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Political Epistemology and the Subject: Epistemic Injustice as a Primary Mode for Oppression

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the notion of epistemic injustice in relation to privilege, marginalization, and oppression. I define epistemic injustice as anytime marginalized bodies are denied credibility based solely on their status as that Other. Conversely, epistemic privilege occurs whenever those in power are given credibility based solely on their elevated or authoritative status within society. It is my claim that epistemic injustice is not just a problem of knowing and that it reaches far beyond the scope of traditional epistemology and roots itself in both the social and political. It is, at a fundamental level, a tool used to control and oppresses already marginalized populations. I utilize the Puerto Rican Pill Trials that took place from 1952-1960 in order to expand upon the notion of epistemic injustice and the destruction of word-of-mouth testimony among groups of marginalized bodies. Along with this I assert that epistemic injustice has drastic consequences and is not just a problem of knowing. These consequences are two-fold. One, the denial of recognition from oneself and one's peers, and two, the inability to engage in the introspective process of creating one's subjecthood.

Epistemology and political philosophy share a deep connection, one that is often overlooked by traditional conceptions of what epistemology *should* be. Accounts of theories of knowledge that focus specifically on abstracted Truth, justified true belief, and reaching universal maxims of knowledge through logical analysis are, in some cases, very useful tools that philosophy helps cultivate. However, focusing on knowledge as something that is strictly theoretical can create problems and leave our empirical understanding of the world lacking of substance. Abstract understandings of knowledge and the quest for a universal maxim of Truth often shroud the importance that epistemology can have when it is positioned within the real and social world as we experience it. In fact, to separate our understandings of power from our understandings of knowledge is defeating. The two are interconnected and inseparable in almost every circumstance. As Miranda Fricker argues in

Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege,” the powerful have some sort of unfair advantage in ‘structuring’ our understanding of the social world.”¹ It is because those directly in relation with the central power *do* have the ability to structure the rest of the world around them that the connection between epistemology and political philosophy should be explored in great detail.

Not only is the world structured *by* those in power, but also by the knowledge that is held as valid and “true” within *their* society is solely controlled by a select few. This monopolization of knowledge is not only oppressive, but creates epistemic injustice and furthers marginalization within groups of bodies that have already been labeled as on the “fringe.” It destroys potential for word of mouth testimony from the groups that are furthest from the central focus of power, denies recognition by one’s greater epistemic community, and aids in the creation of further oppression to take place that is not specifically epistemological.

The heart of oppression lies in epistemological constraints that are placed upon populations of already marginalized bodies. Fringe groups further in difference from the central power and further outside the normative views of citizenship often have their credibility destroyed by the central power itself. Not only are marginalized voices typically not taken into consideration but—when they are heard, which is only a fraction of the time—their reliability is diminished simply because they belong to a particular marginalized group. Marginalized bodies do not experience the same type of epistemic privilege that those of us closer to the central power do. Credibility is destroyed, testimony ignored, and even expert knowledge is dismissed as meaningless and insignificant. Practices of systemic oppression often aim to destroy credibility and word of mouth testimony altogether, denying the subject the ability to be an epistemic agent.

This denial lies largely in Western society’s obsession with both recognition and individuality. Recognition is only easily attainable for those closer to the central power—primarily those who find themselves in a position of privilege or dominance. Individuality, similarly, is a luxury only given to those who can be recognized by their larger community, a recognition that is often given only through epistemological respect. By individuality I do not mean a single person alienated from the greater world. The notion of an abstract, self-sufficient subject is not the kind of individualism with which I am concerned. Instead, by individuality, I mean an understanding of subjecthood—an ascription of self-determination that lies in the presupposition that all persons are fundamentally equal and have the ability to cultivate virtues and flourish

¹ Fricker, Miranda. “Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1999): 191-210. Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1999.10716836>.

under a well-ordered society. When epistemic respect is denied, it necessarily follows that recognition does not, and cannot, take place. Since critical and rational thought are often seen as fundamental to the human experience, we can also say that being able to express that thought, and have it believed, is just as fundamental. When we are denied this expression, this epistemic respect of our peers, we are often devalued as knowers, rejected by our epistemic community, and, therefore, denied aspects of subjecthood.

I. Epistemic Injustice and Epistemic Privilege

Epistemic injustice takes place whenever those in power are given credibility based solely on their status within society *or* when marginalized bodies are denied credibility based solely on their status as that Other. This is a phenomenon asserted by Miranda Fricker in her 1998 article *Rational Authority and Social Power*. The connection between the epistemological and the political is prevalent in Fricker's work. She asserts that the political character of a subject is derived from "the fact that epistemic subjects are socially constituted individuals who stand in relations of power."² Individual subjects interact with the world around them, a world that is constituted of social structures and power relations, and a world in which oppression is a constant, potentially even a fundamental aspect of society. Because essentialist claims about the human species assert that we are rational and analytic beings, it follows that one of our primary concerns is, in fact, acquiring knowledge. It also follows that, not only do we wish to gain knowledge, we wish to have our claims assessed as valid or at least taken into consideration.

