

*Eugenia Stefanello**

Epistemic Injustice and Inequality: The Case of Epistemic Arrogance

Abstract

Inequality can manifest itself in a wide and multifaceted range of, often overlapping, contexts and can be caused by a multitude of different causes: economic, social, and political. There is a less evident source of inequalities that, nevertheless, has critical ethical implications: epistemic injustice. My first goal will be to clarify the nature of this connection. In this sense, I will argue that there is a vicious cycle between epistemic injustice and inequality. Next, I will focus on a specific epistemic vice, namely epistemic arrogance which is a prime example of how interconnected epistemic injustice and inequality are. Epistemic arrogance is particularly harmful, both from an epistemic and ethical perspective, because of what I call the “concealment effect” that prevents the testimonies of marginalized individuals from being heard and believed.

Keywords

Inequality; Epistemic Injustice, Epistemic Arrogance

1. Introduction

“How is it possible that so few people have so much and so many have so little?”. There is a specific moment in our lives, typically adolescence, when this question suddenly pops up in our minds. Interestingly, the thing to be had – so much or so little – can varied: money, political power, social influence, opportunities, water, food, a livable environment, and a peaceful country. To me, whenever we are confronted with this question, what we are really asking is how and, most importantly, why inequalities exist. In the same breath and with some degree of generalization, we are usually troubled by the recognition of inequalities. We are *morally* concerned by this revelation. And if someone were to say that even the most blatant inequality – say, starving children in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the outrageous amount of food waste in Europe – did not

* Università degli Studi di Padova

bother them in the least, we would find it at best morally questionable and at worst downright wrong.

Let us assume that what I have said applies to most of us. This also means that, at least for the most part, we are able to recognize inequalities when we see them. However, there is a peculiar kind of inequality that is harder to detect: inequality fostered by epistemic injustice with significant moral and epistemic implications. Epistemology and Moral Philosophy have only recently begun to discuss the relevance of epistemic injustice in inequality. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's seminal account of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), I will explore the connection between epistemic injustice and inequality, focusing on the moral issues that this relationship raises. Specifically, I will argue that there seems to be a vicious cycle between these two phenomena: inequality is one of the causes of epistemic injustice which can be responsible for instances of inequality, which in turn can further exacerbate epistemically unjust dynamics.

In this context, I will examine a specific epistemic vice, namely epistemic arrogance, which is one of the main causes of epistemic injustice and can be considered a paradigmatic case of the vicious cycle mechanism between epistemic injustice and inequality since it prevents its victims from equal access to both private and public debate. Specifically, epistemic arrogance presents what I will call a "concealment effect" that has ethically problematic consequences. Arrogant people disregard the grievances of epistemically marginalized individuals as mere attacks on the freedom to speak and act. This dismissal is based on the mistaken assumption that such forms of freedom are equally accessible to all.

2. A vicious cycle: Epistemic Injustice and Inequality

The most basic definition of epistemic injustice is "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker 2007, p. 1). According to Fricker, it can manifest itself in two forms: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The first form of injustice occurs when a knower or a group of knowers is deemed unworthy of epistemic credibility not because of a lack of epistemic resources or skills, but because of some features about them that trigger in the listener some kind of prejudice. The features that are most likely able to cause a prejudicial attitude in the listener are the ones linked to the knowers' identity which, ultimately, refers to their ontological status. As a solid body of empirical research confirmed, the most common candidates are race, gender, age, and disability: we tend to trust more a man's opinion even though a woman has more or equal expertise on the matter (Hutchison 2020), we assume that ethnic minority members are less trustworthy (Stanley et

al. 2011) we are more skeptical of elderly people's testimonies, believing that they are not very reliable not because they may have been diagnosed with dementia but solely for their advanced age (Levy and Macdonald 2016), and we tend to partially, if not totally, exclude people with mental disability from the community of trustworthy knowers (Corrigan and Watson 2002). This occurs at different levels of consciousness and results in actions with varying degrees of severity both from an epistemic and a moral perspective: from assuming that the woman in the room is the nurse and not the doctor to denying women access to the medical profession.

