

Should Political Philosophers Attend to Victim Testimony?

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ABSTRACT *There is a growing recognition that victims of injustice may have privileged access to knowledge about the injustices they experience, and that injustices are perpetuated through silencing victims by taking them to be less credible, and through denying them the platform and capacity to speak. However, these are not ideas that political philosophers tend to engage with in a sustained manner, to the extent that they alter methodological approaches to be systematically attentive to victim testimony. In this article, I provide two arguments in favour of political philosophers attending to victim testimony, one moral, one epistemic, and demonstrate that the moral case has little purchase, but that the epistemic case is more successful. Then, I present the strongest case against including victim testimony in political philosophy, and I argue that it does not hold up to scrutiny. In so doing, I demonstrate how methodological practices in political philosophy could be improved through drawing on feminist social epistemology; attending to victim testimony can enrich political philosophy in epistemically acceptable ways, and it also corrects for a range of potential biases.*

1. Introduction

There is a growing recognition that victims of injustice may have privileged access to knowledge about the injustices they experience, and that injustices are perpetuated through silencing victims¹ by taking them to be less credible, and through denying them the platform and capacity to speak.² However, these are not ideas that political philosophers tend to engage with in a sustained manner, to the extent that they alter methodological approaches to be systematically attentive to victim testimony.³ In this article, I provide two arguments in favour of political philosophers attending to victim testimony, one moral, one epistemic, and demonstrate that the moral case has little purchase, but that the epistemic case is more successful. Then, I present the strongest case against including victim testimony in political philosophy, and I argue that it does not hold up to scrutiny. In so doing, I demonstrate how methodological practices in political philosophy could be improved through drawing on feminist social epistemology; attending to victim testimony can enrich political philosophy in epistemically acceptable ways, and it also corrects for a range of potential biases.

As a sidenote, in this article, I do not seek to provide an explanation for *why* political philosophers do not generally attend to victim testimony.⁴ Instead, I simply observe that political philosophers generally do not attend to victim testimony, and I suspend judgement on whether this is a conscious choice. I then assess what I take to be the strongest available arguments not to attend to victim testimony *if* political philosophers were to defend this choice.

This article proceeds in the following manner: in Section 2, I provide the standard moral argument for attending to victim testimony, before I argue that this has little purchase on political philosophers *as such*. Then, I present the epistemic argument for attending to victim testimony, and I show that this has greater purchase on political philosophers, and that it also strengthens the moral case for attending to victim testimony. Finally, I present some caveats to the epistemic argument, but show that they do not undermine the argument *as such*. In Section 3, I present the strongest argument for the absence of victim testimony within analytic political philosophy, namely that while victim testimony may be potentially informative for public policy concerned with improving the situation of marginalised communities, it seems less straightforwardly clear that the same is the case when determining abstract political concepts such as justice. I then respond to this by showing how victim testimony can (and should) productively inform how we arrive at conclusions about justice through drawing an analogy to the relationship between epistemic justice and injustice, as discussed by Miranda Fricker.⁵ Thus, I show that the strongest available argument for not attending to victim testimony within political philosophy does not hold up to scrutiny, and that there are good reasons for political philosophers to attend to victim testimony.

2. The Moral and Epistemic Case for Attending to Victim Testimony

In this section, I elaborate on the moral and epistemic arguments for attending to victim testimony. I first briefly present the moral argument, whereupon I show that it may be seen to have little purchase on political philosophers *as such*, justifying the general disengagement with victim testimony within political philosophy. I then present the epistemic argument, showing that this forms a stronger argument for why political philosophers should attend to victim testimony, and that it reinforces the moral case for doing so.

