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# Socially Situating Moral Knowledge

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SOCIALLY SITUATING MORAL KNOWLEDGE

by

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B.A., Washburn University, 2008

M.A., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy

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This thesis entitled:  
Socially Situating Moral Knowledge  
written by Annaleigh Elizabeth Curtis  
has been approved for the Department of Philosophy

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Curtis, Annaleigh Elizabeth (Ph.D. Philosophy)

Socially Situating Moral Knowledge

Thesis directed by Professor Alison M. Jaggar

I seek to provide a partial answer to this question: what is epistemically required of us as socially situated moral agents? We are familiar with the idea that each of us, as moral agents, has a set of moral obligations—to be kind, to be fair, to do good, or whatever. We are also familiar with the idea that each of us, as epistemic agents, has a set of epistemic obligations—to believe truly, to follow our evidence, to engage in inquiry, or whatever. But moral agents also have epistemic obligations that arise specifically out of the challenge of figuring out what is morally required. I argue that several commonly held accounts of our epistemic obligations as moral agents are seriously flawed; they get the methodological question wrong, perhaps at the expense of the practical question. The commonly held epistemic obligations against which I argue hold that: we can reason about morality alone or in relatively closed groups, we should not accept as true the testimony of someone whose reasons we do not understand, and we should always believe in proportion to the evidence we have. Further, each of these accounts is flawed as a result of a similar pair of crucial missteps. First, each of these views about moral method is insufficiently attentive to the role and value of epistemic communities. Second, each of these views fails to take seriously empirical evidence about human cognition.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Socially Situating Moral Knowledge

#### 1. Introduction

##### 1.1. Epistemic Obligations and Moral Method

Any theory of knowledge must be socially situated. Knowledge—including moral knowledge—is already social. Knowers, too, are already social. It is our theories of knowledge and knowing, and especially moral knowledge and knowing, that have some catching up to do. It is one aim of the following chapters to aid in this project.

I seek to provide a partial answer to this question: what is epistemically required of us as socially situated moral agents? We are familiar with the idea that each of us, as moral agents, has a set of moral obligations—to be kind, to be fair, to do good, or whatever. We are also familiar with the idea that each of us, as epistemic agents, has a set of epistemic obligations—to believe truly, to follow our evidence, to engage in inquiry, or whatever. But moral agents also have epistemic obligations that arise specifically out of the challenge of figuring out what is morally required. We can distinguish between these two questions:

What does morality require of me?

How should I figure out what morality requires of me?

The first is a question about moral practice, the second moral method and epistemology.

The question of how we should think about morality is as deeply serious and important as the question of what we should do, perhaps more so. Each of us must make moral decisions; we cannot opt out of morality because that, too, would be a moral decision. These decisions can be

made in better or worse ways. Getting good answers to the methodological question helps us get good answers to the practical question. Especially grave is the possibility that we will get bad answers to both questions—that we will be incorrect both about how we should think about morality, and what we should do about morality—while thinking we have objective, universal answers to both.

I argue that several commonly-held accounts of our epistemic obligations as moral agents are seriously flawed; they get the methodological question wrong, perhaps at the expense of the practical question. The commonly held epistemic obligations against which I argue hold that: we can reason well about morality alone or in relatively closed groups, we should not alter our beliefs due to the testimony of someone whose reasons we do not understand, and we should always believe in proportion to the evidence we have. Further, each of these claims is mistaken as a result of a similar pair of crucial missteps. First, each of these views about moral method is insufficiently attentive to the role and value of epistemic communities. Second, each of these views fails to take seriously empirical evidence about human cognition.

## **1.2. Refocusing the Debates**

To remedy the shortfalls in currently accepted moral epistemology and moral method, I explore the phenomenon of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Thinking about how people may be wronged in their epistemic capacities forces us to think about what is epistemically valuable. I argue that we can appeal to the epistemic value of well-functioning epistemic communities (WFEC) to explain many cases of epistemic injustice. We can also appeal to WFECs in thinking about how to prevent future epistemic injustice, and remedy its harms. The accepted accounts of our epistemic obligations as moral agents are overly individualistic. They focus on individual knowers as if they were entirely separable from their epistemic, moral, political, and social

contexts. It is this abstraction away from community that masks a necessary element of human cognition, which is that it is social to the core. We cannot extricate ourselves from our social positions. Or a stronger claim: occupying some social position is a necessary precondition for the existence of moral/epistemic agents.

The focus on individuals abstracted from their epistemic communities not only leads many philosophical accounts to discount the value of community, it also encourages an empirically false image of how our minds process information and make decisions. Undergirding the three commonly-held epistemic obligations is the supposition that our thoughts, biases, and evaluations are both under our control and transparent to us. I present mounting empirical evidence that this supposition is false. Implicit bias, stereotype threat, and confirmation bias, for example, are well-established facts of human social experience and cognition (see Jost et al 2009, Nickerson 1998, Steele 2010, and others). Moral philosophers cannot ignore them and should not discount their impact on moral reasoning. I try to give a theory of epistemic obligation and moral method in light of this empirical picture. That is, I provide a normative account suitable for the real world of knowers who are situated in particular contexts and who are susceptible to certain cognitive errors.

In Chapter 2 I develop an account of three features that mark WFECs: they are inclusive, nurturing, and encouraging of re-interpretation of social experience. In Chapters 3-6, I draw on this account to argue for both community-level and individual-level epistemic obligations. Throughout I argue that we have obligations to develop and maintain WFECs. I also argue that we have individual obligations: sometimes to seek the moral testimony of members of specific other communities, sometimes to defer to the testimony of others whose reasons we do not appreciate or understand in cases where they are more likely than us to be correct, and

sometimes to believe against our evidence in some cases where belief has self-fulfilling properties, as it does in the case of stereotype threat.

## **2. Current Understandings of Moral Method**

### **2.1. Epistemology and the Individual**

Most contemporary approaches to moral method assume a certain picture about human epistemic capacities, which stems from the Cartesian tradition in epistemology more generally. The primary goal of Cartesian epistemology is the acquisition of indubitable, foundational knowledge by the individual knower (see e.g. the First Meditation). Descartes purported to prove the existence of himself, the external world, and the existence of God through sheer reason from the armchair. He thought that any similarly rigorous thinker across time and space could access this same foundational knowledge. In this way, the Cartesian picture of epistemology was radically egalitarian. Knowledge was not limited to the wealthy or the educated; it was available to all who approached the question correctly, using the recommended method. This knowledge was thought to be free from the influence of values, interests, and biases. Short-circuiting these influences is part of what it means to have approached the question correctly. If someone arrived at the conclusion that God exists because she had a very strong commitment to the truth of that conclusion, she would have erred by reasoning poorly, even if the conclusion were true. To reach this conclusion in a justified way, one must reason to it free from the influence of one's own values or interests. This view of knowledge and its acquisition is supposed to be universal—applicable across all times and places.

This is certainly the classical picture proffered post-Enlightenment by all the major works in epistemology across the major divisions in the field. It is shared by rationalists like Descartes, empiricists like Locke and Hume, idealists like Berkeley, and even Kant. Indeed, this view of

knowledge is not merely coincidental with the Enlightenment; it is partially constitutive of it.

Kant's own well-known definition of enlightenment typifies this strain of thought:

“Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another” (Kant 1784). Epistemic individualism and self-sufficiency are required for full participation in epistemic ‘maturity’. This general picture of how we can (and should) acquire knowledge remains dominant today, as is evident when one considers the preoccupations of mainstream Western epistemology.

These major preoccupations are: to provide an adequate conceptual analysis of knowledge, including avoiding the Gettier (1963) problem, to develop the correct analysis of justification (is it foundationalist, coherentist, or something else), to defend the best theory of knowledge acquisition, and to defeat skepticism about the external world and other minds. Audi, for example, takes epistemology to be, broadly, the study of knowledge and justification (Audi 2003). Each of these questions is typically approached with the assumption that a discussion of a particular person's social context or community is largely irrelevant, except perhaps as an explanation of why she holds false beliefs (Huemer 2005). In discussing the focus on the individual, Audi claims:

The field of epistemology has traditionally been concerned with individuals taken one at a time, apart from the notable exception of the status of testimony as a source of grounds for belief. Why should there be this individual emphasis, if indeed there should be? It seems quite possible that a single individual could have both knowledge and justification even if no group does, whereas it is not possible that there be a group that has actual knowledge or justification when no individual member of that group has knowledge of or justification for the proposition in question. *We* cannot know anything unless it is known by you or me or some other individual—though there are some things we cannot *learn* by ourselves. Thus, in the case of a map of the world, knowledge by many people is needed to build the resulting social representation of geographical knowledge. Nonetheless, one of us could survive the rest and retain knowledge, or an omnipotent God could have created just one finite person with the capacity for knowledge and an environment in which it is exercised. In this respect, individual

knowledge and justification are apparently *logically prior* to their social counterparts: the former is possible without the latter, but not conversely (Audi 2003: 265).

Audi makes these claims as though they were obvious and uncontroversial (and most in mainstream epistemology have thought that they were). I discuss some criticism of this view in the next section.

## 2.2. Socializing Epistemology

In the past 30 years or so, serious criticism of this sort of view has surfaced from social epistemology and feminist epistemology. Social epistemology is a varied field, but the core focus on the social dimensions of knowledge production has helped to encourage alternatives to epistemology's focus on the solitary individual and her knowledge. Despite the role of social epistemology in developing these alternatives, much of the work in social epistemology is insufficiently critical of the role unjust social structures, in particular, might play in knowledge production and acquisition. I have sometimes remarked that there is social *epistemology* and then there is *social* epistemology. Those doing the former tend to take the traditional tools and assumptions of epistemology and apply them to social interactions (such as testimony or disagreement), whereas the latter tend to take the social more seriously, and tend to be more wary about the assumptions of traditional epistemology.

Feminist epistemology is often considered a sub-field of social epistemology because it focuses on the gendered social dimensions of knowledge production. Elizabeth Anderson claims that feminist epistemology is the subset of social epistemology "that investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge" (Anderson 1995a: 54). This claim is too broad when made of feminist epistemology as a whole, but it is at least appropriate when considering

those who write about situated knowledge from a feminist perspective, since it just is a claim about the influence of the social, especially gendered aspects of the social, on knowledge production. Many feminist epistemologists endorse a model of epistemic agents as situated knowers. They argue that the social positions and identities of agents are not epistemically irrelevant or unequivocally negative features. Indeed, these features systematically make possible, limit, shape, expand, and create the epistemic capacities of these agents.

In the background of this focus on situated knowers is a less-discussed element: what these knowers are situated *in*: epistemic communities. Philosophers of science, including and especially feminist philosophers of science, have been at the forefront of theorizing about communities and their role in scientific inquiry and inquiry more generally.

Some see the solution afforded by a social account of knowledge as worse than the problem. I claim, in contrast, that this judgment is a result of accepting a false dichotomy between the rational or cognitive and the social and that scientific knowledge is produced by cognitive processes that are fundamentally social. An adequate normative theory of knowledge must then be a normative theory of social knowledge, a theory whose norms apply to social practices and processes of cognition (Longino 2002: 128-129).

The realization that all knowledge (not just scientific knowledge) is social, then, requires a reevaluation of epistemology, which has been done on the assumption that knowledge was primarily individual. “As an 'epistemological community', a community in which knowledge is constructed and shared, and experiences are possible and shaped, our largest community is, in every sense, a science community” (Nelson 1990: 314). There is no sharp division between science and the rest of us, and just as scientific knowledge is social, all knowledge is social. Theories of knowledge that fail to take sociality into account, then, are inadequate theories of knowledge.

Recall the quotation from Audi (2003) above. Audi claims that social knowledge is

impossible without individual knowledge, so individual knowledge is logically prior to social knowledge. Nelson denies this claim:

Beliefs appear to be more like the “private property” of individuals. But for much the same reasons, the “private ownership” is mostly illusory. Beliefs, like knowledge, require public conceptual schemes for their formulation. [...] These considerations argue for the view that it is communities or groups that acquire and possess knowledge, and that focusing on individuals in epistemology is inappropriate. Individuals “have” beliefs and they know, but only in a derivative sense. Their beliefs and their “knowing” depend on public language and the conceptual scheme it embodies, and what they know and believe is constrained by public standards of evidence. The primary epistemological agents are groups—or more accurately, epistemological communities (Nelson 1990: 255-256).

It is not my goal at this time to defend Nelson's view, but she shows that Audi's claims are far from *obviously* true. In particular, I want to follow Nelson in claiming that Audi gets the priority relationship exactly wrong: it is communities, rather than individuals, that are necessary for knowledge.

Perhaps it is true that “an omnipotent God could have created just one finite person with the capacity for knowledge and an environment in which it is exercised” (Audi 2003: 265). But what kind of person would this be, and what kind of knowledge would she have? She would not have propositional knowledge because, as Nelson says, language is public. So too are the concepts language captures. She would have to be grown since she would not have anyone to nurture her until she could take care of herself (see Baier 1985). Such a person would have cognitive activity and non-propositional beliefs, certainly, but would be very different from you and me. Audi might respond that this omnipotent God could imbue in this single person a language, concepts, the ability to apply them, and so on. But in either case, this person is very different from us, and her knowledge would be uninteresting from the point of view of epistemology. In the real world we are not imbued by any omnipotent being with certain, indubitable knowledge and pre-set language. Rather, we develop language, concepts, schemas,

and knowledge gradually over time in the context of particular communities, which are shot through with varying levels of injustice, inequality, and prejudice.

If Audi is correct to say that, in some sense, the individual is logically prior to the community with respect to knowledge, these are not the kind of individuals with whom we are (or should be) concerned in developing a theory of human knowledge. To say that imagining a person like this settles the proper subject of epistemology is disingenuous, particularly since, short of such a person, all actual knowers are socially situated in real epistemic communities as a matter of necessity given how humans in fact are. If what we are after with epistemology is a theory of “knowledge and justification” where this is understood to be a theory of *actual* human knowledge and justification, and how these may be improved, then the individual is not prior to the community in any relevant way. Individuals could not exist without communities and *vice versa*.

### **2.3. Moral Epistemology and the Individual**

Moral epistemology, like epistemology in general, concerns a cluster of questions about knowledge. In the case of moral epistemology, these are questions about moral knowledge: how can we have moral knowledge? How can we have justified moral beliefs? By what methods should we seek moral knowledge? Who can have moral knowledge? How do we know what we ought to do? The dominant view in moral epistemology is quite similar to the Cartesian strain in general epistemology. Like the traditional view in epistemology, this view is characterized partially by a desire to inhabit an impartial point of view (see Rawls 1971, Sidgwick 1874).

The methodological goal of mainstream moral epistemology is accessing this impartial point of view in part to ensure that moral judgments are not infected inappropriately by personal interests and biases (see Mill 1863, Rawls 1971). Here Rawls explains how he thinks the original

position should be constructed, but the same desiderata hold for other views:

The idea here is simply to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose on arguments for principles of justice, and therefore on these principles themselves. Thus it seems reasonable and generally acceptable that no one should be advantaged or disadvantaged by natural fortune or social circumstances in the choice of principles. It also seems widely agreed that it should be impossible to tailor principles to the circumstances of one's own case. We should insure further that particular inclinations and aspirations, and persons' conceptions of their good do not affect the principles adopted. The aim is to rule out those principles that would be rational to propose for acceptance, however little the chance of success, only if one knew certain things that are irrelevant from the standpoint of justice (Rawls 1999: 17).

Whatever the correct moral theory is, it is supposed that its contents should not depend on or reflect the social position of the person developing or adopting it. It should be accessible and acceptable to all insofar as it is accessible and acceptable from this impartial point of view. It is supposed that individuals can access this impartial point of view in a mundane way. That is, it is not just experts who have this ability. Anyone can do it almost any time. I return to this question in the third and fourth chapters.

#### **2.4. Socializing Moral Epistemology**

As in the case of epistemology more generally, there are potent criticisms of this view. Just as we cannot think of knowers as abstracted from their communities, we cannot think of moral agents as abstracted from their communities. Indeed, these are the very same people and communities. We are all moral and epistemic agents and we all operate in multiple, overlapping epistemic communities, which are also moral communities.

Feminist philosophers have been at the forefront of emphasizing the role of communities and actual moral decision-making when thinking about moral method (see Jaggar 2000a, Tobin 2007, Walker 2007). For example, Jaggar notes that a desire to access an impartial point of view often means glossing over differences in social power that make a difference in moral theorizing.

Contemporary moral philosophy often conceptualizes humans on a level of abstraction so high that many morally salient differences become invisible. These differences include, though they are not limited to, gender differences. [...] Because gender norms situate men and women differently, assigning them systematically different privileges and responsibilities, social practices and policies that are formally gender neutral may have results that in practice favor one sex disproportionately over the other (Jaggar 2000a: 454).

Social power is a function of communities both because communities develop the conceptual and material resources to define and enforce differences and because social power could not exist outside the context of a community. Moral method cannot abstract away from the context, which includes communities, individual social positions, the power relations at work, and so on, then, without abstracting away relevant features of the issue.

I argue throughout the following chapters that we must take seriously the role of communities in thinking about moral knowledge, just as we must take seriously the role of communities in thinking about all knowledge. The impulse toward an account of moral knowledge that takes seriously its ineradicably social dimensions is driven by many considerations. In arguing for my view of epistemic obligations, I draw on feminist philosophy, philosophy of science, philosophy of race, philosophy of language, and cognitive and social psychology, among other fields and sub-fields. In this way, and others, I take this project to be one in naturalized moral epistemology. “[F]eminism’s defining concern with gender inequality has encouraged feminist philosophers to approach moral philosophy using methods that are naturalized in the sense of being openly multidisciplinary and informed by empirical knowledge, rather than rationalist or idealist in the sense of purporting to appeal to reason alone” (Jaggar 2000a: 458).

### **3. Chapter Overview**

There are six chapters following this one. Chapter 2 provides some necessary explanation

of the current state of the literature on epistemic norms and refocuses the debate on epistemic injustice as a methodological guide. Most accounts of epistemic normativity are teleological. On this view, epistemic norms—whether these take the form of requirements or prohibitions or permissions—arise out of the desire to achieve or promote some goal. Traditional accounts of these epistemic goals have tended to focus on things like truth, justification, rationality, or wisdom. Indeed, the goal of having truth and avoiding error is the most common (see Alston 1985, 2006, BonJour 1985, Conee 1992, David 2001). If one takes truth to be an epistemic goal then the next question is how best to achieve or promote this goal. Epistemic norms are designed to answer this question, and to guide our actions with respect to achieving the goal of, in this case, believing truth and avoiding error. I take some issue with this method of determining how we should derive these epistemic norms. Rather than determining what is epistemically valuable first and then asking how to achieve that goal, I argue that it is sometimes helpful to look at cases of epistemic injustice first, without imposing a pre-set vision of what is and is not epistemically valuable. When we look at cases of epistemic injustice (see Fricker 2007, Medina 2013), we can ask what has gone wrong, epistemically speaking, to make these cases unjust. This provides a methodological guide for determining what is epistemically valuable.

In the latter part of the chapter, I employ this method and argue that the two types of epistemic injustice Fricker outlines—testimonial and hermeneutical injustice—arise out of poorly-functioning epistemic communities. I develop an account of well-functioning epistemic communities as being inclusive, nurturing, and concerned with re-interpreting social experience. I claim that WFECs are epistemically valuable, and that cases of epistemic injustice arise in the absence of these communities. Likewise, WFECs often serve as a corrective for epistemic injustice. If we accept the broadly teleological account of epistemic norms and we accept that

WFECs are epistemically valuable, then we can ask when this value is undermined and which norms arise out of promoting it? I provide a partial answer to this question in the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 3 I take my first modest step away from currently accepted epistemic norms. It is supposed that individuals benefit a great deal from interaction with others, but they are not obligated to seek others for their moral testimony, and to the extent that they do seek the input of others, they do so in relatively closed epistemic communities. I argue that these relatively closed epistemic communities are necessary, but limited, and that these limitations make claims to universal, timeless, and impartial moral truth dubious at best. The limitations of such communities are: exposure to limited sorts of experiences, exposure to limited sorts of reasons and arguments, they reward conformity and confirmation, and there are ideological constraints on epistemic legitimacy. These features of closed epistemic communities work against them being well-functioning in the ways I describe in the second chapter. Next I establish the extent to which all of us operate in such closed epistemic communities. I draw on literature on confirmation bias to help explain this. We tend to seek out information that confirms our already-settled views about the world (see Nickerson 1998). In practice, this means seeking out those epistemic communities which validate our own views. One result of this is that the views of members of such closed communities tend to get more extreme and more entrenched over time (see Schkade et al 2006, Sunstein 2012, and Sunstein and Hastie 2008). Beyond this general explanation for the tendency toward such relatively closed epistemic communities, I argue that philosophical method encourages it. Indeed, the philosophical communities of philosophers are relatively closed. Its members exhibit both necessary and contingent homogeneity.

When combined with further argument about the limitations of individual moral

perception, the result is troubling. I argue that each of us has different skills with respect to moral perception, and each of us approaches the objects of that perception from different positions. We may notice different things, take different things to be important, and so on. Philosophy's claims to timeless, universal moral knowledge are at odds with the relatively closed nature of its inquiry into such claims in concert with the limitations of each of our moral perception. To remedy this tension, I propose that moral agents have epistemic obligations to seek moral testimony from members of other epistemic communities whose own moral perception may give them access to other, better reasons and arguments. By drawing on the epistemic resources of many communities and individuals, we can help to counteract the limitations each of us face in thinking about moral issues.

Chapter 4 provides guidance on what to do with that testimony once we have it. The commonly held view is that input from others may help us change our mind or clarify our thinking about moral issues. In this way, testimony may provide us with reasons on which to base, and possibly alter, our beliefs. However, moral testimony is not such that we should change our beliefs just because someone else believes differently—we should not accept a moral view on the *authority* of some person, though we may accept a view on the reasons she provides. This idea is often formulated as an appeal to moral autonomy (see Hills 2009, Hopkins 2007, Nickel 2001, Wolff 1970). Hopkins: “having the right to a moral belief requires one to grasp the *moral* grounds for it” (2007: 630). In cases where we are presented with testimony that we do not grasp in this way, then, we have no right to the belief. Phrased in a different way, in cases where one is faced with unconvincing moral testimony, one's view should not change.

I argue that this conception of moral autonomy is based on a mistaken view about our ability to access, understand, and weigh the testimony others provide. This view is mistaken

because of our limited moral perception, the likelihood that we will over-value the input of socially-favored individuals and under-value the input of socially-disfavored individuals, and the ways in which our sense of what is interesting and important is shaped by social position. I propose an account of relational moral autonomy and argue that whether we should defer to the unconvincing testimony of another will depend in part on her (and our) social position.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I examine the epistemic problems of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat occurs when anxiety about confirming a negative group stereotype causes someone to perform worse than they would in a non-threatening context, confirming the stereotype in the process. In Chapter 5 I introduce some research on stereotype threat, especially research on women's math performance. I argue that stereotype threat imposes epistemic harms both on individuals who experience it and on communities. I focus on the individual harms: diminished epistemic performance, loss of credibility, lack of understanding, incongruous experience of the world, and constrained options.

I argue that these epistemic harms are a result of poorly-functioning epistemic communities. Then I argue that WFECs can counteract the epistemic harms of stereotype threat. In particular, I look at two sorts of successful interventions that improve performance. The first is a group study method developed by Uri Treisman (1992), which successfully improved calculus performance in both women and African Americans (two groups who suffer from stereotype threat with respect to mathematics). The second is a cluster of successful stereotype threat reducing strategies that have in common providing cues about inclusivity. If members of threatened groups feel welcomed in a community or specific context, their performance improves.

In Chapter 6 I continue to investigate stereotype threat, but turn to a more individual

question. What should each of us, individually, believe about the content of stereotypes? Put another way, what, if anything, is epistemically *bad* about stereotypes? Many think that what is epistemically bad about stereotypes is that they are false and/or resistant to counter-evidence (Blum 2004, Fricker 2007). I reject this view about the epistemic badness of stereotypes. I propose that the contents of stereotypes are often what Langton (2009) calls maker's knowledge. Unlike the sort of knowledge we typically have in mind when we think about how our beliefs track the world, maker's knowledge “not only aims at truth, but *makes* its truth” (Langton 2009: 292). Because stereotypes may sometimes have the power to make their content true, and to generate evidence for their content, their epistemic badness cannot be explained only by reference to truth or evidence. In the rest of the chapter I look at the question of what is epistemically bad about them, and what we should believe about them, through the lens of a puzzle presented by Haslanger (2007) on which it seems that we both ought to believe and ought not believe a single proposition.

I distinguish between three sorts of stereotypic claims: evaluative, natural, and probabilistic. I argue that Haslanger (2007 and 2011) provides ways of explaining the epistemic badness of evaluative and natural claims in terms of truth, but these do not work for probabilistic claims, which may be true and quite well-supported empirically. I argue that the puzzle, when it concerns probabilistic claims, can be seen as expressing conflicting *prima facie* epistemic duties. While we may have a duty to believe truth and avoid error, we also have duties arising out of the value of WFECs. I argue that we are obligated to disbelieve even true, well-supported probabilistic stereotypic claims as a result.

In Chapter 7 I conclude with some discussion of the implications of my research, as well as some suggestions for future research. I discuss the implications for philosophical method, in

particular. I also outline some possible institutional interventions. While I criticize undue focus on the individual throughout these chapters, most of the epistemic obligations for which I argue are, at bottom, individual obligations. Future research, including my own, should explore group and community level interventions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Epistemic Norms and Epistemic Communities

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter takes a closer look at the extant literature on epistemic norms and especially how they get their force. The most common account of this normative force is a teleological one—epistemic activity aims at epistemically valuable things (whether truth, knowledge, rationality, or whatever) and epistemic norms are those rules or guidelines that are conducive to those ends. I argue that epistemic injustice can serve as a powerful methodological guide in determining what is epistemically valuable. Then, drawing on Fricker's account of epistemic injustice, I argue that well-functioning epistemic communities are epistemically valuable.

#### 2. Epistemic Norms

Just as we think that some actions are morally right or wrong, good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, just or unjust, we think that some beliefs and attitudes are epistemically right or wrong, good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, just or unjust. There are epistemic norms just like there are moral norms, prudential norms, and so on. The field of epistemology is undergoing what Riggs (2006) calls the “value-turn”. Mainstream epistemologists are paying attention to epistemic value and norms. The normative elements in epistemology tend to be cashed out in terms of justification (see Lycan 1985, Kim 1988, Pollock 1987).

If a belief is justified for us, then it is *permissible* and *reasonable*, from the epistemic point of view, for us to hold it, and it would be *epistemically irresponsible* to hold beliefs that contradict it. If we consider believing or accepting a proposition to be an “action” in an appropriate sense, belief justification would then be a special case of justification of

action, which in its broadest terms is the central concern of normative ethics. Just as it is the business of normative ethics to delineate the conditions under which acts and decisions are justified from the moral point of view, so it is the business of epistemology to identify and analyze the conditions under which beliefs, and perhaps other propositional attitudes, are justified from the epistemological point of view (Kim 1988: 383).

As agents we can think of ourselves as being guided—sometimes in conflicting ways—by many sets of norms, e.g. moral, prudential, epistemic, and others. Likewise, we can judge the actions of others insofar as they accord (or not) with various sets of norms.

If I am rock climbing, then I should try to keep my arms straight as much as I can, because that will decrease muscle fatigue and put most of the onus for holding me up on my skeletal system, which is much stronger than my muscular system. But if I am writing a paper or a cooking a meal, no such straight-armed norm guides me. In those cases, it might be best to have slightly or fully bent arms. Sets of norms often conflict in this way, and there may be no clear way to sort through which set of norms should take precedence in a given case. Likewise, even within the same domain, norms will vary depending on context. Though it is typically good to keep one's arms straight while rock climbing, sometimes arms should be bent, as when one is reaching for a new hold. “[D]ifferent norms serve different purposes, and when they conflict that does not show that there is something wrong with one of the sets of norms – it just shows that the different norms are doing different jobs” (Pollock 1987: 73).

## **2.1. The Epistemic Point of View**

But what is “the epistemological point of view” that Kim refers to? And what does it mean to say that sets of norms do “different jobs”? These ideas are related. We can think of these sorts of norms as being goal- or value-oriented. To say that a set of norms does a job is to say that it is oriented toward some goal or goals (—in this chapter I use goal/goals and value/values

synonymously). “One way to explain why we ought to do something is to show that it is a means to some goal that we have. A similar, but slightly different, way is to show that it is a means to some valuable result” (Feldman 2000: 682). The appropriate response to these goals or values may vary. “While every value calls for a response, they do not call for the same response. Some values call for promotion and thereby give us defeasible reason to promote them. Others should be honored, respected, or admired and give us defeasible reasons to honor, respect, and admire things that have value” (Littlejohn 2012: 68-69). In addition to determining what is epistemically valuable, we will need to determine what response this value requires.

In the case of rock climbing, one goal is to make it to the top of the climb with minimal muscle fatigue. Keeping one's arms straight helps one achieve that goal, so it is a norm of rock climbing. Talk of points of view, then, merely means taking one set of goals as primary at a given time (see Wedgewood 2002). From the rock climbing point of view, you should try to keep your arms straight. From the cooking point of view, you should not. It would be very odd to see someone walking around town wearing a harness, keeping her arms straight, occasionally putting chalk on her fingers—following various norms of rock climbing—and to find out that she has no intention of rock climbing. It makes no sense for her to follow these norms because she does not have the goals associated with them, and they are likely to hamper the achievement of others goals she does have. From the rock climbing point of view, she is doing everything she ought to do, but from other points of view (for example, the prudential point of view), she is not.

To evaluate beliefs or attitudes from an epistemic point of view, then, is to take an epistemic goal (or the epistemic goals) as primary at the time of evaluation. “And the evaluative aspect of epistemology involves an attempt to identify ways in which the conduct and the

products of our cognitive activities can be better or worse vis-a-vis the goals of cognition”

(Alston 2006: 29). But this just pushes the question back a level: what are the epistemic goal(s)?

Or, what is epistemically valuable? Before I take up this question, I should clarify the terminology I employ in talking about epistemic norms.

## 2.2. Normative Terminology Employed

In this and the following chapters I use some normative terminology more familiar in a discussion of morality. Here I will lay out what I mean by these terms. Alston (1988: online) notes that requirement, permission, and prohibition are the basic deontic categories. Here I outline the terms I use to capture these basic categories. I use them interchangeably, though some of the terms carry connotations of greater or lesser force.

I use 'obligation', 'ought', 'should', 'right', 'obliged', and 'required' in the same general way, to mean that one epistemically *must* do something, just as in the ethical domain, they would mean that one morally *must* do something. Here are some examples to demonstrate usage:

You are epistemically obligated to believe that the Earth is round. You epistemically ought to reject that line of reasoning. You are epistemically required to believe me. He epistemically should reevaluate his stance. It is epistemically right to think that she is telling the truth. You are epistemically obliged to believe this conclusion.

In each of these cases, the message is about what the epistemic norms demand, and to do otherwise would be epistemically wrong.

If something is epistemically permitted, then that thing is *allowed*. That is, it would not be epistemically wrong to do, but it also would not be epistemically wrong not to do. To denote this concept, I also use 'may'.

You are epistemically permitted to believe in the existence of God. You epistemically may reject that hypothesis.

As in ethics, what is permitted is neither required nor prohibited, but one is always permitted to do what is required. For example, if I am morally required to rescue a drowning child, then that action is also permitted. If I am permitted to donate to a certain charity, then I am neither required to do so, nor am I prohibited from doing so. There is one complication which arises in ethics and epistemology as well. In ethics, a maximizing consequentialist thinks that one must do the optimific act, and anything else is wrong. So the only time one is permitted, but not required, to do something is when there is a tie for best. If two actions would produce the same amount of good, and that amount is higher than all other available actions, then one is permitted to do either, but required to do one of the two. It would be wrong not to do one of them, but for either one considered individually, it would not be wrong to do and not be wrong not to do. This complication is relevant to the discussion of epistemic norms because many people hold views on which one and only one epistemic action (for example, believing, disbelieving, withholding belief, seeking more evidence, and so on) is required and all others are prohibited. For example, if I am trying to decide whether I should believe that there is an elephant in my living room (suppose that there is not), then one might think that there is only one permitted belief, and that belief is also required: I should believe that there is not an elephant in my living room.

Epistemic prohibition indicates that something is epistemically *forbidden*. I use the following terms to capture this concept: 'wrong', 'should not', 'ought not', and 'impermissible'.

Here are some examples:

You epistemically should not believe that there is an elephant in your living room. It would be epistemically wrong to conclude that. You epistemically ought not accept her testimony. Belief in that proposition is epistemically forbidden. He is epistemically prohibited from inferring that. It would be epistemically impermissible to believe that.

When something is epistemically prohibited, then, not doing it is required, just as when

something is morally prohibited.

I also make use of the the concepts of blame and praise. Though I do not offer a precise definition of these terms, I use them to evaluate epistemic acts where the agent herself seems to merit special attention—she is especially worthy of either praise or blame for acting in accord with or in violation of epistemic norms. Examples:

You are epistemically blameworthy for ignoring the woman's testimony. She deserves epistemic praise for seeking out the evidence that cracked the case.

Though epistemic acts and habits merit praise or blame regardless (i.e. they are categories of epistemic evaluation in general, not just in these special cases), I use the terms in cases where the agent seems especially involved in her epistemic goings-on.

In some cases, I will simply say that something is epistemically *better* or *worse* than some other thing. This just means that that thing is more or less conducive to the epistemic goal(s) than some other option. Similarly, in ethics, we might say that giving a person in need help is better than not doing so, but worse than giving two people in need help.

### **3. Truth as Epistemic Goal**

In this section I briefly explore the most commonly proffered epistemic goal—the goal of having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs (see Alston 1985, 2006, BonJour 1985, Conee 1992, David 2001). Many philosophers have agreed that truth is an epistemic goal, even the only epistemic goal, though there is little agreement about how to formulate the goal. “[The epistemic] point of view is defined by the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs” (Alston 1985: 59). Similarly BonJour claims: “The basic role of justification is that of a *means* to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our objective goal [...] The distinguishing characteristic of

epistemic justification is thus its essential or internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth” (1985: 7-8). William James' early attempt at stating this goal is as follows: “We must know the truth: and we must avoid error,-these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers” (1911: 7).

