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# Hermeneutical Dissent and the Species of Hermeneutical Injustice

TRYSTAN S. GOETZE

*According to Miranda Fricker, a hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a deficit in our shared tools of social interpretation (the collective hermeneutical resource), such that marginalized social groups are at a disadvantage in making sense of their distinctive and important experiences. Critics have claimed that Fricker's account ignores or precludes a phenomenon I call hermeneutical dissent, where marginalized groups have produced their own interpretive tools for making sense of those experiences. I clarify the nature of hermeneutical injustice to make room for hermeneutical dissent, clearing up the structure of the collective hermeneutical resource and the fundamental harm of hermeneutical injustice. I then provide a more nuanced account of the hermeneutical resources in play in instances of hermeneutical injustice, allowing six species of the injustice to be distinguished. Finally, I reflect on the corrective virtue of hermeneutical justice in light of hermeneutical dissent.*

The exclusion or marginalization of a social group from collective processes of meaning-making can lead to a situation where no one, not even members of that group, are able to make intelligible sense of some of their distinctive and important experiences. This situation is what Miranda Fricker calls *hermeneutical injustice*: “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2007, 1). One of her examples is sexual harassment: before mid-twentieth century feminist activists had coined that very concept, collective understanding provided no way to properly interpret a woman’s experience of sexual harassment, particularly, the wrong the harasser does to her. These experiences thus remained barely

intelligible, collectively and to the women who went through them, constituting a harm to them in their capacity as knowers.

But what about cases where members of a marginalized group have successfully produced their own ways of interpreting their experiences, *despite* their hermeneutical marginalization? Consider, for example, the multitude of new concepts and terms that have been produced in LGBTQ+ communities, such as the idea of being *agender*. Members of these communities may understand a person's experience of genderlessness perfectly well. But many who are differently situated continue to struggle to make sense of this non-binary gender identity. As agender activist Tyler Ford writes in an autobiographical essay for *The Guardian*:

People don't know what to make of me when they see me, because they feel my features contradict one another. They see no room for the curve of my hips to coexist with my facial hair; they desperately want me to be someone they can easily categorise... Strangers are often desperate to figure out what genitalia I have, in the hope that my body holds the key to some great secret and unavoidable truth about myself and my gender. It doesn't. My words hold my truth. My body is simply the vehicle that gives me the opportunity to express myself. (Ford 2015)

Call cases like Ford's instances of *hermeneutical dissent*. There are many other examples from feminist, queer, race, and disability theory, where hermeneutical dissent has overcome a collective interpretive failure.<1> But are Ford and others like them subject to hermeneutical injustice?

According to several critics of Fricker's view, the answer would seem to be negative. Drawing on examples of hermeneutical dissent, José Medina (2013), Rebecca Mason (2011), and Kristie Dotson (2012) each argue that Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice either fails to capture or rules out the possibility of cases like Ford's. If the former is true, then this

is a serious oversight; if the latter is true, then Fricker's account runs against some of the core commitments of feminist and other liberatory theory. Either way, hermeneutical dissent and its relation to hermeneutical injustice deserve our attention.

In this paper, I argue that we can account for cases of hermeneutical dissent as instances of hermeneutical injustice, provided we make three clarifications regarding the nature of hermeneutical injustice. First, to make our account of hermeneutical injustice compatible with hermeneutical dissent in the first place, I clear up our understanding of the collective hermeneutical resource, arguing that it consists in the interpretive tools that are shared by all. Second, to show how hermeneutical dissenters can still be subject to a hermeneutical injustice, I dissolve some ambiguities surrounding the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, arguing that the primary harm is that the subject's experience lacks intelligibility, *either* cognitively *or* communicatively. Third, I provide a more nuanced account of hermeneutical resources that makes it easier to track the extent of hermeneutical gaps relative to various social groups and individuals. This fine-grained picture of the hermeneutical economy allows us to distinguish six species of hermeneutical injustice. I then reflect on the corrective virtue of hermeneutical justice, given the complexities just introduced. I conclude by returning to Ford's story and summarizing the extended account of hermeneutical injustice I have provided.

#### COLLECTIVE RESOURCES AND DISSENTING COMMUNITIES

According to Medina, Mason, and Dotson, the way Fricker presents the collective hermeneutical resource creates problems in accounting for hermeneutical dissent. Medina claims that "Fricker's expression 'the collective hermeneutical resource' strongly suggests that we can pool all the hermeneutical resources available to all groups" (Medina 2013, 103). According to Medina, Fricker presents the collective hermeneutical resource as *cumulative*: it refers to *all* of the interpretive tools in circulation across *all* discursive communities. Mason

and Dotson's interpretation is slightly different. Mason claims that Fricker presents the interpretive tools used by members of socially powerful groups as the *only* hermeneutical resource available to marginalized subjects, and "thus glosses over important distinctions—in particular, distinctions between dominant and non-dominant hermeneutical resources" (Mason 2011, 300). Dotson makes much the same claim: "Fricker seems to assume that there is but one set of collective hermeneutical resources that we are all equally dependent upon" (Dotson 2012, 31). According to Mason and Dotson, Fricker presents the collective hermeneutical resource as *exhaustive*: it is the only resource available. We can illustrate these interpretations using Venn diagrams (Figure 1): the shaded region is the collective hermeneutical resource and each circle represents some collection of hermeneutical tools. On Medina's interpretation (a), the collective resource is the *union* of various community-specific hermeneutical resources; on Mason and Dotson's interpretation (b), the collective resource is the *only* hermeneutical resource.

