberatory purposes, and which might guide a more adequate response to cases of hermeneutical injustice.

2. Hermeneutical Injustice and Beyond: A Critique from Social Epistemology

Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as a form of epistemic injustice that occurs when "a significant area of one's social experience [is] obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" which, in turn, is the result of "persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalisation" (2007: 154-155). According to this view, when one's social experience is obscured from collective understanding by virtue of one's membership in a marginalised social group, our collective hermeneutical resources present "a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be" (Fricker 2007: 150). Fricker's purpose is thus to examine how these hermeneutical lacunae reproduce relations of inequality between members of dominant and non-dominant groups by rendering marginalised subjects incapable of making sense of a significant portion of their social experiences.

One recurring criticism of this account of hermeneutical injustice has to do with Fricker's claim that these gaps in collective hermeneutical resources prevent members of marginalised groups from understanding their experiences. Indeed, Fricker's descriptions of how cases of hermeneutical injustice confine non-dominant subjects to hermeneutical darkness (2007: 149), rendering them cognitively disadvantaged (2007: 151), have often been taken to underplay the cognitive agency of these subjects. By ignoring the possibility that marginalised people may understand their own experiences, despite living under oppressive systems, she appears to neglect "resistant epistemic and communicative practices of non-dominant subjects and in so doing may contribute to their marginalisation and disempowerment" (Mason 2011: 294). In one particularly prominent instance of such criticism, Fricker stands accused of equating collective hermeneutical resources with dominant ones, thus dismissing the interpretative resources available

to marginalised subjects and communities. Depicting these gaps in hermeneutical resources as wholly collective, Fricker essentially neglects how dominant (mis)understandings of marginalised groups' experiences actively exclude oppositional discourses and interpretations. As Kristie Dotson puts it:

> Such an assumption fails to take into account alternative epistemologies, countermythologies, and hidden transcripts that exist in hermeneutically marginalized communities *among themselves*. It also fails to curtail the role power plays in hindering the hermeneutical resources of the marginalization. The power relations that produce hermeneutically marginalized populations do not also work to suppress, in all cases, knowledge of one's experiences of oppression and marginalization within those marginalized populations. (2012: 31)

Several commentators have thus argued that the specific injustice suffered by members of marginalised groups whose interpretative resources are excluded from dominant ones does not fall within Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice, since in these cases, the most cognitively disadvantaged subjects are not marginalised ones (Mason 2011; Pohlhaus 2012; Dotson 2012; Toole 2019). On the contrary, marginalisation both results in and is the result of a type of situated ignorance that primarily affects members of dominant groups who disregard the resources of the marginalised. Accordingly, members of marginalised groups may hold perfectly sound understandings of their social experiences, yet still "find that their experiences are systematically neglected, ignored, or distorted" by dominant hermeneutical resources (Mason 2011: 300). Hence other notions have been put forward to account for the specific forms of injustice to which members of marginalised groups are subjected by virtue of not having their resources recognized by dominant groups. Gayle Pohlhaus, for instance, introduces the notion of *wilful hermeneutical ignorance* to describe cases in which non-dominant groups actively resist hermeneutical injustice by developing resources that allow them to make sense of their experiences while dominantly situated subjects remain ignorant of them. Similarly to what happens in cases of white ignorance (Mills 1997), wilful hermeneutical ignorance occurs when dominant groups wilfully refuse "to acknowledge and to acquire the necessary tools for knowing whole parts of the world" (Pohlhaus 2012: 729). Wilful

hermeneutical ignorance arguably results in *contributory injustice*, a notion developed by Dotson to account for a distinctive kind of epistemic injustice that occurs when the refusal to acknowledge and acquire alternative hermeneutical resources "thwarts a knower's ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency" (2012: 32).

In contrast with what happens in the cases of hermeneutical injustice described by Fricker, in instances of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice, it is members of the dominant groups who are rendered cognitively disadvantaged, in that they are incapable of understanding the social experiences of the marginalised. Although they remain the result of structural inequality, these forms of epistemic injustice are plainly agential and, thus, culpable. They are concretely culpable of harming marginalised subjects, not in their capacity to understand their experiences, but in their very ability to communicate them to dominant groups (Toole 2019: 611). These are the kinds of problems that get lost in Fricker's treatment of epistemic injustice and hermeneutical injustice. As Dotson explains, by "narrowing epistemic injustice to acceptable permutations of the forms she outlines, Fricker creates a conceptual frame that, if taken seriously, would serve to exclude pervasive forms of epistemic injustice" (2012: 41).