The goal of believing true things and not believing false things is plausible. We are not out to acquire some random set of beliefs or just the beliefs that make us happy. Alston claims that this “is so obvious that it would seem to be unnecessary to belabor the point” (2006: 30). If truth is an epistemic goal, then the epistemic point of view will take acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs as primary when evaluating different sets of norms. Despite its widespread acceptance as a goal of inquiry, the precise nature of the truth goal has been notoriously difficult to spell out. In the following subsections I survey three of the disputes about what the truth goal really is.

### **3.1. Truth Over Time or Truth at a Time?**

One dispute concerns whether the truth goal is synchronic or diachronic. That is, do we want truth at a particular time, or do we want truth over time? On the synchronic interpretation of the goal, we want to have truth and avoid error at each moment. On the diachronic interpretation of the goal, we want to have truth and avoid error over a long period of time. Instead of seeing my goal as believing truth and avoiding error now, I want to believe truth and avoid error over my lifetime. The diachronic goal has largely been rejected on the grounds that it would open the door to the consequences of a belief counting in favor of believing it, even if it is false.

Note that having a justified belief cannot be a *causal* means for reaching the truth-goal. A person can be justified in believing  $p$  even if believing  $p$  will cause her to hold a massive amount of false beliefs later on, even if all later beliefs to which her present belief causally contribute will be false. Similarly, a person can be unjustified in believing  $p$  even

if believing  $p$  will cause her to hold a massive amount of true beliefs later on, even if all later beliefs to which her present belief causally contributes will be true. Being justified in believing  $p$  has nothing at all to do with the causal consequences of believing  $p$  (David 2001: 160).

That is, it seems like the diachronic interpretation of the truth goal would say that a belief is justified if we know that it is false, but that believing it will result in our believing five more truths in the future. For this reason, most who defend some version of the truth goal defend the synchronic version.

It is worth noting that the concept of epistemic justification operating in this objection may beg the question against non-truth oriented epistemic goals. That is, it assumes that to be justified in holding some belief means having some relation with the likely truth of the belief—it assumes that justification is concerned with truth, which is part of what is at issue. But if epistemic justification boils down to what we are epistemically permitted to believe (as Kim puts it in the quotation above), and if there are epistemic goals that are both not reducible to truth and that could override truth, then it seems like one might be epistemically permitted to believe—and, as a result, justified in believing—things even without the sort of concern for truth assumed here. Beyond that, the defender of the diachronic goal might claim that the objection begs the question against the diachronic goal specifically. It assumes that justification is concerned with truth, and that it is concerned with truth right now. The diachronic goal, after all, is also concerned with truth, but it is assumed by the objector that only concern for truth right now will do. This objection to the diachronic goal may be somewhat circular. Still, many find that their intuitions about what it means to be epistemically justified are strongly in line with the synchronic truth goal for just this reason—that causal consequences do not play a role in justification. That is, many people think that epistemic justification *just is* about what we have

most reason to believe is true now. So if I have most reason to believe that the Earth orbits the Sun, then I am justified in believing that, and I am not justified in believing that that is false. Even if believing now that the Sun orbits the Earth would result in my having millions of true beliefs in the future, many think I would not be justified in believing that the Sun orbits the Earth.

### **3.2. Truth for Me or Truth for Us?**

Another dispute concerns whether the truth goal is a goal proper to individuals, groups, or both. Most epistemologists have assumed that individuals are the primary focus of epistemic evaluation and so have thought about the truth goal as one that guides the beliefs of individual knowers. I want to have true beliefs and avoid false beliefs, and you want to have true beliefs and avoid false beliefs, but we do not coordinate our pursuit of truth except insofar as we have to use others as sources of knowledge. There have been challenges to this picture from philosophers of science and feminist philosophers, among others. Philip Kitcher, for example, argues that scientific inquiry involves a division of epistemic labor such that the scientific community will do better overall at getting things right if some scientists pursue unpromising lines of inquiry (Kitcher 1990, 1993). Though each individual may not be directly involved in the pursuit of truth, the community is, and each individual does better as far as attaining truth and avoiding error under this set-up. If every scientist pursued the most promising theory or best hypothesis, then less progress would be made than when the scientific community uses a mixed strategy of pursuing many different possibilities. Defenders of the collective truth goal think the goal is to end up with a collective body of knowledge with the best balance of true beliefs over false beliefs, not for each individual to pursue a body of knowledge with this feature, though each

individual may fare better if the collective goal is pursued.

Feminist philosophers have also been keen on exploring the co-operative elements of a search for truth. Many feminist philosophers have argued that knowers are inseparable from their specific social contexts, and that a theory of knowledge, truth, and inquiry must take this into account. Annette Baier notes that we depend on others for the development of our own agency, including epistemic agency. As Baier puts it, “A person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood. Persons essentially are *second* persons” (1985: 84). Unsurprisingly, feminist philosophers of science have produced some of the most well-developed and careful views on the role and nature of community in inquiry. Helen Longino argues that objectivity—closely connected to truth—is a feature of communities rather than of individuals (Longino 1990, 2002) and Lynn Hankinson Nelson argues that communities are the primary subjects of knowledge (Nelson 1990, 1993). Patricia Hill Collins argues that, “For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (2000: 260). On these views, it does not make sense to talk about the epistemic goals of individuals without also talking about the epistemic goals of the communities in which those individuals operate.

### **3.3. Any Old Truths or Interesting Truths?**

If one takes truth and the avoidance of error in general as a goal, then one has to deal with the problem of trivial truths. That is, if truth is all that matters, then any truth will do, but we tend to agree that some truths are more valuable than others. “It is often pointed out that if the multiplication of truths were our sole cognitive goal, we could not better spend our time than by

memorizing telephone directories” (Alston 2006: 32). As a result, epistemologists like Alston and Haack (1993) prefer to talk of important or interesting truths. Widely accepted though this argument from trivial truths is, Treanor (2012) argues that it rests on the mistaken assumption that any two true sentences contain the same amount of truth. In Alston's phonebook example, Treanor might claim that one entry in a phone book does not connect up to the same amount of truth as a sentence about, say, physics or philosophy. So it is a mistake to think that what is doing the work is what is interesting or important. Instead, what we take to be trivial truths are often sentences expressing small bits of truth, and what we take to be important truths are often sentences expressing large bits of truth. It is also the case that two entries in the phonebook may differ in their value depending on the context in which we look for them. Finding the number for the parents who gave you up for adoption many years ago differs markedly from finding the number for someone to whom you have no connection.

Among those who agree that truth is epistemically valuable, there is further dispute about whether it is the only thing of epistemic value and how best to promote (or honor or respect or whatever) this valuable thing. But there are also other epistemic goals defended, which I do not have time to discuss here: knowledge, rationality, understanding, wisdom, and virtue among them. At the end of this paper I argue well-functioning epistemic communities are epistemically valuable for reasons that do not reduce to concerns about truth. However, they are also valuable insofar as they are conducive to truth. That is, truth is epistemically valuable, as many epistemologists have claimed, but it is not the only thing that is epistemically valuable.

#### **4. Epistemic Value—Monism or Pluralism?**

Even if there is broad agreement that the truth goal is part of what guides the epistemic

point of view, it may not be the only goal that does so. That is, many find a sort of epistemic pluralism more plausible. However, some epistemologists hold that the truth goal is the only epistemic goal. Pritchard calls this view Epistemic Value T-Monism: “True belief is the sole ultimate fundamental epistemic good” (2011: 2) On this view, sets of epistemic norms are evaluated on how conducive they are to truth. A set of epistemic norms that called for knowers to form beliefs on the basis of sacrifice to the gods—assuming that this would be an unreliable method—would be a worse set of norms than, say, forming beliefs on the basis on one's evidence—assuming that this would be a reliable method—because the latter is more likely to result in a knower acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs.

On this monist view about epistemic value, things other than true belief may have epistemic value, but they have this value instrumentally because they conduce to true belief. For example, we might think that having formed a belief in a rational way has epistemic value, but that this value is derived from the fact that rational belief is truth-conducive (see Feldman 2000).

Aren't there lots of other epistemic goods beside true belief, such as knowledge, justification, rationality, etc.,? Well, yes, but the thought is that what makes these goods epistemic goods, on this view, is that they are a means to true belief. Thus, the epistemic value of, say, justification, is due to the fact that justified beliefs tend to be true beliefs. Hence, the epistemic value of this good is parasitic on the epistemic value of true belief in the sense that the epistemic value of this good is instrumental epistemic value relative to the fundamental epistemic good of true belief (Pritchard 2011: 3, see also Brogaard 2008).

A monist view about value has certain theoretical advantages for the epistemologist. For example, taking just one thing to be valuable makes comparisons between options relatively easy. The pluralist is sometimes put in the position of developing a decision procedure to determine which value is more important when they are in conflict, but these decision procedures often seem *ad hoc* and open to counterexamples. For the monist, this is never an issue since

values cannot come into conflict—she needs only to do the work of determining which option best promotes whatever value is sought. The monist also has the advantage of theoretical parsimony. If the epistemic value of true belief can provide a satisfying account of epistemic norms, then it would be unnecessary to posit other sources of value.

The pluralist about epistemic value has her own theoretical advantages. Longino argues that pluralism about explanation in general has the advantage that it allows us to generate a more complete understanding of the world. A similar point can be made in favor of epistemic value pluralism because it may allow us to get a better picture of the landscape of epistemic norms.

The very possibility of pluralism turns the value-free ideal upside down—values and interests must be addressed not by elimination or purification strategies, but by more and different values. To see this, consider the following. First, suppose pluralism is right, that is, the world is not such as to be in the end describable by one theory or conjunction of theories. Then, even if a given theory has impeccable evidentiary support, is justified in the narrow sense, that it has problematic social consequences (that is, its acceptance would advance or undermine the interests of one or more groups in society relative to others) is reason not directly to reject it but instead to develop an alternative approach that has equivalent empirical validity. (This is not an armchair pursuit; it takes time, effort, and resources.) The social payoff is an escape route from natural inevitability arguments. The epistemic payoff is an increase in the range of phenomena that we can know or explain. This multiplicationist strategy is constrained, but not foreclosed, by requirements of empirical adequacy. It does not encourage one thousand flowers to bloom, but only two or three may be needed (Longino 2004: 137).

Following this view, pluralism about epistemic value may have similar advantages in explaining various problems in our understanding of epistemic normativity. For example, Pritchard (2011) has noted that epistemic value pluralism of some sort has the potential to solve the swamping problem (also called the value problem or the Meno problem), which is the difficulty of explaining why knowledge that *p* is more epistemically valuable than mere true belief that *p*.

The extant literature on epistemic value tends to begin from intuitions about general epistemic kinds—that truth or knowledge is always valuable, that believing falsely is always

epistemically bad, and so on. In this way, it is similar to moral theories built from an answer to the question: What is morally good? Some ask this question and find that they are monists because the only thing that seems morally good is, for example, happiness: “Questions about ends are, in other words, questions about things that are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end” (Mill 1861: 54). Others ask this question and find that they are pluralists because more than one thing seems morally good. “On reflection it seems clear that pleasure is not the only thing in life that we think good in itself, that for instance we think the possession of a good character, or an intelligent understanding of the world, as good or better” (Ross 1930: 17). Though this method has been dominant in ethics, and now in the normative areas of epistemology, it is not the only, or even the best, method of determining what sorts of things are valuable. In the next section I discuss another way of going about this task.

### **5. Injustice as Methodological Guide**

Another way to figure out what is valuable in some domain is to figure out when and how those values have been undermined. Analogously, in ethics we might sometimes find it helpful to start with an action or set of actions that seem wrong or unjust and work our way backward to determine what accounts for their moral status rather than generating a principle first and comparing acts to it to determine whether they are right or wrong. As Fricker notes discussing her own methods in the Preface to *Epistemic Injustice*, “My interest here is in injustice specifically in the sphere of epistemic activity, and certainly in this sphere I believe that there are areas where injustice is normal, and that the only way to reveal what is involved in epistemic justice (indeed, even to see that there is such a thing as epistemic justice) is by looking

at the negative space that is epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007: viii).

This sort of bottom-up approach to normative theory is not new, of course. Feminists, in particular, have been interested in this method of inquiry.

[Feminist Practical Dialogues] typically do not begin with the articulation of general moral rules or principles; instead, they begin with the creation of opportunities for participants to talk about their own lives. The importance placed on first-person narrative reflects the early radical feminists' conviction that the dominant understandings of reality, insofar as they had been male authored, had at best disregarded and at worst distorted or denied the truth of women's experience (Jaggar 1995: 125, see also Tobin 2007, Walker 1998).

Even some who do not identify as feminists (at least not for the purposes of moral theorizing) have endorsed a similar view about moral reasoning. Jonathan Dancy, for example, is best known for his defense of moral particularism, which rejects the idea that there are any general moral principles at all (see Dancy 1983, 1993, 2006). In the field of applied ethics, reasoning often begins from cases rather than principles. Even when one begins with a moral principle or general conception of what is morally valuable, these principles are tested against intuitions, which might undermine our confidence in those principles. So this general rejection or de-emphasizing of the principle-first style of reasoning is somewhat familiar now in moral theory. In epistemology—outside of feminist epistemology—it is still relatively rare.

If truth were the only epistemic goal, then we would expect to find epistemic injustices (or epistemic wrongs, or blameworthy beliefs, or whatever) taking place where the goal of truth is thwarted and in no other cases. So if there is an epistemic wrong the wrongness of which is not attributable to the undermining of the truth goal (or if there is an undermining of the truth goal which is not epistemically wrong), then there must be other goals or values at stake from the epistemic point of view. It is worth noting that this method of revealing epistemic value is

consistent with monism or pluralism, with true belief being the only epistemic goal, or with something else being epistemically valuable. If one comes in with some view about what is epistemically valuable, then the results of that inquiry might validate that view, or it might undermine it. At any rate, there is no radical threat to our understanding of epistemic value in looking to cases of epistemic injustice. Rather, we stand to gain further understanding of the epistemic landscape, just as moral understanding has been enriched by the bottom-up approach.

## **6. Epistemic Injustice**

Fricker introduces two types of distinctly epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. “Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, 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). If we accept that these epistemic injustices exist, then we can ask what has gone wrong to make them exist and what valuable things their existence thwarts. In this section I will give Fricker's account of this.

### **6.1. Fricker on Testimonial Injustice**

If an epistemic agent says something and another agent discounts (whether on purpose or not) her testimony because she is a woman or because she is Black, for example, she suffers a testimonial injustice. Fricker gives compelling literary examples of this sort of phenomenon (from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), but this sort of injustice is familiar to the point of banality, though it may often go unnoticed. Fricker briefly mentions that testimonial injustice can serve to thwart the interests of truth and to create a “serious form of unfreedom in our collective speech situation” (Fricker 2007: 43), but these do not constitute the primary harms

of testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice wrongs a person intrinsically as a knower and, by extension, as a person. The ability to share knowledge with others is part of the capacity to reason, which Fricker says is fundamental to our understanding of personhood (2007: 44). “No wonder, then, that being insulted, undermined, or otherwise wronged in one's capacity as a giver of knowledge is something that can cut deep. No wonder too that in contexts of oppression the powerful will be sure to undermine the powerless in just that capacity, for it provides a direct route to undermining them in their very humanity” (Fricker 2007: 44).

Part of what explains the centrality of sharing knowledge to our understanding of ourselves is that the process of providing testimony which is well-received and receiving testimony which is well-provided serves to validate and shape these understandings in relation to others, and is what results in us having mental states that rise to the level of beliefs (Fricker 2007: 52). She draws heavily on Williams's (2002) account of steadying the mind as a way of sorting through various mental states.

[E]ngagement in mutually reliant, and so mutually trustful, dialogue with others is the chief impetus for this process by which the mind becomes settled. This is because my interlocutor asks me a question, and given that I come to the exchange in the frame of mind of someone with an interest in ongoing trust with such an interlocutor (in due course she may be able to tell me something I need to know), then her question calls on me to ask myself how the world is in order that I may answer truthfully (Fricker 2007: 52).

Fricker's use of Williams is in line with feminist discussion about the collective nature of inquiry and knowledge. It is in a context of other knowers that we develop and exercise our epistemic agency.

Fricker goes on to argue that the sort of insult to one's epistemic agency that occurs as a result of testimonial injustice is a sort of epistemic objectification—it turns an epistemic agent

into an object rather than a subject.

But testimonial injustice—especially when it is systematic—also wrongfully deprives the subject of a certain fundamental sort of respect, and the distinction between a source of information and an informant helps reveal this deprivation as also a form of *objectification*. The subject is wrongfully excluded from the community of trusted informants, and this means that he is unable to be a participant in the sharing of knowledge (except in so far as he might be made use of as an object of knowledge through others using him as a source of information). He is thus demoted from subject to object, relegated from the role of active epistemic agent, and confined to the role of passive state of affairs from which knowledge might be gleaned. He is ousted from the role of participant in the co-operative exercise of the capacity for knowledge and recast in the role of passive bystander—a role in which, like objects, he is able to exercise no greater epistemic capacity than that of featuring in potentially informative states of affairs. The moment of testimonial injustice wrongfully denies someone their capacity as an informant, and in confining them to their entirely passive capacity as a source of information, it relegates them to the same epistemic status as a felled tree whose age one might glean from the number of rings. In short, testimonial injustice demotes the speaker from informant to source of information, from subject to object. This reveals the intrinsic harm of testimonial injustice as *epistemic objectification*: when a hearer undermines a speaker in her capacity as a giver of knowledge, the speaker is epistemically objectified (Fricker 2007: 132-133).

Fricker draws on a rich feminist literature on sexual objectification to generate an account of epistemic objectification (see Haslanger 1993, Langton 2000, 2009, MacKinnon 1989, Nussbaum 1995). Indeed, she notes that accounts of the former often include discussion of the latter. MacKinnon connects the sexual objectification of women to their silencing and indicts the Millian view on which any speech is good speech insofar as we seek to find truth and avoid error. “In a society of gender inequality, the speech of the powerful impresses its view upon the world, concealing the truth of powerlessness under a despairing acquiescence that provides the appearance of consent and makes protest inaudible as well as rare. Pornography can invent women because it has the power to make its vision into reality, which then passes, objectively, for truth” (MacKinnon 1989: 205).

The idea that women are invented by their objectification does not merely mean that they

are forced to be seen in some way that they are not—Fricker has a tendency to use this language even as she seems to resist it (see Fricker 2007: 53-55). Rather, it means that they are that way because they are constructed that way in the context of constrained options. In the sexual context, this may mean that women find objectification and even degradation arousing (see Langton 2009 and MacKinnon 1989). In the epistemic context, this may mean that women come to see themselves as degraded in their epistemic capacities. “A final twist is that, in some contexts, the prejudice operating against the speaker may have a self-fulfilling power, so that the subject of the injustice is socially *constituted* just as the stereotype depicts her (that's what she counts as socially), and/or she may be actually *caused* to resemble the prejudicial stereotype working against her (that's what she comes in some measure to be)” (Fricker 2007: 55).

This effect of epistemic objectification is captured in what Fricker calls the secondary harm of testimonial injustice. Whereas the primary harm was the affront to a person *qua* knower and reasoner, the secondary harm is that testimonial injustice may result in extrinsic epistemic setbacks—one may lose knowledge, confidence, or fail to develop intellectual virtues. Even in an isolated incident of testimonial injustice, the loss of confidence in one's belief may cause one to fail to satisfy the conditions for knowledge (Fricker 2007: 47). I may know that *p* in the classic sense: I am justified in believing that *p*, *p* is true, and I am not in a sort of Gettier situation with regard to *p*. But if my belief or confidence in *p* is undermined by someone failing to accept my testimony that *p*, I may cease to be justified to such an extent that I no longer know that *p*. Suppose I see an item that I believe appears to be blue. I assert that it is blue, but everyone else in the room says that it is green. If I trust the sincerity of these other people, I should begin to doubt my belief that it is blue, perhaps even believe that it is green, despite its appearance to me

(Sellars gives an example of this sort involving a necktie salesperson who learns to doubt his color perceptions [1997]). If it turns out that I live in a society where women are thought to have poor color recognition skills, however, then the others in the room who fail to accept my testimony may be wronging me in the way Fricker describes. I knew that the object was blue, my confidence in that belief was undermined, so I ceased to know that it was blue, but this confidence was undermined wrongfully in the case where this is the result of prejudice.

More dangerous are the effects of persistent testimonial injustice. Such a climate may result, not just in a loss of knowledge of specific propositions, but also in a loss of “confidence in [one’s] general intellectual abilities to such an extent that [one] is genuinely hindered in [one’s] educational or other intellectual development” (Fricker 2007: 47). Related to the loss of confidence in general is the failure to develop intellectual virtues as a result of testimonial injustice. “Most notably, for instance, loss of epistemic confidence is likely to inhibit the development of intellectual courage, the virtue of not backing down in one’s convictions too quickly in response to challenge” (Fricker 2007: 49). The loss of intellectual courage is not trivial and may have widespread impacts on a person’s epistemic life.

## **6.2. Fricker on Hermeneutical Injustice**

The second sort of epistemic injustice Fricker discusses is hermeneutical injustice. She spends considerably less time on it than she does on testimonial injustice, but in some ways it is the more insidious of the two types because it is often difficult to know when it is happening. It occurs when we lack the concepts to understand something, particularly when this is a result of power imbalance. The paradigm case of hermeneutical injustice is “a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (Fricker 2007: 151). For example, Fricker cites

extensively from Susan Brownmiller's memoir, *In Our Time*, in which Brownmiller offers the story of how a group of women shared their experiences with something for which there was no name at the time: sexual harassment (Fricker 2007: 150). The lack of the concept of sexual harassment meant that people who experienced it did not have the ability to understand or explain the wrong of harassment.

Consequently, a group's unequal hermeneutical participation will tend to show up in a localized manner in hermeneutical hotspots—locations in social life where the powerful have no interest in achieving a proper interpretation, perhaps indeed where they have a positive interest in sustaining the extant misinterpretation (such as that repeated sexual propositions in the workplace are never anything more than a form of 'flirting', and their uneasy rejection by the recipient only ever a matter of her 'lacking a sense of humour') (Fricker 2007: 152-153).

Other examples given by Fricker include marital rape, post-natal depression, and the effects of family obligations on the perception of women in the workplace (Fricker 2007: 155).

Hermeneutical injustice is a collective cognitive handicap, but the burdens of this handicap are unequally distributed (Fricker 2007: 151). Lacking a concept of sexual harassment was not a disadvantage for the sexual harassers in Brownmiller's stories. "By contrast, the harassee's cognitive disablement is seriously disadvantageous to her. The cognitive disablement prevents her from understanding a significant patch of her own experience: that is, a patch of experience which it is strongly in her interests to understand, for without that understanding she is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment" (Fricker 2007: 151). The problem, then, is not just that we all fail to know something we might know (as the truth goal might suggest), but that our collective inability to understand something serves to isolate and undermine some while confirming the appropriateness of an unjust world to others.

Let us say, then, that 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. [...] the primary harm of (the central case of) hermeneutical injustice concerns exclusion from the pooling of knowledge owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. [...] The wrongs involved in the two sorts of epistemic injustice, then, have a common epistemic significance running through them—prejudicial exclusion from the participation in the spread of knowledge (Fricker 2007: 162).

Though Fricker argues that the primary harm of both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice is in this sort of exclusion from the pool of knowers, which results in undermining one's epistemic selfhood, she claims that whereas testimonial injustice is an issue of interpersonal wrongs, hermeneutical injustice is a structural wrong. It has no perpetrator (Fricker 2007: 159, see also 168). Our collective understandings are not maintained by any particular individual—we cannot call up Webster to complain that the dictionary did not include a definition of sexual harassment in the past. As Jaggar notes, “Speaking requires a language but dominant vocabularies may lack the resources necessary to express perspectives of subordinated groups [...] Because language is essentially public, creating new vocabularies is necessarily a collective rather than an individual project” (2000b: 238). As in the case of testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice involves the secondary harms of potentially undermining knowledge claims, causing a lack of confidence, and generally discouraging development of intellectual virtues (Fricker 2007: 163).

## **7. Wrongs Reconsidered—Epistemic Community**

In this section I argue that a well-functioning epistemic community is epistemically valuable. I will re-cast the wrongs of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice in terms of thwarting of the goal of developing and maintaining such a community (see Anderson 2012 for another attempt to make Fricker's account less individualistic). Epistemic agents are not

atomistic individuals pursuing truth and eschewing falsity, but nor are they involved in a social pursuit in a merely game theoretical sense, attempting to make rational decisions about what to believe in a context of more and less reliable “players”. Rather, agents are partially constituted—formed—by their epistemic status in a community of people engaged in activity and inquiry. “Speech is a distinguishing characteristic of human beings and it is primarily through talking that we become members of a human community and acquire much of our most basic knowledge” (Jaggar 1995: 117). These epistemic communities can be better or worse in a number of ways. I use the terminology of “function”, but I do not mean to imply that epistemic communities have as natural or inevitable features what I am about to describe. I also do not mean to imply that epistemic communities are well-functioning most of the time and that departures from this norm are rare, as I might if I said that my toaster was malfunctioning. Indeed, our epistemic communities are more often than not poorly-functioning.

### **7.1. What Makes an Epistemic Community Well-Functioning?**

In this section I will give an account of three central features of a well-functioning epistemic community (WFEC). I do not claim that this is a complete account of WFECs; though each feature is necessary, they may not be jointly sufficient. A WFEC is: inclusive, nurturing, and oriented toward understanding and (re-)interpretation. I develop these features by examining poorly-functioning epistemic communities and feminist criticism of them. It might seem hasty to describe a WFEC without first exploring what an epistemic community is in general. I have in mind a very loose conception of epistemic community on which we are always a part of many overlapping epistemic communities at once and are also excluded—sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly—from many epistemic communities. The most familiar case of an epistemic

community is the scientific community, because it is a group of people spread across time and space who are nevertheless united in a commitment to inquiry (see Longino 1990). But there are also more fleeting and/or localized epistemic communities: *ad hoc* committees formed to investigate possible misconduct, study groups, consciousness-raising groups, families, internet forums and so on. All human communities are, in addition to whatever else they might be, epistemic communities.

### 7.1.1. Inclusion

A WFEC is inclusive, but not in the nominal, naïve sense that “everyone has a seat at the table”. This nominal sense of inclusion is misleading in two ways: (1) merely having a seat at the table does not guarantee inclusion, and (2) sometimes local exclusion actually contributes to general inclusion.

To the first point, the sort of inclusion I have in mind can be undermined in a number of ways. Iris Marion Young distinguishes between internal and external exclusion from democratic political discussions (Young 2000: 52). External exclusion involves intentional or unintentional exclusion of interested parties from discussion. Such exclusion can be *de jure*, like a situation in which only white men legally can run for political office, or *de facto*, like in a situation where only white men have the resources to run for office, though all are formally allowed the opportunity to do so. Internal exclusion occurs when groups or individuals have access to decision-making apparatus, yet fail to wield as much power as others.

Having obtained a presence in the public, citizens sometimes find that those still more powerful in the process exercise, often unconsciously, a new form of exclusion: others ignore or dismiss or patronize their statements and expressions. Though formally included in a forum or process, people may find that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not treated with equal respect. The dominant mood may find their ideas or modes of expression silly or simple, and not worthy of consideration.

They may find that their experiences as relevant to the issues under discussion are so different from others' in the public that their views are discounted. I call these familiar experiences *internal* exclusion, because they concern ways that people lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others even when they have access to fora and procedures of decision-making (Young 2000: 55).

A WFEC will attempt to avoid both external and internal exclusion by correcting for practices that exclude those who should be included.

To the second point, the goal of inclusion in general is sometimes best served by some exclusion. “[W]e must never forget that empirical discussions are always infused with power, which influences who is able to participate and who is excluded, who speaks and who listens, whose remarks are heard and whose dismissed, which topics are addressed and which are not, what is questioned and what is taken for granted, even whether a discussion takes place at all” (Jaggar 1998: 11). A WFEC does not seek a sort of naïve inclusion of all, the success of which depends on an ideal speech situation in which all participants are equally able to express concerns, be heard, arbitrate disputes, and so on. Rather, a WFEC recognizes that power differences situate each unequally with respect to others. As a result of this recognition, it may be appropriate to exclude some from an epistemic community temporarily or permanently, externally or internally. “[A]s mainstream practices and official institutions diversify and become progressively accessible to everybody equally, safe havens should be not only allowed but encouraged and protected, so that those who are still struggling to achieve equal status and to enjoy full agency within society can take refuge” (Medina 2013: 8).

Such exclusion allows discussion to proceed from shared assumptions that might have to be defended at length in a completely open epistemic community (Jaggar 1998: 13-14). As a result, such exclusive communities allow their members to explore and develop their thoughts

without the sorts of pressures they might face in a larger group. “Within the safety of her community, the dissenter may feel that finally she has the freedom to 'be herself.' She no longer has to be on guard or to dissemble. Finally, she is free to be 'authentic,' to say—and therefore discover—what she 'really' thinks” (Jaggar 1998: 14). This does not mean that the basic assumptions or decisions of exclusive groups is beyond reproach from outside the group (Jaggar 1998: 16-17). However, a WFEC must accept that exclusion is sometimes required.

As a result, saying that WFECs are “inclusive” may seem like a misnomer. But this seems less puzzling if one thinks of inclusion as a normative, rather than merely descriptive, concept. Exclusion for some may mean inclusion for others who would not otherwise be included. In this way limited exclusion can “be interpreted less as an attempt to limit the discursive autonomy of others than as a claim to discursive autonomy for themselves” (Jaggar 1998: 10).

### **7.1.2. Nurturance**

A WFEC is nurturing. While much of my conception of a WFEC draws on Jaggar's account of Feminist Practical Dialogue (FPD), this feature is especially reliant. These dialogues emphasize listening, understanding, and helping others in the context of a small community. Some epistemic communities can be combative, competitive, aggressive, or harsh (see Moulton 1983 for an account of philosophy as such a community). This emphasis on competition and aggression is often mistaken for a desire for dispassionate search for the truth. But this competition is likely to work counter to the goals of inclusion, since competitive and aggressive elements are likely to reinforce the same power structures that position people unequally in an epistemic community. A WFEC is not one in which members seek to impose their wills on other members, to simply overwhelm them, or to triumph over them. Rather, a WFEC seeks to nurture

members of the community in order to encourage, validate, and edify them. This does not mean that criticism or objections are disallowed—think of a parent's loving suggestions for improvement as an example of criticism that also involves nurturing. It does mean that criticisms and objections are made in the service of helping others and only when appropriate.

“[D]isagreement, indeed, is valuable insofar as it encourages speakers to reevaluate their accounts of their own experience. Thus, while FPD cannot countenance attempts to impose, rather than suggest, alternative ways of thinking about experience, it does recognize that sometimes it may be more nurturant and supportive to challenge than to accept a speaker's understanding even of her own life, for instance, if she is blaming herself for being the victim of assault” (Jaggar 1995: 134).

In describing feminist pedagogical practices, Jaggar notes that a sense of community in a classroom is not the outcome of discussion and mutual respect over the course of a term, but rather a precursor to it.

Especially noteworthy is feminist instructors' conscious concern with establishing a sense of community as a prerequisite to dialogue, despite the inevitable presence of inequalities. Working to establish such a sense of community requires feminists to recognize in practical ways that people are not simply “talking heads.” Thus, feminists attend not only to the explicit content of assertions made but also to the speaker's emotional and physical needs, providing not only an attentive ear but food, drink, haircuts, and hugs (Jaggar 1995: 123).

Though Jaggar focuses on feminist women engaged in dialogue, and though this sort of communication style is more commonly associated with women, nurturance is a feature of all well-functioning epistemic communities. As she notes, “There are epistemological as well as moral reasons to avoid intimidating, humiliating, and offending others. Frightened, humiliated, or affronted people are ill-prepared for moral reflection; they are likely to be either defensively

closed to alternative ways of thinking or so crushed that they cannot be critical” (Jaggar 1995: 135).

### 7.1.3. Understanding and (Re-)Interpretation

WFECs are interested in understanding the world, which involves interpretation and re-interpretation. Jonathan Kvanvig offers an account of understanding as a goal of inquiry.

“Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question” (Kvanvig 2003: 192). But of course this picture of understanding leaves out the questions of how we got the information we have, why we sought it rather than other information, how we piece it together, to what end, and so on. As Longino argues, background assumptions play a big role in how we interpret data.

Background beliefs or assumptions, then, are expressed in statements that are required in order to demonstrate the evidential import of a set of data to a hypothesis. As such, they both facilitate and constrain reasoning from one category of phenomena to another. [...] Evidential relations are not autonomous or eternal truths but are necessarily constituted in the context in which evidence is assessed [...] Both the Aristotelian and the Galilean are being rational when they defend their respective accounts of the swinging stone. What explains why it serves as evidence for different hypotheses is not that the two see it differently and in ways determined by those hypotheses in question but that they hold different background assumptions in light of which its evidential relevance is differently assessed. Once it is accepted that the evidential relation is always determined by background assumptions, then it is easy to see that there could be a neutral description of a given state of affairs, that is, one agreed to by both parties to a dispute, and no agreement on the hypotheses for which it is taken as evidence. (Longino 1990: 59-60).

The same set of data, in other words, means different things given different background assumptions. What is selected and what is ignored in observation may also depend on these assumptions. “Once we’ve noted that our experience of the world is already an interpretation of

it, we can begin to raise questions about the adequacy of our conceptual framework. Concepts help us organize phenomena; different concepts organize it in different ways” (Haslanger 2006: 17, see also Jaggar 1989).

All epistemic communities are involved in some kind of inquiry; this is part of what marks them as epistemic communities. As a result, all epistemic communities are engaged in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation. A WFEC is interested in interpretations and re-interpretations of the world that, at the very least, do not run counter to the previously discussed features. An interpretation of the world that requires the internal exclusion of some members, for example, is problematic. A WFEC will attempt to re-interpret the information or practices that lead to the exclusion. For example, if someone fails to see her own behavior as racist, this could be a failure of her interpretation of her actions, but possibly also a failure of the interpretive resources in her epistemic communities. It may be helpful, then, for members of her epistemic community to offer re-interpretations of her actions in an attempt to convince her that her behavior is racist, which may result in a better understanding of the world on her part, and may improve the interpretive resources of the community.

A variety of discursive strategies may be employed in persuading others to perceive things differently. They include telling 'counterstories' that highlight alternative features of situations, drawing attention to analogies with other situations, using language designed to arouse moral emotions such as disgust, pride, or shame, and encouraging imaginative identification with other people. Thus, feminist moral deliberation is typically hermeneutic, concerned to reinterpret experience and social reality (Jaggar 1990: 126-127).