2.1. The Moral Case for Attending to Victim Testimony Has Little Purchase

The moral argument for attending to victim testimony goes as follows: first, injustices are perpetuated through silencing victims in preventing them from critiquing the systems that oppress them, and from participating in decision-making processes.⁶ In other words, in silencing victim testimony, challenges to unjust social structures are more easily quashed. Second, it can also be argued that in failing to take people's testimony seriously, as a result of systematic prejudice held against them, this constitutes an injustice in and of itself. Miranda Fricker names this phenomenon 'testimonial injustice'. Testimonial injustice happens when a speaker is given less credibility than deserved because of a prejudice held against them by their audience, as a result of an identity characteristic, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, or age.⁷ Such injustices are systematic, in that they are connected, via common prejudice, with other injustices.⁸ However, Fricker argues that it is important to recognise that testimonial injustice differs from other injustices in that it involves being wronged in one's capacity as a knower.⁹ Thus, ignoring victim testimony excludes victim input from political decision-making processes, with the consequence that eliminating injustices does not become a political priority. Moreover, ignoring victim testimony is also an injustice in its own right. This is the moral case for attending to victim testimony.¹⁰

From the perspective of political philosophy, however, while it remains that it is morally right to argue for the political inclusion of all citizens in decision-making structures, and to strive to avoid causing testimonial injustice, there is insufficient reason to think that doing so, given the moral argument alone, would produce radically different theories from those arrived at without directly consulting victim testimony. In short, the moral argument does not provide sufficient reason to believe that political philosophers inadequately promote the cause of marginalised citizens when they fail to attend to victim testimony, insofar as they are concerned with challenging injustice.

Furthermore, it follows that there is insufficient reason to believe that political philosophers are at risk of causing testimonial injustices by virtue of not attending to victim testimony, given the moral argument alone. To explain why this is the case, I draw on Kristie Dotson's response to concerns that the definition of testimonial injustice is too broad, and thereby casts too many cases of non-pernicious silencing or failed testimonial interactions as unjust.¹¹ Dotson acknowledges that it appears to be an unsustainable position to take all ignorance as harmful. This is because some ignorance is arguably necessary, and indeed required for responsible epistemic practices.¹² To consider every fact under the sun in order to arrive at a justified belief would be counterproductive, in that it requires more time and cognitive effort than could possibly be expected of us as human beings, and it distracts us from achieving what we set out to do. Thus, Dotson argues that ignorance is not always harmful; indeed, sometimes ignorance is prudential. As a result, there needs to be some bad consequences to the ignorance for it to be a case of testimonial injustice.¹³

To bring this back to the ignorance of victim testimony within political philosophy: *if* the consequences are the same with respect to which political philosophies we end up with, then there would be no harm in not attending to victim testimony, whether in the conclusions we reach, or in the failure to listen to victims. It therefore does not seem that political philosophers are systematically at risk of causing a testimonial injustice, given the moral argument alone, as there appears to be no tangible harm in political philosophers' failure to attend to victim testimony. Indeed, it could be argued that attending to victim testimony potentially distracts political philosophers from arriving more directly at the conclusions they seek. Thus, from the perspective of political philosophy, victim testimony does not merit significant focus on its own accord, given the moral argument considered on its own.

2.2. *The Epistemic Case for Attending to Victim Testimony*

The epistemic argument for attending to victim testimony can be summarised as follows: knowledge of injustices is often not directly epistemically available to non-victims, while it is more readily available to victims. Therefore, we must attend to victim testimony if we are to access knowledge about injustices. In what follows, I present some models through which to make sense of the ways in which epistemic, social, and cognitive processes may be intertwined in ways that may prevent us from accessing knowledge about injustices. I do not take this list to be comprehensive of all such mechanisms, but rather to illustrate the range of epistemic barriers to knowledge of injustices. Then I present the argument for why victim testimony may provide special epistemic access to injustices.