I link this sort of limitation in Fricker's original account to her attributing hermeneutical injustice to a matter of structural prejudice. Resorting to Fricker's own conception of prejudice as a judgement that is distorted by some (good or bad) affective investment on the part of the subject, we immediately lose track of the relevant prejudice's roots in ideology. That there is a prejudice, indeed, implies that reality can only be adequately grasped once we do away with it. Ideology, on the other hand, cannot be dismissed as simply "unreal", since it effectively organizes the social world and the material relations in which every group is forced to participate.[1] We could of course conceive of prejudice as a form of ideological thinking itself, but Fricker does not actually seem to do so. Instead,

[1] For feminist-informed accounts of ideology, see Hartsock (1983), Hennessy (1993) and Crary (2018).

she characterizes the kind of identity prejudice behind cases of hermeneutical injustice as a form of structural bias caused by unequal hermeneutical participation. Admittedly, such marginalisation is not so much an incidental phenomenon, as it is a direct function of established social relations of power which prevent marginalised groups from participating equally in the practices where social meanings are generated and disseminated, i.e. institutional, legislative, cultural and scholarly practices (Fricker 2007: 156). Fricker is thus seen as speaking directly to the familiar idea of representation politics, built on the premise that a lack of representation of marginalised groups in key sectors of society produces practices that do not respond to those groups' interests and concerns. But while it is true that the representation of marginalised groups may put some important needs and concerns on public agendas, representation alone cannot correct for the ideological character of our institutions. Hence attributing hermeneutical injustice to a matter of prejudice alone neglects the oppressive structures that allow for marginalisation in the first place.

I want to argue that hermeneutical injustice is more adequately conceived as stemming from ideological thinking itself. To be sure, I am not claiming that Fricker herself neglects these oppressive structures, but rather that her explanatory model leaves us with insufficient tools to understand and combat hermeneutical injustice. Instances of wilful hermeneutical injustice and contributory injustice actually demonstrate that the participation of marginalised people in collective practices of meaning creation will sometimes do little to enhance the group's social power, if the dominant social structures do not have space for them. Indeed, the social epistemology critique has done more to correct for Fricker's original account than merely accommodating new forms of epistemic injustice within a previously incomplete framework. It has shown how, within ideological settings, prejudice is not simply the cause of harmful epistemic practices, but rather one of its consequences.

Fricker has subsequently acknowledged that the collective hermeneutical resource "will surely not exhaust all the various up and running sets of social meanings that are being used locally by this or that group in a given society" (2016: 163). In doing so, Fricker

adequately circumscribes her account of "collective hermeneutical resources" to an array of concepts and words that are shared by and accessible to virtually everyone in a given society, but which may not include the hermeneutical resources developed by marginalised communities. She has also come to duly recognise the "role of our agency in sustaining [the two kinds of epistemic injustice]", adequately accounting for the culpable nature of the aforementioned cases of epistemic injustice (2017: 5). But such recognition does little to correct for Fricker's remarks concerning how gaps in collective hermeneutical resources cause "an acute cognitive disadvantage" in members of marginalised groups (2007: 151). The reason is that the social epistemology critique itself does not (yet) falsify the original portrayal of hermeneutical injustice as a type of injustice that does not merely prevent one's social experience from being collectively understood, but also hinders one's own understanding of one's social experience. Indeed, the fact that there are hermeneutical resources other than the dominant ones, and that these may contain concepts that adequately account for marginalised groups' social experiences, does not (1) imply that hermeneutical injustice cannot affect those who are not fluent in such alternative resources, nor does it (2) deny the existence of cases in which the relevant resources are not available in both dominant and non-dominant contexts. I call these "uncontroversial" cases of hermeneutical injustice.

3. Hermeneutical Injustice Revisited: Agency at the Margins

I want to argue that, while the clarification of the notion of "collective hermeneutical resources" has adequately accounted for the existence of alternative resources developed by marginalized subjects, it remains oblivious towards oppositional stances in unproblematic cases of hermeneutical injustice. I speak of uncontroversial cases of hermeneutical injustice to refer to cases in which no alternative hermeneutical resources are available or, otherwise, accessible to epistemic subjects. Although social epistemology critics successfully defend the cognitive agency of subjects who do have access to these alternative resources, they remain largely silent about the cognitive status of subjects who do

suffer hermeneutical injustice by virtue of lacking the relevant resources. At the same time, Fricker's description of how hermeneutical lacunae produce cognitively disadvantaged subjects cannot account for what it takes of marginalized subjects to overcome instances of hermeneutical injustice – and how they actually do it in real-life cases.