Because a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource that has been produced by hermeneutical marginalization is the background condition for hermeneutical injustice, these interpretations necessitate that a hermeneutical injustice can occur *only* in cases where no interpretive tools that could make that experience intelligible are available *to anyone*. Thus, Medina "[finds] it problematic that Fricker operates with the working assumption that when there is a hermeneutical gap, a range of experiences will be rendered unintelligible *for everybody*" (Medina 2013, 101, his emphasis); Mason claims that "when a hermeneutical lacuna exists with respect to the experiences of a marginalized group, *everyone* fails to understand" (Mason 2011, 303, my emphasis); and Dotson makes the same point: "for Fricker, the hermeneutical lacuna in hermeneutical injustice renders some experiences difficult to conceptualize *for the marginalized and the perceiver alike*" (Dotson 2012, 32, my emphasis).

But if the hermeneutical gap must be global, then hermeneutical dissent is not captured by our account of hermeneutical injustice. On Medina's reading, the collective resource extends across all the interpretive tools in circulation, regardless of who actually has them. Subjects in hermeneutically dissenting communities therefore avoid hermeneutical injustice because they have produced the interpretive tools required to understand their experiences—despite the absence of those tools in the repertoire of subjects in dominant social groups. But this gap in dominant hermeneutical resources leads to an interpretive breakdown when marginalized subjects attempt to explain their experiences to dominant subjects. Medina claims that the dominant subjects suffer an epistemic harm, in that they cannot obtain knowledge about the dissenters' experiences, yet, “interestingly and crucially, the hermeneutical harms are *wrongful for others*, not for those upon whom the epistemic harms are directly inflicted” (Medina 2013, 107, his emphasis). This phenomenon, Medina concludes, is not addressed on Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice. On Mason and Dotson's interpretation, however, hermeneutical dissent cannot even be accounted for. If the collective hermeneutical resource is the *only* resource available, then for any interpretive tool at all, either everyone has it or no one does. Therefore, hermeneutical dissent is impossible—but since we can point to clear cases of hermeneutical dissent, there must be something wrong in Fricker's account.

In a recent piece, however, Fricker has resisted these interpretations, claiming that “a commitment to the existence of localised interpretive practices that may perfectly capture a given range of experiences but whose meanings are not sufficiently shared across wider social space is already present at the heart of the original account of hermeneutical injustice” (Fricker 2016, 167). That is to say, Fricker claims that her original account can already accommodate hermeneutical dissent. According to her, the collective hermeneutical resource is neither cumulative nor exhaustive: “[the collective hermeneutical resource] contains only

meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else. [It] contains those concepts and conceptualisations that are held *in common*” (Fricker 2016, 163, her emphasis). The hermeneutical gap is in the common resource that *everyone* has access to—and the existence of this gap does not at all imply that *no one* must have access to the required tools. Again, we can illustrate with a Venn diagram (Figure 2). According to Fricker (2016), the collective hermeneutical resource is the *intersection* of various community-specific resources.

It is easy to place hermeneutical dissent on Fricker’s intersectional account of the collective hermeneutical resource. The existence of a gap in the interpretive tools shared by all says nothing about the interpretive tools that may be available among the members of any particular group. That group’s hermeneutical dissent may successfully produce the interpretive tools that are needed to make intelligible sense of their experiences despite the gap in the collective hermeneutical resource. In fact, we can see hermeneutical dissent in action in some of Fricker’s own examples from her earlier work. Consider Wendy Sanford’s experience of postpartum depression as recounted by Susan Brownmiller (1990). Sanford was an upper-class Republican woman struggling with depression after giving birth to her son, and she and her husband had been blaming her for these difficulties. A friend convinced Sanford to come along to a feminist consciousness-raising seminar, where she learned about postpartum depression, conceived as a medical condition and not a personal deficiency. Sanford came away with an understanding of her experience that made better sense of her predicament and helped her to realize that the way she was feeling was not her fault. Fricker describes Sanford as suffering a hermeneutical injustice: the collective hermeneutical resource did not provide the appropriate interpretive tools for Sanford to properly understand her experience, because women were hermeneutically marginalized. And yet, feminist activists *had* produced the needed interpretive tools, despite the collective gap and despite

their hermeneutical marginalization *qua* women. Clearly, Fricker intends her account to have room for hermeneutical dissent.