The second form of epistemic injustice is caused by "a gap in collective interpretative resources" (Fricker 2007, p. 1) that prevents certain types of testimonies from being adequately understood not only by those in the community who have not had that specific experience but also by those who have not had the conceptual tools to account for it. Usually, the groups targeted by testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice overlap. For instance, for a long time, black people in the United States struggled to express to non-black individuals how pervasive racism was in their everyday life until the concept of "systemic racism" was conceived (Feagin 2013). Additionally, hermeneutical injustice is directed at those knowers who, for a different host of reasons, have an unconventional style in their testimonies. Patients with psychiatric illnesses are a perfect example of how the ways in which they express themselves, combined with the listeners' lack of adequate interpretative resources, lead to unfavorable credibility judgments (Kidd and Carel 2017; Carel and Kidd 2014).

It is important to note that epistemic injustice does not happen in a vacuum: prejudices and lack of hermeneutical resources stem from the broader social, historical, political, and cultural context in which each subject involved in the epistemic relationship is enmeshed and influenced. Crucially, inequalities of various kinds are a constitutive part of this context and, therefore, profoundly impact epistemically unjust processes. To be more precise, I suggest that inequality is directly responsible for epistemic injustice rather than merely participate in it. As a matter of fact, not only inequality is "the crucial background condition for hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker 2007, p. 152), but it also constitutes one of the critical sources for testimonial injustice.

In particular, a specific characterization of inequality is highly consequential in causing epistemic injustice: borrowing Scanlon's terminology (Scanlon 2018) let us call it *basic moral and epistemic inequality*. We face this type of inequality when we reject the opposite theoretical assumption, that is, when we deny *basic moral and epistemic equality*. According to the latter, "everyone counts morally [and epistemically], regardless of

differences such as their race, their gender, and where they live”, their socio-economic status, their sexual orientation, their health condition, their level of education, their age, health status, and so on (Scanlon 2018, p. 4). Consequentially, inequalities occur whenever this principle is not respected, i.e., when someone is not included in the moral and/or epistemic community because of one of the above characteristics.

This type of exclusion from the moral and epistemic community is simultaneously produced by and capable of producing negative prejudices. For instance, I do not count poor people as members of the epistemic community because I prejudicially believe they are to blame for their condition – perhaps because they are lazy – and, therefore, not worthy of trust when it comes to their testimonies. Additionally, it reinforces and encourages the proliferation of old and new negative prejudices about poverty as a valuable reason to exclude someone from the epistemic community and not trust them. And, as noted above these prejudices are the ground on which testimonial injustice is built. Hence, negative prejudices and stereotypes are both the cause and the effect of basic moral and epistemic inequality, that plays a major role in testimonial injustice.

Note that it is often difficult to neatly separate epistemic and moral inequality. They are tightly intertwined. In this case, part of the reasoning that leads to negative prejudices and, ultimately, the exclusion from the community is moral in nature: prejudices about poverty tend to rest on the idea that poor people are morally blameworthy for what has happened to them since being lazy is thought of as morally wrong behavior. By the same token, it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the epistemic and moral consequences of inequality, prejudices, and testimonial injustice. Poor people are “punished” both from an epistemic point of view, when their epistemic credibility is deflated simply because of their status, and from a moral point of view, when they are judged as morally bad people and therefore undeserving of help.

Basic moral and epistemic inequalities are also crucial in promoting hermeneutical injustice. Basic moral and epistemic inequalities increase and it is motivated by prejudices on the basis of which members of certain groups are not granted equal “hermeneutical participation” in the creation of “meanings pertaining to some areas of the social world” (Fricker 2007, pp. 153-54). Therefore, similarly to testimonial injustice, the dual role of prejudice as cause and consequence is present here.

Consider again the poverty example: because of the prejudices about poverty mentioned above, poor people are “*hermeneutically marginalized*” (Fricker 2007, p. 153), that is, they are excluded from the practices that create meaning about, for instance, what it means to be poor and how it is possible to alleviate this condition. In this way, prejudices operate as a cause. Concurrently, this exclusion reinforces those same negative

prejudices. Their exclusion seen as voluntary, as proof of their laziness: poor people are so lazy and so different from the rest of us that do not even bother to take part in the conversation about how to contrast poverty. In this sense, prejudices are the consequence of basic epistemic and moral inequality. Moreover, poor people's exclusion is also responsible for our collective lack of adequate interpretative resources to understand their experiences and testimonies. In other words, it is responsible for hermeneutical unjust practices against poor people.