Of course, this process of re-interpretation is never complete; interpretations of the world must always be revisable and defeasible.

In the above I have attempted to outline three features of what I call well-functioning

epistemic communities. To some degree I am relying on the reader to recognize that these are desirable features and that their absence constitutes a problem. The coming chapters also help to demonstrate the seriousness of our failure to have such epistemic communities. In the next section I argue that the wrongs of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices can be seen as violations of the value of developing and maintaining these communities.

## **7.2. Epistemic Injustice as Violation of a Well-Functioning Epistemic Community**

There are two parts to the value of a well-functioning epistemic community. There is epistemic value for the agent in being afforded respect and status in her epistemic community, and there is also epistemic value for the community in including agents within it. The latter might be cashed out in terms of truth-conduciveness. That is, one could be a truth monist about epistemic value but hold that well-functioning epistemic communities are instrumentally valuable in that they are the best way to generate true beliefs and debunk false beliefs in their members. While I think that this is true of well-functioning epistemic communities, I want to focus on the former value associated with these communities. The value of developing and maintaining such a community is not just that it generates the best balance of true beliefs over false beliefs, but also that doing so is inseparable from the value of being respected as an epistemic agent.

Recall Fricker's account of the primary harms of epistemic injustice. Both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice have as their primary harm, “prejudicial exclusion from the participation in the spread of knowledge” (Fricker 2007: 162) as a result of lack of respect for a knower, epistemic objectification, or interpretive disadvantage, depending on the case. I offer the following account not so much as a competing alternative, but as a supplement—another way of

framing these same concerns. Fricker is not inattentive to the role of community in epistemic injustice, but she does not focus on it. In focusing on the value of epistemic communities, we gain another way of making sense of epistemic injustice.

### **7.2.1. Testimonial Injustice**

Cases of testimonial injustice can often be understood as a failure of an epistemic community to be inclusive and/or nurturing. When they cause a person to be excluded from an epistemic community altogether, they are a form of external exclusion. For example, testimonial injustices might result in a person being denied acceptance to a PhD program, or excluded from a study or reading group because she does not seem smart or original enough. More common, though, are cases of testimonial injustice that serve to internally exclude people. Testimonial injustices owing to prejudicial stereotypes are part of what serve to make some members' ideas seem silly or off-base and others' sharp or on-point. Being at a disadvantage in terms of credibility makes it hard to influence others even when one has “a seat at the table”. Exclusion as a result of testimonial injustice degrades the status of a knower in her epistemic communities. Respect and status are social concepts, not individual concepts. That is, respect is a relation between individuals in the context of a community. Fricker describes the hurt of experiencing this degraded epistemic status as one that cuts to the core of being. Part of what accounts for the centrality of our epistemic status is that it enables us to engage in mutual exchange of knowledge and testimony. That is, epistemic community serves as a necessary backdrop for respect and status. Without a community, there could be no such things. As Collins argues, “People become human and empowered primarily in the context of a community, and only when they 'become seekers of the type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony' (p. 185). The

power of the word generally, and dialogues specifically, allows this to happen” (2000: 261—internal quotation from Molefi Asanti 1987).

Testimonial injustice is not an individual failure, or not only an individual failure. The sorts of testimonial injustice that issue from problematic stereotypes and prejudice are community failures because the concepts of race, class, sex, sexual orientation, ability, and so on are generated by and within those communities. When an epistemic community has as part of its concept (or, more accurately, its cluster of concepts) of race that white people are more credible than non-white people, this is an affront to the community's status as well-functioning because this concept precludes full inclusion.

Testimonial injustices may also result from an epistemic community and its members failing to be sufficiently nurturing. Fricker's secondary harms of testimonial injustice—the loss of knowledge, loss of confidence, and failure to develop intellectual virtues—are one result of an overly callous epistemic community. Such a community fails to develop in its members the sort of confidence required for full participation in the community, and, so, fails to treat them with due respect as epistemic agents. While in some cases this is intentional on the part of some individual, it may also be unintentional, as when testimonial injustice is paired with hermeneutical injustice. Someone may suffer a testimonial injustice when she is told that her understanding of an experience of sexual harassment is unwarranted, and she may suffer this testimonial injustice in part because of the lack of interpretive tools in her epistemic community. That is, a member of the community may judge her as less credible because he cannot understand the situation she is in. As a result, she may doubt her own experiences of her situation and come to see herself as less credible. A more nurturing community would encourage people to

take seriously the experiences of its members even when it lacks the conceptual resources to make sense of them (see Antony 1995).

WFECs often serve as a corrective for testimonial injustice. When a testimonial injustice occurs, a WFEC is better equipped to deal with it. Fricker explores at length the example of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, whose testimony is unjustly discounted as a result of his race. In explaining how Robinson might cope with this injustice, Fricker describes the role of a locally well-functioning epistemic community.

Williams's conception of identity allows us to see how the prejudice working against a speaker in a given discursive exchange may concern a category of social identity (racial, political, sexual, religious) that is *essential* to his identity, essential to who he is. Thus we now understand better how, when this is the case, the injustice cuts him to the quick. Not only does it undermine him in a capacity (the capacity for knowledge) that is essential to his value as a human being, it does so on grounds that discriminate against him in respect of some essential feature of him as a social being. Keeping one's dignity in the face of such a double assault on one's personhood can take great courage, especially if the assault is persistent and systematic. A character such as Tom Robinson may only be able to do it owing to the happily fragmentary nature of social identity taken as a whole. His membership of his own racial community means that an essential dimension of his identity will in part be forged through trustful conversation and other activities of reciprocated trust and respect within that community, in which he may find solidarity and shared resources for psychological resistance. [... T]he formation of such a community is itself a social achievement and not a social given (Fricker 2007: 54).

This case is fictional, but the claim here is borne out in myriad ways (see Collins 2000, hooks 1989). Jaggar (1995) gives many examples of this in her discussion of FPD. In many cases, the groups she discusses came together out of the need to remedy epistemic injustice, to say nothing of the political, moral, and social injustices they faced. Where mainstream epistemic communities—from health care to militarism to educational—failed to countenance the claims of women, feminist communities sprang up to validate and theorize the experiences of women. In so doing, these communities positioned themselves as alternative spaces in which epistemic

agents could continue to develop.

### **7.2.2. Hermeneutical Injustice**

Hermeneutical injustice may result from a failure of an epistemic community to offer the interpretive tools necessary for all members to flourish epistemically. The use of the term “offer” here is not meant to be too suggestive. It is not as if some member of the epistemic community ferrets away useful or subversive concepts so that no one can get at them. Rather, these concepts and interpretive tools have to be developed over time by members of the community, and various features of the community may have helped or hampered this process. A WFEC is one that encourages re-interpretation of phenomena. Hermeneutical injustices may also arise out of a failure to be inclusive or nurturing. The promotion of these features often rise and fall together.

For example, the lack of a concept of sexual harassment was, to be sure, a failure of the broader epistemic community to interpret and understand the experiences of women. It was also a failure of this epistemic community to be nurturing and to invite discussion and validation of these experiences. As in the case of testimonial injustice, WFECs serve as a corrective for hermeneutical injustice. Discussing the need for a community of Black scholars, bell hooks writes, “Coming together to talk with one another is an important act of resistance, a gesture that shows our interest and concern. It enables us to see that we are a collective, that we can be a community of resistance. Together we can clarify our understanding of black experience, of similarity and difference as they determine our social relations, while sharing ways we remain self-affirming and whole as we do our scholarly work” (hooks 1989: 71).

Most of the examples of hermeneutical injustice given by Fricker were remedied—to the extent that they have been and continue to be remedied—by consciousness-raising groups and

other local epistemic communities.

Finding something potentially authoritative to be absurd gives one critical courage; one hermeneutical rebellion inspires another. The sense of dissonance, then, is the starting point for both the critical thinking and the moral-intellectual courage that rebellion requires. That, I take it, is part of the mechanism of consciousness raising. Put a number of people together who have felt a certain dissonance about an area of social experience, and factor in that each of them will have a different profile of immunity and susceptibility to different authoritative discourses, and it is not surprising that the sense of dissonance can increase and become critically emboldened (Fricker 2007: 168).

Fricker makes much of the “identity-constructive power” of epistemic injustice (2007: 168). That is, the power it has to undermine one's sense of self as a knower in the context of a community of knowers, but it is also the case the community provides the best, perhaps only, corrective to this loss of selfhood. It is similarly required to counter objectification. “Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (hooks 1989: 131).

Because the features that help to define WFECs are necessarily social features, an epistemic community might be well-functioning with respect to some social groups and poorly-functioning with respect to others. An epistemic community might be inclusive, nurturing, and interested in understanding and re-interpreting the experiences of white women, but be inhospitable to Black women, for example. Considered in general, then, this community is poorly-functioning, but indexed to the smaller group it is well-functioning. As a result, it is commendable in some ways and should be criticized in others. This is unavoidable since epistemic communities are real and must operate under non-ideal conditions. This sort of incompleteness in being well-functioning can be better or worse. If the inability or unwillingness to include the experiences of some people comes out of prejudice or myopia, then the community should work to change. If it comes out of a need to be insular, if only temporarily, then it may be

unproblematic, as I noted in discussing the ways in which exclusion in general might foster inclusion for a localized group.

### **8. Does Epistemic 'Ought' Imply 'Can'?**

Having presented a general account of epistemic normativity and argued for the epistemic value of WFECs, I want to address a common objection to the general project of outlining what we epistemically ought to do. Because the deontic terms used in epistemic evaluation are isomorphic with the terms used in moral evaluation, it is tempting to think that they have all the same features. But in this section I suggest that claims about what we epistemically ought to do do not imply that we are able to do them, unlike the common view in ethics that 'ought' implies 'can'.

If we talk about what we epistemically ought to do, and particularly about what we ought to believe, do we thereby imply that we can do or believe those things? For example, if I say you epistemically ought to believe that there is a large green alien in the room with you right now, you might object to this claim about obligation that you cannot form such a belief (in part because there is not a large green alien in the room with you right now). Even if you wanted, for some reason, to form the belief, you probably could not. Beliefs of this sort are not under our voluntary control. Is this fact enough to show that you have no such epistemic obligation? In other words, does an epistemic ought imply can? Many people accept that 'ought' implies 'can' in ethics. If I cannot perform some action, then I cannot be obligated to perform that action. Perhaps the principle holds in epistemology as well. If it does, then one might worry that talk of what we epistemically ought to do is misguided (see Goldman 1999, Levy 2007, and Plantinga 1993). Feldman puts the argument this way ('deontological' here just means judgments making

use of the deontic concepts outlined earlier):

1. People do not have voluntary control over their beliefs.
2. If deontological judgments about beliefs are sometimes true, then people have voluntary control over their beliefs.
3. Deontological judgments about beliefs are not sometimes true (Feldman 2001: 79).

If this argument succeeds, then many of the suggestions in the following chapters will seem strange, since they often claim that we epistemically ought to do things (believe this, do not believe that) over which it is not clear we have voluntary control—this concern arises in particular with the suggestion in Chapter 4 that we ought to defer to the moral judgments of others, thereby taking on those beliefs, and the suggestion in Chapter 6 that we ought to ignore or believe against the evidence we have in some cases. Whole volumes could be written about this topic, but for present purposes, I just want to make plausible (rather than fully defend) the position that epistemic 'ought' does not imply 'can'.

Feldman (2001) rejects both 1 and 2 in his formulation of the argument, but I focus on 2 here (see also Frederick 2013 and Steup 2000, 2011 for other rejections of 1 and Chuard and Southwood 2009 for a different rejection of 2). That is, we can still make claims about epistemic obligations even if it turns out that we cannot reliably and consciously control which beliefs we form.

Zagzebski (2003) briefly addresses the question in a footnote:

But unless we are willing to say that no belief is impermissible, there must be some things we ought and ought not to believe, so the 'ought implies can' rule does not prohibit us from speaking of epistemic permissibility. I am not going to discuss the extent to which we can control each of our beliefs. My point is just that so long as we do think there are acts of belief that are impermissible, it follows that either we have whatever power over believing is intended in the 'ought implies can' rule or else the 'ought implies can' rule does not apply to these beliefs. In other words, I think the intuition that impermissibility applies in the realm of belief is stronger than the 'ought implies can' rule (Zagzebski 2003: 18-19—fn 23).

Zagzebski is right to remind us of the strength of our intuitions about epistemic evaluation. After all, we talk quite regularly in these evaluative terms, and, when we do, we are well-understood by others. The question, then, should not be whether epistemic 'ought' implies 'can', but rather what we mean when we make such claims.

Feldman (2001) notes that some oughts seem to arise out of certain roles—he calls them Role Oughts. Role Oughts are such that an inability to fulfill them does not remove their normative force.

Teachers ought to explain things clearly. Parents ought to take care of their kids. Cyclists ought to move in various ways. Incompetent teachers, incapable parents, and untrained cyclists may be unable to do what they ought to do. Similarly, I'd say, forming beliefs is something people do. That is, we form beliefs in response to our experiences of the world. Anyone engaged in this activity ought to do it right. In my view, what they ought to do is to follow their evidence (rather than their wishes or fears). I suggest that epistemic oughts are of this sort—they describe the right way to play a certain role. [...] Furthermore, it is plausible to say that the role of a believer is not one that we have any real choice about taking on. It differs in this way from the other roles mentioned. It is our plight to be believers. We ought to do it right. It doesn't matter that in some cases we are unable to do so (Feldman 2001: 87-88).

Of course, I disagree with Feldman that epistemic obligation begins and ends with following the evidence, as I argue in Chapter 6, but I agree with his general point here. Recall that the epistemic point of view is one on which we take the epistemic goal(s) to be primary for the purposes of evaluation. But we need not assume that those goals are attainable; they may be generally unattainable or unattainable in a more limited way on case by case bases.

To extend one of Feldman's examples, we have standards in evaluating teachers that make reference to certain educational goals. That a person is ill-equipped to achieve some of those goals does not mean that, *qua* teacher, she ought not do so. It just means that our evaluation of her will be rightly poor. If she is unable to explain long division, for example, it does not mean

that she is not required to do so, it means that she has failed to meet her obligations. Likewise, we have standards in evaluating knowers that make reference to certain epistemic goals.

Finally, it seems to me that part of what is mistaken about the objection that we cannot voluntarily form beliefs is the focus on the individual without reference to her epistemic communities. That is, it assumes from the beginning that epistemic obligations are always about individual agents. Instead, epistemic obligations may depend in large part on the make up of epistemic communities, and epistemic communities are part of what determines how well individual agents are able to fulfill their obligations. As I have argued, WFECs are epistemically valuable, and this value gives rise to certain epistemic obligations. In some cases, the very reason we are unable to meet our epistemic obligations is that our epistemic communities are poorly-functioning. If epistemic injustice is used as a methodological guide, then restricting our normative inquiry to individuals will not work because epistemic injustice involves structural problems in the broader context of epistemic community rather than just interpersonal epistemic inadequacy. For example, a poorly-functioning epistemic community might make its members such that they are unable to find women credible, but I think it is plausible that they still have an obligation to find them credible. Part of how we should make sense of this claim is by reference to the flaws in their epistemic communities. In evaluating them as epistemic agents, part of what we are evaluating is their very inability, so that inability is neither an excuse nor does it discharge their obligations.

## **9. Conclusion**

I have argued here that we can see epistemic injustice as issuing from a violation of the value of well-functioning epistemic communities. Well-functioning epistemic communities are

marked by their inclusion, nurturance, and interest in understanding and (re-)interpretation. The sort of respect, status, and selfhood Fricker argues epistemic injustice undermines is respect, status, and selfhood relative to some epistemic community or communities. If it is true that well-functioning epistemic communities are epistemically valuable, then a cluster of questions presents itself:

What set of norms lends itself to developing and maintaining well-functioning epistemic communities? In what ways are epistemic norms as presented in mainstream epistemology incompatible with the value of well-functioning epistemic communities? When various epistemic values are in conflict, if this occurs, how should this conflict be resolved? How should individual epistemic agents be guided by these norms?

In the following chapters, I provide partial answers to these questions by examining commonly-defended views of epistemic norms—that we should always believe on our evidence, that we can reason about morality alone or in isolated groups, that we should not defer on moral questions to others whose reasons we do not accept—and arguing that these norms sometimes come into conflict with or undermine attempts to develop and maintain well-functioning epistemic communities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Closed Epistemic Communities and the Obligation to Seek Moral Testimony

#### 1. Introduction

When should a moral agent seek the input of others on a moral issue? And from whom? Intuitively, there are at least some circumstances in which we ought to ask others for their thoughts on some moral issue. If we know very little about the issue, if we suspect we are overlooking some important aspect of the issue, or if we think someone else might be able to offer better arguments or reasons than those we have already considered, just to name a few possible considerations. And certainly we should not ask just anyone—we should ask people who can provide helpful insight.

#### 1.1. An Example—Susan and Abortion

Suppose that Susan sets out to develop a considered view on abortion. She thinks rigorously about the issue, consults and argues with trusted friends and elders, does extensive research into available literature on abortion, and comes to the conclusion that it is almost always morally wrong, setting aside questions about legal permissibility. At first we might think that Susan has done a good job of fulfilling her obligations as an epistemic agent investigating a moral issue. Whatever we think of her conclusion, she does everything we think a person epistemically ought to do in these circumstances.

But what if we find out that Susan lives in a relatively closed religious community? Her framework for thinking through moral issues is informed by her religious beliefs and texts, her

friends and elders share her religious commitments, and all of the literature available to her, while it considers opposing views, is written from the same religious perspective. Knowing this about Susan and her process of inquiry, we might now think that it is epistemically problematic. Her consideration of reasons and arguments might be flawless so far as it goes, yet it is objectionable for what it fails to consider in the first place and why it fails to consider those things.

In this initial case, we may think that Susan is not at fault for her oversight. Indeed, we may think that she does as well as she could have given the circumstances. However, if Susan comes to understand that she lives in a relatively closed epistemic community but still avoids intellectual interaction with people outside her community, we would think that she is epistemically blameworthy for doing so. We would probably think she is especially epistemically blameworthy if she both knows that she lives in a closed community and knows that her community is likely to have systematically distorted ways of evaluating moral issues, and she still fails to interact with people outside her community when she has a chance to do so. We might think she is *even more* epistemically blameworthy if the above is true of Susan, and she also has good reasons to believe that there are members of some specific communities with whom she might interact who are more likely than her and her fellow community members to have access to other, perhaps better reasons and arguments, and she refuses to interact with them while still thinking that her conclusions hold true in a timeless and universal way.

In other words, it seems to me (and I think it will seem to many) that Susan does her best in the case where she is in a relatively closed community with no chance to interact with others, but she does something seriously epistemically wrong when she becomes aware of the

limitations of her community and fails to attempt to remedy them.

## **1.2. Susan and the Rest of Us**

In this chapter I argue that moral agents—including and especially philosophers—are in the same limited epistemic position as Susan when they reason about many moral issues. Indeed, I will argue that each of us operates within relatively closed epistemic communities, avoids intellectual interaction with people outside our epistemic communities despite their limitations, and we have good reasons to believe others might have access to other, better sets of reasons and arguments. Because of this, I conclude that each of us has an epistemic obligation to seek out the moral testimony of others, especially those whose social positions make access to these other reasons and arguments more likely. This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first section I give an account of why we think Susan's epistemic position within a relatively closed epistemic community is problematic. Then I argue that all of us are in the same problematic position as Susan. Finally, I suggest what an epistemically responsible moral agent ought to do to remedy this problem—namely, solicit the input of members of certain other epistemic communities and seek out and develop well-functioning epistemic communities.

## **2. Epistemic Limitations of Closure**

I take it that most will agree that there is something amiss in Susan's case as described. Her reasoning process takes place in the context of a relatively closed community with limited epistemic resources, but she makes claims intended to be taken as universal (for example, that abortion is seriously morally wrong). In this section I provide an account of what makes such closure epistemically necessary before going on to note its limitations.

## 2.1. The Necessity of Closure

Some degree of closure is a necessary feature of epistemic communities. The accumulation of knowledge is slow and gradual—it builds on the past. This does not mean that no progress is made, but rather that it is made slowly. If we have some theory or hypothesis that seems to explain the data we have, then we suppose that the burden of proof lies with someone wishing to undermine it. We stick with what is established until we have reason to reject it. In general, this is a good way to maintain conceptual and communicative stability in an epistemic community. If hypotheses were rejected or accepted at random, or if there was no knowing what sort of background assumptions fellow community members were operating on, it would be impossible to cooperate with others in any sort of epistemic enterprise. We could not communicate with each other without shared points of reference and language. These shared points of reference often take the form of conventional wisdom, accepted methods of inquiry, preferred texts, and so on.

The shared reality bias is the tendency of individuals who interact frequently to converge in their perspectives on and judgments about the world (Hardin and Conley 2001). Such convergence helps people coordinate their expectations and behavior with respect to each other, reduces social conflict, and facilitates social bonding and cooperation toward common goals. It is epistemically useful for individuals engaged in joint inquiry, as it keeps them “on the same page” (Anderson 2012: 170).

I noted in Chapter 2 that closing an epistemic community to outside participation is often a valuable exercise. One reason is that such closure has especially positive effects for epistemically devalued groups. In consciousness-raising groups, for example, women became more sure of things over time—more sure that they were experiencing systematic harassment. In part, this was because they developed new ways of thinking about and interpreting their experiences; they developed coherent frameworks that challenged the existing ways of

understanding the world. This was a positive instance of the effect a closed group can have on its members' ways of understanding their experiences and the world because in every other epistemic community, their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions were devalued, explained away, and trivialized. Limiting the participation of some in a community, then, can bring to light new, better ways of thinking about moral (and non-moral) issues.

Closure is also epistemically valuable when it allows a community to bracket points of view, concerns, and arguments that would hinder the goals and methods of inquiry specific to a group. Longino defines cognitive communities such that they, by definition, share some goals and methods: “A cognitive community is any group bound by some set of common goals and shared public standards regulating critical (knowledge-productive) discourse and the stabilization of representations as knowledge” (Longino 2002: 145). Including committed sexists in a feminist group would hinder the group's goals, just as including Tarot card readers would hinder the scientific community's goals. They would continually have to justify the existence of the group and its concerns to hostile parties and would never make it on to talking about other things. Epistemic communities must be, as Anderson says, “on the same page” in at least some respects in order to make progress. Since epistemic communities benefit from closure in these ways, the question becomes: when is exclusion justified and on what grounds? I provide an answer to this question when it concerns moral inquiry in particular later in this chapter. Having claimed that some degree of closure is necessary for epistemic communities, I now highlight four limitations to which such closure gives rise. Each of the following factors is conceptually distinct, but they often come together, strengthen, and amplify one another.

## 2.2. Exposure to Limited Sorts of Experiences

Susan, like all of us, has only one life to live. As a result, she has only one set of personal experiences, though these experiences may be rich and multifarious, and she may operate in many overlapping epistemic communities. She can make inferences from her own experiences to the experiences of others, but this exercise may be unreliable. For example, if Susan's family is well-off financially, she may infer from her experience of having a financial safety net when she leaves the home (she can always call her parents for a little help if she needs it) that everyone has such a safety net. Or perhaps she simply does not consider the effect of this privilege on her understanding of other people who might be struggling financially. In addition, if her community is relatively closed and homogenous she will see many people around her having similar experiences, which seems to confirm the universality of those experiences.

Mitt Romney, in his unsuccessful bid for president, remarked that if people want to start a business or go to school but do not have the start-up funds, they should simply borrow money from their parents (*Politifact Texas* 2012: online). Of course, this seems like perfectly viable strategy for the millionaire son of a millionaire, but is less helpful for people who: have no parents or are estranged from them, have parents with fewer resources than the Romneys, have parents who will not lend them money because the children are gay or female or atheist, and so on. The social position Mitt Romney occupies blinds him to the experience of people in lower socio-economic classes and those with different social identities.

Return to the case of Susan and abortion. She may know very few, if any, women who have had or contemplated abortion. More likely, she may know several, but not realize this, particularly since the community stigmatizes abortion (indeed, this is true of many of us).

Anyone who might be contemplating it would likely keep it secret to avoid being ostracized and judged. This might be especially true if the whole series of events that results in a person contemplating abortion are, themselves, stigmatized in the community. Sex itself might be stigmatized, and contraception might be both stigmatized and unavailable. So if someone is in the position of considering an abortion in this community, she is also judged negatively for engaging in sexual activity, but perhaps also for being “reckless” or “irresponsible”. Susan might also live in a rural community, several hours away from any abortion provider, making abortion available only or chiefly to those with the resources (time, transportation, money) to access it. As Susan looks around at her community, then, she is unlikely to see many people whose stories and reasons to abort are available and salient to her. She may come to think that only irresponsible or selfish people consider abortion. She does not get the chance to empathize with the range of factors that lead to someone considering abortion nor is she able to see the structural factors in her community that contribute to this problem. She fails to see both of these things because her epistemic community is systematically limited by its closure.

### **2.3. Exposure to Limited Sorts of Reasons and Arguments**

Susan's search for clarity on the issue of abortion also runs into trouble because the pool of resources she is pulling from for reasons and arguments for and against abortion is itself skewed. If I were teaching an ethics class and I presented the strongest arguments on one side of an issue, but only strawperson arguments on the other side, I would expect my students to prefer the side with the stronger arguments because of the way the dialectic has been presented. But this sort of skew might happen in less nefarious ways. There might only be compelling arguments on one side of an issue because there are disincentives to develop compelling arguments on the

other side or because the people formulating arguments do not see how to develop other arguments. Even the understanding of such issues as having a finite and already-known set of “sides” is problematic. There might also be arguments that seem compelling to some and unconvincing to others because of the background assumptions of each person. Huemer makes this point about philosophers in particular:

I would not wish to be understood as claiming that reasons and evidence play no role in philosophical theorizing. But even if an individual accepts only those positions for which he can find plausible arguments, and accepts them on the basis of those arguments, non-rational biases may still play a decisive role in determining his belief system. To see why this is so, notice (a) that such biases may determine which positions one *looks for* arguments to support, (b) that there very often are plausible arguments for each of multiple competing theories, particularly in philosophy, and (c) that non-rational biases may affect how plausible one finds an argument. In view of points (b) and (c), a skilled philosopher who sets out looking for ways to defend a particular philosophical position will generally find some arguments that he will consider plausible (naturally, there are some limitations to this); thus, the decisive move is the one made right at the beginning, when one decides which theory to sympathetically investigate. And *that* move is typically more a result of bias than of arguments (Huemer 2005: 247).

Susan might read the classic duo of Marquis (1989) and Thomson (1971) on abortion and find that Marquis is more compelling than Thomson. Perhaps she thinks Marquis makes good points and she cannot see quite where the argument goes wrong. Thomson, on the other hand, might be a bit too libertarian for her tastes. Perhaps she thinks she would have an obligation to stay connected to the famous violinist, disagreeing with Thomson's intuition. She might be pulled one way or the other based on subtle effects of socialization; for example, the strength of the socialization of women to care for others, even at the expense of themselves.

In general, epistemic communities will favor certain sorts of reasons and arguments over others. This may be through some conscious effort to limit thought on the issue, but it is more likely the result of many complex factors. One such factor is that the conceptual resources to

generate certain reasons or arguments (or to undermine existing arguments) may simply be unavailable, as in the case of women attempting to explain the wrongness of sexual harassment before they had this concept to appeal to in doing so. As I discuss presently, there are pressures within the epistemic community toward conceptual conservatism, which disincentivizes re-interpretation of experiences like sexual harassment.

#### **2.4. The Epistemic Community Rewards Conformity and Confirmation**

Susan's epistemic community is conceptually, and in a general epistemic sense, conservative. This is not because the views of the members of the community are politically or morally conservative, but rather because there is a presumption toward keeping things the way they are. I noted above that every epistemic community must have this feature in order to continue functioning. This sort of epistemic conservatism is at once necessary and troubling.

It can be bad when these features maintain stability by rewarding epistemic conformity and inquiry that confirms settled beliefs and frameworks for understanding the world, particularly when this epistemic stability contributes to social injustice. For example, the first people complaining about sexual harassment were met with various forms of dismissal, rather than serious consideration. This did not happen because, or only because, men wanted sexual harassment to continue, but rather because the epistemic tendency toward conservatism struggled to make sense of the women's complaints. Confirmation of settled beliefs is secured in a similar way. If everyone in an epistemic community believes that the Earth is flat or at the center of the Universe, then the people challenging this view will be seen as eccentric, crazy, or stupid.

Although class societies are governed by a ruling system of ideas, they also contain some ideas that are subversive to that system: slaves perceive reality differently from the masters. As long as the society is relatively stable, however, subversive ideas will not be generally accepted or even understood; they will receive widespread consideration only

during a period of social upheaval. During times of relative stability, the dominant ideology is imposed in a number of ways. The most obvious of these ways involve the direct suppression of potentially subversive observations or theories. One effective means of doing this is by denying a voice to those classes from which such ideas are likely to emerge. Those classes are denied education and even literacy, and their ideas are labeled as superstition. By contrast, honors are heaped on those who invent theories that can be used to justify the status quo, and their ideas are popularized in the mass media (Jaggar 1983: 359).

The epistemic community is quick to assimilate theories, reasons, and arguments that confirm existing understandings of the world, and are quick to marginalize and reject those that challenge them. Susan's epistemic community has these features, so she is likely to find incentives to believe what everyone around her believes—that abortion is always seriously morally wrong—and the community is likely to ostracize those who question this view.

## **2.5. Ideological Constraints on Epistemic Legitimacy**

Related to the previous point, but distinct from it, all epistemic communities labor under the influence of *ideology*. It might seem controversial to say that *all* epistemic communities have this feature, but if systems like racism, sexism, classism, and so on can be seen as ideology (which I think they can), then it seems plausible that all epistemic communities have to deal with some sort of ideological effects, perhaps even if they are only exerting implicit influence. As Haslanger uses the term, “[ideology] is necessary for there to be any social coordination, both just and unjust” (2011: 181). As I will explain later, some epistemic communities are better equipped to minimize the negative effects of ideology on the epistemic system at large.

Of course, the term “ideology” has a contentious history of use. I am following Shelby's (2003) account here.

The particular beliefs we are interested in can be understood as any subset of the beliefs of the members of an historical era, geographical region, society, social strata, or social group that has the following features:

- a. The beliefs in the subset are widely shared by members in the relevant group; and within the group, and sometimes outside it, the beliefs are generally known to be widely held.
- b. The beliefs form, or are derived from, a *prima facie* coherent system of thought, which can be descriptive and/or normative.
- c. The beliefs are a part of, or shape, the general outlook and self-conception of many in the relevant group.
- d. The beliefs have a significant impact on social action and social institutions (Shelby 2003: 158).

These characteristics together mark what Shelby calls “forms of social consciousness”, of which ideology is one type (2003: 16). Susan's thinking about abortion is guided in part by her community's ideological commitments.

Ideology is the liquid in which we constantly stew. It may be more or less apparent to us, and more or less influential to us, but it is always there serving as an epistemic backdrop. Shelby notes that ideology has the epistemic function of shaping and limiting what and how we can know things.

Kai Nielson reminds us, “by presenting and inculcating a false or slanted *perspective* that arranges the facts in a misleading way, or fails to mention certain facts, or places them in an inconspicuous context.” Rather than being simply false, then, ideologies are typically more or less distorting or biased in some way. At least part of the reason that the defective nature of these belief systems often goes unrecognized is that the casual observations of everyday life seem to regularly confirm these beliefs. For example, racist ideology underwrites the widely held view that (most) black women who receive welfare support are poor because they are lazy, irresponsible, and promiscuous, and that they pass on—through their example and perhaps their genes—such tendencies to their children. Accordingly, poor blacks are not seen as deserving of public support but rather public contempt (Shelby 2003: 165).

Ideology, then, can have very serious consequences for the lives of individual people, and for the function and structure of social systems as a whole.

Susan's inquiry into abortion is constrained all along by the relevant ideological beliefs of her community, which might include the influence of racism, sexism, classism, religious

hierarchy, and the interplay between all of these. One effect of ideology on her inquiry is that she is likely to interpret experience *via* certain frameworks that reinforce the dominant view of the world, just as someone looking into welfare in a racist society might come to racist conclusions about Black welfare recipients.

### **3. Closure and Well-Functioning Epistemic Communities**

I have given some explanation of why we think Susan's inquiry in her closed epistemic community is likely to yield unreliable results when these results are intended to be universally applied. I now want to consider how these features of closed epistemic communities interact with the account of well-functioning epistemic communities (WFEC) that I have given previously. I will look at each feature of WFECs—inclusion, nurturance, and re-interpretation—in turn and argue that relatively closed communities may risk falling short in each area.

#### **3.1. Inclusion**

I have argued previously that WFECs are inclusive in both the internal and external senses described by Young (2000). The sort of relative closure I have described is a *prima facie* threat to this inclusion. This is not because of the basic point that any sort of closure will necessarily exclude some, but rather because closure will tend to place some unjustifiable restrictions on inclusion, both externally and internally.

Closed communities will tend to prevent inclusion of people who might contribute to the goals already held by the community and/or those who might criticize some of the community's goals or methods in productive ways. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) provides an account of the suppression of Black feminist thought that provides a helpful example. Collins catalogs some of the ways in which Black women and their intellectual labor have been excluded from

mainstream consideration:

Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews. Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship (Higginbotham 1989; Morton 1991; Collins 1998a, 95-123) (Collins 2000: 5).

The inclusion of Black women in the academy and other places with the status to confer intellectual merit and prestige on its members would have served those communities well in terms of, for example, having a better, more complete account of social experience, injustice, even public policy, and so on. That Black women were (and often still are) excluded in this way was orthogonal to many of the goals of the community, and its closure prevented inclusion of people with valuable input.

But Collins notes that, in other ways, the goals of Black feminist scholarship are, themselves, at odds with the goals and methods of the academy more generally.

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the *purpose* of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. In the United States, for example, African-American social and political thought analyzes institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it. Feminism advocates women's emancipation and empowerment, Marxist social thought aims for a more equitable society, while queer theory opposes heterosexism (Collins 2000: 9).

This observation helps to explain why it is good to have distinct epistemic communities pursuing distinct areas of inquiry. It also demonstrates the ways in which the goals and interests of different communities might be at odds with each other in some ways, yet serve as complements to each other when put into conversation. The intellectual work of Black women, feminists, Marxists, queer theorists, and others provides valuable insight to mainstream academic work, particularly if mainstream academic work purports to provide universally applicable theories (as the analytic tradition in ethics does). The relative closure of the academic community with respect to, for example, Black women rendered it poorly-functioning because it excluded from consideration (and discounted the seriousness of) the insights of people and whole other communities from which it might have benefited epistemically, whether through accessing contributions to the epistemic goals of the community or hearing criticisms that would improve the community.