Let us consider Fricker's in-depth discussion of a paradigmatic instance of hermeneutical injustice that occurred when, prior to the coining of the term 'sexual harassment' in the 1970s, women subjected to this type of abuse were prevented from making sense of it (2007: 149-150). Such was allegedly the case of Carmita Wood, an office employee at Cornell University who, having been subjected to repeated unwanted sexual advances from a professor at the department she worked in, reached out to a feminist group where she was able to share her experience of abuse with other women. It was there, borne out of the collective efforts of women sharing similar experiences of abuse, that the concept of sexual harassment as we currently know it was first articulated. Fricker describes this moment as a "life-changing flash of enlightenment" (2007: 153) whereby a gap in collective hermeneutical resources was effectively filled with a concept that accounted for the long-misunderstood experience of sexual harassment. The hermeneutical darkness that had left women "deeply troubled, confused, and isolated" (ibid.: 151) was successfully lifted. Nowhere, however, does Fricker account for the relation between these women's experiences of despair in isolation, their *active* reaching out for help in feminist safe spaces and the eventual coining of the term 'sexual harassment'.

There is, notwithstanding, something very intuitive about Fricker's employment of the "collective gap" metaphor in this context. Differently from what happens in cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice, the injustice suffered by women before the concept of sexual harassment came to be seems to adequately qualify as an unproblematic case of hermeneutical injustice given that the concept was missing from both dominant and non-dominant resources. Yet, as Rebecca Mason (2011) contends, it is far from clear that the women involved in the meetings that would lead to the coining of the term 'sexual

harassment' were as incapable of understanding their experiences of abuse as Fricker suggests. Taking the case of Carmita Wood as an example, Mason powerfully argues that the very fact that Wood actively sought out feminist support is proof that she lacked no capacity to understand her experience as harmful and dehumanizing (cf. 2011: 297). In fact, while Wood and the other women involved in the meetings may "not have gleaned the broad significance of [their] experience – for instance, that it was a widespread and unfortunately common occurrence in many women's lives", it was precisely their understanding of it as wrongful molestation that "fuelled the resistance movement that was responsible for naming sexual harassment" (ibid.: 297-298). At this point, I argue that what gives this case the appearance of having been successfully overcome through a process of naming alone is Fricker's conflation of conceptual and lexical scarcity under the same "gap" metaphor.

Indeed, as Fricker offers very few clarifying remarks about her definition of "collective hermeneutical resources", she ambiguously navigates the idea that people who suffer hermeneutical injustice are lacking some important resources, often assimilating a lack of specialised vocabulary to the impossibility of conceptualisation. In a recent attempt to correct for this fault, Mason has claimed that when speaking about "collective hermeneutical resources", Fricker is concerned with "the cognitive and linguistic tools (i.e. concepts and words) that we use to understand the world and to communicate with one another about it" (2021: 248). While Mason might be too charitable in attributing the intention of this distinction to Fricker, her reassessment of the notion of "collective hermeneutical resources" as tracking both conceptual and lexical tools allows her to identify two necessary conditions for something to configure a case of hermeneutical injustice.[2] Says Mason,

A subject, S, suffers hermeneutical injustice only if

[2] As made explicit in the passage just quoted, Mason actually distinguishes between *cognitive* and *linguistic* resources, which she equates to concepts and words, respectively (cf. 2021: 248). There are important reasons, which will hopefully become clear, for which I cannot endorse a distinction articulated in these terms and I thus choose to speak of *conceptual* and *lexical* resources.