It is my claim that epistemic injustice is not just a problem of knowing. It reaches far beyond the scope of traditional epistemology and roots itself in the world that we, as social beings, interact with. The very notion of epistemic injustice comes from the central power's ability to deny credibility and respect to specific groups within society; therefore, its very existence is systemic and is a flaw of the structure of society. It is, at a fundamental level, a tool used to control and oppresses already marginalized populations. While those who constantly find their status as a knowledge claimant diminished, and in some cases even destroyed, suffer from epistemic injustice; those who are in a position of power and status consistently experience epistemic privilege. Their claims of knowing are taken at face value simply because they are in the correct position to be believed.

² Fricker, Miranda. "Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology." *Proceedings from the Aristotelean Society, New Proceedings* 98 (1998): 159-77. Accessed November 9, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545280>.

As Bat-Ami Bar On points out in *Marginality and Epistemic Privilege*, when we take sociopolitical theory into account when assessing epistemic injustice, those that consistently find themselves in positions of privilege with relation to their knowledge claims are those that are positions of authority.³ Meaning, the closer to the central power one finds themselves, the more credibility their knowledge claims are given. Conversely, the further one finds themselves from the central power, the less credibility their knowledge claims are given. This becomes extremely important when attempting to induce any sort of social change. It is usually the voices of the marginalized that have the most important things to say, the voices that should be taken into consideration *because* of their personal and cultural experiences of oppression; however, they are also the voices that are silenced based on their marginality alone.

II. The Puerto Rican Pill Trials: A Historical Look at Epistemic Injustice

From 1952-1960 a series of birth control trials were conducted in Puerto Rico under the supervision of Dr. John Rock. This was the first large scale testing that was done on the pill, given to more than 220 women on the island for at least one year, but in some cases up to three. Puerto Rico was chosen, not only because of its proximity to the United States, but also because there were no laws against contraception and there were already established birth control clinics.⁴ The history of these clinics is a different issue entirely, products of imperialism invading the country of Puerto Rico in an attempt to control the population of the island by sterilization; however, the already established imperialist framework can help us to understand *why* Puerto Rico was chosen in the first place. A 1953 article published by the American Academy of Political and Social Science outlined the prospects of birth control in Puerto Rico outlined exactly why it was that the small island *needed* methods of contraceptives during that specific period of time. An excerpt from the article reads, “with a quarter of its population illiterate, with an annual per capita income around \$400, and with about 85 percent of its people Roman Catholic, the prospects for birth control in Puerto Rico would seem negligible.”⁵

Stycos and Hill then go on to explain three important aspects of changing Puerto Rican culture that necessitate the need for the introduction of more birth control clinics as well as means of contraception. The first is “indirect propaganda” from the government that

³ Bar On, Bat-Ami. “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege.” In *Feminist Epistemologies*, 83-100. New York: Routledge, 1993.

⁴ Knowles, Jon. “The Birth Control Pill: A History.” 2013. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/1213/9611/6329/pillhistory.pdf>.

⁵ Stycos, J. Mayone, and Reuben Hill. “The Prospects of Birth Control in Puerto Rico.” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 285 (1953): 137-44. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1029126>.

had “largely dispelled ignorance of the possibility of contraception” (note, the fabrication of knowledge passed down to citizens by the central power was taken as a truth simply because of the authority said truth came from). Second, though a majority of the population identified as Catholic, this didn’t impact their views on the use of birth control. And lastly, the shifting of cultural ideals and social patterns directly encouraged having a small family.⁶ Not only was Puerto Rico an ideal nation to begin the first impactful trials of the pill with, but it was also seen as an undeveloped nation that needed to be brought up to par with the Western standard of living. Marginalization had already occurred through the implementation of birth control clinics in Puerto Rico by Western nations in order to curb population growth via sterilization, directly contributing to *how* it was the women involved with the Puerto Rican Pill Trial were treated.