Closed communities as I have described them can serve to maintain internal exclusion in similar ways. Recall that internal exclusion occurs when some members of a community fail to wield as much power as others. In the epistemic context, this often means that certain people are marginalized within the epistemic community, which might have the result that their views, experiences, and reasons may not be granted as much weight because they do not fit well with accepted ways of understanding the world. On this point, Collins also notes the many ways in which the work of Black women has been co-opted, depoliticized, distorted, and misunderstood even after gaining nominal acceptance within the academy, as well as the pressures on individual Black women who are included in the mainstream.

One way of excluding the majority of Black women from the knowledge validation

process is to permit a few Black women to acquire positions of authority in institutions that legitimate knowledge, and to encourage us to work within the taken-for-granted assumptions of Black female inferiority shared by the scholarly community and the culture at large. Those Black women who accept these assumptions are likely to be rewarded by their institutions. Those challenging the assumptions can be placed under surveillance and run the risk of being ostracized (Collins 2000: 254).

Epistemic communities must be aware of the epistemic benefits and limitations of closure and must be open to the possibility of the need to evaluate and re-evaluate their goals and methods as they relate to the broader goal of an inclusive epistemic community.

### **3.2. Nurturance**

The second definitive feature of a WFEC is that it nurtures its members. A closed epistemic community may or may not be nurturing. We could imagine a very nurturing version of Susan's community. As described, it does sound like she is nurtured in many ways. When she seeks information about abortion, she is engaged, she has access to material, people offer her their points of view. They encourage her to make use of her resources. We might think that part of what nurturing involves is encouraging people to explore all positions. But Susan's community might meet this requirement and still have a problem. The central problem in her case is that the resources themselves are limited in ways that skew the likely results of inquiry. It is partially because the available resources are so skewed that the community can afford to be nurturing to Susan's inquiry—indeed, it has some incentive to do so. Trying to outright prohibit people from investigating or thinking certain things (though certainly not unheard of) is likely to result in push-back and rebellion, but if it seems like all the available positions are considered and found lacking, then push-back is less likely.

We could imagine closed epistemic communities that fail to be nurturing in other ways. They might be harsh and require agreement. They might be overly competitive and prefer

triumph over the search for truth. Of course, this could be the case with any epistemic community; it is not a concern unique to closed communities.

### **3.3. (Re-)Interpretation**

The third feature that marks a WFEC is its interest in interpreting the world in ways that are conducive to inclusion and nurturance. In particular, WFECs encourage re-interpretation of social experience. Susan's closed community fails in this hermeneutic task. The community and its epistemic blinders set invisible limits on the range of interpretations considered appropriate. The background assumptions with which it provides its members work to perpetuate interpretations of phenomena that preserve the authority of the dominant narrative about, in this case, abortion. Susan's epistemic community does not provide her with, and discourages the development of, concepts that might give nuance to the issue. Such concepts or ways of framing the question would be too radical a disruption of the established assumptions, which include ways of understanding gender, sexuality, politics, and ethics

Closed epistemic communities are likely to fail to be well-functioning in just this way. The homogeneity of experiences represented in such communities places a natural limit on the kinds of interpretations likely to be considered adequate. By this I mean that the community will find it easier to accept some interpretations that conform to the common experience of the world.

Mitt Romney—in a completely separate campaign gaffe—said to a group of wealthy donors that 47 percent of Americans do not pay taxes and painted this group as, essentially, a moocher class who would vote for President Obama no matter what. Of this group he said, “I’ll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives” (*Mother Jones* 2012: online). Many on the left found this section of the secretly-taped speech

outrageous and started proclaiming that it was a death knell for the Romney campaign because it revealed the deeply in-egalitarian roots of Romney's thought processes. But the right, or at least some on the right, reacted differently. His statements were evidence that he “got it”; the speech spoke to their conception of the poor as “takers”. One Republican strategist claimed that the remarks had “captured conservative thinking” (O'Connell 2012: online). So the same statement meant two different things to these different groups, and, more importantly, signaled different basic assumptions and interpretations of the world. These settled assumptions make re-interpretation on both ends more difficult because one has to dig out the assumptions and question them before dealing with the specific incident.

If one were to sit down with Mitt Romney and try to convince him that what he said was wrong—rather than just “not elegantly stated”—one would have to unearth assumptions about the type of people who do not pay taxes, why those people do not pay taxes, the role of government, and so on. But this would probably have little effect, since the epistemic community made up of conservative politicians and pundits discourages re-interpretation of social phenomena in ways that challenge these assumptions, just as the epistemic community made up of liberal (or at least moderate if one hesitates to call this group “liberal” or “left”) politicians and pundits discourages the re-interpretation of phenomena. This is not to say that both groups are equally bad or that both interpretations are equally good, but just to point out the effect of group closure on the range of interpretations available. Again, this is partially due to a helpful feature of epistemic communities: they have to maintain some degree of stability so that people can interact with one another and have shared starting points. However, a well-functioning epistemic community should encourage challenges and disagreements, particularly when its

starting points may disadvantage some members' understanding of the world, as the assumption that the poor are irresponsible does.

#### **4. How are We All Like Susan?**

So far I have given a partial account of what seems problematic about Susan's closed epistemic community, and argued that such closed communities are unlikely to be WFECs, which I have previously argued are epistemically valuable. I appealed to the intuition in the beginning of this chapter that if Susan came to know that she was in such a community, with all its epistemic limitations, and if she knew that consulting specific people from outside her community would give her a more complete picture of the world, then she really ought to do so. It would be like a researcher trying to cure cancer who refuses to read the literature on existing research in her area. This does not mean she needs to countenance the views of everyone who has an opinion, but that she ought not ignore some in an unjustified or unprincipled way. People, like Susan and the rest of us, who are trying to sort out what we ought to do, what is right and wrong, how we should act, and so on, should not ignore information likely to help. This failing is primarily an epistemic one. Sometimes we have moral and epistemic obligations to seek information about what morality requires of us, just as Susan has an obligation to seek input from people outside of her community once she becomes convinced of its limitations.

##### **4.1. The Tendency Toward Closure**

We might look at Susan's situation with something like condescension or pity, but this is a mistake. Here I argue that all of us are in similarly closed epistemic communities when we try to reason about morality. Part of the reason for this is that being in a closed epistemic community is easier. It is nice to be around people who agree with you, at least on some things. Disagreeing

with others constantly is exasperating and tiring or worse.

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects; in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate (Bacon 1620: online).

While many of us like to think we enjoy a good discussion and debate—and undoubtedly many do—we also like to hear that people agree with us because it helps us confirm our intelligence and standing in the community.

#### 4.1.1. Confirmation Bias

One problem with this tendency is that we are all susceptible to *confirmation bias*.

Confirmation bias is “the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson 1998: 175). The term is used by most to refer to “unwitting molding of facts to fit hypotheses or beliefs” (Nickerson 1998: 175).

Confirmation bias can occur in many ways. Nickerson's (1998) literature review catalogs its many forms:

- “Restriction of attention to a favored hypothesis” (177);
- “Preferential treatment of evidence supporting existing beliefs” (178);
- “Looking only or primarily for positive cases” (178);
- “Overweighting positive confirmatory instances” (180);
- “Seeing what one is looking for” (181);
- The Primacy Effect – the tendency to overweight information acquired earlier in a process of inquiry (187); and
- Overconfidence in one's own accuracy (188).

Each of these factors can occur independently or in concert to produce the effect. Marks and Fraley (2006) did research to see whether people would be more likely to recall information that conformed to the sexual double standard (that men are rewarded for sexual activity and women

derogated). “[P]eople's belief in the sexual double standard may lead them to be vigilant to information consistent with the double standard. If this is the case, a cycle may occur such that people notice information that corroborates a double standard, which solidifies their belief in its existence, thereby making it all the more likely that they will continue to notice information that corroborates the double standard” (Marks and Fraley 2006: 23-24).

Hill et al (2008) found that subjects primed to suspect someone of being guilty (in this case, of cheating on a task) were more likely to ask questions that presupposed the person's guilt than subjects primed for innocence. They also found that people who were asked questions that presumed their guilt seemed to act in a way that suggested their guilt: by acting nervous and defensive, for example (Hill et al 2008: 369).

Another notable finding in the third experiment was that when innocent suspects responded to guilt-presumptive questions, the self-fulfilling prophecy was even more pronounced indicating that some aspect of the verbal response was perceived as indicative of guilt. [...] These findings are particularly concerning given that independent observers were just so confident in their judgments of guilt/innocence, regardless of whether the suspect was actually guilty or innocent. In other words, erroneous judgments of guilt were made with confidence (Hill et al 2008: 369).

In other words, the presumption of guilt had powerful effects on the investigator, the subject, and independent observers: the investigator was more likely to search for indications of guilt, the subject was more likely to display indications of guilt, and observers were more confident in their judgments of guilt.

When most people think about confirmation bias, they think about the effect it has on an individual's beliefs and her likelihood of error. But I want to bring out a different element of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias will lead us to seek out closed epistemic communities. This is part of what it means in the real world (as contrasted with the laboratory setting) to seek out

and interpret evidence. If we tend to seek evidence that confirms our existing views, and interpret evidence to confirm already held hypotheses, then we will do this by finding people who agree with us, whether that means looking only at certain news outlets, going out with certain people and not others, moving to a certain city or neighborhood, going to one school rather than another, taking this job rather than that one, and so on. It is worth noting that confirmation bias might lead us to seek not only people who agree with us, but people who disagree with us in certain ways that also confirm our views. So I might listen to Rush Limbaugh just to confirm my view that he—and by extension the positions he advocates—is crazy, extreme, dangerous, and so on. Merely seeking out someone who disagrees is not enough to counteract the bias. I say more about which kind of people we ought to seek out, and how, later in the chapter.

#### **4.1.2. Confirmation Bias and Group Selection**

Because of the powerful effect of confirmation bias (and many other factors, to be sure), we are likely to seek like-minded people to engage in conversation and debate. But this means our understanding of the range of positions, the best and worst arguments, and so on, will be shaped within a relatively homogenous epistemic community. Schkade et al (2006) did research to see what would happen to people's views if they spent time interacting with like-minded people.

[C]itizens from two cities in Colorado were assembled into five-person groups and asked to deliberate on three of the most contested issues of the time: global warming, affirmative action, and civil unions for same-sex couples. The two cities were Boulder, known to be predominantly liberal, and Colorado Springs, known to be predominantly conservative. Citizens were asked to record their views individually and anonymously; to deliberate together and to reach, if possible, a group decision; and then to record their postdeliberation views individually and anonymously. What happens on Deliberation Day? The basic answers are simple. First, the groups from Boulder became even more

liberal on all three issues; the groups from Colorado Springs became even more conservative. Deliberation thus increased extremism. Second, every group showed increased consensus, and decreased diversity, in the attitudes of their members. Many of the groups showed substantial heterogeneity before they started to deliberate; as a result of a brief period of discussion, group members showed much more agreement, even in the anonymous expression of their private views. Third, deliberation sharply increased the differences between the views of the largely liberal citizens of Boulder and the largely conservative citizens of Colorado Springs. Before deliberation began, there was considerable overlap between many individuals in the two different cities. After deliberation, the overlap was much smaller (Schkade et al 2006: 2-3).

If one is a member of some relatively closed epistemic community, even for a short period of time, one's views are likely to get more extreme (where extreme does not necessarily have a negative connotation—if one's views get more extreme in the direction of being correct, for example) (see also Sunstein and Hastie 2008). Sunstein (one of the other researchers in Schkade et al 2006) gives one reason for this increasing extremism, which I have already touched on in discussing Susan: “The more interesting reason involves the exchange of information. In conservative groups, for example, people tend to offer a number of arguments against affirmative action, and very few arguments in favor of it. Group members learn from what they hear. Having heard the set of arguments in their group, people become more confident, more unified and more extreme” (Sunstein 2012: online). Confirmation bias makes us likely to seek out closed communities where we are more likely to hear positions that support our own, and members of these communities have the tendency to become more calcified in their beliefs as time goes on.

#### **4.2. Philosophical Method Encourages Closure**

So far I have argued that individuals are likely to suffer from confirmation bias, that this bias encourages each of us to seek out relatively closed epistemic communities, and that these communities tend to discourage non-confirming thought. Philosophers often see themselves as bastions against bias, clear-thinkers who can overcome common biases with reason and

evidence. “Most of the dominant voices in Western ethics have sought to transcend the changing world of the senses and the contingencies of historical situations by pursuing timeless and universal moral truths through practices of moral reason that have also been conceptualized as timeless and universal” (Jaggar 2000a: 457-458). Here I argue that the combination of closed epistemic communities and claims to timeless, universal truth is problematic.

#### **4.2.1. The Impartial Point of View**

The dominant method of moral reasoning in contemporary analytic philosophy is characterized by a desire to inhabit an impartial point of view. Particular humans have biases that make reasoning about morality difficult. Prudential concerns, family ties, religious affiliations, and so on pull us in one direction or another. The concern is that these biases will stand in the way of discovering what is really right, wrong, good, praiseworthy, and so on. These biases might not be right on the surface; they could operate implicitly, so that it is not obvious to me that they are influencing my decision. The goal of philosophical method is to discover moral principles and derive from them moral judgments that are not infected inappropriately by these persistent biases. In classrooms, departmental colloquia, and in scholarly articles, the method is put into practice *via* a familiar offering of analogies, principles, counter-examples, refinements, distinctions, and objections. Exposed to the process of critical reasoning, moral principles will be made better or abandoned, and intuitions about particular cases are defended and questioned.

It is often assumed that moral reasoning should be done primarily by the individual. Supposing that we had determined the correct impartial theory, any individual could go out in the world and apply it to any given situation as long as they know the relevant non-moral facts. If act utilitarianism is true, then each individual agent performs utility calculations and finds the

optimific outcome. If Kantian deontology is true, then the agent acts in accordance with the categorical imperative. Individual moral agents are the main site of moral action and reasoning. Rawls supposes that a single person, putting herself in the original position, can know what principles all other people would agree to under fair conditions (Rawls 1971: 52).

#### **4.2.2. Pushing Our Armchairs Together**

The process of developing these principles is highly individualistic. It is supposed that any philosopher, suitably trained and attentive to her moral sense, could embark on the path of discovering such a principle. This is certainly how most moral theories have been developed, and this is considered unproblematic. The canonical texts in contemporary moral theory all use this method: Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* and *On What Matters*, Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other*, Ross' *The Right and the Good*, Sidgwick's *Method of Ethics*, and Rawl's *Theory of Justice*. These are all wonderful and impressive works in their own ways, but the authors all proceed by assuming they have the ability and authority to discover moral truth on their own.

There is a stronger and a weaker version of the claim. The stronger version holds that a single individual could engage in moral reasoning on her own and reach a correct and complete account of morality if she followed the correct method. This would be analogous to the Cartesian project in traditional epistemology, in which any one person can reason to the indubitable truth of substantive claims—I, the external world, and God exist, for example. There is simply no need for interaction with others if one has this view. It may be that many ethicists would be willing to accept this strong claim that ethics can be done by an individual, at least in principle.

But one might object that moral reasoning often takes place via a process of argument

and engagement with interlocutors, though a single individual typically authors the end product. Discussing ethics with other philosophers, friends, and students can often help clarify our thinking about moral issues. Sometimes others think of objections or suggestions that had not occurred to us. We routinely share drafts of our papers with others for comment, and the whole of Western ethics has built on past works. Certainly one only needs to look at the long list of acknowledgments in a book like Parfit's *On What Matters* (among many others) to see that philosophy is, in fact, a group activity. So one might see academic philosophy as a group endeavor in these ways, despite its seemingly individualistic commitments. The weaker version that moral claims can be justified on the basis of deliberation, careful thought, and argument, typically in conversation with other philosophers, students, mentors, and friends, then, is a more accurate picture of moral reasoning within contemporary analytic ethics. It is not individualistic in the strict sense; it requires or at least advises some interaction with others. But who are the others with whom it requires or advises interaction? Primarily philosophers.

#### **4.2.3 The Epistemic Communities of Philosophers**

Suppose that Saul, a philosophy graduate student, sets out to develop a considered view on abortion. He thinks rigorously about the issue, consults and argues with fellow graduate students, trusted colleagues, and professors, does extensive research into available literature on abortion, he attends conferences and colloquia, he writes a dissertation on the topic, and comes to the conclusion that it is almost always morally wrong.

Whatever we think of his conclusion, he seems to have done everything currently accepted philosophical practice prescribes. We may think he is mistaken about his substantive views without being epistemically blameworthy, just like we thought Susan had done everything

she ought to do. But like Susan, Saul has conducted his inquiry in a relatively closed epistemic community—academic philosophy. Like Susan, he may be missing out on the insight provided by diverse experiences and counter-arguments, he may fail to appreciate or notice certain moral considerations, and some of his views might be driven by ideology and conformity to commonly-held views. Finally, like Susan, once he realizes that he has conducted his inquiry in a closed epistemic community, he would be doing something epistemically wrong or blameworthy in failing to consult members of other epistemic communities as he continues to engage in moral thought.

Why should we think that academic philosophy is a closed epistemic community in the same way that Susan's religious community is closed? We should think this because the philosophical community has the same problematic features that Susan's community did, though in different ways and to different degrees: members of the community have been exposed to limited sorts of experiences, reasons, and arguments, their epistemic community rewards a certain amount of conformity to and confirmation of existing beliefs, and there are ideological constraints on epistemic legitimacy.

Academic philosophers in the West have at least these things in common in virtue of their being academic philosophers in the West: they are highly educated, they stand in some relation to the academy (though these relationships vary quite dramatically from student to full professor to adjunct to post-doc), and they have certain credentials and affiliations which carry varying levels of status. But there are also contingent features of academic philosophers. They are more often than not male, white, middle- or upper-class, straight, and able-bodied, for example. These contingent characteristics also have an increasing positive correlation with positions of power

within academic philosophy—as one looks farther up the hierarchy, some particular person is more likely to have those characteristics. Even today only about 30% of the PhDs awarded in Philosophy go to women, the lowest of any non-science discipline (Healy 2011: online), and women make up just fewer than 17% of the full-time teaching pool (Leiter 2011: online). In addition to their contingent social characteristics, there are also contingent academic characteristics: they will tend to have a similar knowledge base, they will have read many of the same texts, they interact primarily with each other, they identify with specific intellectual traditions, and so on.

What this relative social and academic homogeneity means is that philosophers have a large, common set of experiences and a high likelihood of sharing other experiences. They all have the experience of being a student, of writing a paper, of teaching a class. They are more likely than not (by a large amount) to have the experience of class and race privilege. This does not mean that the group of academic philosophers taken as a whole does not contain a wealth of diverse experiences and insights—no doubt it does. But the point here is to note what members of the group *philosophers* have in common so that we can go on to see how these commonalities, whether necessary or contingent, might affect, shape, limit, and expand the set of personal and group experiences they have to draw on. For example, every academic philosopher must have been a pretty good student (to get good enough grades and test scores, to gain admission to graduate school, to successfully graduate, to get a job, to publish, and so on). But this means that they may struggle to understand the experience of students who are not as good, for whatever reason, and may be less able to help those students learn, which is troubling given that research is typically tied to teaching duties. This is just one example meant to bring out the effect of the

commonalities described.

Similar problems exist for the contingent social commonalities. That most philosophers, particularly historically, but also today, have been men has had a non-trivial impact on the subject matter of philosophy. It has tended to ignore issues of special importance to women like child-rearing or domestic violence (see Jaggar 2000a) or to ignore the experiences and insight of women on issues it does consider more, like abortion. Just as Susan's limited exposure to abortion causes her to overlook or underestimate elements of the problem, philosophers' limited exposure to abortion—and especially to theorizing on abortion that takes gender justice into account—causes them to do the same. To the extent that this is becoming less common, this is due to the increasing presence and input of female philosophers, which strengthens rather than undermines the claim about philosophy as a closed epistemic community. It may be less closed, more open to change than Susan's community, but that does not mean that it is always so or that it is not still mostly closed.

I will make a similar point about the philosophical community's exposure to limited sorts of reasons and arguments now. How could philosophy, of all things, suffer from this problem? After all, everyone is familiar with Cicero's claim: *nihil tam absurdum dici potest ut non dicatur a philosopho*; there is nothing so absurd but it may be said by a philosopher (Stone 2005: 72)! Surely philosophers, if anything, have the opposite problem: they are willing to entertain all sorts of arguments, even when they are thought crazy for doing so. Their positions run the gamut, they leave no stone unturned, they bite bullets if necessary, and so on. Even when they lack diversity of experiences, they pride themselves on having a diversity of positions represented. But this diversity is still within a set of fairly narrow constraints on standards of argument, what is

considered worth discussing, how reasons are weighed against each other.

Moral philosophy's customary focus on action-guiding rules and principles, on choice and decision, on universality and impartiality, and on obligation and right action have masked the importance of moral perception to a full and adequate account of moral agency. Yet although an agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation, unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation may be for naught (Blum 1994: 30).

Philosophers tend to use (and discount) the same sorts of arguments and reasons even on very different questions. For example, there are reductive arguments, arguments that point out ambiguities or equivocations, and the same distinctions (e.g. internalism/externalism) pop up in every area. This occurs in part because philosophers rely on a limited pool of texts and a specific intellectual tradition. In some cases, the array of positions under consideration today for particular philosophical problems is the same as those under consideration by the Ancient Greek philosophers (e.g. theories of political legitimacy or the connection between body and mind). Having a relatively limited set of argumentative tropes makes resistance to challenges much easier, particularly when the challenges question the legitimacy of this range.

If a consideration is raised that falls outside of the accepted range, it is often dismissed as “not philosophy” or, in ethics, “not a moral consideration”. Sometimes these claims are true and the consideration raised would be better suited to attention by another discipline, but sometimes these claims represent a more insidious (but not necessarily intentional) act of intellectual gatekeeping. This is similar to the limitation on Susan's community: only certain kinds of arguments are heard and rehearsed, only certain texts are appealed to, and only some people are asked for input.

This gatekeeping also occurs via the process of confirmation of and conformity to

existing beliefs. Philosophy is epistemically conservative. The orthodox views are well-understood and even those who think they are incorrect recognize that they are academically viable positions to hold. For example, a utilitarian may think that philosophers who defend deontology are incorrect, but still welcome them as a valuable contributor to the discipline. In this way, already established positions have a certain epistemic legitimacy to them. If one wants to defend a view that is dissimilar to the established positions, or if one presents a consideration that is unintelligible to most others in the field, she faces a steep uphill battle. In practical terms, this means that people defending orthodox views have it easier in the academy (getting advisors, graduating, getting jobs, being published) than those who challenge them. This is especially problematic given the relative homogeneity of philosophy—they might dismiss as generally unintelligible problems that are unintelligible *to them*. In at least this way, the philosophical community rewards conformity to the existing views and to an affirmation that those views and considerations are the ones that matter.

Like Susan's community, the philosophical community will have trouble understanding challenges to its views. This is partly a feature of the interpretive limitations of any conceptual framework. We must necessarily commit to some language and some assumptions, and the conceptual resources available might be inadequate to understand, or might distort, the range of phenomena we would like to understand. Epistemic conservatism makes the move from this initial unintelligibility to rejection or dismissal. Just as Susan's epistemic community finds things that confirm their widely-held view about abortion to be more plausible than things that do not, Saul's epistemic community may do the same thing. In the case of the philosophical community this might occur in different ways, of course. Philosophers might entertain more arguments on

abortion, and Saul's substantive view might be in the minority, unlike Susan's. However, to the extent that the range of acceptable arguments is limited and Saul's view falls into this range, his defense of the view tends to confirm that the existing range exhausts the possibility space. In general, this is perhaps the most common way in which the philosophical epistemic community polices its borders: by thinking it has already discovered a set of natural borders dividing philosophy from not-philosophy.

The fourth problematic feature of Susan's epistemic community was the effect of ideology in constraining the community's view of epistemic legitimacy. Of course, philosophers labor under the effects of various ideologies: racism, sexism, classism, and so on. But I want to follow Rebecca Kukla in noting that the presumption that we can and do access an impartial point of view is itself ideology, which has serious epistemic implications. “[A]perspectivalism itself is not a 'politically neutral' option in epistemology; rather, it is a piece of ideology, fueled by a history of specific interests and usually accepted without any argument or critical interrogation” (Kukla 2006: 82-83).

Feminist philosophers have routinely criticized the impartial point of view in epistemology in general, and especially in moral epistemology (see Haslanger 1993, Jaggar 1983, 2000a, 2000b, Kukla 2006, Langton 2000, 2009).

[Western moral philosophy] has invoked ideals of rationality, universality, impersonality, detachment, dispassion, neutrality, and transcendence, and it has aspired to evaluate actions and practices from a postulated “moral point of view” often explicated metaphorically in terms such as a god’s-eye view, the perspective of an ideal observer or an archangel, an Archimedean point, or a view from nowhere. [...] Many of these recommendations have required that moral agents put themselves in the places of others or reverse perspectives with them, and several feminists have challenged such prescriptions on the grounds that they not only misrepresent empirical processes of moral thinking but are also epistemically incoherent, mystifying, and indeed authoritarian (Jaggar 2000). Any method of moral reasoning that requires moral agents to think from

others' perspectives is impossible in principle, because individuals' perceptions, values, and modes of reasoning, their understanding of their own and others' needs and interests, even their constructions of moral situations, vary both individually and systematically according to their particular social experiences and locations. Although such thought experiments may have rough-and-ready heuristic value, they cannot enable anyone, not even a philosopher, to attain a universal moral standpoint that entirely transcends the particularities of his or her socially located perspective. Pretensions to think from all perspectives are no more than disingenuous rhetorical devices that philosophers utilize to claim unwarranted false authority for their own opinions (Jaggar 2000a: 461-462).

In addition to elitism and covert authoritarianism, it is also troubling that many recommend philosophical methods of attaining an impartial point of view that do not fit with what we know about cognitive and social psychology.

For example, even when we know about biases and how they affect judgment, we think we are immune to them (Pronin et al 2002). “The results of our three studies suggest that knowledge of particular biases in human judgment and inference, and the ability to recognize the impact of those biases on others, neither prevents one from succumbing nor makes one aware of having done so” (Pronin et al 2002: 378). Pronin and Kugler (2006) found that one source of the bias blind spot was people's tendency to trust their own introspective accuracy and doubt the introspective accuracy of others. Furthermore, West et al (2012) found that the bias blind spot described by Pronin et al (2002) was not attenuated by cognitive ability. That is, one is not less susceptible to bias if one is smarter. Indeed, one may be more susceptible.

We found that none of these bias blind spot effects displayed a negative correlation with measures of cognitive ability (SAT total, CRT) or with measures of thinking dispositions (need for cognition, actively open-minded thinking) If anything, the correlations went in the other direction. We explored the obvious explanation for the indications of a positive correlation between cognitive ability and the magnitude of the bias blind spot in our data. That explanation is the not unreasonable one that more cognitively sophisticated people might indeed show lower cognitive biases—so that it would be correct for them to view themselves as less biased than their peers. However, [...] we found very little evidence that these classic biases were attenuated by cognitive ability. More intelligent people were not actually less biased—a finding that would have justified their displaying a larger

bias blind spot (West et al 2012: 9-10).

Uhlmann and Cohen (2007) also found that when subjects are primed for their own objectivity, they are more likely to express bias (for example, gender bias) (see also Merritt et al 2010, Monin and Miller 2001). So a philosophical methodology that relies on the ability of intelligent, well-intentioned people to recognize and overcome their biases through mental effort alone stands on shaky empirical ground.

Saul's philosophical epistemic community is closed in the same way that Susan's religious epistemic community is closed. Its members have access to a limited set of experiences, arguments, and reasons. The community values conformity and confirmation, and it is governed methodologically by the ideological, empirically questionable claim that impartiality can be attained through individual effort. Saul's problem, then, is that he has conducted his inquiry into the morality of abortion in an closed epistemic community even while taking his inquiry to be comprehensive and his conclusions universal. Saul's epistemic community is closed in ways different from the ways Susan's epistemic community is closed, but closure presents the same general epistemic problems. Saul is likely to have missed out on or discounted relevant arguments and experiences and he is likely to believe things regardless of their truth, just as Susan did. In the next section I explain why the fact that Susan and Saul were engaged in moral inquiry, in particular, makes this closure especially problematic.

### **4.3. The Incompleteness of Moral Perception**

In the previous section I argued that confirmation bias will lead us to seek out relatively closed epistemic communities and that philosophical method as currently understood not only does not overcome this tendency, it reinforces it. In this section I argue that each of our skills and

angles of moral perception differs, and this makes more acute the epistemic problems of closure.

Is the well-intentioned moral agent in a position to access all the moral considerations that might be relevant to her inquiry (as many philosophers have assumed in their own work)? No. The dominant metaphor in philosophy's discussion of this question is perception. So just as two differently situated people will notice and assign differing values to things in their respective visual fields, two differently situated people will notice and assign differing values to things in their respective moral fields. This metaphor is not without problems, but it serves a rough heuristic value.

Blum gives a number of instructive examples of how this difference in moral perception may manifest itself. One example involves a white man, Tim, who is waiting for a cab.

Waiting near him are a black woman and her daughter. A cab comes by, passes the woman and her daughter, and stops in front of Tim, who, with relief, gets in the cab. Tim's relief at having secured a cab might block him from his full awareness the cab driver's having ignored the black mother and child in favor of him. Salient in Tim's perception might simply be the presence of the cab. But suppose that once in the cab Tim, idly ruminating, puts the pieces of the situation together as having intentionally passed up the woman and child. Suppose he also infers that the driver did this out of racism—because he just prefers not to have blacks in the cab, or does not want to go into the sort of neighborhood where he imagines the woman will ask him to go. (Although these are morally distinct reasons, both involve racism, perhaps in different ways.) Whether Tim is correct in this inference is not so important to my current purposes as whether the inference is a plausible one, which I am assuming it to be. This perception of racism now becomes Tim's “take” on the situation. He now sees in the situation an issue of injustice he did not at first see (Blum 1994: 36).

What distinguishes two possibilities for Tim—one in which he sees the cab driver's decision as racist and one in which he does not—is his moral perception. Many things can affect what we notice in a situation. If Tim had just come from a talk on implicit racial bias or a discussion with a friend about racism, he might be more likely to notice the cab driver's actions and more likely to infer racist intentions. If he had just left a tough meeting with his boss or a fight with his

partner, he might be so absorbed in his own anxiety and fear that he would not notice or infer racist intentions.

These factors can be incidental—it is a matter of chance whether we have just had a fight or a gender studies class or watched a funny movie. But there are at least two sorts of non-incident factors that can affect our moral perception in systematic ways: (1) social location and (2) intentional cultivation of one's moral perception. I discuss each of these factors now.

#### **4.3.1. Social Location and Moral Perception**

Standpoint theorists have advanced the claims that knowledge is socially situated and that some social positions are more conducive to truth in some domains than others (see Collins 2000, Harding 1991, Jaggar 1983, Wylie 2004). Here I want to make plausible the claim that social location or position has systematic effects (both positive and negative) on moral perception in particular domains.

Consider again Blum's example of Tim and the taxi. The likelihood that Tim's "take" on the cab driver's intentions includes a perception of racism might vary systematically according to Tim's own race. Suppose that Tim is Pakistani and experiences persistent racism as a result of this. Racism as a general feature of life is more prevalent for him than it is likely to be for Tim, the white man. Because of this prevalence, racism presents itself more readily as a plausible explanation for the cab driver's actions.

This effect is partially explained by the role *base rates* play in our cognitive lives. Base rates (also called prior probability or prevalence) are "relative frequencies with which certain states or conditions occur in a population" (Kamphuis 2010: 1). If you knew that 1 out of 100 people in the US had a specific genetic mutation, then the base rate of that mutation in that

population would be 1%. You could then use this base rate to calculate how likely it is that some particular person in the population has the mutation.

Though humans are notoriously prone to discounting base rates under certain circumstances, we also use them as quick guides to making sense of information rapidly (see Gendler 2011). If the base rate of sexism I experience (whether personally or through reading news stories and talking to other people) is, say, 50%, and your base rate of sexism is 5%, then I will expect one of every two new events to be sexist, whereas you will only expect this for one out of every twenty new events. Of course, our brains do not do this sort of thing slowly and explicitly, they do it quickly and more or less behind the scenes. So when something happens—a speaker only calls on men after a talk even though several women have their hands raised—sexism presents itself more readily as a possible explanation to me than it does to you because I take the base rate of sexism to be higher.

We should expect the base rates of morally relevant phenomena, like racism, sexism, classism, and so on to be higher in groups positioned to experience those things both because they do experience them more often and because those who are not positioned to experience them personally are also more insulated from their prevalence.

Because their class position insulates them from the suffering the oppressed, many members of the ruling class are likely to be convinced by their own ideology; either they fail to perceive the suffering of the oppressed or they believe that it is freely chosen, deserved or inevitable. They experience the current organization of society as basically satisfactory and so they accept the interpretation of reality that justifies that system of organization. They encounter little in their daily lives that conflicts with that interpretation. Oppressed groups, by contrast, suffer directly from the system that oppresses them. Sometimes the ruling ideology succeeds in duping them into partial denial of their pain or into accepting it temporarily but the pervasiveness, intensity and relentlessness of their suffering constantly push oppressed groups toward a realization that something is wrong with the prevailing social order (Jaggar 1983: 370).

As Jaggar notes, social positions of oppression do not guarantee special insight into oppression, but they do make such insight more likely. In many contexts, one's social location is a non-incident factor that systematically shapes moral perception.

#### **4.3.2. Intentional Cultivation of Moral Perception**

Just as social position does not guarantee special powers of moral perception, nor does it doom the privileged to lacking sensitivity to oppression. In this section I argue that a cultivated sense of moral perception can provide a person with non-incident moral insight. “[T]aking responsibility for rectifying deficits in our perceptual capacities is no trivial task. Mere observational vigilance will not do the trick, since we are seeking to fix the very perceptual capacities we exercise during such vigilance (Kukla 2006: 88).”

One of the examples of incident factors that might affect moral perception was having just come from a gender studies class. If a person has just spent an hour or so discussing gendered oppression, he may be more likely to notice such oppression because the possibility is at the fore of his mind. But these sorts of initially-incident factors can be cultivated into what Norlock (2011) calls “habits of moral perception” (348). If he takes this limited awareness and works to habituate it, then he may come to have more reliable moral perception of gendered oppression.