(i) S is unable to understand the nature and normative significance of their social experience, *e*, or

(ii) S is unable to describe the nature or normative significance of *e* in a way that most people can understand. (2021: 250)

Where Fricker conflates conceptual and linguistic resources in the wider category of hermeneutical resources, Mason demonstrates that one might lack (ii) the capacity to publicly articulate their experience even if they lack no (i) understanding of the experience in question. Hence, this distinction allows us to break the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice in two so that, on the one hand, we have a distinctively conceptual type of injustice and, on the other, we have a distinctively lexical type. With this in mind, we may say that the women involved in the meetings that eventually led to the coining of the term 'sexual harassment' were surely prevented from (ii) describing the nature or normative significance of their experience in a way that most people could understand due to a gap in collective hermeneutical resources. This gap, however, did not necessarily prevent them from (i) understanding the nature and normative significance of their experience, i.e. it did not prevent them from conceptualizing it as a wrongful, perhaps unjust experience. By Mason's lights, however, we can still speak of other women – say, women who did not count with the support of a feminist structure – who, prior to the creation of the concept of sexual harassment, did not actually understand the nature and normative significance of their social experience. But, if this is so, we are again left to wonder how this distinctively conceptual type of injustice may be overcome if marginalized subjects cannot so much as put their finger in the relevant social experiences.

We may now get the feeling that an "idea" of what is missing from conceptual resources must already be in place if we are to speak of a "gap" at all. Consider the case of Joana, a young feminist woman who is a member of a feminist collective organizing reading groups. As Joana takes part in a discussion about domestic and reproductive work, she is introduced to the concept of "mental load", which strikes her as the best account she has heard up until that point of a common complaint made by her mother throughout her youth.

Empathizing with her mother's experience of unrecognition for all the invisible work she had done, Joana decides to introduce the concept back at home: *mental load, a term that designates the invisible work required to oversee all of the tasks involved in domestic and care labour, and which typically falls on women's shoulders*. Coming back to her reading group next week, Joana cannot hide her amusement toward her mother's response: *every time I bother her now, she goes: Watch out for my mental load!* On Joana's intuitive account of her mother's acquisition – and quick fluency – of the term 'mental load', she *simply gave her a word to say what she had in mind throughout all those years.* Contrary to Fricker's suggestion that the acquisition of the relevant term comes "as a life-changing flash of enlightenment" (2007: 153), Joana and her mother's experience indicate that the intuitive notion of a "gap" in our collective hermeneutical resources must necessarily refer to a pre-existing, world-situated idea of what is missing. At the same time, it seems highly exaggerated to say that Joana's mother's idea corresponded to any sophisticated understanding of the nature and normative significance of her experience of overburden with respect to domestic and care work.

To be sure, I am convinced that the value of collective work seeking to fill in the gaps in our shared hermeneutical resources goes well beyond mere practices of *naming* previously nameless social experiences. Indeed, there is a sense in which those women sharing common experiences of abuse were rendered capable of *conceptualizing* their experiences in a way that they had not before. By looking out for common patterns and consequences of the abuses they suffered, they were effectively engaging in practices of concept-creation that rendered their experiences intelligible to themselves and to others. Naming was but the ultimate stage of this process. But while we may concede that hermeneutical injustice often prevents marginalized subjects from understanding the significance – namely, the political significance – of their social experiences, it seems quite unintelligible to say that they have no understanding whatsoever of what they go through. For how were they to engage in collective practices of concept-creation, or otherwise recognize the missing concept, had they not an idea of what was missing?

Fricker's response to this question is seemingly simple: women's ability to overcome the silence to which they had been referred to is a function of their *exceptional* capacity to collectively awake "hitherto dormant resources for social meaning" (2007: 148). But this appeal to exceptionality seems to do little to account for that which led women in search of the relevant concepts in the first place – a process that was necessarily set in motion *despite* prejudice in dominant hermeneutical resources. On closer inspection, we see that the very organization of collective practices of concept-creation essentially rested on the possibility that women were already making sense of their social experiences, if not at least by feeling that "their embodied experiences of harassment were at odds with extant misinterpretations circulating in dominant discourses" (Mason 2011: 297). What this means is that, even in the absence of adequate lexical *and* conceptual tools, marginalized subjects retain the cognitive agency that allows them to conceptualize their experiences through affect and emotion.

That Fricker fails to account for this process is, according to Alice Crary (cf. 2018), a function of her reliance on a neutral conception of reason and the ensuing argumentative model of language with which she operates. The pervasiveness of this reliance may, in fact, account for Fricker's insistence in treating epistemic injustice as the result of mere prejudice and the subsequent limitations of her approach. As it happens, by attributing epistemic injustice to a matter of prejudice, Fricker is led to a picture of epistemic virtue where the goal is ultimately the *neutralization* of prejudice (cf. 2007: 96). Although accounting for epistemic virtue in terms of "a sensitivity to patterns of moral salience" that is acquired through "a proper moral socialization" (ibid.: 72-74), Fricker depicts the critical evaluation of these acquired sensitivities as a matter of exceptional reasoning performed by the virtuous agent (cf. ibid.: 104). By doing so, she essentially neglects how a proper moral socialization may only be evaluated – and, indeed, achieved – by reference to some non-neutral ethical standards (cf. Crary 2018: 2).