The first reason injustices are not always easily epistemically accessible is that by virtue of being members of a specific belief community, and in responding to the specific forms

of material conditions and social habits of that community, we may be oriented towards certain questions and epistemic resources, and away from others. Our position in the world thereby gives us both epistemic advantages and epistemic limitations; shared knowledge practices allow us to build on a wide range of knowledge that others have discovered, and to make quick and useful practical decisions about how to navigate our surroundings.¹⁴ However, similarly, it also means that there are features of the world that we are less disposed to notice or take seriously, and we may, wittingly or unwittingly, be participating in a system that actively discriminates against certain types of people.¹⁵ For instance, in a patriarchal society, theories that affirm the naturalness of patriarchal gender norms are endorsed more quickly than theories that question them, irrespective of how well grounded they are in facts. This is because these are the norms we are familiar with, and presently organise our lives around. Anyone who belongs to a specific knowledge community, even those that are marginalised within it, may to varying degrees be disposed to hold these beliefs.¹⁶ Even when we actively aim to not perpetuate a state of affairs we take to be unjust, we may have unconscious biases, happening ‘under the radar’ of conscious decision making, that make us act in support of an unjust state of affairs.¹⁷

The second reason injustices are not easily epistemically accessible is that it is also possible to think of these dynamics in terms of all the features of the world from which our attention is directed away. In failing to notice something, we also fail to conceptualise it. In lacking adequate conceptual frameworks, our inability to notice a certain state of affairs is perpetuated, as it is harder to pinpoint. Moreover, even if we do notice, without a generally recognised concept in place it becomes difficult to express that state of affairs in a way that makes it generally noticeable. Injustices are commonly among those things that we fail to notice, and thereby to provide concepts for. Having the concept of a specific unjust state of affairs implies that we accept the description of that state of affairs *as* unjust. This also means that we implicitly challenge the social structures that produce them. Thus, the social structures of an unjust status quo tend, in some way or other, to direct our attention away from noticing and conceptualising the injustices it produces. A standard example is that the act of sexual harassment existed prior to the concept of sexual harassment. Before it existed as a concept, it was difficult to pinpoint as a phenomenon, and as an injustice in its own right.¹⁸

Some ways in which we intentionally or unintentionally are directed away from noticing and conceptualising injustices include the following: first, victims of injustice do not hold the power for shaping common linguistic and social practices by virtue of not having political and economic power, and by virtue of being systematically excluded from prestigious educational programmes, cultural institutions, and mainstream media.¹⁹ Second, there is often direct, institutional repression of the cultural traditions and political insights of social resistance movements, such that many articulations of injustice that have existed are obscured and possibly even erased from common public memory. For instance, the repressive nature of British colonialism is hardly touched upon in the history curriculum of British schools.²⁰

Moreover, people who find themselves at complicated intersections of various oppressions, for instance as subject to both racism and sexism, or ableism and classism, may have a harder time making their specific and multiple oppression understood both to themselves and within wider society. This is because we usually form a concept about an injustice by forming a stereotype about what a certain kind of oppression looks like, who is the stereotypical victim, and who is the stereotypical perpetrator.²¹ Stereotypes of victims are

often those considered the most privileged members within their marginalised group, as they provide what are considered the least complicated cases of what it means to be oppressed based on membership of that group. For instance, what racism constitutes is usually identified with the experiences of men of colour. What sexism constitutes is usually identified with the experiences of white women.²² Thus, while racism and sexism may be recognised as unjust, the types of injustices that women of colour generally suffer are often not recognised and adequately conceptualised. This is because they do not fall squarely under our stereotypical understanding of racism, or our stereotypical understanding of sexism, as they may be shaped by a complex interplay of several types of oppression at once. Thus, most often, the more complex and multi-layered the injustice, the less likely we are to have established an adequate conceptual framework to talk about it properly.

In light of all the epistemic barriers presented above, how can we access knowledge about injustices? It is in answer to this question that the idea of attending to victim perspectives and experiences becomes theoretically compelling. While victims may not necessarily have the conceptual capacity to detect whether an experience is unjust, the experience itself is detectable, and often acutely real. Moreover, it is also worth recognising that most movements for social justice have been struggles for the recognition of a certain state of affairs as one of injustice. More often than not, an injustice is abundantly clear to the victims, even when it is not evident within society at large. This is because those who are privileged have no experiences that give them cause to scrutinise how social relations inform their knowledge.²³ Marginalised groups, however, may have experiences that conflict with the mainstream narrative about social relations, and may not be as vulnerable to acceptance of unjust practices out of bias or habit. They thereby have an epistemic advantage.