We might have the capacity to see something, but only with work. We may need to draw on our current epistemic resources in novel and creative ways in order to perceive, and in doing so we may incrementally rehabilitate our perceptual practices. When we look at maps or geometric or scientific diagrams, for instance, we bring reason and inference to bear in decoding what we see, and only later, once we have habituated ourselves to looking at them, will we be able to directly perceive the information they contain (Kukla 2011: 89).

Even when one has cultivated the habit of moral perception, one's perceptions are fallible. Such

habituation does not give one the right to be certain about one's assessment of a situation.

Particularly valuable in the quest to develop one's moral perception and to keep in check the tendency to think one's perceptions are always the correct ones is the strategy of relying on the testimony of others. "This sometimes requires us to make a provisional meta-commitment to trusting in someone else's perceptual capacities, for reasons other than our ability to directly verify their deliverances right now [...] Luckily, such trust, while fallible, need not be arational or arbitrary. Indeed, we all live within an *epistemic division of labour* whose structure is intertwined with the larger structure of social institutions" (Kukla 2011: 89). In the final section of this chapter I extend this suggestion to argue that moral agents have an epistemic obligation to seek the testimony of those whose moral perception may add insight to their own deliberations and to develop and maintain well-functioning epistemic communities (as contrasted with poorly-functioning, closed epistemic communities), the structural features of which make such insight more available and accepted.

## **5. What Should We Do?**

I have so far made the case that each of us faces a problem when we attempt to think through moral issues: our moral perceptions are likely to be incomplete and the epistemic communities we inhabit are likely to be closed. In this final section I argue that this problem requires us to seek the input of other people and to make our communities less closed, just as Susan should seek the input of people outside her epistemic community and should attempt to make it less closed. First I discuss the individual obligation, then the community obligation.

### **5.1. Individuals**

If we want to make more reliable moral judgments, then we should not trust ourselves or

our closed communities to provide all the insight required. Instead, we should engage in discussion and deliberation with a wide range of people, and especially those who are likely to bring important insights. In Susan's case, she ought to seek out the input of women of a range of races and classes who have had or contemplated having an abortion. She should listen to them and take seriously their stories, reasons, and justifications. She should investigate the context, both personal and structural, that led them to this decision point and influenced the decision they made. She should find reading aside from those texts approved by her epistemic community. Saul, too, should do these things.

In particular, Susan and Saul (and all of us) should seek the input of people who are likely to have insights into the particular moral questions we are asking, but who also might help to reframe those questions or ask new questions. We should all make use of the epistemic division of labor, as Kukla recommends. Jaggar describes some of the benefits of reliance on the testimony of others:

First-person narratives may contribute to moral reflection in more than one way. Most obviously, they provide information about the lives of people whose situations may be very different from those of their hearers. It is a commonplace that our experience is broadened by learning about the experience of others. Of course, we may learn about other people's lives by reading or watching films or TV as well as by listening to them speak but personal interaction with a speaker makes a story especially vivid and immediate. Listening to others recount their experience may increase our understanding of our own lives as well as those of others. It may help us to see hitherto unrecognized implications of our own actions; "helping" a disabled person without waiting for her request, for instance, may be to assume a position of power relative to her that reinforces a system of able-bodied privilege. Listening to others may also enable us to perceive commonalities in their experience and ours, a perception crucial to feminism. [...] With this recognition feminists become able to define as sexual harassment or date rape, for instance, moral and political problems that previously "had no name" (Friedan 1963) (Jaggar 1995: 125-126).

In determining who we ought to seek out for testimony, we can use the clues provided by social

position. We should seek those who are affected by the issue, especially those negatively affected and systematically oppressed. For insight into gendered oppression, then, seek those who have experienced the brunt of it: women and other groups who are disadvantaged by a system of gendered oppression. The same goes for racial oppression, class oppression, and so on.

In many cases it may be difficult to recognize that some particular group is in such a position. For example, if you see abortion as a question about competing claims on resources (as Saul might), then it is difficult to see how gender or the experiences of women matter at all. If you see it as a question about the status of women and gender justice (see Jaggar 1973, 1997, 2009), then the import of such experiences is more obvious. But this complication (that it is not always easy to see who is relevantly affected or how) also tells in favor of seeking the input of a wide range of people, since this helps to clarify what is at stake and for whom.

In addition to seeking the input of others, we should work to cultivate certain features of our moral perception. Kukla makes this claim about responsible perception in general:

Indeed, it now looks as though a key element of epistemic *responsibility* is the ongoing cultivation of our perceptual capacities; being a responsible observer requires not just using our perceptual capacities to look carefully and fairly at the evidence, but working to develop these capacities so as to render our perceptual apparatus more sensitive and accurate. We need to take it as an *epistemic failure* and not just a piece of bad luck if we are unable to access warrant that others seem able to access. Likewise, occupying a perspective that enables accurate, objective perception is an *achievement* and not just a given feature of our found location. It is not fully under our control what we can learn to see, but there is also no reason why we must leave the direction of this development entirely up to chance (Kukla 2006: 88).

Part of what is involved in this cultivation and the habituation of good moral perception just will be the interaction with diverse others, since such interaction helps to put each of us into contact with concerns unlike our own.

## 5.2. Communities

Another way to counter the concerns I have raised above is to seek out, develop, and maintain WFECs instead of closed epistemic communities, which will tend to be poorly-functioning. By working to make our epistemic communities more inclusive, nurturing, and interested in critical re-interpretation, we encourage structural checks on individual closure. “Where the aperspectivalist advocated restricting the tools of epistemic inquiry to those that are *already* shared, I am suggesting instead that democratic accessibility is a *project* that we undertake in the shared pursuit of knowledge” (Kukla 2006: 92).

Inclusion works against closure in what is probably an obvious way: closure itself is a function of an epistemic community failing to be inclusive in unwarranted ways. Including people with different experiences, social positions, and skills of moral perception is good for an epistemic community, particularly with respect to moral reasoning. Diversity in an epistemic community makes it more difficult to take a particular position or way of framing the issue to be obvious. It also makes it easier to express dissenting views, since the community is less homogeneous.

Nurturance, too, works against closure and in favor of a more complete understanding of the moral landscape, particularly in concert with the commitment to re-interpreting social experience. Part of the problem posed by closed epistemic communities is their tendency to reject unfamiliar claims as ridiculous, silly, ill-conceived, and so on. One feature of a WFEC is that its members assume first that an inability to understand some claim is a fault, at least partially, of the community and its collective conceptual resources. Recognizing this, WFECs encourage re-interpretation in helpful ways, even and especially when the existing interpretations

help maintain community stability, since such stability may itself be oppressive.

With respect to moral reasoning, it is particularly important to think about the limitations of our epistemic communities because we do want to make claims that are as authoritative and justified as we can. For example, we want to make claims about the moral status of gender-based oppression. But we cannot make claims like this and others if we justify them in the context of a relatively closed epistemic community. The limitations of our epistemic communities and our individual moral perception requires that we think critically about who should be, but is not, included in discussions about moral matters. It also requires that we think critically about whose views are over-valued or over-represented in our current discussions.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that closed epistemic communities have four independently problematic features (exposure to limited sorts of experiences, exposure to limited sorts of arguments and reasons, the tendency to reward conformity and confirmation of existing beliefs, and ideology that sets limits on epistemic legitimacy), and that they are unlikely to be well-functioning epistemic communities. I have also argued that all of us—and especially academic philosophers—inevitably operate in such epistemic communities. To counter the epistemic limitations imposed by the attempt to reason about morality in these closed communities, I argue that individual epistemic agents have the obligation to seek out the input of others who are likely to provide insight into the moral issue at hand, as well as to cultivate good habits of moral perception. I also argue that we should evaluate our epistemic communities and attempt to make them less closed, or to find new, more open epistemic communities. We should, in other words, find or develop and maintain well-functioning epistemic communities.

Susan and Saul, operating in their closed epistemic communities, are able to make judgments on moral issues that appear coherent and complete in the context of the closed community, as a puzzle might appear complete if one put half of it together in the absence of the other pieces (notwithstanding the strange jagged border that might create if it were a traditional puzzle). But once these views are exposed to the testimony of others and Susan and Saul engage people outside of their closed communities, it may become clear that many of the pieces are missing or that the existing pieces are arranged incorrectly. Even once one has sought out the testimony and input of others, one's epistemic obligations are not discharged; having all the information does not guarantee reaching a particular conclusion, just as having all the pieces to a puzzle does not guarantee that one can arrange them in the correct way. I take up the difficult question of what to do with this insight from others in the next three chapters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Responding to Unconvincing Moral Testimony

#### 1. Introduction

What is permitted or required of the epistemically and morally responsible agent when she is faced with unconvincing testimony on some moral issue? Consider a case.

**DISAGREE** Suppose that Ann believes that  $p$  about some moral matter, but comes to learn that Ben believes that  $\text{not-}p$ . Suppose further that Ann and Ben, upon learning of their disagreement, decide to sit down and discuss their respective reasons for belief. Ann is not compelled by the reasons Ben gives; Ben is not compelled by the reasons Ann gives. Ann and Ben seem to be in a sticky epistemic situation; they disagree, and neither feel the pull of the other's reasons.

How should Ann and Ben react when they discover that the other disagrees? Many are likely to think that Ann and Ben ought either to maintain their pre-disagreement beliefs or alter their credences for their beliefs in the light of their disagreement. Indeed, many may think it uncontroversially true that neither Ben nor Ann ought to defer to the other in this case precisely because the issue under consideration is a moral one, and because Ben and Ann are unwilling to endorse the reasons the other provides. These intuitions may be explained by an appeal to a certain understanding of moral autonomy. We must be—in a deep sense—the author of our own moral views, which should be based only on reasons we can endorse and understand.

Contra this common reaction, I argue that there are some situations where one of Ann or Ben ought to defer to the other—that is, one ought to adopt the view of the other. In this chapter I argue that we are sometimes required to defer to the moral testimony of others, even in cases of seemingly intractable disagreement, where we are unable to appreciate, understand, or weigh the

moral reasons given by another. Conversely, I argue that agents are sometimes required not to defer to the moral testimony of others, even in cases of seemingly intractable disagreement, when one's own reasons are not appreciated or understood by another. Clearly there must be some account for why we are sometimes required to defer to the testimony of others and why we are sometimes required not to do so. While I do not give a complete account of this difference, I do offer one piece of the answer. We are sometimes required to defer in the face of disagreement or lack of understanding when the person with whom we disagree occupies a social position that gives her some epistemic advantage with regard to the moral matter at hand. Likewise, we are sometimes required not to defer in the face of disagreement or failure to be understood when the social positions we occupy give us some epistemic advantage with regard to the moral matter at hand.

This chapter proceeds in five parts. First, I explain what I have in mind when I talk about moral testimony and narrow the scope of the chapter. Second, I canvas the extant philosophical defenses of moral testimony as a source of moral knowledge. Third, I present the objection to deference to moral testimony we fail to understand that it undermines the moral autonomy of the person who accepts it. Fourth, I give four considerations that undermine this objection. Fifth, I revisit the issue autonomy and deference in the context of epistemic communities.

## **2. Moral Testimony and Reactions to Testimony**

In the following section, I will explain what I take moral testimony to be, and discuss the ways in which we might react to the moral testimony of another.

### **2.1. What is Testimony?**

Testimony is the statement or presentation of one's views. Moral testimony is the

statement or presentation of one's views on some moral matter. Though testimony has formal connotations in law and elsewhere, it need not be formal in the sense relevant to this paper. That is, testimony may not always come in the form of discrete statements about this or that, nor does it need to be written or spoken directly to count. We might receive the testimony of others through conversation, reading articles, hearing about the views of others, or perhaps even through empathizing with others or being exposed to the emotions others feel as a result of some moral issue. Testimony may or may not involve the giving of reasons. Karen Jones distinguishes between testifying and arguing: "*testifying* that *p* contrasts with *arguing* that *p* insofar as it is the testifier herself who vouches for the truth of *p*; someone who argues that *p* lets the arguments vouch for themselves" (1999: 57), but notes later that testimony does not preclude argumentation (1999: 63). After all, the testimony of an expert or eyewitness might involve and indeed rely on the giving of reasons.

Much of the extant literature on moral testimony assumes without much discussion that testimony simply involves the statement of a view *sans* reasons. There are at least some instances of non-moral testimony that do not seem to require the giving of reasons to be a legitimate source of knowledge. For example, if someone who just came in from outside tells me that it is snowing outside, I do not need to ask them for their reasons for believing this. It is worth noting that there are such reasons, they are just quite commonplace and we know them to be generally trustworthy. The acceptance of moral testimony *sans* reasons seems more problematic on its face, which leads many of those who have given philosophical consideration to moral testimony to reject it entirely as a legitimate source of moral knowledge. It is supposed that if testimony is accompanied by reasons, then the reasons will be either good or bad, convincing or not, in which

case the hearer can accept or reject the view *on the strength of the reasons* rather than *on the authority* of the person testifying. These sorts of distinctions are the result of the focus in the current literature on the question of whether testimony about some moral conclusion can ever result in either moral knowledge or moral understanding on the part of someone who receives the testimony. In this chapter I am not especially concerned with whether simply hearing the testimony of another on some moral matter can result in moral knowledge. Rather, I am concerned with how the responsible agent should react in the face of testimony. In particular, I am concerned with how the responsible agent should react in the face of testimony she finds unconvincing.

I construe reasons broadly to include any consideration that counts in favor of something, in this case one's view about some moral issue (Scanlon 1998, Crisp 2006, Parfit 1984, 2011). I include in the sorts of considerations that might count in favor of a moral view both reasons in a more narrow sense, such as appeals to moral principles or analogous cases, and emotions, such as outrage or unease. That is, it counts in favor of some action's wrongness that I feel moral outrage about the action, just as an appeal to a moral principle or analogy counts in favor of its wrongness. This is not to say that my moral outrage and my argument by analogy are unassailable as reasons for my view, but they are reasons. It may turn out that my outrage is misplaced, just as it may turn out that my analogy is flawed. But the fact that I feel moral outrage when treated in some way is at least *prima facie* evidence that I have been wronged. As Alison Jaggar argues:

[Emotions] may provide the first indications that something is wrong with the way alleged facts have been constructed, with accepted understandings of how things are. Conventionally unexpected or inappropriate emotions may precede our conscious recognition that accepted descriptions and justifications often conceal as much as reveal

the prevailing state of affairs. Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger or fear may we bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger (1989: 168).

Much more could be said about the role of emotion in moral testimony, but for now it suffices to mention that emotion has a role to play in moral reasoning and moral knowledge.

## **2.2. Reacting to Moral Testimony**

Providing moral testimony, then, is merely the sharing of one's moral view, with or without providing reasons for the view. Both the statement *x is wrong* and *x is wrong because y* count as moral testimony on this way of construing the concept. Given this understanding of testimony, there are a few sorts of responses we might have upon exposure to the testimony of another, especially when that testimony is accompanied by reasons or arguments. First, we might agree with her view either because it coheres with what we already believe or because we find it convincing. Second, we might not agree with her view because it does not cohere with what we already believe or because we do not find it convincing. Third, we might have a mixed reaction because we either agree with her conclusion, but not her reasons, or the other way around.

The first sort of option is somewhat interesting. We often have our beliefs and experiences confirmed by the testimony of others, whether on moral or non-moral questions. If I go to a talk and hear an argument for a position I have long held or suspected to be true, I may increase my credence in that view or simply keep it the same. Recall my concerns about the effect of hearing confirming views in the context of isolated epistemic communities from the previous chapter. The third sort of option is also interesting, because it might be that certain sorts of testimony that confirm our beliefs actually ought to make us doubt whether our own view is correct. For example, if I discovered that some moral belief I hold is also held by a moral

monster, it might give me strong reason to reevaluate my position. While both of these are interesting philosophical questions, I will not discuss them in this chapter. Rather, I will focus on the second sort of option in the face of testimony—testimony that we find unconvincing on its own or in concert with our own views. DISAGREE is such case, because it involves a lack of understanding or appreciation of the reasons given by another.

### **3. Defenses of Moral Testimony as a Source of Moral Knowledge**

Though the majority of the extant literature on moral testimony is pessimistic about the ability of testimony to serve as a legitimate source of moral knowledge, there are some who defend this possibility, for at least some limited circumstances.

#### **3.1. Jones, Driver, and Sliwa on Moral Testimony**

Perhaps the best-known defense of moral testimony as a source of knowledge is due to Jones, who argues that ‘wise trust’ in others who have local expertise in certain moral matters is necessary in a world where even mature moral agents need to share an epistemic division of labor with others (1999: 56). Julia Driver follows Jones in accepting some claim to local expertise on the part of those who have relevant experience. Driver argues that such experience is a marker of reliability. “The best way to think of experience is as providing a plausible mechanism for development of moral sensitivity” (Driver 2006: 629). Driver goes on to argue that even if a person has moral expertise, and we know that she has moral expertise, we should still be wary of trusting her to accurately pass on her moral knowledge (2006: 629-634).

She does allow for some reliance on testimony when the testimony is accepted for good reasons: “A decision is made at a higher level—a higher legislative level, if you will—to trust the judgment of a person one has good reason to trust. The trust is not blind, it is not faith. Thus the

agent exhibits both independence of mind and responsiveness to reasons (2006: 636).” Paulina Sliwa offers the most recent defense of moral testimony, agreeing with Jones and Driver that other people may sometimes be in a better position to make a moral judgment than we are. She provides two reasons for this: “For one, we might be concerned that our own judgment is compromised by bias or self-interest. Secondly, we might think that the other person is just better at making certain moral judgments than we are” (Sliwa 2012: online 4).

Jones, Driver, and Sliwa all provide cases in which it is supposed to seem intuitively permissible to defer to the testimony of another. Interestingly, among these examples, the most compelling ones share a common theme—they are all examples supposing that some people are better than others at identifying sexism or racism. Jones's classic example concerns Peter, a man living in cooperative housing who is upset about certain membership decisions.

Peter came to believe that the threat of veto was making membership decisions arbitrary and unjust. White women and women of color had advocated rejecting three white men on the basis of perceived sexism, and, in one case, racism. Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of sexism and racism. Thus, his commitment often remained theoretical and he saw fewer occasions as calling for antisexist or antiracist response than he might have seen. Such blindness can sometimes indicate insincerity, but in Peter's case it did not. He genuinely did want to understand the perspective of the women and he wanted to be able to share it, *if* indeed it turned out to be correct. He could pick out egregious instances of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’ applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to nonegregious new cases. [...] Peter decided to leave the co-op. His reason for leaving was that, as a member, he felt he had to be able to endorse the decisions that the group was making—they had to be decisions that were ‘his’ in the sense that he could identify with them, even if they were the result of compromise and negotiation (Jones 1999: 59-60).

Jones includes some dialogue between Peter and the women in the house, who struggle to explain why they found the applicants to be sexist and racist; they are unable to provide Peter with reasons he feels comfortable endorsing. It is worth including such a long, detailed example

because it helps to capture more accurately the often-tricky problem of sharing reasons with one another in an epistemic community, particularly on moral matters. Jones thinks, and I agree, that Peter should have accepted the testimony of the women in the house concerning the sexism of the applicants.

The women are having what Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions” about the applicants. In a bit of the dialogue the women, frustrated both that Peter does not understand and that they cannot seem to explain their position, say, “Well, it was just a feeling I got. A feeling that he didn’t think me important” (Jones 1999: 60). I suspect that most women will recognize this sort of frustration from their own experience in attempting to describe to well-meaning male friends why they find some situation uncomfortable or why they dislike a particular joke and so on. I will have more to say about this in the remainder of the chapter. Note that Peter is faced with a case of DISAGREE because he finds that he cannot appreciate the reasons the women are giving him for their position and they cannot appreciate his reasons. If I am correct that the general philosophical response to DISAGREE will be to say that neither Ann nor Ben should change positions, then they must hold that Peter should not defer to the women.

It is no coincidence that the most ready examples of the obligation to defer to others on moral issues have to do with unjust social phenomena like sexism and racism. “We might say that at least sometimes, the capacities involved in acquiring moral knowledge are indeed similar to perceptual capacities. There is a moral analogue of blindness, which is not to be assimilated to being too foolish to follow a moral argument. Those who lack the relevant perceptual skills in a given moral domain must rely on those who have sharper vision” (Jones 1999: 63). The tendency toward a sort of blindness in spotting instances of sexism or racism is a feature of the systems

themselves.

The central insight of radical feminism—though we need not be radical feminists to recognize it as an insight—is that “distinctions of gender, based on sex, structure virtually every aspect of our lives and indeed are so all-pervasive that ordinarily they go quite unrecognized. Instead of appearing as an alterable feature of our social organization, gender constitutes the unquestioned framework in terms of which we perceive and interpret the world” (Jaggar 1983: 85). Sexism, like other forms of oppression, is often obscured because it is a pervasive structural element that typically presents as natural and normal, even to those who bear the brunt of it. However, it may be easier to recognize when one has dealt with it repeatedly and learned to name it as sexism. This helps to explain why Jones, Driver, and Sliwa all appeal to the role of experience in explaining why some people (namely, women) are more apt to recognize sexism when it occurs. Women have an obvious interest in ending sexist oppression that most men do not have (or do not have to the same degree), which accounts for their increased acuity in recognizing sexist behavior. “Both men and women in fact help to perpetuate the system of male dominance (just as workers as well as capitalists help to perpetuate the capitalist system), but women’s objective interests as women also encourage them to resist that system in many ways. Men, too, may sometimes resist the system of male dominance, but, because that system provides them with privileges, they are much less likely to resist it” (Jaggar 1983: 330).

### **3.2. Thomas on Moral Deference and the Need for a Social Account**

Though these three accounts get part of the story correct, there is more to be said about moral testimony. In particular, a more social account of moral testimony—an account that takes seriously the role of epistemic communities in moral reasoning—is required to make sense of our

obligations when faced with testimony that relies on reasons that seem unconvincing to us.

Lawrence Thomas (1998) offers an account of what he calls moral deference (but which is different from what I call deference) that takes injustice and social inequality into consideration.

Thomas distinguishes between moral deference and bearing witness. Contrast the two:

To bear witness to the moral pain of another, say, Leslie, with Leslie's authorization, is to have won her confidence that one can speak informedly and with conviction on her behalf to another about the moral pain she has endured (Thomas 1998: 376).

Moral deference, then, is the act of listening involved in bearing witness to another's moral pain, but without bearing witness to it. [...] It is about listening, in the ways characterized above, until one has insight into the character of the other's moral pain, and so how he has been emotionally configured by it (Thomas 1998: 377).

For Thomas, then, moral deference is more intense and more involved version of what I have in mind with deferring to the moral testimony of another. Thomas's deference requires a level of trust (on the part of the person providing testimony), as well as the background of serious injustice or moral wrong, that my view does not. That is, Thomas calls for deference as a response to serious wrongs, particularly those that occur as a result of social injustice. My view encompasses moral testimony on a wide range of issues, some less serious than what Thomas has in mind. His view requires only active, open listening and respect, whereas I use deference in a more formal way just to mean that one accepts as true the judgment of another. I see Thomas's account as representing the best practices for engaging another person who has experienced some moral wrong. Thomas's account also differs from my own in that he proposes deference as a way of coming to understand the moral reasons another person is presenting—namely, those moral reasons that arise out of experience of serious moral wrong. My account concerns what to do when testimony is offered and this understanding is not achieved. Of course, the best option would be for every party to some moral discussion to understand the claims of the others in just

this way. But my view offers some guidance where this is not the case, and, importantly, where such understanding may be impossible or practically unattainable. Before I discuss my own view in more depth, I present the major objection to the sort of deference I defend.

#### **4. An Influential Conception of Moral Autonomy**

There is one major sort objection in the literature to the view that deference is sometimes permissible, let alone required. Though it has been stated in many ways by many different philosophers, the central idea is captured by what Robert Hopkins calls ‘The Requirement’: “having the right to a moral belief requires one to grasp the *moral* grounds for it” (2007: 630). That is, part of what it means to be an autonomous (self-legislating) moral agent is an appropriate understanding of the reasons why some moral claim is true or false. Similarly, Phillip Nickel claims, “[It] must be the case that morality requires one to *act* from an understanding of moral claims, and therefore to *have* an understanding of moral claims that are relevant to action” (2001: 257). Alison Hills calls this responsiveness to (or at least understanding of) moral reasons ‘orientation’. “Someone who is appropriately oriented is sensitive to the features of actions that determine whether those actions are right or not, and to whether she has reason (and what strength of reason) to perform those actions” (2009: 13). One who does not grasp moral reasons in this way lacks moral understanding. Later she echoes Hopkins’s notion of The Requirement, claiming, “[W]hat you cannot do is to treat testimonial evidence as having authority independently of the reasons why p that you acknowledge or to which you can gain access” (Hills 2009: 22). Nickel also makes the case that moral testimony cannot result in moral understanding. “[Although] moral testimony may give rise to a correct moral belief in these cases and thus ‘work out’ in the crudest sense, it does not provide a basis for morally good

action” (Nickel 2001: 260).

Robert Paul Wolff is often quoted in defense of this requirement for autonomy in the face of moral testimony:

The responsible man is not capricious or anarchic, for he does acknowledge himself bound by moral constraints. But he insists that he alone is the judge of those constraints. He may listen to the advice of others, but he makes it his own by determining for himself whether it is good advice. He may learn from others about his moral obligations, but only in the sense that a mathematician learns from other mathematicians—namely by hearing from them arguments whose validity he recognizes even though he did not think of them himself. *He does not learn in the sense that one learns from an explorer, by accepting as true his accounts of things one cannot see for oneself.* Since the responsible man arrives at moral decisions which he expresses to himself in the form of imperatives, we may say that he gives laws to himself, or is self-legislating. In short, he is autonomous. As Kant argued, moral autonomy is a combination of freedom and responsibility; it is a submission to laws which one has made for oneself. The autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. He may do what another tells him, but not because he has been told to do it. He is therefore, in the political sense of the word, free (1970: Ch I Part 2—emphasis mine).

To accept the moral testimony of another, then, is problematic when one does not grasp the reasons for the moral position one adopts. In the emphasized sentence above, Wolff is claiming just this. In the moral domain, we cannot or should not accept a claim solely on the word of another, though we may seek the input and arguments of others as advice.

This view does seem to capture what we may find intuitively problematic about the most common sort of case discussed in the testimony on moral testimony. Sarah McGrath offers this pair of cases, which is quite typical of the literature:

Case A. After carefully reflecting on the question of whether eating meat is immoral, I become convinced that it is.

Case B. You tell me that eating meat is immoral. Although I believe that, left to my own devices, I would not think this, no matter how long I reflected, I adopt your attitude as my own. It is not that I believe that you are better informed about potentially relevant non-moral facts (e.g., about the conditions under which livestock is kept, or about the typical effects of eliminating meat from one’s diet). On the contrary, I know that I have all of the non-moral information relevant to the issue that you have (2009: 1).

McGrath supposes that most of us will think that the person in Case B has done something irresponsible, both epistemically and morally. Perhaps the problem is that she has abdicated her moral autonomy in deferring to the testimony of another on this question. On Hopkins's view, she has violated the requirement that she grasp the moral reasons for the position, and so she has no right to hold the position. Or in Hills's terms, she lacks the appropriate moral orientation, and so does not really have moral understanding, even if she gains moral knowledge in accepting the testimony.

Applying this objection to DISAGREE provides an explanation for why one might think that neither Ann nor Ben ought to defer to the other. Namely, Ann and Ben do not grasp or understand the reasons they are given in support of the other's position. To defer under such circumstances would require accepting some moral position without understanding it and to do so against what seems intuitively correct to each of Ann and Ben. Likewise, one taking this position must say that Peter acted rightly in withdrawing from the co-op because he could not endorse the reasons given for rejecting the applicants.

### **5. The Problem(s) with this Conception of Autonomy**

The autonomy objection does give an initially compelling explanation of why we think that the person who refuses to think through the morality of animal use makes a serious epistemic and moral error. She was capable of thinking through the issue herself, but declined to do so. Instead she simply deferred to someone she trusted. There is a sense that she has short-circuited a valuable, even indispensable, process; there is a similar unease about someone who is perfectly capable of completing her own homework, but simply copies the answers of her friend. But what about the case of Peter and the co-op? An appeal to moral autonomy here is

unsatisfying. It helps to explain why we think Peter's principled decision to leave the co-op is, in some ways, admirable. Jones on this point:

[Peter] shows a keen and admirable awareness of the importance of moral issues. Moreover, his desire to have, *and to understand*, morally adequate reasons for acting makes us fairly sure, that, should Peter fall into morally bad circumstances, he will not be following the leader into error. This sort of independence—the independence of those who want to keep their moral beliefs in step with what they take to be cogent reasons—gives us a sense of the notion of autonomy which shows why autonomy is thought to be something valuable (1999: 62).

What the objection cannot explain is why many of us have the intuition that Peter should have deferred to the women in the house. In this section I provide and explain some of the considerations that should lead us to take a more nuanced view of autonomy and a more optimistic view of moral testimony. This will also help to explain why it seems so clear to many of us that some instances of deference to moral testimony are impermissible, yet others are permissible or even required.

The central problem for the autonomy objection is its assumption that rational moral agents who are presented with moral reasons will be able to understand and appreciate them to a roughly appropriate degree right away or after sufficiently rigorous reflection. Rebecca Kukla (2006) describes—before going on to argue against—this sort of view in epistemology more generally as follows:

One traditional hallmark of the propriety of an epistemic practice is that it provides *aperspectival* warrant. That is to say, epistemologists generally think that our reasons must be available to anyone who is exposed to the relevant causal inputs and is able and willing to properly exercise her rationality. The motivating idea behind this requirement is roughly that an *objective* view is one that is not bound to a particular perspective or distorted by the intervening presence of the inquirer herself (80).

Suppose I reach out to place my hand on a burner, my friend warns me not to rest my hand there, and I ask her why. When she tells me that she has just finished cooking and the burner is hot, I

will understand right away why she told me not to rest my hand there. The burner would burn my hand, which would be bad, so I should not do it. Similarly so with moral reasons—suppose that I ask my friend whether kicking puppies is wrong. She tells me that it is, and I ask why. When she tells me that kicking puppies causes the puppies unnecessary pain, I understand right away that causing unnecessary pain is bad, so I should not do it. If she told me that it was wrong, and provided me with this reason, and I failed to grasp it, perhaps even after further explanation and appeals to other cases of cruelty, we would probably think that I was somehow defective in my capacity as one who reasons about morality. But this view about moral reasoning depends partially on an empirical premise that is rarely recognized and defended explicitly.

Namely, this view depends on a rational human capacity to recognize, understand, and weigh moral reasons when presented with them—or at least after argument for them. I make the caveat that reasons need not be understood by all right away because sometimes we only feel the force of a reason after it is compared to some reason we already accept as legitimate. This assumption about human cognition is false. Code on the more general version of this question:

Claims to the effect that the construction of knowledge should be an independent project, uncontaminated by the influence of testimony, opinion, or hearsay, presuppose cognitive agents who can know their environments by their own unaided efforts. Assumptions that knowledge, once acquired, is timelessly and universally true presuppose constancy and uniformity in subjectivity across historical, cultural, and other boundaries. Analogously, contentions that one should not be swayed by feelings and loyalties in moral decision making presuppose a 'human nature' amenable to guidance by reason rather than emotion, whose possessors can live well by acting as impartially as possible (Code 1991: 71).

In what follows I give four problems for the view I have described.

### **5.1. Limited Moral Perception**

I argued in the previous chapter that there are some moral reasons that some people either cannot have access to or will have a very hard time understanding, and which may be very hard

for those who do understand them to convey. In other words, moral perception is always limited. In Peter's case, there is no lack of effort to understand the reasons the women are providing. Peter is committed to the higher-level moral principle that sexism is unacceptable, but he does not grasp the women's reasons for thinking that the applicants to the co-op are sexist. In part this is explained by the fact that part of what grounds these reasons is something that Peter does not himself experience as a result of his social position. The women experience the subtle cues of sexism and racism—perhaps a lack of respect, disengaged conversation, differential treatment, or a look that suggests one is less important—on the part of the applicants. Peter is unlikely to notice such things because they are quite subtle and are never directed at him by the applicants. So in a very simple way, Peter does not access these reasons without relying on the women's testimony; they are the only ones who have direct access to the sort of evidence that anyone could have in the situation. They have also, *qua* women, been exposed to repeated instances of the sort of sexism they experience in this one case, whereas Peter has not.

The women's social positions have given them a sort of fine-tuned sensitivity to such things and, in contrast, Peter's social position has allowed him to maintain a sort of blindness, to use Jones's terminology, or a tone-deafness that could be remedied by practice. "One way to find out about the value of respect is to ask those who have always been respected; a better way is to ask those who have struggled to win respect and tried to live without it. Saying such political experience can contribute to moral knowledge commits us to nothing stronger than the view that one's knowledge about moral matters, like one's knowledge about other matters, can deepen with experience" (Jones 1999: 65). Peter might well be able to sharpen his ability to recognize subtle instances of sexism. If he engages with more women about their everyday experiences of sexism,

hears more accounts, witnesses with a critical eye women interacting with men, and discusses these cases with more experienced women as well as other men engaging in the same project, he may be able to more accurately distinguish sexist behavior from non-sexist behavior, even in very subtle cases. But despite such an effort, he might not get much better—progress is not guaranteed. Either way, he will not get anywhere without accepting some amount of testimony from the women, or without an ongoing dialogue with them about their experiences of sexism. If there is something objectionable about Peter's deferring to the testimony of the women in this case, surely it cannot be that he should have figured it out for himself. On the other hand, deferring to their testimony on this matter seems like the best way both to have accurate beliefs now and to increase the likelihood of having correct beliefs in the future.

## **5.2. Inappropriate Weighting of Testimony**

### **5.2.1. Credibility and Testimony**

There are some moral reasons, evidence, and claims that some people will over- or under-value. One way in which we systematically err in our evaluation of reasons is through our assessments of credibility—both of the speaker and the claim. We implicitly and explicitly assign different credences to different pieces of information on the basis of their source, how they cohere with other things we know, and so on (see Code 1991). By credence I just mean something like our belief in the likelihood that a proposition is true. Consider the claim that a ghost knocked over my glass of water. If I were to consider this claim right now, I would assign it a very low credence, because it does not cohere with my other beliefs about things like ghosts. That is, because I am confident that ghosts do not exist, I will think a proposition about ghosts doing anything is very unlikely. If I believed in ghosts, I might assign the proposition a higher

credence. If I believed in ghosts and had other evidence of their existence in the area of my glass of water, and for their penchant for knocking things over, my credence for this proposition might be quite high.