Crary better glosses this neutral conception of rationality as "a view of our mental access to reality wherein neutrality – conceived as approached via the progressive shedding of ethically and culturally

local perspectives or modes of understanding – serves as a regulative ideal" (2018: 5). The upshot of this view is that it now seems to suggest that any "affective investment on the part of the subject" – which, recall, figured in Fricker's definition of prejudice – ought to be cleared away to give room for greater clarity in the space of reasons. Wherein feminist epistemology has traditionally articulated accounts of ideology in terms of the material forces that shape our ways of making sense of the world by mystifying oppression and, thus, turned to women's lives and experiences to look for oppositional discourses, Fricker restricts the space of anti-ideological thought to that of value-free rationality. To be sure, Fricker rightfully conceives of sexist systems as ideological in nature. But her equation of ideological obstacles with affective ones falls short of understanding the feminist historical commitment to situated thought as a response to the acute awareness that some aspects of the world "only come into view from certain ethical perspectives" (Crary 2018: 20).

Bearing these reflections in mind, Fricker's equation of marginalized subjects' affective responses with a cognitive disadvantage may now come as a disappointment. Indeed, it is one thing to claim that women living under ideological systems may be prevented from understanding the nature and normative significance of their social experiences. It is another to suggest that their social positioning renders their assessments of their experiences irrational or otherwise unsuited for rational discourse. This being said, I do not think that the neglect of the affective responses of marginalized people is an intended consequence of Fricker's analysis. In fact, she examines in detail how instances of hermeneutical injustice might leave marginalized subjects relying on affect alone before they are equipped with more sophisticated conceptual and lexical resources. Fricker simply overlooks the role these responses might play in rational practices of concept-creation and thus fails to recognize their place in liberatory thought. Due to this neglect, she cannot so much as bridge the gap between conceptualizations that are not politically advantageous to marginalized subjects and conceptualizations that may bring along political change. Opening up the realm of rationality to accommodate affective responses is

not only required to understand and successfully overcome cases of hermeneutical injustice, as it further authorizes a revaluation of marginalized subjects' agency under ideological systems.

Most certainly, thinking about that which has not been collectively codified must be thinking of a very different kind. It must be thinking that is not reduced to the application of rigid, previously determined rules, but rather arises out of gaps left open by those rules. Contrary to what is implied by neutral accounts of rationality, there is no reason to expel this primordial mode of making sense of the world from the realm of rationality and objectivity. It is, after all, the kind of thinking that grounds our most sophisticated rational practices. To illustrate this point, I now turn to Wittgenstein's later reflections on "hinges" and his emphasis on the situated character of our rational practices. What can this picture of our rational lives tell us about the type of conceptualization required for one to come to speak of the unspoken? As in everything Wittgensteinian, the best method will be an examination of how it is we are already doing it in our ordinary lives.

4. A Wittgensteinian Idea: The Objective as Hinge

Arguably Wittgenstein's most systematic account of the workings of our epistemic practices can be found in the notes that compose his now widely discussed *On Certainty* (1969). In these later writings, following the path that had previously been laid out in the *Investigations* (1958), Wittgenstein remains committed to the idea that our rational and linguistic dealings are deeply embedded in our customs (PI: § 198) and practices (PI: § 202). But his emphasis is now that these very practices endow us with some basic concepts or capacities that allow us to go about our rational lives. A good way to illustrate this idea is to refer to his metaphor of the "hinge":

> The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were hinges on which those turn. (OC: § 341)
>
> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted. (OC: § 342)
>
> […] If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC: § 343)

This particular passage of Wittgenstein's text has given rise to an extensive literature on so-called "hinge epistemologies" and is often appealed to in the context of stimulating debates about the possibility of raising and answering sceptical *doubts*. What is often neglected, however, is its potential to guide our world-directed *questions*. Hinges, as presented in OC: §§ 341-343, are merely a metaphor for what Wittgenstein describes as the "scaffolding of our thoughts", which "gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form" (OC: § 211). Conceiving of this scaffolding as that which must stand fast so that we may claim to know some aspects of the world, hinge epistemologists often implicitly distinguish between two different forms of objectivity at play in Wittgenstein's considerations of hinges: the object of our certainty, i.e. our hinges, and the object of our knowledge, which is dependent on our hinges. Since, as Wittgenstein has it, the object of our knowledge is derived or otherwise dependent on the object of our certainty, it is the former kind of objectivity that we ought to focus on if we are to understand what stands fast when we create – and, indeed, may come to know – new concepts.[3]