Second, victims are more likely to have established conceptual resources to make sense of their experience of injustice than non-victims. Victims may stand in a relation to each other that makes collaboration and community building essential for survival. They need to develop concepts to talk about their shared challenges. Non-victims, on the other hand, have no particular incentive to establish concepts for injustices they have not experienced. Thus, despite all the potential epistemological pitfalls, it is through attending to testimony about experience that we may gain the most direct access to information about injustices, insofar as we are prepared to listen without prejudice or agenda, and are prepared to expand, and modify, our conceptual frameworks.

If this is the case, political philosophers should attend to victim testimony on the basis of acquiring a better understanding of what injustices exist, and how they manifest themselves, so as to ensure that they are not unintentionally, and implicitly, accepted within social structures that they judge just. Thus, attending to victim testimony would not be an irrelevant endeavour when developing theories of justice; indeed it has the potential to be theory altering, in providing new information about unjust social practices and the mechanisms that produce them. Furthermore, by not attending to victim testimony, political philosophers are at risk of endorsing social structures and practices that perpetuate injustices. Thus, the failure to attend to victim testimony within political philosophy would be a potential harm towards the victims in failing to challenge injustices, and in silencing them when they have something relevant to say. In other words, the systematic failure to attend to victim testimony would constitute a case of reliable ignorance and thus the reliable failure to track the truth, with harmful consequences both with respect to the

views being put forward by political philosophers, which are not checked for biases and blind spots, and in failing to hear victims when they do have a unique and relevant contribution to make; the epistemic reasons for attending to victim testimony thereby strengthen the moral reasons for attending to victim testimony within political philosophy.

2.3. *The Epistemic Case Is Unreliable*

It is possible to cast doubt on the epistemic benefits of victim testimony for the following reasons: first of all, if we are biased in a way that makes us think of members of certain marginalised groups as less credible or capable, as we are not used to taking their demands seriously, we are also less able to take seriously the claims they make about themselves and their social situation when we attend to their testimony. This makes it generally unlikely that we will be able to pick up on knowledge about injustices through victim testimony, as it is easier to dismiss challenges to our world view as unreasonable or unfounded than it is to change our overall world view and moral commitments.

Second, it is not a given that victims feel prepared to share in full the knowledge they have about their own marginalisation. Kristie Dotson calls this phenomenon ‘testimonial smothering’, and it happens when a speaker modifies her testimony so that it does not fully reflect what she intended to say. She may choose to do this for two reasons: first, the speaker may have the appropriate conceptual framework to adequately express what happened to her, but it is not a given that the hearer has the conceptual framework and competence to understand the speaker. Second, the speaker may deem testifying too risky, or think that more is achieved by not testifying.²⁴ For instance, while the harm and ramifications of sexual harassment may be clear to those who suffer it, it may not be well understood or acknowledged by those who perpetuate it. Thus, the speaker may judge that testifying is likely to be futile or too risky, and thereby adapt her testimony to suit what her audience would find easier to hear. She may arrive at this judgement irrespective of whether it turns out that her audience *does* have the capacity to understand her testimony, and does not have malicious intentions.

Moreover, even if victims were giving their testimony in full without fear of repercussions, it is not a given that they would be in a position to challenge the political structures that cause the injustices they suffer. We might expect victims to be better equipped to resist implicit biases, at least against their own group, simply because their experiences of themselves and their peers would not match the negative stereotypes held about that group. However, John Jost provides evidence that as much as 40 to 50% of members of disadvantaged groups exhibit implicit negative biases against their own group. The sheer stigma of being a member of a marginalised group could lead to a lack of self-confidence that makes one wish to be a member of a different group, and hence evaluate one’s own group in worse terms.²⁵