Thirteen years after the trials took place Dr. Helen Rodriguez noticed a similarity between the process of sterilizing Puerto Rican women and the pill trials. Rodriguez was trained as a pediatrician in Puerto Rico and spent the 1960’s working in clinics on the island before moving back to the United States and becoming a Puerto Rican healthcare activist. In a 1973 radio interview she was asked specifically about medical experiments that had been done in Puerto Rico, specifically those done on women. Not only does she observe that the dose of estrogen in the pills given to the Puerto Rican women was almost ten times the normal amount, but that this specific factor alone increased the “dangers of blood coagulation, or possible later malignancies.”⁷ Under the high dose given to the women involved with the Puerto Rican Pill Trial side effects included dizziness, nausea, headaches, and vomiting. Such high doses also increased the “likelihood and severity” of such side effects as well as “very serious risks, such as heart attack and stroke.”⁸ Rodriguez also speculated that informed consent was not accurately obtained. No written information was given to the women who participated in the trials and they were also not required to sign any sort of document of consent.⁹

Of course, these side effects were not accurately dealt with until ten years later after the pill had been produced and marketed for consumption within the United States.¹⁰ Women from the Puerto Rican trial that complained of such discomforts were dismissed and the explanation was made that there must have been something wrong with them prior to the birth control trial. Their credibility was diminished, even destroyed, simply because they were women of an “undeveloped” nation that was already feeling the affects of an imperialistic framework. The women involved with these trials experienced epistemic injustice on a drastic scale. Not only was their word

⁶ Ibid, 137.

⁷ “Sterilization in Puerto Rico.” *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 11 (1973): 9-10. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25772013>.

⁸ Knowles.

⁹ *Off Our Backs*, 10.

¹⁰ Knowles.

discounted as important, but also their knowledge of *themselves* was seen as irrelevant to the greater outcome of the trial. Knowledge about one's body should be of primary importance; however, it seems as though we live in a world structured around the notion that those in an authoritative position know what's best for us, even when that comes to our bodies and our minds. The Puerto Rican Pill Trials show just how pervasive epistemic injustice is, how the mere notion of it is entirely systemic and leads to greater oppression of already marginalized bodies. Since the women involved in these trials did not have a degree of epistemic privilege, they were discounted as knowers and denied proper recognition, further contributing the oppression they were already experiencing under the established imperialist framework.

III. Recognition and Subjecthood

The women who took part in the Puerto Rican Pill Trials didn't just experience epistemic injustice. Asserting such would be a gross misunderstanding. Whenever epistemic injustice takes place, it necessarily follows that recognition is denied. Because those that are in authority have the ability to structure the world as they see fit and fabricate and alter specific knowledge claims, it can be said that authoritative figures have a complete monopolization over knowledge within their particular society. Groups of bodies that are commonly seen as outliers have little to no say in the structuring of the world and their claims are often presumed to be false on face value alone. Puerto Rican women that took part in the 1952 trials of the pill did not have the authority to have their claims to side effects of the drug heard. Instead, the world was structured around them by the doctors that initiated the trial regardless of what the women had to say about the discomforts they were experiencing. The exiting framework of cultural imperialism served to discount the expression and knowledge claims of the women involved, instead making the excuse that there must be something fundamentally wrong with *them*—that their subjecthood needed to be questioned.

As Jane McConkey points out in *Knowledge and Acknowledgement: Epistemic Injustice as a Problem of Recognition*, “under conditions of cultural imperialism, dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as Other.”¹¹ This directly places epistemic injustice in the realm of recognition. Whenever epistemic injustice occurs, it can also be said that an Otherization of a marginalized body occurs as well. After all, as Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*, “Otherness is a

¹¹ McConkey, Jane. “Knowledge and Acknowledgement: Epistemic Injustice as a Problem of Recognition.” *Politics* 24, no. 3 (2004): 198-205.

fundamental category of human thought.”¹² The need to gain recognition by further dominating and oppressing an already marginalized fringe group is something that is inherent within the current power structure—a central focus of almost complete power and authority whose greatest tool lies in the ability to engage in the oppression of others through a dangerous monopolization of knowledge.

McConkey asserts that “a knower is not credible unless they are understood as such by society, a person cannot even begin to count as a knower unless their knowledge claims can be acknowledged.”¹³ This acknowledgement lies solely in relation to one’s own epistemic community as well as the larger social world with which the knower at question interacts. When acknowledgment is denied, credibility is destroyed, and claims are rejected based on a knower’s perceived membership of a specific marginalized group, recognition is completely taken away. Under epistemic injustice the subjecthood of a person is rendered almost useless by the greater society they belong to, denying them the ability to engage in a process of true determination of the Self. Instead, since their word is constantly seen as unreliable and invalid, the Otherness that has been prescribed to them by greater society is internalized, wrecking any form of recognition they could gain from, not only their epistemic community, but from themselves as well.

Knowledge is an important aspect of society. Every person within a State is concerned with how their understandings of and interactions with the social world affect their ability to create their own subject and be recognized as such. When knowledge claimants are continuously discredited based on their membership to a marginalized and, therefore, stereotyped group, their ability to recognize and determine their own subjecthood is denied. Epistemic injustice should be considered a fundamental part of the oppression done by those in authoritative positions—by those who are closer to the central power—because it contributes directly to the Otherization of those of us who find ourselves further from the central focus of power.

¹² De Beauvoir, Simone. “Simone De Beauvoir, The Second Sex.” In *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

¹³ McConkey, 203.