It is far beyond the scope of this section to examine in detail the different interpretations of *On Certainty* and my goal here is not an exegetical one. Nonetheless, I believe that Wittgenstein's talk of hinges can help to illuminate the kind of objective thinking that precedes and is required for us to arrive at collective practices of concept-creation. For this purpose, I one increasingly accepted way of reading Wittgenstein's conception of hinges as non-epistemic in nature. This interpretation follows Wittgenstein in positing that our certainty in our hinges has little to do with knowledge and that, as such, hinges cannot play the foundational epistemic role in our rational dealings that one might have wished they did. Some authors accompany this characterisation of hinges with a non-propositional reading, according to which we should take seriously Wittgenstein's claim that our hinges determine our ways of *acting* in the world (OC:

[3] I would like to thank Professor Modesto Gómez-Alonso for illuminating my understanding of Wittgenstein's notion of "hinges" during his intensive PhD seminar in Epistemology of Religion, organised within the framework of the FCT-funded project "Epistemology of Religious Belief: Wittgenstein, Grammar and the Contemporary World" in January 2021.

§ 204), rather than determining a propositional attitude such as *knowing* or *believing*.[4] Although it might be too strong to claim that our hinges have no semantic content whatsoever, non-propositional readings alert us to the need to conceive of hinges in a way that does not reduce them to a narrow cognitive dimension. In this connection, Wittgenstein's conception of hinges accounts for how our most fundamental certainties play out in the background of everything we do (which includes, but does not reduce to, what we say).

This emphasis on the role played by hinges in our rational dealings, rather than in the specific propositional content they may assume, is precisely why someone like Duncan Pritchard (2016) speaks of *hinge commitments* rather than *hinge propositions*, the latter being the most common designation in the hinge epistemology literature. But although commitments of this kind do indeed share the same nature, they may vary greatly in relation to personal, cultural or epochal specificities. This leads Pritchard to trace a distinction between what he describes as "an entirely general hinge commitment that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs" – the *über hinge commitment* – and its specification in an "apparently heterogeneous class of hinge commitments" – one's *personal hinge commitments* (2016: 95-96). One interesting aspect of Pritchard's account of personal hinge commitments is that, on his view, these would accommodate not only certainties about (what are ordinarily seen as) unproblematic objective aspects of the world, such as one's having two hands (OC: § 125) or the fact that every human being has parents (OC: § 211), but also certainties about some aspects that could be seen as subjective, such as one's religious faith or political ideals (Pritchard 2021: 1119).

Now, our reliance on these commitments is not something that we arrive at through practices of argumentation or mere flashes of intuition, but rather something that one "swallows down" over the course of one's learning process (Pritchard 2021: 1121). As

[4] Note that not all proponents of the non-epistemic reading agree on whether this interpretation further entails a conception of hinges as essentially non-propositional in nature. See Moyal-Sharrock (2004) for a defence of the non-propositional reading. See also Pritchard (2016: 84-88) for a critique of this reading.

Wittgenstein puts it, our commitment to certain aspects of the world constitutes the "inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true or false" (OC: § 94); it is our "world-picture" and its "role is like that of rules of a game" (OC: § 95). This image of our rational dealings speaks closely to a conceptualist tradition whereby what we perceive in the world is not merely a given but is rather processed against a background of acquired concepts that function like rules in a game. But the game, Wittgenstein tells us, "can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules" (OC: § 95). So, while affording hinges a conceptual role in our ordinary practices of evaluating and perceiving the world, Wittgenstein does not reduce our conceptual architecture to a matter of inferential rules alone. Instead, he puts the emphasis back on the type of attitude that is required for us to make sense of what lies around us, which is one of commitment to certain other features of the world. What this suggests is that the personal hinge commitments that we hold fast as a result of, say, having been raised in a religious community, or in a left-wing commune, are better glossed as predispositions or sensitivities rather than as fully-fledged concepts.[5] We can now begin to grasp how a Wittgensteinian understanding of our rational lives speaks directly against any neutral conception of reason whereby we would need to stand outside our practices in order to adequately make sense of our social experiences.