Finally, it is worth noting that although victims may in many cases be able to establish their own hermeneutic frameworks for the injustices they experience, the very experience of suffering injustice can also be hermeneutically disorienting. Thus, there may also be a barrier to victims’ capacity to form the requisite conceptual framework to pinpoint and express the injustice they experience. With social privilege comes the privilege of encountering a world that makes sense, which in turn enables us to identify our needs and how to meet them, and thereby to acquire more knowledge about the world; the reverse may be the case if one finds oneself at the bottom of the social hierarchy. One reason for this might

be that the trauma of the specific injustice may be psychologically disorienting. However, this phenomenon can also be explained without relying on the specific psychological disposition of individuals. Jeff Spinner-Halev argues that when people suffer injustices over time, the world does not feel like a place where one's needs matter, or where they can be met; it is a hostile place.²⁶ This sense of alienation is in itself disorienting with respect to understanding one's position, locating one's needs, and thereby recognising that (and in what ways) one is a victim of injustice.²⁷

In sum, while victims may in principle have the right epistemic resources to expose injustices and thereby challenge an unjust status quo, there are also reasons why victims often do not access or communicate these resources. Thus, the epistemic benefits of victim testimony may be unreliable, at best, or, at worst, non-existent. This may thereby undermine the epistemic argument for attending to victim testimony, and therefore provide good reasons for political philosophers not to engage with victim testimony; the philosopher risks relying on biased and unfounded claims about injustice without the capacity to judge whether this is the case.

2.4. *The Epistemic Case Holds with Some Caveats*

As established in the previous section, there are several reasons why victim testimony might not be an automatic or reliable source of knowledge about injustices that would otherwise be epistemically inaccessible to us. This is because victims are also subject to biases; they do not always have access to the right hermeneutic framework to understand or explain their experiences of oppression, and in cases where they do, there are obstacles to successful testimonial transfer. However, this does not mean that unique victim knowledge about oppression and injustice cannot or has not been accessed, at least in some cases, and that it is impossible for us to judge when this is the case. There are no reasons to think these barriers to knowledge through attending to victim testimony cannot be overcome.

The literature suggests several different routes, such as consciousness raising, participation in political activism, and standing in solidarity with other marginalised groups.²⁸ The key thing that each of these has in common is the participation in a collective endeavour with the ultimate aim of emancipation from oppression, in whatever form it comes, and in whatever form this emancipation may end up looking like. Specifically, in these collective settings, oppressed individuals get to make sense of their experiences and their lives together with other individuals who may share their experiences, and who have shared interests. This has several consequences: first of all, it means that the systematic nature of the issues that the individual victim faces may become more apparent, and cannot simply be explained away as bad luck, or as deserved. Thus, it becomes possible to explain one's experiences of oppression as that of actual systematic oppression.

Second, given the goal-oriented nature of these groups, the members cannot afford to make bad epistemic judgements about the oppression that they claim to experience, its underlying causes, and how to address them. Poor epistemic judgements could jeopardise one's ability to achieve the goal of emancipation, or the specific political targets on the road to emancipation. This means that these groups often closely and critically scrutinise their analysis of the oppression they experience, and the ways in which their experiences can be made sense of in this light. In short, their experiences serve as an

epistemic starting point to a collective and rigorous investigation, rather than as automatically conferred knowledge.

Third, endeavours involving political struggle across social groups, for instance in various inhabitants of a neighbourhood coming together to save a local library, may establish solidarity between various marginalised social groups. In this process, both differences and similarities in experiences of oppression might be more clearly brought out to the individual groups, and a better system-wide critique might emerge, as well as a better understanding of one's own specific position within that system.

Finally, the risk of the whole group testifying about general, shared experiences is much smaller than for an individual coming forward to tell her own unique story. There is safety in numbers, and group testimony is less likely to be dismissed. Thus, the risk of testimonial smothering is diminished if first processed through a social group, and explained not only as the story of one individual, but as a story symptomatic of a larger issue. Moreover, the group shoulders the risk of coming forward, rather than the individual, and might be better prepared to handle the consequences.