This defeats the version the worry raised by Mason and Dotson that hermeneutical injustice cannot accommodate hermeneutical dissent—but it does not yet fully answer Medina’s worry about cases where hermeneutical dissenters are unable to make themselves understood to dominant subjects. As was the case for agender people in the Ford case, it is unclear whether the feminist activists in the Sanford case suffer a hermeneutical injustice. That our account has space for hermeneutical dissent does not yet show that hermeneutical dissenters are subject to hermeneutical injustice.

#### THE HARMS OF HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE REVISITED

In order to show that the interpretive breakdown between hermeneutical dissenters and ignorant subjects constitutes a hermeneutical injustice, we must re-examine the harms of hermeneutical injustice. We have already seen that a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource owing to the subject’s hermeneutical marginalization does some kind of harm to the paradigmatic subjects of both hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical dissent. If the harms in both cases turn out to be the same, we ought to identify hermeneutical dissenters as suffering hermeneutical injustice as well.

But it may seem that the harms suffered in each case are distinct. On the one hand, some instances produce *communicative* harms. In these cases, the subject is not prevented from acquiring knowledge of her experience, but she is prevented from sharing that knowledge because others find her testimony unintelligible. On the other hand, Medina, Mason, and Dotson all concentrate on cases that produce *cognitive* harms. In these cases, the subject herself is unable to attain knowledge of her experience in the first place. Both the communicative harm and the cognitive harm undermine the subject’s capacity as a knower—the former by impairing her ability to share knowledge, the latter by preventing her from



acquiring knowledge. Fricker's account seems to waver between these two harms when it comes to which is the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice. In order to understand whether hermeneutical injustice afflicts hermeneutically dissenting subjects, we must clear up this ambiguity.

On the one hand, Fricker sometimes claims that the primary harm is communicative: “the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice consists in a situated hermeneutical inequality: the concrete situation is such that the subject is rendered unable *to make communicatively intelligible* something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible,” which amounts to “prejudicial exclusion from the *spread of knowledge*” (Fricker 2007, 162, my emphasis). We can see this most clearly in another of Fricker's examples, which she takes from Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love* (McEwan 1998). The novel's protagonist, Joe Rose, is stalked and harassed by Jed Parry, a religious zealot deluded by an erotomaniacal misapprehension that Joe is in love with him. At key moments in the story, Joe tries to communicate his experience of Jed's behavior to other people—first to his partner Clarissa, then to the police—but each time he is unable to make his experience intelligible to his interlocutors. Importantly, Joe does not suffer a cognitive harm at all: he *knows* that there is something very wrong and potentially dangerous about Jed. Nevertheless, Joe, through no fault of his own, is unable to explain Jed's menace in a way that others find intelligible. Joe is harmed in his capacity as a knower because he is prevented from sharing his knowledge.

On the other hand, Fricker sometimes claims that the primary harm is cognitive. One example is the case of sexual harassment alluded to earlier. Brownmiller (1990) describes the experience of Carmita Wood, a university employee who was sexually harassed by a male professor. Before Wood and other feminist activists came together to discuss these experiences, inventing the term “sexual harassment” in the process, a collective

hermeneutical gap prevented Wood or anyone else from attaining knowledge of this experience. As Fricker puts it: “a patch of her social experience which it was very much in her interests to understand was not collectively understood, and so *remained barely intelligible, even to her*” (Fricker 2007, 162, my emphasis).<sup><3></sup> Another example is the Sanford case described earlier. Fricker describes the moment Sanford realized that she was suffering from postpartum depression as a “revelation concerning an experience of female depression, previously *ill-understood by the subject herself*, because collectively ill-understood” (Fricker 2007, 149, my emphasis). Wood and Sanford both were harmed in their capacity as knowers because they were prevented from acquiring knowledge of their experiences.

If we try to interpret either the communicative or the cognitive harm as the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, we encounter problems accounting for all of the central cases *and* hermeneutical dissent. If the primary harm is communicative, then cases where the subject is unable to acquire knowledge of her experience will not count as instances of hermeneutical injustice, because the subject will have no knowledge to communicate at all. She will of course have communicative difficulties; Wood, for instance, is portrayed as *both* unable to intelligibly articulate *and* unable to acquire knowledge of her experience of sexual harassment. But this communicative trouble comes too late. The subject has already been harmed in her capacity as a knower *before* these communicative difficulties, which are not even of the same sort required for hermeneutical injustice—with no knowledge to communicate, the communicative harm simply cannot arise in the required way. This result is problematic because we can no longer account for the most troubling central cases (namely, cases like Wood’s or Sanford’s) as instances of hermeneutical injustice. Interpreting the primary harm as cognitive fares no better, because it forces us to exclude all cases where the subject has achieved knowledge of her experience. Consequently, both cases of

hermeneutical dissent and Joe's case will fail to qualify as hermeneutical injustices. We might be able to describe some other species of epistemic injustice to cover either interpretation's losses, but it would be more satisfying if we had a unified account given that both harms have a common cause.