Finally, to "close" the vicious cycle, epistemic injustice is itself part of what makes inequalities prosper, which, as said, are themselves implicated in instances of epistemic injustice. This seems, even intuitively, correct: the exclusion of some members of certain groups from the epistemic community is certainly not capable of making *everyone* epistemically and morally count. Specifically, the low, if not absent, level of epistemic credibility accorded to certain testimonies because of the status of their knowers and/or our collective lack of interpretative resources of certain testimonies, again, because of the features of certain groups of knowers are catalysts for basic moral and epistemic inequality. For example, because of epistemic unjust practices, poor people are treated even more unequally because of their status which, in turn, will reinforce negative prejudices about them, starting the vicious cycle all over again.

In sum, epistemic injustice is responsible for creating fundamental moral and epistemic inequality which, in turn, contributes to exacerbating the dynamics of epistemic injustice. Thus, if left unaddressed, the vicious cycle between epistemic injustice and inequality has the potential to perpetuate itself indefinitely, since both of its elements are intimately involved in causing each other. One is not merely contributing factor to the other. On the contrary, epistemic injustice constitutively causes basic moral and epistemic inequality and vice versa.

To be sure, basic moral and epistemic inequality has concrete consequences in our societies and everyday lives, that is, it helps produce or worsen the standard inequalities that we easily identify as such: economic, social, and political inequalities. In this sense, poverty is probably one of the most glaring cases of how the vicious cycle between inequality and epistemic injustice can be directly implicated in more tangible forms of inequality.

Crucially, this cycle is vicious both from a moral and epistemic standpoint, since its implications are morally and epistemically problematic. The unjust and unequal exclusion of certain groups of people from the epistemic and moral community that the relationship between epistemic injustice and inequality entails limits the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, which is epistemically harmful, and at the same time does not accord everyone the same level of respect, which is morally harmful (Tanesini and Goldberg 2016).

3. The Concealment Effect: Intellectual Arrogance and Inequality

Epistemic injustice and its opposite, epistemic justice, can also be characterized as epistemic vice and epistemic virtue, respectively. And the people who possess them as epistemically vicious or virtuous (Kidd, Battaly, and Cassam 2020). According to this theoretical approach, epistemic vices can be defined as those traits that “make us bad thinkers, insofar as they prevent us from acquiring and sharing knowledge, express bad motives and desires, or interfere with our individual and collective epistemic functioning (...)” (Kidd, Battaly, and Cassam 2020, p. 1). As it might be evident, this way of framing the concepts mirrors the approach of virtue ethics, which is particularly appropriate considering the hybrid nature that those vices usually have. As said, not only do they have epistemic and ethical implications but they are also “ethical and epistemic in kind” (Fricker 2020, p. 89).

One of the epistemic vices that seems most relevant to epistemic injustice is epistemic arrogance. According to Tanesini, this epistemic vice “manifests itself in behaviors designed to ‘big oneself up’, such as bragging, boasting, or arrogating special entitlements, and in activities that diminish other people by humiliating or intimidating them and discounting or dismissing their views” (Tanesini 2020, p. 62). The positive correlation between epistemic arrogance and epistemic injustice is fairly straightforward: by being arrogant, the vicious person, both, actively excludes his victims from meaning-generating debates and, implicitly denies their testimonies the same level of credibility or relevance as his own.

Consider a successful entrepreneur who has never experienced anything remotely close to poverty. Not personally and not among his wealthy family members or groups of friends. At a fancy charity dinner to raise money for homeless people, he goes on and on about how poor people should pull themselves out of the hole they have dug themselves into. Hard work and dedication will do the trick, that is exactly how *he* made it. Charity is fine but it will only go so far if the people receiving it are not ready to commit and do the work. At his table is set a social worker with more than twenty years of experience working with homeless people. She politely told the entrepreneur that, in the majority of cases, poor people are not lazy or unwilling to work hard. Mental illness, physical illness, addiction of various kinds, and external factors such as high rates of unemployment, lack of affordable housing, or high medical costs are usually the most common causes of both poverty and homelessness (Lee, Tyler, and Wright 2010). The entrepreneur abruptly interrupts her and insists that all people, including himself, have to face these challenges in life but the only way to overcome them is to roll up your sleeves and push through.