The picture I have painted here, of victim insights being accessed within an activist group setting, is only tentative. What I seek to show is that there may well be ways of reliably accessing the epistemic insights of victims based on their direct experience of oppression, and counteracting the epistemic unreliabilities of this process, as well as communicating victim insights. This also means that, given the risks at stake, we should, as political philosophers, be prepared to engage with the current literature on standpoint epistemology and epistemic injustice, as well as striving to do further research to find ways to understand and overcome barriers to successful and informative victim testimony. The key here is that more research is needed on how to access victim knowledge about injustice and oppression while avoiding political and epistemological pitfalls. This does not warrant the wholesale dismissal of the epistemic importance of attending to victim testimony. There is moral and epistemic risk attached to not attending to victim testimony, and this risk is so high that we should attend to victim testimony even if it does not guarantee new theoretical insights. This is because if we fail to access knowledge about injustices, we leave our theories open to status quo biases, namely that they implicitly endorse an unjust social or political outcome because we are not aware of the ways in which it may indeed produce or reproduce injustices. Moreover, if victims do have a unique contribution to make to these discussions, we must ensure that their voices are heard. If not, we are, as political philosophers, causing testimonial injustice.

3. The Relevance of Injustice in Theorising about Justice

In what follows, I present the strongest argument for political philosophers not to attend to victim testimony, namely the argument from relevance. I then show how this argument does not hold up to scrutiny, insofar as we can retain the specific epistemic benefits of attending to victim testimony, which I argued for in the previous section.

3.1. *Injustice Has Little Relevance for Justice*

The argument from relevance goes as follows: while victim testimony should be attended to for the purposes of ensuring against bias, this does not mean that victim testimony can

and should positively shape the actual theories produced. Indeed, it could still be argued that attending to victim testimony prevents us from achieving an objective and generalisable theory of justice, as it prioritises one set of perspectives and needs over others. In other words, what I have shown is that victim testimony might be relevant for certain, more policy-oriented forms of political philosophy, and crucial in ensuring that these are unbiased. However, it is not obviously relevant for 'high theorising', and indeed it could be an impediment to such a theoretical project.

Specifically, there are still reasons to doubt that victim testimony has the potential to be theoretically informative within the context of analytic political philosophy about justice. This is because although we may now have reliable access to knowledge of specific, previously epistemically inaccessible injustices, it is not clear that it tells us much about what justice consists in in more general terms. Developing a conception of what features a perfectly just society must possess is a different endeavour from discovering new kinds of injustice within a society that is not already ideally just. The purpose of the first project is to determine an objective standard of justice, so as to determine what political goals to work towards in a way that is not biased by present personal interests; the other project seeks to make visible particular kinds of injustice. The reliance on testimony could hamper the former project by making it too rooted in present concerns rather than in a conception of justice unfettered by these. This could further justify the general lack of engagement with victim testimony within political philosophy.

3.2. *A Parallel Case: Epistemic Justice*

In response to the argument from relevance, it is first important to note that it assumes a very narrow definition of analytic political philosophy as primarily focused on giving accounts of justice and other such abstract terms, rather than on philosophy as a relevant tool for solving current political problems. Increasingly, political philosophers are moving towards a broader definition of political philosophy, and to a greater extent aim to base their theorising in observations about real-life politics (hence, the emergence of non-ideal theory and realism as methodologies within political philosophy).²⁹ However, this has not necessarily increased the degree to which victim testimony is treated as theoretically informative. I will not go into more detail on this point. Instead, in what follows, I show that even if we were to commit to this narrow definition of analytic political philosophy, which is the most recalcitrant when it comes to the idea of attending to victim testimony, victim testimony, as arrived at through consciousness raising, should be treated as central to how we develop our views as political philosophers. My key claim here is that a more complete understanding of injustice and the social world leads to a better understanding of the nature of justice. Moreover, we must ensure that the principles of justice we endorse are genuinely acceptable to all members of society, including those members whose voices tend to be marginalised.

3.3. *The Relevance of Injustice*

A similar claim can be made in the case of 'ideal' analytic theories of justice. This is because many injustices could arise, or persist, even within societies that provide the conditions for implementing the principles of justice that the ideal theorist deduces. First, this is the case because the theorist at hand may have unchecked biases and blind spots.

However, second, and more crucially, given the ideal theory methodology, principles of justice are developed prior to accessing any informed conception of what injustices exist and persist, and why. In other words, it does not matter who the theorist is, and what their personal biases are. Their shortcomings will be the same.