The picture we arrive at is one that greatly resembles feminist standpoint theory in positing that our epistemic practices are always already situated in relation to our particular positionings in social reality. Indeed, the Wittgensteinian account of hinges that I have been sketching shows us that our rational dealings take place against a background of non-neutral commitments, including our ethical and political commitments. So, for instance, our having been brought up with feminist ideals does not instantly turn us into feminist activists, but it certainly instils in us a certain kind of hinge sensitivity about matters of equality in our ordinary actions and thought. It is to the extent that we necessarily draw from these acquired predispositions in navigating the world that our hinge commitments can be said to pick out objective aspects of that same

[5] The examples are Pritchard's (2021: 1119).

world. This is not to say that everyone will hold fast the same kind of sensitivities; rather, the fact that one does hold them fast will be decisive in how one goes about in the world. This kind of resemblance between feminist standpoint theories and Wittgenstein-inspired hinge epistemologies have not gone unnoticed. As Natalie Ashton (2019) argues, as theories of knowledge and justification, they share a commitment to the unassailable locality of our epistemic practices, the recognition of the non-epistemic character of some central aspects of justification, and, finally, an attitude of reconciliation with the legitimacy of these very aspects. In hinge epistemologies, however, the non-epistemic character of our hinges has sometimes been taken to mean that these basic features of our rational lives are as such irrational or otherwise immune to rational evaluation.

Hinge epistemologists' resistance to the idea that our most basic commitments do not qualify as sound rational attitudes is a function of their assumption that "the fact that they need to be in place in order for rational evaluations to occur means that they cannot be rationally evaluated themselves" (Pritchard 2021: 1118). But this assumption can only be held with reference to a view that equates rational evaluations with epistemic justifications, and effectively narrows down the realm of reason to that of knowledge. Within this narrow picture of reason, the fact that our commitment to certain aspects of the world cannot be articulated in knowledge-claims inevitably renders them non-rational.

To be sure, certainty in hinges is not something that is up for grabs *at the moment* they serve as the objective ground against which we make judgements. However, to say that something must stand fast so that we can carry on with our rational lives is not to say that what stands fast at one point will not be subject to revision later on. Far from being inviolable in the sense of not being up for rational evaluation, our hinges accommodate the very sensitivities that allow us to fully appreciate the ways in which we go about in the world.[6] Considering Wittgenstein's own examples of hinges, we cannot go wrong about the possibility of change at the hinge-level. Think, for

[6] For a thorough critical account of "inviolability interpretations" of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, see Crary (2007: ch. 3).

instance, of his unshakable conviction that no one has ever been on the moon (OC: § 106) and how this hinge commitment might have accompanied changes in his wider system of beliefs had he lived to watch the 1969 moon landing. So, while change in one's hinge commitments might in effect be "a gradual process that takes place over time, often imperceptibly" (Pritchard 2021: 1122), there is nothing in our hinges' nature that renders them inviolable in any relevant sense. The reconciliation of a necessary scaffolding for our thoughts with the – also necessary – flexible character of such scaffolding is best accounted for in Wittgenstein's riverbed metaphor:

> It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.
>
> […]
>
> And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (OC: §§ 96-99)

To conceive of hinges as irrational or immune to rational evaluation is to remain captivated by a neutral conception of reason (Crary 2007: 118). Only now the more familiar metaphysical sky of rationality has been replaced by a conception of our rational practices as taking place in language games that are overdetermined by some fundamental set of rules. To be sure, our hinge commitments may well be treated as inviolable and immune to change, and such treatment is what effectively renders them ideological in certain contexts. So that, if boys are taught to objectify girls and this is, furthermore, something that is held fast by their whole system of beliefs, they will most likely not have developed the sensitivities required to identify cases of sexual harassment as something wrongful. Likewise, if girls are taught they are mere objects of desire and, furthermore, that they do not belong in the public sphere of labour, then they might have a hard time making sense of the nature and normative significance of their experience of

sexual harassment at work. But this strict way of following rules, Wittgenstein tells us, is not all there is to our ordinary rational practices. In reality, our "rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself" (OC: § 139), which is to say that our practical sensitivities are recursively called upon themselves to evaluate the commitments that guide our being in the world.