This is clearly a case of epistemic arrogance. Importantly, it is also a case of epistemic injustice. His arrogant behavior has two effects: on the one hand, by interrupting and contradicting the social worker's informed and experienced testimony, he denied her the deserved level of epistemic credibility and trust that her testimony deserved. On the other hand, he silenced her, by preventing her from meaningfully contributing to the conversation about a topic on which she was an expert. In turn, the epistemic unjust effects of intellectual arrogance reinforce inequalities by both exacerbating the already pervasive negative prejudices about poor people and by precluding the acquisition of knowledge on the topic and, ultimately, fostering ignorance. All of this makes epistemic arrogance epistemically vicious. At the same time, the rudeness and humiliation that characterized epistemic arrogance and that the entrepreneur reserved for the social worker are also morally wrong: he disrespected her not only as a professional but also as a person by failing to show her the basic level of respect (Tanesini and Goldberg 2016, p. 74).

The aspect I find most interesting about epistemic arrogance is the inability of the person displaying this vice to recognize that his or her personal experience is not the most relevant on every occasion, especially when the topic of discussion is the experiences of other people that are so widely different from his or her own. This inability is rooted in the implicit or explicit assumption that the lived experience of the arrogant person is the template against which all other experiences must be measured and compared. For this reason, epistemic arrogance is a problematic character trait to have in every relationship. For instance, think of two friends: Pam is explaining how she felt when her boss treat her badly in front of the entire office. Michael interrupts her and declares that he knows exactly what she is talking about, he experienced the exact same thing and he will explain to her what she should do to fix the situation. However, it turns out that if he had let Pam finish, he would have realized that their experiences were totally different and that he did not understand her after all.

Nevertheless, epistemic arrogance seems to have its most troublesome consequences in "a context of social inequality", that is, where the economic, social, and political power is unequally distributed among its members (Liebow and Ades 2022, p. 533). And where there is an imbalance of power among members of a relationship, the members who have more power can be considered privileged. When this happens, we are faced with a specific type of epistemic arrogance which consists of "someone take[ing] their own limited experiences to be indicative of another's complete experience with a particular type of oppression" (Liebow and Ades 2022, p. 532). Consider again our arrogant entrepreneur: what makes him a full-fledged epistemic arrogant is the fact that

he would have behaved in the same arrogant way even if his interlocutor had actually been a poor person rather than a social worker. Perhaps he would have said that he understood how difficult it must be since he too had to work part-time in a coffee shop when he went to college to pay for his lifestyle. Yet, he was still able to graduate and get a good job.

This is an outrageous example of the *epistemic incompetence* that afflicts arrogant people, especially privileged ones¹: they are not able to recognize the inherently limited character of their particular experience and how their privileges differentiate it from that of those who did not enjoy them. It is important to note that the use of the word incompetence does not imply a lack of responsibility and accountability for the arrogant person, in the same way as we are no less responsible for a bias because it is unconscious. Of course, instances of intellectual arrogance can occur in more subtle ways than in the arrogant entrepreneur case, but the assumption on which they are grounded is the same.

Epistemic arrogance seems to have another peculiar feature that makes it particularly concerning from a moral perspective: it displays what I call a *concealment effect* toward the grievances of its victims. In recent years, we have witnessed a difficult yet steady increase in the space that members of marginalized communities have been able to occupy in the public debate. One of the consequences of this phenomenon has been the proliferation of legitimate complaints by marginalized individuals about what it really feels like to live in their shoes and how inaccurate and hurtful epistemic accounts of their experiences made by arrogant privileged people are. These statements are usually met with the same arrogant attitude displayed in the first place: the default epistemic move is to belittle their testimony, casting doubt about its epistemic credibility. A paradigmatic example of this is the response Paola Egonu – a Black Italian volleyball player and one of the best offensive opposites in the world – received after her answering positively to a journalist's question about whether Italy is a racist country. Some journalists and politicians – all white – replied, with different degrees of arrogance, that it simply was not true: Italian people are not racist and Egonu's perception is distorted and, ultimately, untrue.