Fricker's account is ambivalent when it comes to which of these two harms is primary. However, it is suggestive that she occasionally represents these harms disjunctively: "the moment of hermeneutical injustice comes only when the background condition is realized in a more or less doomed attempt on the part of the subject to render an experience intelligible, *either to herself or to an interlocutor*" (Fricker 2007, 159, my emphasis). The disjunction suggests that the two harms are both manifestations of a more general epistemic harm. Namely, I propose that the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice is that *the subject has some distinctive and important social experience that at some crucial moment lacks intelligibility*. That crucial moment may come when the subject tries to communicate knowledge she has about her experience to an interlocutor who lacks the required interpretive tools to find her testimony intelligible. Or it may arise in the moment of the subject's experience, where her own lack of the required interpretive tools leaves her without knowledge of that experience because it remains unintelligible even to her. So despite their apparent divergence, the communicative harm and the cognitive harm turn out to be instances of the same thing. Consequently, we can account for both hermeneutical dissent and all of Fricker's examples as instances of hermeneutical injustice.

#### GLOBAL AND LOCAL HERMENEUTICAL ECONOMIES

Whether the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice manifests communicatively or cognitively depends on where the gap in the collective hermeneutical resource appears. That is to say, the way in which the subject's experience lacks intelligibility in the moment she suffers a hermeneutical injustice depends on *who*, at that moment, has got the required

interpretive tools. But our account of hermeneutical injustice so far does not specify which epistemic agents and social groups have access to the required interpretive tools: a gap in the collective resource just means that at least *someone* lacks them. In order to better classify the different kinds of hermeneutical injustice we need a more precise account of hermeneutical resources that shifts our attention away from the global hermeneutical economy onto the local hermeneutical economies where dissent takes place.

In Fricker's more recent work, she begins to distinguish different types of hermeneutical injustices along these lines, using the labels "maximal," "midway," and "minimal" (Fricker 2016). What is maximized or minimized is the extent of the hermeneutical gap among different social groups' and individuals' hermeneutical toolsets. In Wood's case (maximal), the hermeneutical gap is global: no individuals or groups had the concept of sexual harassment. In Joe's case (minimal), the extent of the gap is extremely limited: "he himself has no difficulty in understanding [his experience] and would easily be able to communicate to members of almost any social group," yet those to whom he most has interest in communicating—Clarissa and the police—seem not to have got the required interpretive tools (Fricker 2016, 166). The "midway" band, however, is ambiguous between several different forms of hermeneutical injustice. In each case where a hermeneutical injustice occurs, a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource might represent the subject's own lack of the required interpretive tools, or it may represent a lack among the members of various social group(s) to whom she attempts to make her experience communicatively intelligible. Moreover, the idiom of maximization–minimization still glosses over details; for the spread of interpretive tools from dissenting communities out into wider circulation does not happen evenly. Understanding the kinds of hermeneutical injustice that occur in cases of hermeneutical dissent requires further elaboration concerning these local hermeneutical resources.

Table 1 summarizes the possibilities. I have dropped permutations where the relevant tools are in the collective resource, because that implies that everyone has access to them. I have also dropped the permutation where the subject does not have the required tools despite her own social group having them: I am assuming that if a group has the required interpretive tools, then so do all of its members. This is of course an abstraction; certainly, it takes time for interpretive tools to disperse amongst the members of a discursive group, and its members may disagree. In such cases, however, it suffices to draw the line differently, circumscribing only the subgroup whose members agree. Note also that I am only interested in the hermeneutical resources of the subject herself and the hermeneutical resources of social groups to whose members the subject is attempting to communicate. People to whom the subject is *not* attempting to communicate may also lack the required interpretive tools, but this situation merely provides a necessary condition for hermeneutical injustice. Until the subject attempts to communicate with them, or they undergo the same sort of experience themselves, no hermeneutical injustice takes place. The result is six species of hermeneutical injustice.

<i>Type of injustice</i>	<i>Who has the relevant interpretive tools?</i>			
	<b>Collective</b>	<b>Social group other than the subject's own</b>	<b>Subject's own social group</b>	<b>Subject</b>
<i>Effacement</i>	X	X	X	X
<i>Isolation</i>	X	X	X	✓
<i>Separation</i>	X	✓	X	X
<i>Ghettoization</i>	X	X	✓	✓
<i>Exportation</i>	X	✓	X	✓
<i>Obstruction</i>	X	✓	✓	✓

*Table 1. The species of hermeneutical injustice.*

The first scenario is what I call *hermeneutical effacement*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when the subject herself lacks the interpretive tools required to attain knowledge of her experience, and *all* interlocutors with whom she attempts to communicate also lack those tools. Moreover, the subject and others who undergo the experience are so severely hermeneutically marginalized that they have so far been prevented from organizing any effective hermeneutical dissent. In other words, this case arises when the hermeneutical gap extends globally, beyond just the collective. We can interpret the Wood case as being of this type. Prior to the consciousness-raising seminar, there were no communities or individuals that had developed interpretive tools that fully captured the experience of sexual harassment. Moreover, the women who experienced it had not had the opportunity to come together in a supportive environment that would have allowed them to develop the needed interpretive tools. The result was that the women suffered hermeneutical injustices not just because there was a gap in the *shared* store of interpretive tools, but also because *no one* with whom they attempted to communicate had the tools required, not even themselves. Their

experience of being sexually harassed thus lacked intelligibility in the moment of their experience, preventing them from acquiring knowledge about it. Thus, Wood suffered the cognitive harm.