For instance, Rawlsian ideal theory has been criticised for assuming that injustices happen in the public sphere alone, and thereby for ignoring the family as a locus of injustices such as domestic violence, and as the source of a range of socially produced gender inequities.³⁰ However, family structures exist across most societies. We must thereby be mindful of these as constant potential loci of injustice. This inadequacy of Rawlsian ideal theory was discovered only by examining actual gender inequities; Rawls's blind spot would not have been corrected through further armchair philosophy. In other words, the risk of developing insufficient principles of justice can only be mitigated if any injustice is properly acknowledged, and potential general lessons are drawn from attending to what victims have to say about themselves and their own strife. While this critique of Rawls can be accommodated for within the Rawlsian theoretical framework, it illustrates Fricker's case in point; ideal principles are impoverished and blind to their own shortcomings if the theorist does not establish a good understanding of social injustices, and how they manifest themselves, prior to developing a conception of an ideally just society and principles of justice that apply within this context. Given the social invisibility of many injustices, this means that political philosophers should attend to victim testimony to adequately enrich their theories, and to check for blind spots and biases.

A counter-argument to this claim could be that many injustices exist for specific historically contingent reasons. For instance, most racial and gendered injustices, in their current iterations, could be argued to fall into this category. Thus, the ideal theorist would argue, specific knowledge about these are not relevantly informative when developing a conception of an ideally just society. An ideally just society would simply be one in which these do not exist, as it is sufficiently modally removed from a society in which the conditions for the existence of these injustices are in place. However, it would be a mistake to think that generalisable lessons cannot be learnt from examining such historically contingent injustices. For instance, there are lessons to be learnt about the ways in which perceived differences can spawn allegiances, and 'us/them' mentalities, and about how colonial expansion, and efforts to control human reproduction and reproductive labour, can have far-reaching consequences in shaping our social relationships, and oppressive social practices. It is therefore useful to know how, and under what conditions, these dynamics may appear, as well as the variety of ways in which they can play out. In either case, it is worth examining whether there are potentially generalisable lessons to be learnt from these injustices, such that our conception of an ideally just society is sufficiently fleshed out. As established, victim testimony, under the right circumstances, provides a unique source of knowledge about injustice. Attending to victim testimony is thereby a worthwhile endeavour, even if it turns out that no such lessons can be learnt in some particular cases.

Finally, an upshot of this discussion is that if the aim of a theory of justice is to arrive at a conception of a just society that is generally acceptable to all members of society, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, this can be better guaranteed through attending to victim testimony. This is the case not only because we will have a broader, and less biased, epistemic basis on which to judge a state of affairs more or less just, but also because both philosophers and victims (and victim philosophers) have the

requisite tools to call out their own biases, and to judge more clearly whether a proposed social structure indeed meets their genuine needs and demands. Thus, on this account, there is no illusion of consensus or objectivity, based either on the exclusion of victims from the overall discussion, or on victims' failure to access information about the injustices to which they are subject.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in this article, I have shown that, contrary to common practices within analytic political philosophy, attending to victim testimony can enrich theories of justice in an epistemically acceptable way, and also correct for potential biases. I have shown that this is the case because there are good epistemic and moral reasons for attending to victim testimony. Moreover, I have shown that it is a mistake to treat the projects of determining what justice and injustice consist in as separable. Thus, we cannot theorise about what justice and injustice in general consist in before we have done our best to reveal these injustices, if we are to ensure that our theories are unbiased. In other words, contrary to common practices within analytic political philosophy, attending to victim testimony as processed through consciousness raising can enrich theories of justice in an epistemically acceptable way, and also go some way towards correcting for potential biases. Indeed, analytic theories of justice tend to be rife with such biases in their failure to rely on knowledge about injustices.³¹ Thus, it is not only *possible* for victim testimony about injustice to productively inform our theorising about justice, it should be *required* if we are to arrive at genuinely unbiased political philosophy.