Another way in which our credences can be altered is by our assessment of the credibility of the source of a statement (see Barnes 2005 and Bovens and Hartmann 2003). Consider the proposition that a meteor is going to hit Earth. If I hear this information from a panel of scientists and experts, my credence in the information will be high, much to my dismay. If I hear this information from the homeless person downtown who is always predicting a new catastrophe each week, my credence will be significantly lower. This process is not always a reflective one. We tend to naturally and automatically, but unreflectively, assign and update our credences (see Jeffrey 1987). This is just one way in which we try to maintain consistent sets of beliefs. It is also part of the same process that allows us to quickly delineate between different categories of things, like things that are dangerous versus things that are not dangerous. “What kind of person you are, of course, is one with capacities and categories that enable you to encode certain sorts of regularities in your environment. If you weren’t that kind of person, you certainly wouldn’t be reading this article. You wouldn’t be reading anything at all—or speaking a human language, or thinking complex thoughts, or perceiving objects in the way that you do” (Gendler 2008: 36).

This automatic process is indispensable to human survival, but one downside to this automatic process is that it may be influenced by implicit biases and prejudices. Fricker often refers to these prejudices as being the results of stereotypes. “Notably, if the stereotype embodies a prejudice that works against the speaker, then two things follow: there is an epistemic dysfunction in the exchange—the hearer makes an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker’s

credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result; and the hearer does something ethically bad—the speaker is wrongfully undermined in her capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007: 17). Fricker calls this wrong of deflated credibility *testimonial injustice*. Such testimonial injustice can also result in credibility excess—though Fricker is reluctant to attach the moniker of injustice to such cases (Fricker 2007: 19-21)—such as when someone with an accent that tends to indicate erudition or someone in a lab coat utters a statement.

Erudite accents and lab coats are subtle but effective indicators of power and privilege. Most people are familiar with Stanley Milgram’s psychological obedience tests (Milgram 1963, 1965, 1974). The most well-known test, Experiment 5, called for the subject to administer electric shocks to another person. In fact, the shocks were not real; the person being shocked was in on the study and merely pretending to be in pain. “The experimenter, who sat a few feet away, encouraged the participant to continue at each verbal or nonverbal sign of resistance. The study proceeded until the participant expressed resistance to each of four increasingly demanding prods by the experimenter or until the participant had pressed the highest shock generator three times” (Burger 2009: 1). In Milgram’s initial study, 65% of participants “continued to administer shocks all the way to the end of the generator’s range” (Burger 2009: 2). In Jerry Burger’s 2006 partial replication of Experiment 5 obedience rates were only slightly lower (Burger 2009: 1); such is the power generated by the symbolic authority vested in a white lab coat.

### **5.2.2. Credibility and Implicit Bias**

Because we are attuned to these social influences so acutely, we often raise or lower our credence in a proposition on these bases without consciously reflecting on it. That is, our credence updating mechanisms are sensitive to implicit bias. “The existence of race as a category

that gives rise to certain sorts of automatic associations is, for those who disavow the normative content of these associations, hazardous in a particular way: racially-based inequalities—and the psychological processes by which we inevitably encode them—appear to carry not merely moral, but also epistemic, costs” (Gendler 2008: 36-37). Implicit bias is, by now, familiar to most in the philosophical community. According to Jost et al, “the fact of the matter is that the field of social psychology has not seriously doubted the existence of implicit stereotyping and prejudice since at least the early 1990s, if not earlier” (2009: 41). I will briefly bring up the results of some relevant studies here.

Women and men are more likely to say of a male candidate’s CV than of an equally qualified female candidate’s CV that they would hire him and were more likely to say that he had done adequate service, research, and teaching (Steinpreis et al 1999). The same is true for resumes bearing typically Black names versus typically White names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). In a recent study of science faculty rating identical CVs, Moss-Rascusin et al (2012) found that, “both male and female faculty judged a female student to be less competent and less worthy of being hired than an identical male student, and also offered her a smaller starting salary and less career mentoring” (4). These studies show that names alone are enough to activate our unconscious associations with the socially constructed categories of gender and race. One method of testing implicit biases is called the Implicit Association Test, which measures a subject’s ability to quickly connect, “individual exemplars of various social categories (whites vs. blacks, rich vs. poor, gay vs. straight, and so on) with abstract words and categories that have evaluative implications (e.g., good vs. bad, pleasant vs. unpleasant). Thus, people who are faster to categorize the faces or names of whites when they are paired with positive (vs. negative)

stimuli and, conversely, the faces or names of blacks when they are paired with negative (vs. positive) stimuli, are theorized to have internalized a stronger preference for whites relative to blacks, compared to people who respond more equivalently across different category-valence pairings (or in the opposite direction)” (Jost et al 2009: 45). On the IAT, “only 18% of respondents demonstrated sufficiently small implicit bias to be judged implicitly neutral” and “the IAT measures consistently revealed greater bias in favor of the relatively advantaged group” (Greenwald and Krieger 2006: 955). The participants in the studies are not attempting to discriminate—they are likely attempting to do the opposite—but they are. Sometimes this implicit discrimination may affect how the decisions we make in serious ways. Not only will implicit biases influence which CV seems better, which may affect hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, another study suggests that implicit biases alter the provision of medical care. Green et al found that implicit, but *not* explicit, bias against black patients predicted whether or not a physician would recommend thrombolysis for black patients (2007: 1235). “Most modern social psychologists believe that attitudes occur in both implicit and explicit modes, suggesting that people can think, feel, and behave in ways that oppose their explicitly expressed views, and even, explicitly known self-interests” (Bertrand et al 2005: 94).

The separability of these attitudes is explained by the separability of the mental processes that regulate them. “[R]ecent neuroscientific studies demonstrate that conscious processing activates different regions in the brain than does unconscious processing, thus these are distinctive mental processes” (Bertrand et al 2005: 95). Gendler makes a distinction between belief, the result of the conscious processing in our brains, and alief, the result of the unconscious processing in our brains. Or more precisely: “a paradigmatic *alief* is a mental state with the

associatively-linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or non-consciously—by the features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment. Aliefs may be either occurrent or dispositional” (Gendler 2008: 9). So while I might *believe* that race ought not affect my judgment of whose CV is better, I might *alieve* that the CV belonging to the white man is better than the CV of the non-white man, white woman, or non-white woman. Why? Because my unconscious processing is subject to influence by positive social stereotypes about white men and negative social stereotypes about non-white/non-men that are activated by the name on the CV. Gendler’s account of alief is not without detractors, but it seems clear that *something* like alief helps to explain the ubiquity of our implicit biases as well as their tendency to contradict explicit beliefs. Whatever the preferred theoretical construction of this phenomenon, it is not picking out some anomaly in human cognition—it is picking out *an indispensable part* of human cognition. “The first demonstrations of implicit stereotyping and prejudice, then, were merely logical extensions of a well-known cognitive principle—namely that knowledge is organized in memory in the form of semantic associations that are derived from personal experiences as well as normative procedures and rules. Thus, it may be news to some that implicit prejudice is an empirical possibility, but the truth is that its discovery followed naturally from a century’s worth of research on perception, memory, and learning” (Jost et al 2009: 43).

### **5.2.3 Implicit Bias and Testimony**

What does the existence of implicit bias mean for our ability to appreciate the testimony others share with us? Our implicit biases make it more likely that we will find the claims of socially-favored groups more plausible than the claims of socially-disfavored groups. This

occurs in the same way that we will tend to find the CVs of members of favored groups to be more impressive than members of disfavored groups, even when the CVs are identical. Their claims seem more plausible because they are supposed to seem more plausible. Our brains are trying to make sense of the information we have before us quickly and when they see the claim made by a white male about the morality of, for example, capital punishment or abortion or affirmative action, they carry with them an aura of credibility, just as the white lab coat carries with it an authority powerful enough to cause one person to cause another pain against her instincts. When others present us with moral reasons—when they provide moral testimony—we do not receive and process their reasons in a vacuum. Our credibility assessments may be influenced by the assumed reliability of the source and the information they are providing. Since our assessments are influenced by racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressive social structures, we are likely to over-value the testimony of some groups and individuals and under-value the testimony of other groups and individuals.

Further, each time we give some group or individual some credibility assessment, it will alter how likely we think it is that that group or individual is correct the next time they provide testimony. That is, if the testimony of socially-favored individuals is seen as more credible in one instance, the prior probability that the next instance of testimony is credible will be higher, and the same for socially-disfavored individuals, *mutatis mutandis*. After so many iterations, mere group membership or perceived group membership carries with it so much (or so little) epistemic weight as to make the testimony of a member of that group presumptively correct (or incorrect). But, because most of this credibility assessment takes place in the parts of our brains that process information quickly and unconsciously, from the perspective of the individual who is attempting

earnestly to evaluate claims, it will seem as though she has taken into account all of the evidence available to her and made the best decision given the circumstances.

Return to a slightly varied version of the case with Peter and the housing cooperative. Suppose the women articulate their view that the applicants are sexist or racist and Peter agrees that the applicants displayed such behavior—perhaps he noticed that the applicants spent more time chatting with the men, and so on—but he does not feel that the reasons given are particularly weighty, and he may have alternative explanations that account for their behavior such that barring them from the cooperative seems unwarranted. Peter may find that the testimony of the women simply does not sway him from his own view. But the autonomy objection to moral testimony assumes that Peter is able to appreciate the testimony the women provide. It assumes that credibility assessments take place consciously and are—or could be—subject to our desires to be unbiased. Unfortunately, our best science and psychology suggest that our credibility assessments are not—perhaps cannot be—subject to these conscious processes. In DISAGREE, it could be that Ann and Ben are unable to appreciate each other's reasons because of the influence of social stereotypes on the perceived credibility of the reasons and each other.

One outcome of this sort of testimonial injustice in general is that it “presents an obstacle to truth, either directly by causing the hearer to miss out on a particular truth, or indirectly by creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas” (Fricker 2007: 43). Peter, Ann, and Ben may all be missing out on the moral truth in their limited circumstances, but the entire epistemic community also misses out on truth in a more widespread way because of the pervasiveness of the problem of appreciating the testimony others give us. Fricker argues that testimonial injustice wrongs the speaker in her capacity as a knower, and can have prolonged effects on a knower or

class of knowers (2007, see especially Chapter 2). In the next section I will explore the effects of epistemic injustice on the ability of knowers to appreciate their own reasons.

### **5.3. Inappropriate Weighting of One's Own Reasons**

We may under- or over-value our own reasons when we try to weigh our reasons against the reasons of others. As I noted in the previous section, our cognitive mechanisms for assessing the credibility of statements are neither fully transparent nor immune from systematic error. As a result, any given person's ability to weigh competing reasons against each other will be colored by a host of social cues, biases, and mistakes.

#### **5.3.1 Confidence as a Function of Justice and Community**

Bearing the brunt of epistemic injustice may cause people to doubt themselves, their intellectual abilities, and their status as someone who has something to offer the epistemic community.

[S]omeone with a background experience of persistent testimonial injustice may lose confidence in her general intellectual abilities to such an extent that she is genuinely hindered in her educational or other intellectual development. A speaker may incur a testimonial injustice in respect of a particular thing they've said, or with respect to their authority in a specific social role, or just generally; but in cases of systematic testimonial injustice, which are driven by an *identity* prejudice, these three forms of attack tend to come together, so that an identity-prejudicial reception of a particular claim made by a speaker represents an attack on the speaker's epistemic authority quite generally (Fricker 2007: 47-48).

As knowers, we must get most of our information about the value of what we offer the epistemic community from other members of that community. It is not as though people operate as self-regulating machines that pop out bits of knowledge. We learn from others which sorts of insights they find valuable, interesting, and important, and that information—accumulated over a lifetime—feeds back into the development and assessment of our own thinking on complex matters. Just

as a child learns about concepts (greenness, justice, food) by being told by someone else who is competent with the concept when she is applying it correctly and incorrectly, we learn about and refine our concepts, including moral concepts, by incorporating the feedback of those in our epistemic community. But if some person or members of some group almost always told they are misapplying concepts, mis-perceiving events, and misunderstanding things, then it makes sense that they will begin to doubt themselves.

This insight also helps to explain the value of consciousness-raising meetings, which function as a space where under-appreciated insights are validated. “Effectively, [consciousness raising] redefines women's feelings of discontent as indigenous to their situation rather than to themselves as crazy, maladjusted, hormonally imbalanced, bitchy, or ungrateful. It is validating to comprehend oneself as devalidated rather than invalid. Women's feelings are interpreted as appropriate responses to their conditions” (MacKinnon 1989: 100). Part of what compounds this sort of epistemic injustice is the fact that those groups who are likely to be epistemically mistreated are also groups who are likely to have experiences of injustices that the dominant group does not have. If this sort of epistemic injustice goes without remediation we can expect a whole class of experiences to be denied epistemic consideration. “If Carmita Wood, and other women like her, had never gone to consciousness-raising meetings, the experience of sexual harassment would have remained under wraps for much longer, and would have done more to ruin the professional advancement, the personal self-confidence, and, most relevantly here, the general epistemic confidence of women than it was in fact allowed to do, thanks to second wave feminism” (Fricker 2007: 162-163).

When faced with testimony from someone else, members of epistemically mistreated

groups may find themselves doubting their own reasons or thinking that how they had initially cast the problem seems silly or overly sensitive or naïve. But it may be that they are merely under-valuing their own reasons because they are taught to do so, because the structure of the epistemic community mirrors the structure of the human community, which is manifestly unjust. Likewise, members of epistemically advantaged groups may over-value their own reasons. This is simply the flip side of the previous problem. Whereas some people are systematically made to believe that they have little to offer in general, or in particular areas of knowledge, others are systematically made to believe that most of their insights are valid, interesting, important, and so on. Interesting empirical work helps to show how this might happen.

### **5.3.2. Presumed Objectivity and Bias in Our Minds and Methods**

A recent study suggests that priming subjects for personal objectivity actually increases their tendency to express gender bias. That is, “a sense of personal objectivity may prompt an ‘I think it, therefore it’s true’ mindset, in which people assume that their own beliefs and introspections are, by definition, valid and therefore worthy of being acted on. [...] priming a sense of personal objectivity increased gender discrimination, particularly among decision-makers who endorsed stereotypic beliefs or who had stereotypic thoughts made cognitively accessible through implicit priming” (Uhlmann and Cohen 2007: 207). So if people are made to think about how objective they are they are more likely to act on the implicit biases they have. Another study suggests that people are also more likely to overestimate their own positive moral characteristics: “Participants consistently overestimated the likelihood that they would act in generous or selfless ways, whereas their predictions of others were considerably more accurate. Two final studies suggest this divergence in accuracy arises, in part, because people are

unwilling to consult population base rates when predicting their own behavior but use this diagnostic information more readily when predicting others” (Epley and Dunning 2000: 861). Furthermore, if participants are given a white coat described as a doctor's coat, their actual performance in attention-related tasks improves compared to participants not wearing a lab coat, or wearing the same coat described as a painter's coat (Adam and Galinsky 2012). “[T]his research suggests that self-perceptions of objectivity increase people’s faith in the validity of their beliefs and thoughts, and perhaps even in the validity of their feelings and intuitions (cf. Pronin & Kugler, 2007). A sense of objectivity might thereby increase people’s confidence in the validity of stereotypic beliefs, thoughts, and intuitions they have, and thereby increase their likelihood of acting on them” (Uhlmann and Cohen 2007: 208). As I have noted in the previous chapter, West et al (2012) found that this effect is not attenuated by cognitive sophistication.

This research helps to explain the tendency for epistemically advantaged groups to over-value their own reasons because it reveals the value that priming can have on a person's assessment of herself, her actions, and her beliefs. Members of epistemically advantaged groups are constantly being primed for their own objectivity, for their ability to make good decisions on tough cases, and to weigh fairly competing concerns. This would seem to have serious implications for the traditional view of moral epistemology, which attempts to gain access to an impartial point of view in order to issue objective moral verdicts. Philosophers may be especially likely to succumb to this sort of error because they prime themselves for their own objectivity in virtue of the methods they use. That is, the more likely they think it is that their method can help them access this impartial point of view, the more likely their implicit biases will show up in the end product. Just as epistemically disadvantaged groups lose confidence in their own reasons as

a result of invalidation, epistemically advantaged groups may gain undue confidence in their own reasons as a result of over-validation. In both cases, the structural nature of epistemic and social privilege means that the experiences and reasons that are validated (or not) will tend to become stronger over time. The experiences of advantaged groups will be validated, and members of those groups will validate the experiences of similar others, and so on in a strengthening pattern. As a result, the epistemic community as a whole will be likely to experience an over-reliance on the knowledge produced by those people, and will miss out on much of what disadvantaged groups have to offer.

Returning to the case of Peter, we might expect that Peter will over-value his own reasons in the face of competing testimony from the women. His own experience indicates that the applicants are neither sexist nor racist and that the women are being unreasonable or overly-sensitive. But given the empirical information above, it is quite possible that Peter has and will systematically over-value his own reasons, seeing them as objective and unbiased. Meanwhile the women may under-value their own reasons in light of Peter's dismissal or inability to understand them, particularly because they have difficulty clearly articulating their reasons.

#### **5.4. Agenda-Setting**

Our experiences tend to shape which questions we find interesting or worth pursuing in the first place, so we may dismiss as uninteresting the concerns of others whose experiences are unlike our own. Philosophers do not luck into the interesting questions, nor is the proper subject matter of philosophy pre-set. Rather, philosophers have found some things interesting and have pursued them. But this does not mean that the current or historical interests of philosophers account for all or even most of the things philosophers might think about. The same is true for

ethics as a sub-field within analytic philosophy. The sorts of questions ethicists ask and how they answer them may be guided in large part by the particular social positions they have tended to hold. Namely, they have tended to be white, Western, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men. “The discourse of moral philosophy, with its claims that certain judgments are moral ones, that certain beings are moral persons, that certain conditions of responsibility are true and others incoherent, is not outside the social discourse of morality in which these very same matters are at issue” (Walker 2007: 4). The experiences of these people generate interest in hard ethical questions, to be sure. The problem has been that these experiences do not give rise to all the hard ethical questions. Indeed, there may be many areas of ethics that are under-theorized by professional philosophers.

#### **5.4.1. Import- and Interest-Blindness**

When these questions or considerations *are* brought up in discussions, they may be dismissed as uninteresting or easily resolved. But philosophers may miss the significance, both moral and philosophical, of such questions due to a different sort of blindness than the one Jones attributes to Peter in the co-op case. Call this phenomenon import-blindness because the person suffering from it is blind to the import of the questions presented or considerations given. In some cases, philosophers may not suffer from import-blindness, but another sort of blindness where they recognize the importance of a question, but do not themselves find some question as interesting as others, and so they do not work on it. Call this phenomenon interest-blindness. Both import- and interest-blindness can work to set the agenda of ethics in such a way as to exclude whole subsets of questions and considerations; it applies to agenda-setting at the level of issue selection, but also within issues once selected. Discussing the dismissal of intuitionism in

recent moral epistemology, Michael Huemer says of bias: “The influence of such attitudes [...] is more subtle and insidious: these attitudes operate as *biases* rather than explicit premises. They contaminate our judgments as to what seems 'plausible' on its face, which theories are most worth spending time investigating, which objections are 'important' and 'interesting', and so on” (Huemer 2005: 246).

#### **5.4.2. Concepts and Social Experience**

Part of what causes both sorts of blindness is the inescapable fact that having an experience of the world requires that one have an interpretation of the world which excludes other experiences and interpretations. “Once we’ve noted that our experience of the world is already an interpretation of it, we can begin to raise questions about the adequacy of our conceptual framework. Concepts help us organize phenomena; different concepts organize it in different ways” (Haslanger 2006: 17). Understanding that these concepts are constructed rather than presenting themselves fully formed to our brains ought to lead us to question how our particular concepts are incomplete, exclusionary, or dangerous. What have we left out, what have we emphasized, and why? Our conceptual divisions of the world will be shaped largely by the features salient in our experiences, what we need to succeed in our endeavors, what tools are available to us, and so on.

For example, before I got a car I thought about distance in one way, namely as constrained by where I could walk or bike or bus and how long that would take. Now I have a car and I give much less thought to how I will get somewhere, how much time it will take and what I will have to give up to make the journey. I can go to the grocery store to pick up a few things or lots of heavy things without worrying that it will take an hour of my time or that I will

have more than I can carry. If I always had a car I might not think of how these ‘simple errands’ are big undertakings for the car-less, even in a city with excellent public transportation. “Our contingent history of concerns, experiences, and conditions of observation helps determine which facts and properties can show up for us and what counts as normal and aberrant behavior for objects of different sorts. Thus these contingent histories and the second natures they inculcate will help constitute what evidence is available and which inferences are warranted in the face of worldly objects and events” (Kukla 2006: 86). It is no surprise, then, that some questions present themselves as demanding answers and others do not, that some answers present themselves as more plausible than others, and that some questions and answers never make it to the table for consideration in the first place.

Import-blindness in moral philosophy may involve an inability or unwillingness to see that a question has moral components, that certain moral components of a question are as or more important than others, or that certain reasons are moral reasons. Jaggar notes that issues typically associated with the feminine “private sphere” have often been denied moral status, despite having clear effects on the well-being of women and undeniable consequences for our understanding of justice, citizenship, equality, and other concepts usually thought to belong squarely in the “public sphere” and open to philosophical theorizing. “Such issues include the domestic division of labor, media representations of gender, and matters of self-presentation, including body image and fashion” (Jaggar 2000a: 455).

Import-blindness is not a merely theoretical worry, we can look back through the history of Western philosophy and see oversights in the subject matter of ethics, for example in ignoring ethical issues related to family, child-rearing, race, and sex. In general, the inclusion of such

issues have either met with somewhat bizarre treatments (as in Plato's proposal for communal child-rearing), instead of an examination of the lived realities of women, or have come only when female philosophers have written about them. Philosophers today may be more likely to suffer from interest-blindness when confronted with issues like this. That is, they may recognize the importance of such issues, but decline to work on those issues themselves. But if the field on the whole declines to work on those issues, then they still lack any sustained philosophical treatment. One might think that individuals cannot be blamed for what they find interesting. Even in scientific inquiry, we do not typically think that a chemist should be blamed for working on chemistry, or on a particular question chemistry, rather than physics or biology or some other question in chemistry.

But even still, if all of science were focused on chemistry to the exclusion of physics and biology, we would think there was a serious issue, at least in the structure of science as a whole, and we would probably think that steps should be taken to get more people interested in physics and biology. Beyond that, it is worth thinking about the ways in which our interests, whatever else might be said about them, might reflect and perpetuate current injustice. That is, if we find that we are not interested in issues of race or gender, it might well have those preferences as a result of the effects of privilege. If I find that I am not interested in philosophy of race, it may be because I, as a white person, have been insufficiently aware or appreciative of the philosophical interest and moral urgency of those questions. If that is the case, then more reflection on those issues might reveal a genuine interest that was previously obscured by racial privilege.

Applying this Peter's case is a bit more difficult because I have focused here on professional philosophers. But the problems remain for any moral agent. Peter does not

obviously suffer from either import- or interest-blindness with respect to identifying sexism. He takes sexism quite seriously and is committed to its elimination. However, he may suffer from these sorts of blindness at the level of accepting and appreciating reasons *qua* reasons in the first place, or especially *qua* moral reasons. When the women express their gut feelings or inclinations about the applicants, Peter may dismiss these as not being moral reasons at all. That is, he does not see the import or feel the weight of their reasons.

## **6. Revisiting Autonomy in the Context of Community**

I have given four ways in which the conception of moral autonomy that requires a perspectival warrant is questionable. First, our skills of moral perception differ widely and systematically (e.g. on gendered lines). Further, we are likely to under- or over-value our own reasons and the testimony of others as a result of complex cognitive processes which are partially informed by social injustice. Finally, we may suffer from two sorts of blindness with regard to moral questions, which may skew our consideration of these issues and the testimony of others on them. The requirement that we be the sole author of our own moral views supposes incorrectly that we as individuals have at our disposal all the words, concepts, and information needed to do so—that we are epistemically and morally self-sufficient. In this section I draw on my account of well-functioning epistemic communities (WFEC) to show how epistemic and moral autonomy might be re-situated within the context of community.

### **6.1. Relational Autonomy and Epistemic Community**

The conception of autonomy that requires epistemic self-sufficiency on moral issues is part of a broader understanding of autonomy as individualistic. Such individualistic views have been challenged by proponents of *relational autonomy* (see Christman 2004, Code 1991,

Holroyd 2011, Mackenzie 2008, Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).

A distinctive feature of relational conceptions of autonomy is that they are concerned to take into account the social aspects of autonomy, where these aspects include the social conditions that might impact upon or constitute an agent's capacity to be autonomous, or the social relations that might impact upon (hindering or enabling) the exercise of autonomous agency. As such, these conceptions make reference, in specifying the conditions for autonomy, to the social conditions or relations of the agent (Holroyd 2011: 101-102).

In the epistemic realm, an understanding of autonomy must make reference to the epistemic communities in which people develop, reason, and make decisions, recognize both the disadvantages and advantages to those communities with respect to individual agents' autonomy, as well as the impact of particular social positions on moral perception and understanding.

Part of what explains the problems for the self-sufficiency requirement is that people develop more often than not in poorly-functioning epistemic communities, which results in systematic credibility inflation and deflation, import- and interest-blindness, and constrained development of moral perception. These individual problems then manifest themselves in maintaining the poor function of the epistemic community; there is a vicious circle between community function and individual function.

This fact helps to explain why focusing on the lone individual—without reference to her communities—provides an incomplete, distorted picture of moral reasoning and the norms that ought to guide it. But this vicious circle has the potential to turn virtuous in the context of well-functioning epistemic communities. I have given some indications in the previous chapter how WFECs might help to combat limited moral perception. Likewise, WFECs combat the problems that manifest in credibility inflation and deflation at the source by demanding inclusion and nurturance of traditionally undervalued groups. So too is it likely to correct for skewed agenda-

setting by encouraging re-interpretation and fresh discussion of under-theorized topics. There is much more to say about this topic, but I will spend the rest of this chapter talking about individual obligations in the absence of WFECs.

## **6.2. Deference in the Unjust Meantime**

Given that most of us, most of the time are in poorly-functioning epistemic communities, what are our epistemic obligations with respect to unconvincing testimony? We should make use of heuristics, like social position and experience, which tell us when to trust ourselves, when to trust others, and when not to. These contextual clues provide powerful guides to a more reliable understanding of moral reasoning, the role of testimony, and disagreement.

Returning to DISAGREE, we can now see the mistake in the initial reaction to the case, which held—relying on something like the autonomy objection—that Ann and Ben ought not alter their positions for reasons they could not endorse independently. The autonomy objection relies on a false view of human cognitive capacities to understand, appreciate, and accurately weigh reasons and problematically abstracts the individual from her epistemic communities.

The description of DISAGREE under-determines the appropriate reaction precisely because we do not know which moral issue Ann and Ben are discussing, whether that issue is something on which Ann or Ben might be missing relevant experiences, whether they might be subject to the sorts of systematic biases I discuss above, or what challenges they may be facing in trying to understand, appreciate, and weigh each other's reasons.

But this does not mean that we cannot—that Ann and Ben cannot—decide how we ought to react to testimony. If we have a more complete description of Ann and Ben's social positions, their epistemic communities, and the issue under discussion, then we can generate a guide for

how they ought to react. In other words, the considerations I give above should not lead to the pessimistic conclusions that we have no epistemic obligations when faced with such testimony, that we should always refrain from changing our positions in these case, or that we simply cannot know what we ought to do. Rather, recognizing these limitations helps us see more clearly what our epistemic obligations are in such cases. We should defer to others when our social positions are likely to make our reasoning about the matter at hand questionable in some way, while their social positions are likely to make their reasoning about the matter at hand superior on some particular issue. Likewise, we should not defer to others if our social positions are likely to make our reasoning superior to theirs on some particular issue.

By way of elaborating on this, I offer some more filled-out versions of DISAGREE.

DISAGREE-1 Ann and Ben are co-workers at Company C. Suppose that Ann believes that the work environment at C is hostile toward women, but comes to learn that Ben believes that it is not. Suppose further that Ann and Ben, upon learning of their disagreement, decide to sit down and discuss their respective reasons for belief. Ben is not compelled by the reasons Ann gives, which include experiences she's had and reports heard from others; Ann is not compelled by the reasons Ben gives, opting to explain away the stories Ann gives, and appealing to his experience of the company as welcoming. Ann and Ben disagree, and neither feel the pull of the other's reasons.

How should Ann and Ben react when they discover that the other disagrees? DISAGREE-1 is similar to Peter's case, and it is plausible here that Ben ought to defer to Ann; Ben ought to believe that the work environment is hostile toward women even though he does not grasp the reasons why it is hostile—he does not see it himself. He should defer because it is likely that his own judgment about whether the work environment at C is hostile is skewed by his own experiences, which are shaped by his privilege. His experience at C has been a good one: he is respected by his co-workers, his contributions are valued, and so on. Additionally, Ben should

defer to Ann in particular because she has access to reasons he does not—she has been harassed and discriminated against while at C. She also has experience recognizing sexist attitudes, much like the women in Peter's case. Ben is also likely to over-value his own reasons, whereas Ann is likely to under-value hers.

DISAGREE-2 Ann, who is white, and Ben, who is Black, are in an anti-racism advocacy group. Suppose that Ann believes that the group should not work on combating police stop-and-frisk policies, but comes to learn that Ben believes that the group should do so. Suppose further that Ann and Ben, upon learning of their disagreement, decide to sit down and discuss their respective reasons for belief. Ann is not compelled by the reasons Ben, who claims the policies unjustly target young Black and Latino men on the basis of race, gives; Ben is not compelled by the reasons Ann, who thinks the policies merely give police the right to ensure public safety on the basis of reasonable suspicion, gives. Ann and Ben disagree, and neither feel the pull of the other's reasons.

How should Ann and Ben react when they discover that the other disagrees? In this case, Ann should defer to Ben on the question of whether the stop-and-frisk policies are an issue of racial justice. Ann is committed to an anti-racist agenda, but fails to see the ways in which stop-and-frisk policies disproportionately burden Black and Latino men. While she thinks of her view on this as unbiased, she may be blinded by racial privilege into seeing the police generally as a force for good; they have helped her when she was in need, treated her with respect, only pulled her over when she was already breaking the law, and they often let her go with a warning. Ben, meanwhile, has a finely-tuned eye for recognizing institutional racism after encountering it for decades. He also has a different experience of the police; he knows several people killed or beat up by the police, he has experienced their harassment, seen them look at him with automatic distrust, he knows that even academic Henry Louis Gates (see Olopade 2009: online) and actor Forest Whitaker (see Coates 2013: online) are not above suspicion because of their race, and he, like many Black parents, has given his children 'The Little Black Book' for dealing with police.

Ann and Ben have different experiences, and those experiences limit or expand their moral perception on this issue. Ann ought to recognize this and defer to Ben.

DISAGREE-3 Ann and Ben are friends. Suppose that Ann believes that War W was just, but comes to learn that Ben believes W was unjust. Suppose further that Ann and Ben, upon learning of their disagreement, decide to sit down and discuss their respective reasons for belief. Ben is not compelled by the reasons Ann gives, which include arguments about the necessity of the conflict, the care taken to avoid civilian casualties, and so on; Ann is not compelled by the reasons Ben gives, which are based on more pacifist principles. Ann and Ben disagree, and neither feel the pull of the other's reasons.

How should Ann and Ben react when they discover that the other disagrees? Unlike in the previous cases, it does not seem like either Ann or Ben should defer to the other here. So described, neither's social position seems to put him or her in a better position to know whether W was unjust. For now they should maintain their beliefs, which are based on reasons they endorse, though they may suspect that their beliefs will have to change in the future. There may be some other person to whom Ann and/or Ben ought to defer on this issue (perhaps they should seek the testimony of veterans on both sides of the conflict as well as victims of the war and occupation), but as described, neither should defer to the other.

In DISAGREE-3, neither Ann's nor Ben's social position gives him or her special insight into the issue at hand. One can easily imagine other cases where it is not clear whether Ann or Ben should defer, but for a different reason. There are surely cases where Ann experiences social privilege along one axis, like race, but oppression along another axis, like gender, whereas Ben experiences social privilege along the gender axis, but oppression along the racial axis. Though we might expect Ann to be better than Ben at picking up on gender-based wrongs and Ben to be better than Ann at picking up on race-based wrongs, there are moral questions that may bear heavily on both race and gender. In such cases, Ann and Ben would do well to help each other

come to see the racial and gendered elements of the issue, though they would also benefit from the insight of someone oppressed along both axes.

Moral autonomy does not, as some have argued, require epistemic self-sufficiency. Rather, once we see ourselves as epistemic and moral agents embedded in particular social locations within particular epistemic communities, we should see autonomy as requiring some degree of epistemic *dependency*. We must depend on others to develop and refine our habits and skills of moral perception, to engage with us in the process of re-interpreting social experience, to fill in the gaps and distortions in our understandings of the world, and to develop and maintain better epistemic communities.

## 7. Conclusion

The argument I have given here is not one for outsourcing all of one's moral views to others. Rather, it is an argument for recognizing both the limitations and advantages that social positions confer on knowers. It holds that we should be careful and critical when forming beliefs about morality, a task made more difficult and more pressing by the growing mass of evidence that we do not—*cannot*—inhabit an impartial point of view of the Universe. Our best alternative is to invest time and energy into understanding both the biases we are susceptible to and the special insights we have to make. In the cases I have described we are still making autonomous decisions and responding to reasons we can endorse. It is just that the reasons we respond to are meta-reasons about whose testimony is more likely to be correct, about our own likelihood of missing something, about our epistemic communities, and so on. Driver expresses this idea nicely: “if the reasons for accepting the testimony are good ones—i.e. the expert has the right sort of experience, her judgments have been confirmed in the past, etc., then that acceptance is

warranted. The decision to trust has been made for reasons the agent grasps and endorses, and thus the agent is also displaying responsiveness to relevant reasons” (2006: 636). Of course, we must be careful about these judgments as well, since our views about how reliable others are, how often they have been correct, whether their experiences are relevant, and so on are also subject to the problems and distortions I have described. But this is precisely why we need a robust account of social power, injustice, and their impacts on knowledge production and acquisition if we are to have a responsible, action-guiding view of our epistemic obligations as moral agents.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Epistemic Harms of Stereotype Threat and the Role of Epistemic Communities in Counteracting Them

#### 1. Introduction

In 2005, then President of Harvard University and now Director of the National Economic Council, Lawrence Summers gave a controversial speech speculating on the causes of the under-representation of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields. In that speech he said:

It does appear that on many, many different human attributes—height, weight, propensity for criminality, overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability -- there is relatively clear evidence that whatever the difference in means -- which can be debated -- there is a difference in the standard deviation, and variability of a male and a female population. And that is true with respect to attributes that are and are not plausibly, culturally determined (Summers 2005: online).