The second scenario is what I call *hermeneutical isolation*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when a hermeneutically marginalized subject *alone* has the interpretive tools needed to make intelligible sense of her experience. That is, though the subject understands her experience well enough to achieve knowledge of it, none of her interlocutors has the required interpretive tools to make sense of her attempts to share that knowledge. Moreover, her hermeneutical marginalization interferes with other agents or groups taking up the subject's interpretation of her experience, preventing her from engaging in hermeneutical dissent with any who may be similarly situated. In these situations, the subject will not suffer the cognitive harm, because she is able to acquire knowledge of her experience, but she will suffer the communicative harm every time she attempts to communicate about that experience. We might be skeptical about whether such cases can occur as a result of a subject's lone hermeneutical dissent. As Wittgenstein argues, a subject who invented her own term or concept for a specific experience of hers cannot be sure that her applications of that term or concept are consistently tracking the same thing. On his view, the only way these hermeneutical tools can acquire a determinate meaning is for a community to take them up into their practices and to reach a point where the members of that community tacitly agree on public features indicating that applying those interpretive tools is appropriate.<4> Arguably, it is only at this point that the subject could acquire *knowledge* of her experience using these tools. Hermeneutical dissent might begin with an individual's inchoate hermeneutical innovations, but in order to succeed in eliminating the cognitive harm the dissent must be brought to fruition through social processes.

However, there are cases where hermeneutical isolation can occur without hermeneutical dissent, such as when a subject becomes permanently cut off from the community in which she was brought up. For example, consider the ongoing extinction of indigenous cultures with distinctive languages and ways of thinking. Suppose the last surviving member of one such culture lives among members of the region's (now) dominant community. His practically extinct culture gave him distinctive hermeneutical resources for interpreting some of his experiences—say, aspects of hunting—which his neighbors do not share, but which for him hold a distinctive practical and spiritual significance. If his neighbors do not make an effort to take up his indigenous interpretive tools, they may find his interpretations of hunting to be unintelligible. In this case, the survivor's hermeneutical tools have come out of his extinct community's practices, so they will remain determinate enough for him to have knowledge of his experience. But, he will be frustrated in all his attempts to make his interpretations intelligible to his neighbors, owing to a gap in their interpretive tools. He thus suffers the communicative harm. Over time, the lack of social reinforcement from members of his extinct community may also cause him to lose his grip on those interpretive tools, whittling away at his interpretations until he can no longer be certain he is applying them correctly—in the end, he may suffer a cognitive harm by losing the knowledge he once had.

The third scenario is what I call *hermeneutical separation*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when the subject lacks the interpretive tools she needs to make sense of her own experience, and has been unable to engage in hermeneutical dissent with members of her own social group, yet at the same time the required tools are in use by members of a hermeneutically marginalized social group to which the subject does *not* belong. Once the subject comes into contact with these sympathetic strangers, her attempts to explain and understand her experience may “click.” Those with the needed interpretive tools



may recognize the subject's experience as something familiar to them, or the subject may recognize her experience in the testimony of those in the other group. The Sanford case illustrates this kind of hermeneutical injustice. As we have seen, before attending the consciousness-raising seminar, she had no resources to come to an accurate and fully intelligible understanding of her own experience of postpartum depression. At the same time, feminists, a community to which Sanford did not belong because of her political affiliations, *had* developed those resources. Because Sanford did not have the hermeneutical resources at her disposal to acquire knowledge of her own experience, she suffered the cognitive harm until she had internalized the interpretive tools offered to her by the consciousness-raisers.

The fourth scenario is what I call *hermeneutical ghettoization*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when the subject belongs to a hermeneutically marginalized group whose members have engaged in hermeneutical dissent in order to acquire knowledge of their distinctive experience and to communicate about it amongst themselves. But, because of this group's marginalization, no other communities have acquired such an understanding, so the subject cannot make her experience intelligible to members of other groups. One of Fricker's newer examples captures this type of hermeneutical injustice. She draws on Mike and Trevor Phillips's account of the migration of non-white Commonwealth citizens to the United Kingdom after the Second World War (Phillips and Phillips 1998). Black colonial immigrants interpreted their experiences as a struggle to be granted their rights as British citizens, whereas white Brits often viewed the issue as one of accepting or rejecting black migrants into British society without regard for their civic rights. Fricker summarizes: "One could say the concept of a black British citizen had not yet taken hold in white British consciousness" (Fricker 2016, 168). Because the black immigrants were frustrated in their attempts to communicate their knowledge of their civic rights to white Brits, they suffered the communicative harm.