We have already seen the epistemic and moral implications of this kind of behavior: it produces epistemic injustice of various kinds and exacerbates inequalities. Interestingly, there is more. Marginalized in-

¹ I am not suggesting that every privileged person is also epistemically arrogant. I am simply saying that when epistemically arrogant people also have more power and are, therefore, more privileged than the targets of their arrogance, we are faced with a particularly troubling case of epistemic arrogance.

dividuals' complaints that their experiences are not being portrayed accurately trigger another peculiar response. Arrogant privileged people often perceive those complaints as attacks on their freedom to speak or act, because they feel that the marginalized people's request to let *them* speak about their experiences mean that they have no right to participate in the debate at all. It seems to me that they mistake the request for epistemic *priority* with epistemic *exclusivity*. This mistake – whether made in good or bad faith – motivates the perception of being silenced by marginalized people's complaints and, in turn, results in the total concealment of those complaints. This strategy makes them disappear.

Two considerations. First, my tentative interpretation of this phenomenon is that arrogant privileged people justify their perception on the assumption that everyone, including marginalized individuals, has equal access to the same level of freedom as they do. In their view, this supposed equality should guarantee marginalized individuals the space to share their experiences which, consequently, entitles them to express their opinion. This way of framing the situation proves once again the epistemic incompetence of arrogant privileged people: since their experience is the measure of all experiences, they are unable to see that marginalized groups are, in fact, marginalized because of their unequal access to the (public) discourse. Similarly, the disproportionate access that privileged people enjoyed is one of the reasons for their privilege and is responsible for perpetuating it. The inequality is so evident that even a famous and relatively powerful person like Paola Egonu was not able to make her voice heard without being the target of epistemic arrogance and epistemic injustice. Imagine that chances an anonymous black woman would have against those same politicians and journalists. This leads me to my second and final point.

The concealment effect of epistemic arrogance has a major role in contributing to basic epistemic and moral inequality. The first consequence of concealment is that it makes marginalized individuals' complaints invisible from an epistemic point of view. Moreover, in a more subtle way, it discourages marginalized individuals' future attempts to potentially criticize the privileged and arrogant people's testimonies. This mechanism has been effectively called "silencing" because it progressively intimidates, demoralizes, and, ultimately, suppresses any attempts made by marginalized individuals of speaking up and offering any kind of testimonies about their experiences (Tanesini and Goldberg 2016, p. 74).

Invisibility and silencing produced by epistemic arrogance actively promote the exclusion of marginalized individuals from the epistemic and moral community making basic moral and epistemic inequality worst and, by virtue of the vicious cycle dynamic described above, encourag-

ing epistemic injustice. All is not lost, however. There are a number of possible strategies we can implement to address these issues. Here are a few promising approaches that deserve further development. Epistemic arrogance could be countered by developing epistemic humility and loving ignorance (Tuana 2006). These epistemic virtues should encourage listeners, especially those privileged, to acknowledge the limits of their particular experience and understanding of others. Crucially, individual changes are fundamental but ultimately insufficient. Structural socio-political, economic, and cultural changes aimed at reducing inequalities must take place to allow marginalized people to access the public discourse more easily and with less risk of “epistemic retributions” from arrogant members of the community.

Conclusions

There are some kinds of inequalities that are so blatant that we recognize them almost automatically. There are others that are more subtle, such as those related to epistemic injustice. My goal was to try to expose the conceptual and practical connections between epistemic injustice and inequality. In particular, I argued that there is a vicious cycle between these two phenomena, which I further characterized, following Fricker, as testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, and, following Scanlon, as basic moral and epistemic inequality. Crucially, this cycle was characterized as vicious from both an epistemic and moral point of view. I then went on to argue that epistemic arrogance – especially that displayed by privileged individuals – is heavily involved in producing epistemically unjust practices and contributing to the widening moral and epistemic inequality.

Hopefully, the discussion of the link between epistemic injustice and inequality has shown how the ethical and epistemic dimensions of inequality are closely interconnected and mutually influential. A neat separation between these two domains is not only impossible but would also be counterproductive: we need both to understand the phenomena that their interaction produced and, simultaneously, to find possible solutions.

It should also alerted us to how complex and multifaceted inequality is. This awareness should prompt us to choose adequate epistemic and moral tools to detect it and eventually mitigate it.

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