On this wider conception of reason, then, nothing prevents us from conceiving hinge sensitivities and predispositions as internal to our linguistic and rational capacities. In fact, if we broaden our conception of rational thought to incorporate more than mere practices of judgement and justification, we may come to see our hinges' direct bearing on a wider universe of ordinary rational practices. Now, this is not to say that there is no difference between one's application of the concept of "sexual harassment", one's evaluation of the relevant experience as a form of abuse, and one's personal sensitivity to the abusive character of the situation. There is a difference inasmuch as one is led to justify the former two, while the latter simply plays in the back of one's head as it is informed by one's most deeply held commitments.

This account of non-epistemic thinking has, of course, enormous implications for how we perceive the effects of ideology on our conceptualisations of our social experiences. While deeply imbued within the dominant ideology of a certain historical setting, our hinge commitments will respond to a much larger terrain of acquired sensitivities that allow us to attend to certain aspects of our social relations and embodied experiences. To return to our parallel between Wittgensteinian philosophy and standpoint theory, we may consider, with Rosemary Hennessy, that women's lives "can never be separated from the various and often contesting ways of making sense of them; but at the same time, these lives are not exclusively ideological" (1993: 22). Indeed, our acquired sensitivities will sometimes be at odds with dominant interpretations of the world. It is from the space of these open "loop-holes" that ordinary resistant thinking might arise, planting the seed from which greater reflective awareness may grow. Certainly, any sophisticated account of social experience can only be achieved through collective means of philosophical and political struggle (Jaggar 1983: 383-384). But then

again, such collective practices would be blind were they not to refer to that primordial type of thinking that allows us to discern the objective aspects of the world that our analyses ought to focus on. This, of course, is what the objectivity of the hinge amounts to. Far from irrational, our hinge commitments derive their authority from the complex background of sensitivities that allow us to navigate the world. It is from this objective ground of rationality that new concepts may flourish and silences get a chance to be heard.

5. Concluding Remarks

The problem of endorsing a neutral conception of reason in our treatment of cases of hermeneutical injustice is now clear. For how could we possibly come to judge something to be unjust without referring to the very non-neutral resources that render injustice visible in the first place? How could we, first and foremost, even account for such experiences within the framework of a narrow conception of objectivity that excludes all affect from its domain? These are questions that speak to the very conditions of possibility of our collective practices of concept-creation, and their answers can only be illuminated through the lens of a wider conception of reason. For this was necessarily the conception of reason at play among the women who came up with the term "sexual harassment" in the 1970s. As Crary reminds us, "an organising theme of feminist theorising about sexual harassment is that, in order to get the patterns of behaviour constitutive of abuse adequately into focus, we need to look upon the social world from a particular ethically-loaded perspective" (2018: 19). Far from striving to clear their path into an abstract realm of reasons where no subjective elements could blur their reasoning, these women understood that the political salience of the social experience in question could only be captured if they were to approach it from a feminist perspective.

Opening the realm of rationality in this manner also allows us to articulate better responses to cases of hermeneutical injustice. Besides leading us to recognise that hermeneutical injustice does not after all leave marginalised subjects cognitively disadvantaged, it encourages the replacement of top-down approaches that seek to neutralise prejudice with ethically loaded ones that strive to reveal

situated perspectives. While Fricker's war on prejudice may surely motivate a revision of dominant interpretations of marginalised subjects' experiences, it inevitably leaves us with blank spaces where alternative interpretations should be found. Were she to attend more closely to the affective responses of those subject to hermeneutical injustice, the sort of biased resources she examines might appear as proof, not of the need to abstract from such biases, but rather of the pressing urgency to combat it with situated perspectives. Indeed, if we take seriously the need to attend to marginalised lives, then we may just about discover that these "gaps" were never completely empty to begin with.

The consequences of this account for feminist theory and practice are extensive and call for a radical transformation of dominant ways of looking and acting in the world. For we are now called to see the intimate relation between ideological modes of thought and dogmatic philosophical pictures. Feminist liberatory projects have a long task ahead, fighting on two fronts: in the philosophical realm, against a picture of reason that excludes all affect and emotion from its domain, and in the ideological realm, against patriarchal world-pictures hidden behind ideals of neutrality. And this requires practical and theoretical methods that are not individual, nor yet exceptional, but which must begin with women's lives, to actively denounce the interests behind dominant resources and institutions. Once committed to cultivating a collective hinge sensitivity to the historical, material and systemic oppression of women under sexist regimes, we will be one step closer to attending to those silences that speak.

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