The fifth scenario is what I call *hermeneutical exportation*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when the subject acquires interpretive tools from a social group other than any of her own, and attempts to communicate with people in her own social group who have not acquired those tools. The subject is thus able to acquire knowledge of her experience and to share her knowledge with members of that other social group, but not to people in her own group. Moreover, her hermeneutical marginalization hinders her attempts to import those tools into her local communities. For example, we might imagine Sanford coming home from the feminist seminar and trying to explain the idea of postpartum depression to her husband. From what little we know of him—namely, that he was a white, upper-class, conservative, U.S. American cis man—we would expect him to reject Sanford’s new characterization of her condition. It is easy to imagine Sanford trying to explain that her depression is rooted in changes to her physiology (which are out of her control) and in social isolation (in which he is implicated), and he finding all of this unintelligible, retorting that those “radical man-haters” have “put ideas in her head.” When our imagined Sanford attempts to communicate the knowledge she has about her postpartum depression to her husband, she suffers the communicative harm. Such cases may generally be a prelude to a change of group membership: when people in your own community dismiss your interpretations of your own experience, the ensuing alienation is likely to spur you to leave for a more supportive group. In the end, Brownmiller tells us that Sanford divorced her husband, became a feminist activist, and “discovered her lesbian identity” (Brownmiller 1990, 185).

The sixth scenario is what I call *hermeneutical obstruction*. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when the subject, her own social group, and at least some social groups to which she does not belong have all got the required interpretive tools to make her experience intelligible, but there remain some social groups and individuals who

have not yet acquired them, and so those interpretive tools fail to pass into the collective resource. To count as a hermeneutical injustice, the subject must still be subject to hermeneutical marginalization: despite the relatively favorable hermeneutical climate, socially dominant interpretations still run against her and her allies. Moreover, some socially dominant groups may be actively resisting the spread of the subject's dissenting interpretations. For example, let us continue our imagined biography of Sanford. Suppose that (as may in fact be the case) after she joined the feminist community the women's health movement succeeded in exporting their understanding of postpartum depression to a significant segment of the U.S. American population. And yet, suppose the dominant cultural understanding of such experiences continues to run against their interpretations: the feminist activists, now including Sanford, are still hermeneutically marginalized *qua* women. Sanford would now be able to communicate her knowledge intelligibly to a wider range of people, but that intelligibility would continue to fail with interlocutors who have not taken up the interpretations of the women's health movement, especially those actively resisting them. At this stage, our imagined Sanford would still be subject to hermeneutical injustice in her attempts to communicate her knowledge to some people, suffering the communicative harm.

My imagined extensions of the Sanford case also show how the hermeneutical injustices to which one is subjected might change over time. As I presented it, Sanford initially suffers hermeneutical separation, then, after internalizing the feminist conception of postpartum depression, she suffers hermeneutical exportation, and finally, after becoming a feminist herself, she suffers hermeneutical obstruction. These kinds of fluctuations occur because of changes in the subject's group membership and in different parties' hermeneutical resources. The subject may find it epistemically illuminating to expose herself to and to internalize the interpretive tools in use by other social groups, possibly going so far as to change her group membership. Social groups, too, may take up interpretive tools from one

another. In addition to the examples above, we could imagine a Sanford who never attended the consciousness-raising seminar, but whose own social group (say, upper-class Americans) eventually acquired the feminist conception of postpartum depression, bringing an end to her hermeneutical injustice without any change in her group membership. Where the subject is a member of multiple social groups, some of which have got the required hermeneutical tools and some of which do not, she will not suffer a hermeneutical injustice when communicating with members of the former group, but she will when communicating with members of the latter. So if Sanford had carried on as a conservative after becoming a feminist, and her fellow conservatives did *not* take up the feminist conception of postpartum depression, she would continue to suffer hermeneutical exportation among conservatives even though she would suffer no hermeneutical injustice among feminists.

These distinctions illustrate just how complex local hermeneutical economies can be, with diverse social groups circulating dominant and dissenting interpretive tools among individuals who may come into contact with differently situated groups. Hermeneutical dissent is not a straightforward process of inventing interpretive tools for marginal experiences and pushing them out to a wider and wider congregation. Different social groups and individuals may acquire or resist interpretive tools from other social groups, meaning that filling in collective gaps proceeds unevenly—and not, as Fricker (2016) suggests, in a straight line from the maximal form of the injustice (effacement) to the minimal form (obstruction). My account brings out these details and allows us to fully appreciate the complexities of hermeneutical dissent while still recognizing the hermeneutical injustices that dissenting subjects suffer.

## HERMENEUTICAL JUSTICE

I have so far said little about how to correct for these various manifestations of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker proposes an ethical-epistemic virtue of *hermeneutical justice*, which she defines as:

an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one's interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources. (Fricker 2007, 169)

Minimally, when the virtuous hearer encounters a speaker whose testimony seems barely intelligible, and whom he recognizes is likely to be hermeneutically marginalized, he is required to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt and assume that even though he does not understand what has been said, the speaker is not spouting nonsense. In favorable conditions, the hearer and speaker may be able to carry on an extended conversation aimed at producing or sharing the required interpretive tools so that both parties are able to make sense of the marginalized subject's experience.