Thus, the case for attending to victim testimony should have the same pull on political philosophers as it has on other kinds of philosophers, as well as public policy makers and political activists. What remain to be determined are the exact methodological norms that political philosophers need to adhere to in order to attend to actual victim testimony, how this testimony may form a reliable source of knowledge about injustice, and how political philosophers, as non-victims, should use, draw on, and protect this testimony.

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NOTES

- 1 By victim I here just mean someone who is on the receiving end of oppressive social structures.
- 2 For the most prominent examples of this argument, see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*; Fricker, "Silence"; Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence"; Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression."

- 3 Here I primarily target theories that fall within the analytic ideal theory paradigm of justice, of which Rawlsian ideal theory is the prime example, given its dominance within the field, and the huge body of literature focused on criticising or amending the Rawlsian framework. Moreover, Rawls-style ideal theories are the most imperious to the idea of victim testimony as informative, as they are treated as irrelevant, and as potentially scuppering the standard of objectivity against which the theory holds itself. However, it is worth noting that victim testimony, specifically, is rarely engaged with by non-ideal theorists aiming to amend Rawlsian ideal theory in light of real-world political concerns, and political realists, who reject the ideal theory framework of justice altogether. While they may employ real-world examples, they rarely engage with victim testimony itself. Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit's *Disadvantage*, Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government*, and Sarah Fine's "Refugees" are a few honourable exceptions to this generalised trend.
- 4 The explanation could be purely sociological, and therefore have no relation to any of the arguments I discuss. For instance, one potential sociological explanation for not attending to victim testimony is that it is simply not a feature of our dominant methodological trends, and so we do not think to do it. Another possible sociological explanation might be that political philosophers tend to be members of relatively privileged social groups, and thereby do not understand the distinctiveness of the experiences of marginalised groups. This has for instance been suggested by Charles Mills in "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology" to explain the failure of political philosophers to discuss race and racism.
- 5 Fricker, "Silence."
- 6 Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence"; Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression."
- 7 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 16.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 10 It may seem like a category error to include Fricker and Dotson under the heading of 'The Moral Case', rather than 'The Epistemic Case', as both are concerned with epistemic injustices, and firmly base their accounts in epistemology. However, I here seek to distinguish between the moral argument as the argument about the harm to victims in not hearing them (of which epistemic injustice is one key feature), as opposed to the epistemic argument, which is concerned with identifying the specific body of knowledge that victims may have access to *qua* victimhood. This is not to say that the two cases do not overlap, and Fricker and Dotson also at various times touch on the epistemic case. My reason for organising my argument in this way is that (political) philosophers more commonly encounter the literature on epistemic injustice, as well as broader claims about the harms of silencing, but rarely also engage with the broader epistemic case for attending to victim testimony. Thus, it is worth identifying why the moral case alone does not seem to have sufficient sway to reshape methodological practices within political philosophy.
- 11 Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence."
- 12 Townley, "Toward a Revaluation of Ignorance."
- 13 Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 239.
- 14 Pohlhaus, "Knowing Communities."
- 15 Haslanger, "Social Knowledge"; Haslanger, "Ideology, Generics and the Common Ground."
- 16 Jost, "Quarter Century."
- 17 Holroyd, "Implicit Bias."
- 18 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 150; Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 280.
- 19 Honneth, "Pathologies," 11–3.
- 20 Heath, "British Empire."
- 21 Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1282.
- 22 Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement."
- 23 Pohlhaus, "Knowing Communities," 286.
- 24 Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 244–5.
- 25 Jost, "Quarter Century," 277–8.
- 26 Spinner-Halev, *Enduring Injustice*, 9.
- 27 Christiano, *Constitution of Equality*, 62.
- 28 See, for instance, MacKinnon, *Feminist Theory*; Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*; Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing."
- 29 For an overview, see Galston, "Realism in Political Theory"; North, "Political Realism"; Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory"; Rossi and Sleat, "Realism."
- 30 Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*.
- 31 See Francis and Silvers, "Thinking about the Good"; Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology"; Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*; Schwartzman, "Abstraction, Idealization, and Oppression" for some examples.

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