By “variability”, Summers means that men seem to be at the very top and very bottom of results on tests of math and science, whereas women are more closely clustered around the middle. He then hypothesizes that if there are more men with the highest aptitude in math and science, then we should expect under-representation of women in the highest levels of STEM professions because those professions can and do attract the very best people, who will be male about five-sixths of the time according to what Summers calls—using an unintentionally apt description—a “crude calculation” (Summers 2005: online).

Much of the public discourse that followed supposed that people were in one of three camps: those who wanted to follow the evidence and accepted Summers' conclusions, those who

wanted to follow the evidence, but thought Summers was incorrect about what it implied or had not looked at all the evidence, and those who rejected Summers' conclusions on political, rather than epistemic, grounds. Of course, these divisions oversimplify the range of responses (both possible and actual) to Summers' speech, but they do capture two rough divisions: those who thought Summers was correct and those who did not, and those who judged his claims on epistemic grounds and those who judged his claims on political grounds. If one wanted to evaluate his claims epistemically, it was assumed that: (1) one was interested in the truth alone, (2) one would rely solely on evaluating the evidence available, and (3) political values had no place in the discussion.

The controversy over Summers' remarks provides a snapshot of a broader debate about what it means to form beliefs responsibly. Philosophers often think that, epistemically speaking, we should follow the evidence because doing so is the best way to have true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. In this chapter and the next, I argue that this is both false and misguided. In this chapter I, like Summers, consider the question of women's math performance. Unlike Summers, I explain women's diminished performance by reference to a phenomenon called stereotype threat. First, I provide some review of the literature on stereotype threat. Then, I argue that there are distinctively epistemic harms that result from stereotype threat. Next, I argue that these harms can be explained as failures of our epistemic communities to be well-functioning. Finally, I show that these harms may be counteracted by developing and maintaining well-functioning epistemic communities. In the next chapter, I explore the question further by asking whether a concern for evidence and truth alone can adequately guide our beliefs in cases where stereotype threat might be involved.

## 2. Stereotype Threat

In this section, I review the literature on stereotype threat, particularly in the area of women's math performance. There is ample research on the influence of stereotype threat on women's mathematical performance, particularly on difficult exams (see Spencer, et al 1999). Steele and Aronson say, in their pioneering paper on the topic, that, “the existence of [a negative group] stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes. We call this predicament *stereotype threat* and argue that it is experienced, essentially, as a self-evaluative threat” (1995: 797). That is, stereotype threat causes in an individual a sort of crisis of self in which actual performance is diminished in the face of a stereotype about diminished performance.

In the case of gender and mathematical ability, there are strong negative stereotypes that girls and women are less able to do math very well, as in Summers' claim about variability at the high ends.

According to these stereotypes, men/boys are better at math and science domains, whereas women/girls are better at English and reading domains. These stereotypes are transmitted in the culture in a variety of ways, including through mass media, books, parents, peers, and teachers. They may affect children through the toys they play with, the books they choose to read, the way they are treated in class, and, eventually, the classes they choose to take and the careers they pursue (Biernat, 1991; Constantinople, Cornelius, & Gray, 1988; Eccles, 1987; Hewitt & Seymour, 1991; Leinhardt, Seewald, & Engel, 1979; Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990; Meece, Eccles, Kaczala, Goff, & Futterman, 1982). (Quinn and Spencer 2001: 56).

These negative stereotypes can be activated in any number of ways, including subtle suggestion.

For example, the stereotype under consideration here can be activated by all of the following: informing participants that the test has revealed gender differences in the past (Spencer et al.

1999), taking the test in a room where a small majority of the other test-takers are male (Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev 2000), placing demographic questions before an exam rather than after (Danaher and Crandall 2008), simply being a female who is taking a difficult math test (Spencer et al. 1999 and Quinn and Spencer 2001—“Hence, we believe that on difficult math tests, the 'normal' or standard state of affairs is for the situation to be high in stereotype threat” [Quinn and Spencer 2001: 58]), being told that males are better at math as a result of natural ability rather than effort or experience (Thoman et al. 2008 and Dar-Nimrod and Heine 2006), or being told by a female confederate that the experimenter is sexist (Adams et al. 2006). When the stereotype is activated, which, again, is likely the case most of the time for women in mathematics, women perform worse than they would if the stereotype were nullified.

That is, asserting that men are more likely than women to perform very well *helps make it the case* that men are more likely than women to perform very well. Likewise, asserting that this is not the case does a lot to eliminate the gap, and may even result in women outperforming men. Spencer et al. (1999) induced stereotype threat conditions in their second study by including this statement before an exam, plus a statement indicating that one half or another of the test had shown gender differences:

As you may know there has been some controversy about whether there are gender differences in math ability. Previous research has sometimes shown gender differences and sometimes shown no gender differences. Yet little of this research has been carried out with women and men who are very good in math. You were selected for this experiment because of your strong background in mathematics (12).

When the exam was presented as producing no differences in gender performance, there was no difference in performance, with men and women both answering, on average, around 18 questions correctly (Spencer et al. 1999: 12-13). However, when the test was characterized as

producing gender differences, the differences were stark, with men answering, on average, about 26 questions correctly, and women answering, on average, about 5 questions correctly (Spencer et al. 1999: 12-13).

Spencer et al. (1999) replicated Study 2's results in a third study, which used a less highly-selected sample and induced threat conditions merely by having the test, rather than by mentioning that the test produced differences, and non-threat conditions by explicitly mentioning that the test was gender-fair (16-17). Good et al reduced the stereotype threat condition by including the following pre-test statement:

What about gender differences? This mathematics test has not shown any gender differences in performance or mathematics ability. The test has been piloted in many mathematics courses across the nation to determine how reliable and valid the test is for measuring mathematics ability. Analysis of thousands of students' test results has shown that males and females perform equally well on this test. In other words, this mathematics test shows no gender differences (2008: 22).

In this study, the stereotype threat condition just was the normal test-taking condition, which included explicit mention of the diagnostic nature of the exam. Under the stereotype threat condition, women and men in this study performed about the same, but under the non-threat condition, men performed the same as in the threat condition, but women performed significantly better, correctly answering an additional 1.5 questions on average (Good et al. 2008: 23). Quinn and Spencer (2001) were able to reduce threat conditions by including a similar statement: "Prior use of these problems has shown them to be gender-fair—that is, men and women perform equally well on these problems" (64). As in Good et al. (2008), Quinn and Spencer (2001) found that men significantly outperformed women under the stereotype threat condition. Under the non-threat condition, women significantly outperformed women under the threat condition, and also outperformed men, but not in a statistically significant way (Quinn and Spencer 2001: 65).

Dar-Nimod and Heine (2006) were able to generate similar results by placing a GRE-style reading comprehension exam between two math exams, and varying the content of the reading comprehension passages to induce or nullify stereotype threat.

So far, this evidence strongly suggests that if women or girls who are taking a math exam believe or are aware of negative group stereotypes, then they will likely underperform. If they believe that the stereotype does not apply to them or to the test they are taking, however, they are likely to perform much better. But there is also evidence that the beliefs of people not currently at risk of stereotype threat matter for performance. In the domain under consideration now, for example, mothers' beliefs about their children's mathematical ability make a difference.

Jacobs and Eccles (1992) found that the stereotypic beliefs of mothers tended to color the mothers' perceptions of their daughters' and sons' math abilities. In addition, work by Frome and Eccles (1998) showed that mothers tended to underestimate the mathematical abilities of their sixth-grade daughters and overestimate the math abilities of their sons. In a study of high school students, Hyde, Fennema, Ryan, Frost, and Hopp (1990) found that high school boys reported greater favorable attitudes from their mothers, fathers, and teachers about their math ability than high school girls (Quinn and Spencer 2001: 56).

These beliefs and attitudes are transmitted in various ways, such as subtle communication cues, often despite the desires of the person who has the belief (Rosenthal 2003: 151).

This phenomenon of covert belief and attitude transfer—and the effects it has on others—is well-documented in several domains. For example, the beliefs of judges concerning the guilt or innocence of a defendant influence the decisions of juries. “In a meta-analysis of the four studies reported to date, the median effect size [...] would be sufficient to increase the rate of findings of guilty from 43% to 57% for a jury instructed by a judge who believes a defendant is guilty. Note that these studies controlled for the actual guilt and nonguilt [sic] of the defendant [...]” (Rosenthal 2003: 153).

There is a similar outcome in classroom settings, which is sometimes called the Pygmalion Effect or the Rosenthal Effect. When teachers have higher expectations of their students, they tend to perform better, and *vice versa* (see Rosenthal 2002 and 2003).

Meta-analyses (i.e., statistical analyses combining results of separate studies) in a number of research domains (e.g., studies of human and animal learning, of reaction time, and of the perception of inkblots, carried out in many different laboratories) showed that the phenomenon of interpersonal expectancy effects in laboratories and in classrooms was quite replicable; recent work indicates that the average effect size correlation ( $r$ ) is about .30 (Rosenthal, 2002; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978). An average effect size  $r$  of that magnitude would be sufficient to improve a 35% success rate in predicting subjects' response to a 65% success rate (Rosenthal, 2002). (Rosenthal 2003).

All of the above suggests that our beliefs and attitudes, both explicit and implicit, can have a causal impact on both our own behavior and the behavior of others.

### **3. The Epistemic Harms of Stereotype Threat**

In this section I explore some of the epistemic harms to those individuals who experience stereotype threat. There are additional epistemic harms to non-stereotyped individuals—for example the epistemic setbacks faced by the field of mathematics as a result of the under-representation of women—that I do not discuss at length here.

#### **3.1. Diminished Epistemic Performance**

The most straightforward, and most discussed, epistemic harm of stereotype threat is that it causes the person who experiences it to cease knowing certain things either due to an inability to generate true beliefs under the stereotype threat condition or because she loses confidence in the beliefs she once thought true (see Fricker 2007, Gendler 2011). For a girl taking a math exam, for example, this diminished epistemic performance might be because she cannot focus on a problem, and so cannot generate the answer, or because she is checking and re-checking her answers, unsure whether they are correct. Gendler says that this feature of stereotype threat

should make the phenomenon of at least *prima facie* interest to epistemologists (2011: 50). While this is true, I do not think that this diminished epistemic performance, whether through the loss of true belief or justification (due to lowered confidence), is the most interesting epistemic harm imposed by stereotype threat.

What should concern us more about diminished epistemic performance is how it is distributed in an epistemic community. It is, quite obviously, distributed in an unjust way. It does not affect people at random in the same way that we might expect general test anxiety to do so. Rather, it disadvantages people who are in socially and epistemically disfavored groups relative to those in socially and epistemically favored groups. Though stereotype threat can be induced in members of groups who are typically favored by comparing them negatively within a domain (e.g. generating lower mathematical performance and athletic performance among white men by comparing them with Asian or Black men, respectively (see Aronson et al 1999 and Stone et al 1999)), stereotype threat is most ubiquitous among generally disfavored groups. For these groups, or at least some members of these groups, like female scientists or math students and Black academics or students in general, the stereotype threat induced state is the norm rather than the exception. Fricker says of stereotype threat that it “effectively labels a certain social predicament: the predicament of susceptibility to a disadvantageous causal construction” (2007: 57). Because stereotypes are about groups, rather than individuals, and because being a part of a disfavored group partially means that the stereotypes about one's group are likely to be relatively negative, the harms of stereotype threat are incurred most often and most severely by those who are already in a vulnerable position, and these harms are part of what keeps them in that position.

### 3.2. Loss of Credibility

Apart from the diminished epistemic performance caused by stereotype threat, the phenomenon in general causes members of groups who suffer it to lose credibility (or to fail to gain it) with others in their epistemic communities. Women will be less trusted, less heard when it comes to math and science. Their insights in laboratories, board rooms, and department meetings will not go as far. This aspect of the epistemic harm of stereotype threat is a case of testimonial injustice. It would be bad enough if there were negative stereotypes about women's ability to do math and that caused them to be taken less seriously when discussing math with men, for example. But stereotype threat introduces the added complication that they may actually perform worse at math, and the lack of credibility might, in that sense, be justified. As an example, suppose I have two friends, Asha and Barb. I know that Asha excels in her math courses and Barb struggles in them. I would be correct, which is to say rational or justified, in thinking of Asha as more likely than Barb to correctly answer a math question, to give her more credibility in this domain. Extending this idea to women and men in the stereotype threat case, though, does not sit well. There is something suspect about attributing less credibility to women as a result of their low performance which is, itself, a result of attributing less credibility to them. It is the purpose of this chapter and the next to explain this suspicion.

In discussing testimonial injustice as a result of stereotyping in general, Fricker notes that the harm “involves the idea that the social type in question is humanly lesser (think of the sort of racism heaped upon Tom Robinson--'all Negroes lie'), the dimension of degradation *qua* human being is not simply symbolic; rather, it is a literal part of the core epistemic insult” (2007: 44-45). The credibility deficit suffered as a result of stereotype threat will always carry this feature with

it when it is suffered by a member of a socially-disfavored group. Women, then, are degraded as individual knowers when their mathematical performance is decreased as a result of stereotype threat, but they are also degraded as women knowers. That is, they experience the credibility deficit as an affront to the intellectual capacities of all women. Again, this is complicated by the fact that the credibility deficit may be correct or justified in the sense identified above. Women may find themselves confused and torn when confronted with the reality of low performance and the feeling that something has gone awry to make this the reality.

### **3.3. Lack of Understanding**

Stereotype threat imposes an interpretive cost on those who experience it. The world they inhabit is one understood in a way that disproportionately disadvantages them. Women know that girls and women often perform worse on math exams; they know that STEM professionals are overwhelmingly men; they know or suspect that others expect less of them; they know, in other words, the stereotypes about their groups. But they may lack the resources to explain this data in a way that is helpful or productive. A male-dominated world provides as its chief explanation of this data that women are not well suited to quantitative reasoning, that they are not as good at it as men are, that they are less interested in it, that they freely choose to bypass STEM professions, and so on. This is not to say that these are the only explanations, just that they are the dominant ones. Indeed, to the extent that these are no longer the dominant or only explanations, this is so because of feminist resistance to the interpretation of the data that requires women's inferiority. In discussing the impetus for consciousness raising activity, MacKinnon captures the undercurrent of this kind of resistance: "The initial recruiting impulse seems to be a response to an unspecified, often unattached, but just barely submerged discontent that in some inchoate way

women relate to being female” (MacKinnon 1989: 85).

Attempting to explain this vague discontent is difficult or impossible using the language of the oppressor. The same is true for women who experience stereotype threat. There may be a vague feeling that something does not add up, but an inability to explain it in purportedly-neutral terms. When Lawrence Summers gave his speech on the dearth of women in STEM fields, he presented himself as a reluctant follower of the evidence. He discusses two factors which, he thinks, account for most of this dearth: women opting out of high-powered jobs and evidence of variability in mathematical performance. “So my sense is that the unfortunate truth-I would far prefer to believe something else, because it would be easier to address what is surely a serious social problem if something else were true-is that the combination of the high-powered job hypothesis and the differing variances probably explains a fair amount of this problem” (Summers 2005: online).

The point here is not to doubt Summers' sincerity on this point, but rather to highlight it; he would love to believe something else, but he has to follow the evidence wherever it leads, and if he thinks it leads to the conclusion that there are natural differences in ability along sex lines. But where the evidence leads depends in large part on the conceptual and empirical resources of the epistemic community at large. Summers considers other hypotheses, but thinks they are not well supported by the evidence. But this dearth of other explanations that seem supported by evidence puts a burden on women who experience stereotype threat. They have to think that they are not good at math, or taking tests, or that they would just prefer to focus on something else. But as Fricker points out of hermeneutical injustice in general, this collective conceptual deficit does not equally disadvantage Summers and a woman who experiences stereotype threat.

Summers thought of himself as a well-meaning university president who made genuine attempts to understand and counteract a deep social problem but came up short because the truth was not on his side. A woman who experiences stereotype threat—but does not know it—has to come to understand herself as less able to do math, partially because of her sex, and she must come to see women as essentially less capable than men in this domain. Or she must resist this interpretation and be considered a wishful thinker, blind to the evidence or simply irrational (which then plays into a related stereotype of women's cognitive abilities).

These options serve to maintain a system that privileges certain understandings of the world and dismisses others as illegitimate. MacKinnon, again, describing the epistemic and political import of consciousness raising: “The point was, and is, that this process moved the reference point for truth and thereby the definition of reality as such. Consciousness raising alters the terms of validation by creating community through a process that redefines what counts as verification” (MacKinnon 1989: 87). I will say much more about this later in the chapter, but it suffices to point out now that stereotype threat puts those who suffer it in a position where they must grapple with their performance, but the interpretations most readily available to them are those negative explanations that were initially embedded in the stereotype.

### **3.4. Incongruous Experience of the World**

The fourth epistemic harm of stereotype threat I will discuss is the confusion and sense of ill-fit I have alluded to in the previous sections. A girl might find herself confused by the fact that she is confused by a math exam, though she has performed fine in her classes otherwise, or similarly confused about why certain stereotypes exist. This is the sort of confusion that arises when one confronts a world that not only devalues her, but expects her to devalue herself. Sandra

Bartky says that the feminist consciousness is anguished for this reason (1975: 428). “Feminist consciousness, it might be ventured, turns a 'fact' into a 'contradiction'; often, features of social reality are first apprehended *as* contradictory, as in conflict with one another, or as disturbingly out of phase with one another, from the vantage point of a radical project of transformation” (Bartky 1975: 429). When one experiences diminished epistemic performance as a result of being a woman, she may experience what she is told is natural, harmless, scientific, a brute fact, or whatever as threatening instead. Of similar supposedly harmless facts of life, Bartky says:

Each reveals itself, depending on the circumstances in which it appears, as a threat, an insult, an affront, as a reminder, however subtle, that I belong to an inferior caste. In short, these are revealed as instruments of oppression or as articulations of a sexist institution. Since many things are not what they seem to be and since many apparently harmless sorts of things can suddenly exhibit a sinister dimension, social reality is revealed as *deceptive*. [...] Many people know that things are not what they seem to be. The feminist knows that the thing revealed in its truth at last will, likely as not, turn out to be a thing which threatens or demeans. But however unsettling it is to have to find one's way about in a world which dissimulates, it is worse to be unable to determine the nature of what is happening at all (1975: 432-433).

This sense that one is considered inferior may be more or less recognized and resisted, depending on the person who experiences it. But to whatever degree this occurs, it is an epistemic harm for the person who suffers it. “When unconventional emotional responses are experienced by isolated individuals, those concerned may be confused, unable to name their experience; they may even doubt their own sanity” (Jaggar 1989: 166).

This harm may be partially attributable to cognitive dissonance (see Festinger 1957 for the pioneering account). Cognitive dissonance, as we all know from experience, results in confusion and anxiety. Festinger claims that, “[Cognitive dissonance] is a motivating factor in its own right. [...] Cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward

hunger reduction” (1957: 3). In the context of oppression, cognitive dissonance may arise as a result of being defined as socially inferior, which may be both internalized and resisted. “Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior” (Young 1990: 12). For the privileged, there is no such dissonance. There is no need to resort to “wishful thinking” to explain poor performance. The simplest explanation, it will seem, is to say that there are natural differences that manifest themselves in differences in performance. But this explanation is only the simplest one in the context of oppression, which has as a backdrop as assumption about the natural inferiority of women (see Haslanger 1993). Completing a vicious circle, concerns arising from this double consciousness may be part of what causes decreased performance under threatening conditions. Logel et al (2009) argue that attempting to suppress stereotypes “uses up mental resources needed to perform well in the stereotyped domain” (299).

### **3.5. Constrained Options**

Stereotype threat has as a further epistemic harm that it constrains the intellectual options of the person who experiences it. There are at least two distinct ways in which this might happen, which I discuss here. The first is disqualification: a person's intellectual options may be constrained because stereotype threat causes her to fail to meet the qualifications for some intellectual activity that she would otherwise pursue; the second is disidentification: a person's intellectual options may be constrained because stereotype threat causes her to alter her desires or goals such that she stops pursuing some intellectual activity.

### **3.5.1. Disqualification**

One way in which stereotype threat can constrain the intellectual options of someone who suffers it is through failing to meet the qualifications for some intellectual activity.

Disqualification can be direct or indirect. For example, experiencing stereotype threat on the SAT, ACT, GRE, LSAT, or MCAT could result in an otherwise capable applicant being rejected or offered less financial assistance since these tests play a large role in admissions and financial aid decisions. Stereotype threat may also have the effect of depressing grades in classes, meaning that people who experience stereotype threat are likely to have lower GPAs than they might have if they were not experiencing stereotype threat (see Logel et al 2012 for a review of the studies suggesting that removing the threatening conditions actually increases performance). GPAs, along with test scores, are used to weed applicants out for graduate and professional schools, colleges, and jobs. These effects are likely to build up over a person's academic career. If a woman experiences stereotype threat in high school, she may get into a lower-ranked college, then a lower-ranked graduate school, and then a less prestigious job. This means that the pressures that create our professional class, which is identified with intellectual investigation, are sensitive to unjust stereotypes. This is especially troubling when one considers that stereotype threat is most likely to affect the vanguard—the very best in the domain who are especially eager not to confirm negative stereotypes (see Steele 2010).

### **3.5.2. Disidentification**

Fricker notes that testimonial and hermeneutical injustice may discourage a person from developing intellectual virtues (2007: 49, 163). They may also discourage people from pursuing knowledge in certain domains. Stereotype threat often causes what psychologists call

disidentification (see Griffin 2002, Steele 1997, Steele 2010). Steele (1997) argues that identification with some domain is required for success in that domain. If I do not care about chess, then I am unlikely to play chess well; I lack the motivation to learn, practice, win, or prove myself as a chess player.

The theory begins with an assumption: that to sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one's self-definition, a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively accountable. This accountability—that good self-feelings depend in some part on good achievement—translates into sustained achievement motivation. For such an identification to form, this reasoning continues, one must perceive good prospects in the domain, that is, that one has the interests, skills, resources, and opportunities to prosper there, as well as that one belongs there, in the sense of being accepted and valued in the domain. If this relationship to schooling does not form or gets broken, achievement may suffer. [...] To continue in math, for example, a woman might have to buck the low expectations of teachers, family, and societal gender roles in which math is seen as unfeminine as well as anticipate spending her entire professional life in a male-dominated world. These realities, imposed on her by societal structure, could so reduce her sense of good prospects in math as to make identifying with it difficult. (Steele 1997: online).

Stereotype threat is often the most acute for those who do identify with the domain in question.

Women who want to have a career in a STEM field are especially wary of confirming the stereotype, but this extra pressure may decrease performance. Disidentification is one way of coping with this problem, whether it occurs before one has identified with a domain, or after one has done so and faced stereotype threat. That is, many women may find the prospect of disidentifying with math and science a more palatable option than facing the threat of stereotype confirmation.

We all want to feel good about ourselves, which involves feeling like we can be successful in some pursuits to which we ascribe meaning and value. If it seems like we will be unable to succeed in some domain, it may be less painful to devalue the domain than to devalue our potential to succeed in that domain.

Disidentification offers the retreat of not caring about the domain in relation to the self. But as it protects in this way, it can undermine sustained motivation in the domain, an adaptation that can be costly when the domain is as important as schooling. Stereotype threat is especially frustrating because, at each level of schooling, it affects the vanguard of these groups, those with the skills and self-confidence to have identified with the domain. Ironically, their susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability (e.g., their internalization of the stereotype) but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it. (This argument has the hopeful implication that to improve the domain performance of these students, one should focus on the feasible task of lifting this situational threat rather than on altering their internal psychology.) Yet, as schooling progresses and the obstacles of structure and stereotype threat take their cumulative toll, more of this vanguard will likely be pressured into the ranks of the unidentified. These students, by not caring about the domain vis-à-vis the self, are likely to underperform in it regardless of whether they are stereotype threatened there (Steele 1997: online).

Stereotype threat, then, has the effect—directly and indirectly—of discouraging identification with certain domains (math and science for women, academics in general for African Americans). This means that women and African Americans (especially males) are disproportionately redefining themselves individually as people to whom these domains do not matter.

As a woman, I may decide that I prefer writing about literature to math or science, and pursue success in the humanities. Of course, there is nothing wrong with writing about literature, but when disidentification is partly a function of social group, the results of self-selection in and out of domains can result in high concentrations of socially similar people in specific domains, which are themselves not valued equally by society at large. Math and science are generally considered to be intellectually rigorous, the humanities less so. It may become easier to look at the clumping of men in the former and women in the latter and infer that men are better at rigorous intellectual pursuits. This common reaction involves assumptions about both the value of various domains and the extent to which natural ability and hard work track success and desire

to pursue success in some domain. But both of these things have a complex relationship with stereotypes and power. Fricker notes, of this sort of case, “Testimonial injustice may, depending on the context, exercise real social constructive power, and where such construction ensues, the primary harm of the injustice is grimly augmented—the epistemic insult is also a moment in a process of social construction that constrains who the person can be” (2007: 58).

Some people who experience stereotype threat disidentify with the threatening domain, but interestingly, others disidentify with the relevant social group or its characteristics. That is, the conflict presents itself as one between, for example, doing well in math and being a woman. One response is to disidentify with math, and so to stop caring about whether one does well in it, which allows one to maintain one's identity as a woman. Another response is to disidentify with one's status as a woman or with the characteristics that are supposed to accompany that status.

Pronin et al (2004) argue that women who remain identified with math are likely to disavow characteristics associated with poor female performance in mathematics: wearing makeup, flirtatiousness, gossiping, being emotional, wanting children, and planning to take time away from work to care for children (155). They tested identification with these characteristics and other feminine characteristics not associated with stereotypes about mathematical performance (empathy and nurturance, for example).

As predicted, women strongly identified with math responded to the stereotype threat posed by a scientific article impugning their sex's math ability by bifurcating their “feminine identities.” This bifurcation involved disidentification with stereotypically feminine qualities seen as incongruent or incompatible with excellence and success in math-related fields (e.g., wearing makeup or wanting to raise children) but not with those characteristics (e.g., being sensitive or having a good fashion sense) seen as unlikely, or at least less likely, to hinder such success (Pronin et al 2004: 161).

This research is consistent with the previously cited research on academic disidentification.

Stereotype threat causes a crisis of the self that has to be dealt with via an alteration of what one is or values, which requires a closing off of some possibilities.

### **3.5.3. The Pipeline**

Both disqualification and disidentification contribute to a narrowing of possibilities for people who experience stereotype threat. This narrowing of possibilities is an epistemic harm when the possibilities in question involve intellectual pursuits and the construction of oneself as an epistemic agent. The phenomenon described is observable in STEM disciplines. Often called 'the pipeline problem', women are represented by progressively lower numbers in more advanced positions in STEM disciplines—and in philosophy (see Antony 2012, Blickenstaff 2005, Good et al 2008, Wolfinger et al. 2008, Xu 2008).

Many of the most serious deficits caused by stereotype threat are in specifically cognitive or intellectual arenas: math and science for women and academics in general for African Americans, especially men. This means that the biggest, most systematic deficits are in the areas that carry with them the most honorific status. Stereotype threat in these areas has a regulative effect on what sort of person will tend to have, create, and share knowledge in these domains. As I noted in Chapter 2, many of us think that knowledge or truth by itself is not valuable, but that interesting or important knowledge or truth and understanding how things fit together is epistemically valuable. Stereotype threat helps make it the case that socially-disfavored groups will be disproportionately uninvolved the creation of what we have traditionally considered interesting and important knowledge, and will not tend to be in positions to expand and alter what we consider interesting and important.

#### **4. Epistemic Community and Stereotype Threat**

In Chapter 2 I argued that well-functioning epistemic communities (WFEC) are epistemically valuable. WFECs are epistemic communities that are: inclusive, nurturing, and interested in understanding and (re-)interpreting the world. In this section I provide an account of how each of the epistemic harms I described earlier can be understood as a violation of some feature of the WFEC. In many cases, the harm is a violation of each feature, or may be a violation of one feature in multiple ways. I do not attempt to provide a complete account of the violation here, but do attempt to bring out some central elements.

##### **4.1. Diminished Epistemic Performance, Loss of Credibility, and Constrained Options**

As I noted previously, some of the epistemic harms associated with stereotype threat can be explained in terms of undermining the goal of having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs, but what is perhaps more interesting is how these harms are distributed in an epistemic community. These harms are disproportionately distributed among vulnerable populations. A defender of truth monism is at pains to explain why this distribution is epistemically bad in itself. She can explain why it is bad for this person, who loses knowledge, and this person, who loses knowledge, but cannot explain why loss of knowledge along racial lines, for example, is bad. However, if one takes WFECs to be epistemically valuable, it becomes more clear what is going wrong.

An epistemic community that allows such a distribution fails to be inclusive in both the internal and external senses. External exclusion occurs when some are excluded from participation in the community. The continued acceptance (or non-resistance) of the stereotypes about women and math or African Americans and intellectual endeavors is a way to control who

is allowed in to certain discussions. In addition, the diminished epistemic performance faced by those experiencing stereotype threat may contribute to their exclusion from the general epistemic community, or from local epistemic communities. The construction of the stereotypes and the diminished performance because of it create a vicious circle of exclusion. Internal exclusion occurs in similar ways. Recall that internal exclusion occurs when one is granted formal access to some epistemic community, but fails to wield proportional influence in the community. This sort of internal exclusion, where one's credibility is in doubt regularly, helps contribute to the desire to avoid confirming the stereotype, which is part of what generates the effect of diminished performance owing to the extra cognitive resources required.

The acceptance of the distribution of epistemic injustice as unproblematic is also a sign that an epistemic community is uninterested in its central hermeneutic task. Steele describes the work of another academic (then only a graduate student)—Philip Uri Treisman, a mathematician—interested in the underperformance of Black students in his courses. “In his first-year calculus course, among students who had similar math SATs when they entered Berkeley, black students regularly got lower grades than white and Asian students. I have always thought that one of Treisman's major insights was *understanding that this situation didn't have to be accepted as normal*. This is where his anthropology began” (Steele 2010: Ch 6—emphasis mine). A poorly-functioning epistemic community is one that accepts the underperformance of Black students or women or other disadvantaged groups as normal, unproblematic, or not worth further thought. A WFEC takes interest in such a question, in part because the acceptance of the distribution threatens inclusion and nurturance.

The constrained set of options stereotype threat often imposes is related to this

distribution problem. The same problems of inclusion and interpretation give rise to the narrowing of possibilities for women in math and science and African Americans in intellectual pursuits. Here there is also a failure to be nurturing. Female and Black students are not given the kind of nurturing support by the epistemic community (or more precisely, by some specific, contextually relevant epistemic communities, since they are often very nurtured in the context of other epistemic communities, which partially helps to explain their position in the vanguard [see Steele 2010]) that could counteract the negative influences of stereotype threat. Since the academic or intellectual setting in general may be hostile for members of these groups, these local epistemic communities fail to provide a basic prerequisite to productive intellectual activity: namely, a sense of community in which members are afforded respect.

I have previously argued that testimonial injustices can be understood as the failure of an epistemic community to be inclusive and/or nurturing. The loss of credibility caused by stereotype threat is such a case. Epistemic communities have the task of regulating what Fricker (2007) calls “the credibility economy.” As in the previous harm, there is a vicious circle between the stereotyping of certain groups and their depressed performance. In this case, lowered credibility is built into the stereotypes operating within a community and the appropriateness of the stereotype is apparently confirmed by lower performance. A community that allows these stereotypes, which afford lower epistemic status to some groups, fails to be inclusive, but also fails to provide the conditions under which epistemic agents can be nurtured fully. The loss of credibility, which, again, issues in part from the community-proffered stereotype, sets up and subsequently maintains systematic inequalities in the community, which are at odds with the respect due to people *qua* agents.

#### **4.2. Lack of Understanding and Incongruous Experience of the World**

The harms of lack of understanding and incongruous experience of the world are grouped together because both result from an epistemic community that fails most directly in its hermeneutic duties. I have claimed above that a lack of concern about the distribution of epistemic injustice is a result of this type of failure. But it is also a sign of such a failure that the conceptual resources to make sense of the problem are often unavailable. A WFEC encourages continual critical scrutiny, particularly where social experience is concerned. This helps make the point that what is at issue here is not apolitical truth on the one hand and political correctness or wishful thinking on the other, but rather the range of interpretations a community will allow, encourage, investigate, or discredit.

The kind of social knowledge that imposes interpretive disadvantages on some, especially on the already disadvantaged, is the product of a poorly-functioning epistemic community. In the case of stereotype threat, the initial stereotypes of women and African Americans, the range of explanations for performance differences, and the dichotomy that says one is either interested in the truth or interested in political or moral values are all instances of damaging social knowledge. A WFEC will encourage re-interpretation of each of these clusters of concepts.

#### **5. Counteracting the Harms of Stereotype Threat**

In addition to providing a way of theorizing about epistemic injustice in a new way, WFECs offer powerful clues about the counteraction and prevention of the epistemic harms associated with stereotype threat. If the problems arise out of poorly-functioning epistemic communities, perhaps the solutions are to be found in fixing epistemic communities so as to create WFECs. In this section I argue that this is so. I have already argued that WFECs often do

serve as correctives for epistemic injustice; here I present two successful counters to stereotype threat that are produced in WFECs.

### **5.1. Treisman's Group Study Model**

Treisman, the mathematician troubled by the underperformance of Black students in his classes, developed workshops for Black and female students, participation in which dramatically increased performance. The main element of the strategy he suggests is group study. Treisman initially followed his students around to observe their lives and especially their study habits. He discovered that there were fairly stark racial differences in study habits (see Fullilove and Treisman 1990, Steele 2010, and Treisman 1992). Asian students tended to work in groups, study together, and learn the concepts collectively, while white students tended to work alone, seeking help when they encountered confusion or trouble (Steele 2010: Ch 6).