Reflecting on hermeneutical dissent helps us see the requirements of hermeneutical justice in more detail. The virtuous hearer will be aware that the hermeneutical economy is in flux and subject to manipulation by social power. Consequently, he will understand that the interpretive tools that are available to him and to others will not always be the same, and will not always be adequate. In particular, he will be aware that different social groups may have developed better interpretive tools for their distinctive experiences. In situations where the subject seems to show a clear understanding of some experience that sounds unintelligible to his ears, the virtuous hearer will demonstrate a form of epistemic humility with respect to the interpretive tools he is accustomed to using. That is, he is willing to admit that his interpretive tools are fallible—especially with respect to the experiences of the marginally situated. This

humility does not mean that he would uncritically accept any and all dissenting interpretive tools. Rather, he simply understands that those who are differently situated may know better than him when it comes to their own experiences.

The hearer's virtuous activity may continue into helping to "generate a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate through the appropriate kind of dialogue with the speaker" (Fricker 2007, 171). The virtuous hearer may, that is, be drawn into participation in hermeneutical dissent. He may actively help to create a space where the speaker can try out different ways of articulating herself in the search for an intelligible account of her experience. Or he may be drawn to speak with more people in the speaker's situation in the hopes of understanding the hermeneutical tools they are already using but which are not collectively available and not yet locally available to him. The aim of hermeneutical justice is to understand these dissenting interpretations of our social world *before* subjecting them to criticism, and, if they are found to be well-formed, to spread them more widely.

In cases of hermeneutical separation, the virtuous hearer may be able to direct the subject to a hermeneutically dissenting social group that has ready-made interpretive tools for exactly the kind of experience the subject is struggling to understand for herself. The virtuous hearer may even be a member of that dissenting group, and able to teach the needed interpretive tools directly. This role of hermeneutical dissenters in redressing hermeneutical gaps suggests a further proactive move that a virtuous dissenter may make: fighting their hermeneutical marginalization through activism and advocacy. Such efforts aim at spreading dissenting hermeneutical tools to a wider audience, in the hope that those who need them to make sense of their experiences will take them up and that virtuous hearers who do not share such experiences will take those interpretations seriously.

Hermeneutical justice is not without its critics, however. Elizabeth Anderson worries Fricker's account focuses too much on the virtues of individual epistemic agents. Individual

virtues may be enough to correct for hermeneutical injustices in particular interactions between marginalized and virtuous subjects, but, Anderson argues, the structural problem will remain:

in the face of massive structural injustice, individual epistemic virtue plays a comparable role to the practice of individual charity in the context of massive structural poverty. Just as it would be better and more effective to redesign economic institutions so as to prevent mass poverty in the first place, it would be better to reconfigure epistemic institutions so as to prevent epistemic injustice from arising.

Structural injustices call for structural remedies. (Anderson 2012, 171)

Anderson argues that greater social integration would serve as a structural remedy for hermeneutical injustice. Breaking down social barriers between communities will help to counteract structural problems that reinforce hermeneutical gaps and obstructions. Her ideal of integration requires all social groups to participate equally in epistemic activities—including a requirement that they be fairly represented in hermeneutically influential professions such as politics, academia, and journalism—which also requires equal access to the kinds of education that best develop knowledge and intellectual virtue.

It is easy to place hermeneutical dissent in Anderson's institutional account of hermeneutical justice. Greater community integration would provide more opportunities for hermeneutically dissenting social groups to popularize their interpretive tools. Greater educational equality would empower members of marginalized groups by giving them the intellectual resources and social standing to aid in organizing hermeneutical dissent. Fair representation of diverse social groups in hermeneutically influential professions and positions would help eliminate their hermeneutical marginalization by giving them a platform from which to explain their dissenting interpretations, and the authority to make them widespread topics of conversation. Hermeneutically just institutions would help to make

dissenting interpretive tools part of the hermeneutical mainstream, reducing the extent of interpretive gaps.

Finally, the Sanford case raises another possibility: the subject of a hermeneutical injustice may be prevented from acquiring the very interpretive tools she needs if she herself lacks the virtue of hermeneutical justice. Imagine that Sanford's friend had never dragged her to the consciousness-raising group, and her continued association with her conservative social group further alienated her from the feminist community. It is conceivable that even if she then heard of postpartum depression, she would find that interpretation of her symptoms unintelligible. Without the virtue of hermeneutical justice, she would be unable to experience the moment of hermeneutical "revelation" Fricker describes. Hermeneutical justice is therefore not only important for ensuring that the experiences of *others* are not unduly dismissed: it may open our minds to better ways of interpreting *our own* experiences.

#### GENDERLESS DISSENT

To conclude, let us take stock by returning to the Ford case. Hermeneutical marginalization occurs when a group or individual is unfairly excluded from participating in the development of the collective hermeneutical resource. As a result, the tools available in the collective hermeneutical resource may be inadequate to interpret the distinctive and important social experiences of marginalized people. This has long been the case for LGBTQ+ folk, especially those like Ford who identify with non-binary genders. I have argued, following Fricker, that the collective resource ought to be conceived as those interpretive tools which are shared in common, and not as a cumulative or exhaustive catalogue of all the interpretive tools there are. A gap in the common hermeneutical toolset is the background condition for hermeneutical injustice. As Ford writes, they initially had never encountered the very idea of non-binary gender identities, much less gender/less identities: "At this point, gender fluidity and gender neutrality was not being discussed in the media as it is today by celebrities such



as Miley Cyrus and Shamir Bailey...Back then, I had never seen the topic addressed publicly, or by anyone in my life” (Ford 2015). The hermeneutical marginalization of LGBTQ+ folk produced a collective gap in interpretive resources surrounding the experience of being agender.

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, I argued, can appear in two ways. On the one hand, when the hermeneutical gap appears on her interlocutor’s side, it may impair the subject’s ability to communicate her knowledge of her experience. On the other hand, when the gap appears on the subject’s side, it will prevent her from acquiring this knowledge in the first place. The communicative and cognitive harms are both manifestations of the same primary harm: at some crucial moment the subject’s experience lacks intelligibility. At different stages, Ford was subject to both: at first, they did not understand their own experience of being agender. After they joined the relevant LGBTQ+ communities, they acquired the necessary interpretive tools to acquire knowledge of their experience. But they still encounter resistance to their genderless identity in encounters with many people who find such experiences unintelligible.

Some LGBTQ+ communities, engaging in hermeneutical dissent, have developed interpretive tools in order to acquire knowledge of their experiences of being genderless, among other experiences. But the spread of dissenting interpretive tools into the collective is not a process of straightforward accumulation. My taxonomy of hermeneutical injustices tracks whether the subject, her own social group, or other social groups, have picked up the required interpretive tools. With the fine-grained distinctions among hermeneutical resources that I have presented, we can track Ford’s story through several kinds of hermeneutical injustice. They were at first subject to hermeneutical separation, when they had not yet encountered people in LGBTQ+ communities who had developed the concept of genderlessness. After acquiring this concept and joining those communities, Ford became

subject to hermeneutical ghettoization, when trying to communicate to social groups other than their own, and hermeneutical exportation, when trying to communicate to their own non-LGBTQ+ social groups.

Given these local hermeneutical complexities, the virtue of hermeneutical justice demands that virtuous hearers be on the lookout for and participate in hermeneutical dissent, to better understand the social experiences of others, and perhaps even their own. Ford is a good example of such a person, having come to LGBTQ+ communities with an open but critical mind, hoping to make better sense of their own experience. Ford's advocacy, public appearances, and writing also demonstrate their commitment to furthering LGBTQ+ communities' hermeneutical dissent and eliminating their marginalization by disseminating their interpretive tools to a wider audience. Ford's article also instantiates an institutional solution to hermeneutical injustice. By making space in its pages for people who, like Ford, come from hermeneutically marginalized groups, *The Guardian* has lent its institutional authority as a media organization to marginalized voices. Eliminating hermeneutical injustice, in all its forms, will require further commitments on the part of institutions and individuals to hermeneutical justice.

#### NOTES

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1. For instance, see the feminist standpoint tradition, summarized by Anderson (2015, §2).
2. Unlike systematic cases where an entire social group is hermeneutically marginalized, tracking them across multiple aspects of their lives, Joe's marginalization is of an incidental type, affecting him only in a very limited aspect of his epistemic life.

3. It remains slightly obscure exactly what Fricker means when she says that an experience is “barely intelligible.” It cannot be the case that the subject’s experience is so radically unintelligible that it cannot figure in her thought at all; for then it would seem impossible that she could engage in hermeneutical dissent or any other interpretive activity regarding that experience. In some cases the subject’s nascent understanding may amount to some form of epistemic achievement that remains less coherent than propositional belief, perhaps what Shotwell (2011) calls “implicit understanding.” In other cases, such as Sanford’s, the subject may instead have a perfectly intelligible yet false belief about her experience. Regardless, the subject is prevented from acquiring *knowledge* of her experience.

4. See Wittgenstein (1997, §§243–275).

5. A worry might be raised at this point, recalling the Wittgensteinian problem for hermeneutical isolation: without being a member of the dissenting social group whose forms of life have given the required hermeneutical tool a determinate meaning, we might think that the subject of hermeneutical exportation cannot consistently apply that hermeneutical tool which she has borrowed to alleviate the cognitive harm. This worry is only half right. There will be a kind of inauthentic appropriation of hermeneutical tools, where the subject lifts a term or concept from an alien culture without fully understanding its meaning. In such circumstances, she will not achieve knowledge of her experience after all, because she does not really understand the other group’s interpretations. But where the subject has had a more significant and ongoing interaction with the other group, it is plausible to think that she could internalize some of their hermeneutical tools, and keep them on track.

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