Black students, Treisman found, offered a contrast to both styles. They were intensely independent, downright private about their work. After class, they returned to their rooms, closed the door and pushed through long hours of study—more hours than either whites or Asians. Many of them were the first of their family to attend college; they carried their family's hopes. [...] With no one to talk to, the only way to tell whether they understood the concept of a problem was to check their answer in the back of the book. [...] This tactic weakened their grasp of the concepts. Despite great effort, they often performed worse on classroom tests than whites and Asians, who they knew had studied no more, or even less, than they had. [...] Discouraged in this way, they didn't talk much academic shop outside of class, sternly separating their academic and social lives. This, in turn, prevented them from knowing that other students, too, had anxieties and difficulties with their work; it allowed them to think that their problems were theirs exclusively, reflective of their own, or perhaps their group's inability. [...] After a poor performance, they would redouble their efforts, but in the same isolated way. Intense work would be followed by relatively poor performance. Eventually they'd get discouraged, deciding the calculus and perhaps even Berkeley wasn't for them (Steele 2010: Ch 6).

Steele recounts Treisman's research in part to debunk the myth that those under stereotype threat just need to work harder or study more, but there are also lessons in Treisman's solution to the problem.

The first iteration of Treisman's now well-known workshops occurred in 1978. “In response to the debilitating patterns of isolation that we had observed among the Black students we studied, we emphasized group learning and *a community life focused on a shared interest in mathematics*. We offered an intensive 'workshop' course as an adjunct to the regular course. [... W]e provided our students with a *challenging, yet emotionally supportive* academic environment (Treisman 1992: 368—emphasis mine).” The results were dramatic, with Black and Latino participants outperforming all other groups (Treisman 1992: 369) Treisman's workshops are, in many ways, intentionally-planned WFECs. These epistemic communities were formed with a specific set of intellectual goals in mind, they were inclusive (though focused on Black and Latino students and female students, respectively), they were emotionally supportive and encouraging, and they sought to encourage those involved to see themselves as people who could excel in mathematics, especially encouraging them to major in math.

Of course, Treisman was not looking to counter stereotype threat *per se*, but rather general underperformance (of which stereotype threat might be some part). In setting up the program, students were able to find an academic community within the university, where they might otherwise have felt adrift. It likely also provided the students with ready counter-examples to the stereotype since they were constantly surrounded by high-achieving members of the stereotyped group. I discuss this point at more length in the next section.

## 5.2. Inclusivity Cues

I have already cataloged some of the ways in which psychologists have reduced threat conditions in the laboratory. Some of them are:

- (a) assuring subjects that the exam is non-diagnostic (Steele and Aronson 1995),
- (b) assuring subjects that the exam is fair (Good et al, 2008, Quinn and Spencer 2001,

Spencer et al 1999),  
 (c) emphasizing other non-threatened social identities (McGlone and Aronson 2006, Rosenthal et al 2007, Rydell et al 2009, Shih et al 2006), and  
 (d) introducing positive role models (Blanton et al 2000, Marx and Roman 2002, McIntyre et al 2005).

Each of these strategies tackles the central dilemma of stereotype threat, which puts success in some domain at odds with part of one's social identity. (a) resolves the dilemma by taking away the higher stakes of taking a diagnostic exam, which reduces the need to disprove the stereotype. (b) resolves the dilemma by creating a temporary window where success and this particular social identity are not at odds. (c) resolves the dilemma by reminding the subject that she has multiple social identities, some of which are not at odds with success in the domain. (d) resolves the dilemma by providing counter-examples to it. What (a)-(d) have in common is that they all provide the subject with more or less subtle cues that she belongs and can succeed in what she is about to do—her gender or race will not stand in her way.

Steele (2010) discusses the roles of these social cues in triggering or nullifying stereotype threat. He introduces the idea by recounting an anecdote about Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who was the first woman on the court. When another woman, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, was added to the court, O'Connor expressed relief. As Steele says, even with just two people, they had formed a “critical mass” that took the pressure off both of them (Steele 2010 Ch 8).

[W]hat determines how much identity threat a person feels in a setting are the cues in the setting that might signal these contingencies—cues such as, in O'Connor's case, the greater attention her decisions received compared with the attention given to those of the other justices, the questions she got that seemed guided by gender stereotypes, and so forth. This became our working hypothesis about what makes identity threat felt, and what gives it the impact it has: more than individual traits, it is cues, contingency-signaling cues in a setting. [...] We came to a simple working rules: if cues in a setting that point in an unsettling direction mount up, a sense of identity threat is likely to

emerge. But if such cues are sparse in a setting and/or point in a benign direction, then a sense of identity threat should not arise or should subside (Steele 2010: Ch 8).

Though the O'Connor story is just an anecdote, it fits in with the larger picture of research on nullifying stereotype threat.

Marx and Roman (2002), for example, showed that having the test administrator be a woman presented as highly competent in math resulted in the female subjects performing as well as the male subjects and McIntyre et al (2005) showed that having subjects read essays about successful women increased the performance of female subjects. Steele talks about the phenomenon of counting faces; he quotes Arthur Ashe: “Like many other blacks, when I find myself in a new public situation, I will count. I always count. I count the number of black and brown faces present” (Steele 2010: Ch 8). For my own part, I remember sitting in my best friend Jessica's apartment at the beginning of our upper-level Ethical Theory class as undergraduates, counting the female names in the index of the enormous anthology. We counted about four among perhaps 50 or so authors, though we mistakenly identified Hilary Putnam as a woman! In counting heads, like Ashe and so many others, we were trying to figure out whether we had a place in philosophy and in ethics in particular. The result was discouraging, but we were precocious enough together (with our own critical mass of two) to complain about the book to our professor.

These cues, whether head counts or more subtle indicators, are functions of the relevant epistemic communities. Steele likes to use the metaphor of threats being “in the air,” which is a good way of thinking about how cues—positive and negative—operate. They are not usually passed on intentionally by individuals, and they may seem neutral at first glance, as in the case where the test administrator is male rather than female. But things that, taken individually, may

seem and even be unobjectionable, taken together, can still signal the possibility of threat. A WFEC will have fewer of the threatening cues and more of the cues signaling that one is welcomed. This will largely be a result of the level of inclusivity required by a WFEC, but also of its level of nurturance. A new female graduate student in theoretical mathematics, for example, will take cues from her surroundings to get information about how she is likely to fare there. How many female faculty members are there? How many of them are full professors? How many other graduate students are female? Do her male colleagues talk shop with her? When questions of equity arise, how are they dealt with by the department? Imagine two departments.

In Department A there are few female faculty members and only one or two are full professors. Most of the other graduate students are male and they usually discuss their work with each other, preferring to talk to her about music or food. When questions of equity arise they are treated as trivial and dismissed.

In Department B there are many female faculty members at all career stages. The graduate students are still mostly male, but there are lots of female graduate students and all of the students discuss their work with each other. When questions of equity arise they are treated as serious and dealt with immediately.

We could imagine many variations of departments along these axes. A new female graduate student entering Department A would pick up on these cues quickly. She might see the opportunity for threat more often, she might be more vigilant about not confirming negative stereotypes, and she might become more and more isolated (as the Black students Treisman studied did). If she enters Department B she will pick up on these positive cues as well. She will see that there is a space for women in this domain; she can succeed here and is valued as a member of the community. She will not need to spend the extra cognitive (or emotional or material) resources trying to avoid confirming a stereotype because the context indicates that the stereotype is unlikely to have a strong hold here.

In other words, Department A is a poorly-functioning epistemic community. It is not inclusive (both internally and externally), it does not nurture women as members of the mathematical community, and it discourages re-interpretation of phenomena like the possible equity problems. Department B is a WFEC (as far as we can tell from this limited information). It is inclusive, both in terms of ensuring women a place and taking them seriously as scholars. Likewise, it encourages re-interpretation and takes seriously possible problems. Part of what made Treisman's workshops successful was that they, too, had the markings of a WFEC. All indications pointed toward this being a good place for someone who is Black/Latino/a woman to learn about calculus and that calculus could be a good place to be Black/Latino/a woman. With the possibility of threat lifted or at least pushed farther away, it was easier for these students to focus on calculus, just as it would be easier for our female grad student to focus on math instead of whether she belongs in the department.

## **6. Conclusion**

If, as I have argued previously, our epistemic obligations and norms arise out of the promotion of epistemic goals or values, and if we value more than just truth, then the desire to believe true things and avoid believing false things may sometimes be overridden. Indeed, one might think that the truth goal is still the one guiding our epistemic norms in many cases. However, it may not always do the job. I have proposed that well-functioning epistemic communities—defined by their inclusiveness, nurturance, and commitment to (re-)interpretation—are epistemically valuable. The epistemic harms present in stereotype threat cases are often not plausibly traced back to a thwarting of the truth goal, but are plausibly traced back to the thwarting of well-functioning epistemic communities. Such communities also serve as a

powerful corrective to stereotype threat and general underperformance, which is what we should expect given that epistemic agents are always operating within multiple epistemic communities.

Returning to the case of Larry Summers and his remarks on the causes of the dearth of women at the highest levels of STEM professions, we can now see a way to criticize Summers on epistemic grounds without taking for granted that the only way to do so was via a single-minded concern for evidence. Instead, we can ask which epistemic communities are and have been involved at all stages in generating and interpreting that evidence and to what extent each of these communities is poorly- or well-functioning. I have argued here that we can appeal to the value of WFECs in explaining the epistemic harms of stereotype threat and that the development and maintenance of such communities can counteract the effects of stereotype threat. In the next chapter I look more closely at evidentialist norms and argue that they are not up to the task of dealing with stereotype threat on their own.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Stereotypes and Their (Dis)Contents

#### 1. Introduction

What should we believe about stereotypes? Or about specific propositions embedded in stereotypes? Some want to say we should reject stereotypes because they are (in whole or part) false or culpably resistant to evidence (see Blum 2004, Fricker 2007). I will argue that this strategy is inadequate in dealing with some claims related to stereotypes: namely, with empirically well-supported probabilistic claims. By probabilistic claims I mean claims like the following:

- (1) Clara is more likely than Devon to perform very well on math exams.
- (2) 8-year-old girls are more likely to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* than *Moby Dick*.
- (3) Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- (4) Women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways.

These are empirical claims that make generalizations based on evidence. They generalize from past experiences to predict what is likely in the future—they use induction. Usually we think that reasoning based on induction, while fallible, is rational. Though we know that induction may fail in any individual case, it is a generally successful and epistemically unproblematic method of belief formation and regulation.

(3) and (4) above are different from (1) and (2). Among other differences, these two are part of the content of negative stereotypes about women. In this chapter, I argue that we should deny these claims—disbelieve them—despite their being empirically well-supported. First, I give

a common account of what stereotypes are and what we typically take to be epistemically problematic about them, namely that they are false and/or resistant to counter-evidence. Then I draw on Langton's work to argue that stereotypes are a form of *maker's knowledge*, which results in some aspects of stereotypes being true and well-supported by evidence. In the rest of the chapter I argue that even those stereotypic claims that seem true and well-supported by evidence should be rejected. I examine this question in the form of a puzzle about belief on which it seems like we are epistemically required both to believe and to disbelieve such claims. After considering other ways of solving this puzzle, I propose that the puzzle is best explained as a conflict of *prima facie* epistemic duties. Then I argue that our epistemic interests in developing and maintaining well-functioning epistemic communities requires us to believe against our evidence on some probabilistic stereotypic claims like (3) and (4) above.

## **2. Stereotypes and Their Contents**

We are all quite familiar with stereotypes: we use them daily, we benefit from them and are burdened by them, and we often want to resist them when they are negative. Stereotypes are also interesting for both philosophers and psychologists because of their vast impact on our cognition, social order, and behavior. In this section, I explore a common account of what stereotypes are and what philosophers often take to be epistemically bad about stereotypes, which is that they are false and/or resistant to counter-evidence.

### **2.1. What Are Stereotypes?**

Fricker gives a broad, neutral definition of stereotype: “stereotypes are widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes” (2007: 30). Cudd has a similar initial understanding: “Stereotypes are generalizations that we make about persons based

on characteristics that we believe they share with some identifiable group” (Cudd 2006: 69). On this view, stereotypes are a type of social schema (see Cudd 2006, Fricker 2007, Gendler 2011, Haslanger 2011, Steele 2010). Schemas in general are indispensable for survival, and social schemas, too, have this feature: we need them for social and physical survival.

For example, I utilize a schema that tells me to be wary around wild animals. A human—especially a human in a different time and place—who flouted this sort of schema would not be around as long as one who did. Likewise, I utilize a social schema that says I should be wary when I am alone at night and a man is walking toward me. Even though this schema might cause me to overestimate the level of danger in my environment, that overestimation is conducive to my survival and flourishing in general. Schemas also provide us with sets of shared understandings that aid in communication.

Let's take schemas to be intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behavior. They are embodied in individuals as a shared cluster of open-ended dispositions to see things a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances. Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interaction with each other and our environment. Understood this way, schemas are plausibly part of the common ground we rely on to communicate (Haslanger 2011: 194).

Cudd (2006) gives an example of this communicative role: one could not assume women to be “large, aggressive, and socially abrasive” (74) because this would present significant problems for one's ability to effectively communicate with others, whereas assuming that women are small, submissive, and accommodating will aid in communication. Most people share, or at least recognize that others share, this way of thinking about women.

Schemas, and stereotypes by extension, involve beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, dispositions, and habits. Some have thought of stereotypes just as a collection of shared beliefs (see Leyens et al 1994), but Fricker is correct in noting this is too narrow, particularly in light of

the role of implicit associations, rather than explicit beliefs, in perpetuating stereotypes. However, we can still think of some set of propositional content as forming the core of stereotypes even while recognizing that stereotypes involve much more than just statements or beliefs. The dispositions to behave in certain ways based on schemas are guided by some proposition(s). For example, I am disposed to be anxious around wild animals because I take them to be dangerous, though I do not need to entertain the belief that wild animals are dangerous to activate that cautiousness.

On this view of stereotypes, stereotypes need not be negative. Stereotypes might have positive content: kittens are cute, grandmothers are nice, Asians are good at math. The content of stereotypes might also switch valence depending on context. As Fricker notes, the stereotype that women are intuitive carries the negative connotation of irrationality, but may sometimes be positive in a context where intuition is desirable (in attending to others needs, perhaps) (Fricker 2007: 31). But when we talk about stereotypes, we often have the negative ones in mind. “Many of the stereotypes of historically powerless groups such as women, black people, or working-class people variously involve an association with some attribute inversely related to competence or sincerity or both: over-emotionality, illogicality, inferior intelligence, evolutionary inferiority, incontinence, lack of 'breeding', lack of more fibre, being on the make, etc.” (Fricker 2007: 32).

A negative stereotype of this sort will involve a host of propositions, some of which are more transparent than others. For example, consider the stereotype that women are bad at math. This claim alone is very general and its meaning may differ depending on the context. Here are some of the propositions that might be contained in or implicated by the stereotype at different times:

Most women are bad at math.  
 Many women are bad at math.  
 Women are worse at math than men.  
 Women are worse at math than men as a result of natural differences.  
 Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.  
 Women are bad at quantitative reasoning.  
 Women are worse at math than men as a result of effort.

Stereotypes, like the stereotype about women's math ability, differ depending on the epistemic communities involved, the relevant comparison class, the topic under discussion, the background knowledge and assumptions of various people involved, and so on. Likewise, this stereotype will lead us, as people living in epistemic communities where it operates as a schema, to have various dispositions, attitudes, and perceptions. It might cause us, for example, to remember more readily instances of individual women who are not good at math than instances of individual women who are very good at math (recall the research by Marks and Fraley (2006), which found that people recalled examples that confirmed the sexual double standard more easily than those that did not). It is helpful to break down stereotypes into their individual propositional and non-propositional components because this allows us to see which parts of a particular stereotype are operating in a particular instance, which may provide clues for counteracting the harmful impacts of stereotypes.

## **2.2. Stereotypes and Their Discontents**

Most of us think that stereotypes like the one about women's math ability are bad, that we should not use them to make judgments about individual women, and so on. But if they are bad, what explains this? Certainly schemas in general, and stereotypes in Fricker's neutral sense, are not always bad. Sometimes they are very good, as when they help us stay safe and communicate effectively with each other. To distinguish between negative and positive stereotypes, Fricker

defines the sub-category of negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes: “A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment” (Fricker 2007: 35). She gives the example of white jurors judging Tom Robinson (from *To Kill a Mockingbird*) using the negative identity-prejudicial stereotype that Black people are untrustworthy (2007: 36).

In so doing, the jurors do something morally bad, but they also do something epistemically bad. I want to ask what makes stereotypes and their contents *epistemically* bad, rather than morally bad, though the answers may be connected. Fricker's definition provides part of the common explanation: such stereotypes are resistant to counter-evidence. Blum gives a similar account of stereotypes:

Stereotypes are *false or misleading generalizations* about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, *immune to counterevidence*. In doing so, stereotypes powerfully shape the stereotyper's perception of stereotyped groups, *seeing the stereotypic characteristics when they are not present, failing to see the contrary of those characteristics when they are*, and generally homogenizing the group (Blum 2004: 251—emphasis mine).

Blum makes clear some of the epistemically objectionable aspects of stereotypes: they are themselves false or misleading, they are immune to counter-evidence, and they cause us to have false beliefs.

Why think that these are epistemically objectionable features? I have argued previously that many of us take having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs to be an important epistemic goal. One way we tend to think about reaching that goal is by believing in proportion to our evidence and updating our beliefs when presented with new evidence. Evidence, broadly conceived, plays an important role in our understanding of epistemic norms. Evidentialism is

generally taken to be a view about justification on the one hand (one is epistemically justified to the extent that one has believed on one's evidence) and requirement on the other (one is epistemically required to believe in proportion to one's evidence). Those defending evidentialism as a view about justification take the connection between the evidence one has and the degree to which one is justified in believing some proposition to be directly proportional. Hume's oft-quoted dictum on the matter: "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (1748: online). From there, many will claim that one epistemically ought to believe all and only what one is justified in believing (see Feldman and Conee 1985) or, closer to Hume's formulation, that one epistemically ought to believe a proposition to the degree that one's evidence suggests.

Evidentialism is a seemingly plausible and widely-held account of what we epistemically ought to believe (see Clifford 1877, Hume 1748, Locke 1690, Russell 1948 for example). If my evidence overwhelmingly supports the idea that there is not a twelve-foot tall horse in my bathroom, then I would do something epistemically irresponsible in believing that there is a twelve-foot tall horse in my bathroom. In Chapter 2 I presented an account of epistemic normativity on which epistemic norms are evaluated by how conducive they are to promoting epistemic goals like having true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs.

Evidentialist norms in epistemology are often thought to be conducive to this goal. Believing in proportion to one's evidence, then, is "wise" in that it is the best path one has to the truth. Roger White expresses the supposed connection between the truth goal, evidence, and reason:

So there is no problem in this sort of non-permissive case in seeing how rational assessment of evidence is a reliable means to the truth. The probative force of the

evidence is a reliable means to the truth, and a rational inquirer is sensitive to this force, forming his beliefs accordingly. But in any case in which the evidence does favor one conclusion over another, it is *not* equally rational to draw either conclusion. A rational person when confronted with evidence favoring P does not believe not-P (White 2005: 449).

The view of negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes presented by Fricker (2007) and Blum (2004), then, holds that believing (or otherwise acting) on such stereotypes is epistemically bad because it leads us to believe what is false and/or fail to believe in proportion to our evidence. This view does seem to capture some of what we take to be epistemically wrong with stereotypes. In the case of women and girls who experience stereotype threat while taking math exams, part of what seems to be going wrong is that they really could do better under other circumstances, but the belief—both individual and collective—that they will under-perform suppresses actual performance. In other words, the stereotype itself is false, so perhaps what has gone wrong is that a false belief has been accepted as true, in which case, the violation of believing truth and avoiding error seems to capture the misstep. But as I noted previously, stereotypes are multifarious. A stereotype like the one that women are bad at math may be too general, and its content too context-dependent, to have a truth value on its own. Instead, we should ask whether particular elements of this stereotype are false, misleading, or resistant to counter-evidence.

### **2.3. Evidence and Probability**

In this section I talk about the role of evidence in evaluating probability claims in particular. We routinely make and evaluate claims about probability. Think about the claim that 8-year-old girls are more likely to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* than *Moby Dick*. I take it that this claim will ring true to people familiar with 8-year-old girls and the two books.

We do not have to do significant empirical investigation (though we could) into the reading habits of specific 8-year-old girls to know that this claim is probably true. It is sufficient to know that one book is a very easy and popular read, suitable to 8-year-old girls and the other a very difficult, trudging read that most 8-year-olds would struggle with even if they chose to read it, which they probably would not. In other words, we use the evidence available to us to evaluate the relative likelihood of some event occurring: an 8-year-old girl reading a particular book. Of course, there are undoubtedly 8-year-old girls who have read or will read *Moby Dick* and not *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. But this fact does not make the general claim about 8-year-old girls and their reading habits false. Now consider three more examples.

Suppose that Clara and Devon are part of a longitudinal study of mathematical ability. They have taken a test every two weeks for two decades. Over this period, their performances have been impressively consistent. Clara averages 90% on the exams with scores ranging from 85% to 95%, Devon averages 75% on the exams with scores ranging from 65% to 85%. They are about to take another iteration of the exam. What should you believe about how each will score on the next iteration? How confident should you be in those beliefs? It seems that you ought to be somewhat confident that Clara will score around 90%, somewhat confident that Devon will score around 75%, and very confident that Clara will outperform Devon. You should have these beliefs and the attending confidence levels because the evidence you have seems to justify those beliefs and confidence levels while also undermining the justification of other beliefs. If you were quite confident that Devon would get a perfect score we might rightly ask you what reason you could have for believing this and for being so confident. Indeed, we would probably think you had made a serious error in forming this belief because, in doing so, you have ignored the

evidence you have available to you.

What if we have the same sort of evidence, but for groups rather than individuals? For example, if students from Clover High School score, on average, 90% on some exam, and students from Dover High School score, on average, 75% on the same exam. Given this information, we should believe that the Clover students are likely to perform better than the Dover students on an upcoming exam. We should also believe—but with a lower level of confidence—that any particular Clover student will outperform any particular Dover student in the absence of any more specific information about the students in question. All we know about each individual is that he or she is a member of a group who averages this or that score on the exam.

What if the groups in question are marked, not by attendance at one high school or another, but by sex, race, or class? For example, if men score, on average, 90% on some exam, and women score, on average, 75% on the same exam. What beliefs should we form about how men and women will perform on an upcoming exam? Given the information we have, surely we should believe that men are likely to outperform women, and that any particular man is likely to outperform any particular woman. These beliefs are formed on the same grounds as before—the evidence supports them and undermines alternatives to them. But given what we also know about stereotype threat, we might now be wary of following the evidence. We might be tempted to introduce a caveat explaining that the beliefs are merely descriptive. They aim to describe how the world is, not how it ought to be. So someone could believe that men are likely to outperform women on the next exam, but reject the view that this is the result of some natural deficiency in women. I am sympathetic to this impulse, but argue that it is inadequate.

While the view that stereotypes are false and/or resistant to counter-evidence explains their bad-making epistemic features in some cases, it does not explain their bad-making features in cases where part of the stereotype is an empirically well-supported probabilistic claim.

### 3. Stereotypes as Maker's Knowledge

In this section I argue that stereotypes are a sort of maker's knowledge. As such, the direction of fit between world and belief is atypical—instead of our beliefs tracking how the world is, the world arranges to fit some beliefs. Then I argue that probabilistic stereotypic beliefs are often true and empirically well-supported.

#### 3.1. Maker's Knowledge

The concern for truth and evidence cannot deal with cases where beliefs help to arrange the world—to make it how it is. As mentioned before, we typically think our beliefs have a certain relationship with the way the world is. Our beliefs, we assume, track the way the world appears, not the other way around. I see that a chair appears to be yellow, so I form the belief that it is yellow. The chair does not become yellow in response to my belief, and it will not turn green if I believe that it is green. But it does not follow that no beliefs have this power. Langton makes this point about direction of fit:

The observer may render the circumstances abnormal in a variety of ways: the properties of the observed items may be altered by the observer's sheer physical presence; by his social features, for example his power or rank; by his propositional attitudes, his beliefs and desires. So when the norm directs one to assume, among other things, the observer-independence of what is observed, it directs one to assume that the observer is not rendering the circumstances abnormal in any of these ways. [...] But if an observer's *beliefs* can render observational circumstances abnormal by helping to alter the properties of the observed, then implicit in the norm is an assumption about *direction of fit*: that one's belief about perceived regularities conforms to the world. By that I do not mean simply that the belief corresponds to how the world is—for short, that it is true. For there are two ways in which a belief could correspond to how the world is: the belief might conform to the world; or the world might conform to the belief. A believer might believe

that  $p$  because  $p$  is the case—her belief thus conforming to the world; or  $p$  might be the case because the believer believes it—the world thus conforming to her belief. In the latter situation there would be something self-fulfilling about the belief (Langton 2000: 127-128).

What sorts of beliefs have this self-fulfilling character? I have presented empirical evidence in the previous chapter about the wide range of domains in which beliefs have this power: from performance on exams, to tests of athletic ability, to juries' decisions, and animal behavior.

Elsewhere Langton argues that one sort of belief (which becomes knowledge) with this feature is *maker's knowledge*, which “not only aims at truth, but *makes* its truth” (2009: 292). For example, a playwright has maker's knowledge of her play (see Anscombe 1957, Humberstone 1992, Langton 2000, 2009 for further examples of this sort). She writes the dialogue, which helps make it the case that the actors say one thing rather than another. Her actions and beliefs make the play what it is. If I sit in the audience and transcribe the play, I now have the same dialogue before me, but my copy of the script—read off of the world as it appeared to me—is distinct from the playwright's copy precisely because there is a difference in direction of fit between the world and the words. If I erase a line and insert a new one, the play does not change. If the playwright does so, it will.

Stereotypes, broadly-conceived, are a sort of maker's knowledge. The maker is more difficult to identify, since it will not be one specific person, but rather an epistemic community spread across time and space. Stereotypes arise over time out of collective understandings and misunderstandings about groups (which may themselves be products of social, rather than biological, categorization), often in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful and privileged (see Cudd 2006). Even Mill, without the benefit of modern psychological research or feminist theory, recognized this:

History, which is now so much better understood than formerly, teaches another lesson: if only by showing the extraordinary susceptibility of human nature to external influences, and the extreme variableness of those of its manifestations which are supposed to be most universal and uniform. [...] Hence, in regard to that most difficult question, what are the natural differences between the two sexes—a subject on which it is impossible in the present state of society to obtain complete and correct knowledge—while almost everybody dogmatizes upon it, almost all neglect and make light of the only means by which any partial insight can be obtained into it. This is, an analytic study of [...] the laws of the influence of circumstances on character. For, however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the evidence of their being natural differences could only be negative. [...] Even the preliminary knowledge, what the differences between the sexes now are, apart from all question as to how they are made what they are, is still in the crudest and most incomplete state. [...] When we further consider that to understand one woman is not necessarily to understand any other woman; that even if he could study many women of one rank, or of one country, he would not thereby understand women of other ranks or countries; and even if he did, they are still only the women of a single period of history; we may safely assert that the knowledge which men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial, and always will be so, until women themselves have told all that they have to tell. (1869: 108-109).

The idea that the actions, beliefs, characteristics, and behavior of women cannot be taken as evidence for their nature, given their inferior status, is recognition that women as a category have been produced, shaped, and constrained by their oppression.

Langton (2009), following MacKinnon, argues that pornography generates a kind of maker's knowledge about women through this process of enforcing the embodiment of oppressive behavior. "In a society of gender inequality, the speech of the powerful impresses its view upon the world, concealing the truth of powerlessness under a despairing acquiescence that provides the appearance of consent and makes protest inaudible as well as rare. Pornography can invent women because it has the power to make its vision into reality, which then passes, objectively, for truth" (MacKinnon 1989: 205).

By saying that women are submissive, sexually available, and enjoy domination, women

may come to be submissive, sexually available, and to enjoy domination. Then this fact is further proof of the truth of the initial belief.

On MacKinnon's way of thinking, pornography claims to be a mirror. Look, it says, *women are like this*. In reality, pornography acts as a blueprint. Look, it says, *let women be like this*. The difference between a mirror and a blueprint is a difference in direction of fit: a mirror conforms the fit the world; the world conforms to fit a blueprint. A blueprint can seem to be a mirror, because treating women as if they *are* 'like this' can be a way of making women seem to become 'like this', or indeed, genuinely become 'like this'. In conditions of oppression, expectations of how a subordinate will behave can be self-verifying or self-fulfilling (Langton 2009: 299).

To use my metaphor, pornography is not merely an audience member transcribing the play, it is playwright, making the world conform to its vision.

Pornography is the favored example of MacKinnon and Langton in part because the consequences of its role in women's oppression are particularly grave. It has the effect, not only of making women and men desire certain things (as commercials might make us desire one brand of tissue or type of car more than another), but of maintaining a harmful system of domination. "The harm and the knowledge are, in a sense, the very same thing" (Langton 2009: 308).

Examples of behaviors that conform to stereotypes are all around us. Even if one is—for some reason—not convinced that pornography has the power to 'invent women', the case of women's mathematical performance (and stereotype threat in general) seems like a clear candidate for maker's knowledge. When the threat is neutralized or reduced, performance improves. When the threat is heightened, it decreases. The wide range of domains in which stereotype threat can be activated also makes a compelling case for the influence such social schemas have on our behavior. We should alter our understanding of stereotypes to include a recognition that they do not merely describe the world in a false or misleading way, they shape

the world in their image. I propose as a friendly amendment to Fricker's definition of negative identity-prejudicial stereotype:

A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that (1) displays some resistance to counter-evidence and/or (2) generates the evidence needed to verify it.

In the case of the stereotype that women are bad at math, some of the contents (for example, the claim that women are naturally inferior) count as a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype—and as epistemically bad—because they meet the first condition, but other content (like the probabilistic claim about how women and men are likely to perform) counts as a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype—and, as I will argue later, epistemically bad—because it meets the second condition. I removed the clause from Fricker's definition having to do with epistemically culpable resistance to counter-evidence as a result of an ethically bad affective investment because I take it to be unnecessary for the purposes of the definition and because it suggests more intentional planning and control than goes into the perpetuation of stereotypes as a structural, community-based phenomenon. Stereotypes do not require an ethically bad affective investment. They may arise, as Young says of oppression, out of “the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (1990: 41).

### **3.2. Probabilistic Stereotypic Beliefs**

I have given examples of different propositional contents of stereotypes. One sort of content is probabilistic—it makes claims about how likely certain things are. Two examples of probabilistic claims that show up in the stereotypes are (3) and (4) from the beginning of the chapter:

- (3) Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- (4) Women are likely to behave in a sexually submissive way.

These claims are about how things will be in the future, and they are based, in part, on how things have been in the past. They are also examples of the contents of negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes despite being true and well-supported by evidence because the claims (under conditions of injustice) generate the evidence needed to verify them—they are maker's knowledge. In the following two sections I make the case that such claims cannot be considered epistemically bad because they are false or resistant to counter-evidence because they are not false or resistant to counter-evidence.

### 3.2.1. Not False

The claim that the contents of stereotypes are false is unsatisfying. Some of their contents may be true, but they may be true because of the existence of the stereotype under unjust conditions. Hence the insight of the oft-quoted MacKinnon quip: “It is not just an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake. It becomes *embodied* because it is enforced” (1987: 119)

I have given reason to think that (3) is empirically well-supported in the previous chapter: under threatening conditions (which include normal conditions) men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams. So in this sense, it is true that men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams. If you were asked to predict the performance of people based solely on their sex, you would be justified in predicting that men would outscore women. If you knew that the women about to take the test were under reduced stereotype threat conditions, then you would do well to deny (3), since under such conditions, women typically perform as well as men, or better. But if you did not know what sort of conditions they were in, you would have to assume they were under stereotype threat conditions, since this is much more likely than the opposite.

(4), too, is true. Women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways. But they are likely to do so as a result of a combination of men's desires, their own socialization, the impact of media, and so on. hooks discusses this phenomenon even among women who are otherwise committed to resisting gendered injustice: “Their responses suggest that one major obstacle preventing us from transforming rape culture is that heterosexual women have not unlearned a heterosexist-based 'eroticism' that constructs desire in such a way that many of us can only respond erotically to male behavior that has already been coded as masculine within the sexist framework” (hooks 131). That is, male domination is defined as sexy, women incorporate that vision of sexuality into their own desires, and they behave in a sexually submissive way to facilitate the schema of male sexual dominance.

Claims like (3) and (4) are empirical. They can be tested and confirmed or disconfirmed. I suggest here that they are, in fact, right now, empirically well-supported. But they are empirically well-supported in part because of assertions of broader stereotypes about women and assertions of these specific claims. They could be false, of course, but they are not currently false, just as it could be (but is not) false that 8-year-old girls are more likely to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* than *Moby Dick*.

### **3.2.2. Not Resistant to Evidence**

(3) and (4) are also not resistant to counter-evidence. Rather, they are sensitive to confirming evidence and generate such evidence. The belief in (3), and its acceptance in general, helps generate new cases of confirmation. My empirically well-supported belief that men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams is likely to cause me as a woman to under-perform on math exams, which confirms the claim. In general, we should be wary of

evidence on this sort of question.

I no longer view investigations into sexual similarity and difference as value neutral scientific research, as resulting in *discoveries* that logically precede or constitute the basis in some way for philosophical *decisions* about sexual equality. On the contrary, I now believe that our decisions about sexual equality are at least as much the basis for our supposed discoveries about similarity and difference. Indeed, on both the practical and symbolic level, I now think that social equality or inequality may be the major determinant of our scientific conclusions about sexual similarity or sexual difference. [...W]omen's social inequality often translates directly into scientific claims that women are 'naturally' different from or inferior to men. These claims, in turn, reinforce and so perpetuate women's subordination (Jaggar 1987: 30).

Inquiry in the context of injustice is likely to perpetuate injustice rather than challenge it. If this is so, then the evidence we have to rely on at any given time will be more a reflection of existing inequality than anything else.

A defender of evidentialism might object that the evidence of the existence of stereotype threat is reason to undermine our belief in (3) (and the story will be much the same for (4)). Since, as I noted above, the claim made is one about probability, and since the research on stereotype threat gives us reason to think the likelihood of better or worse performance depends, in part, on the threat level of the situation, perhaps one is permitted to withhold belief or to disbelieve the proposition insofar as one thinks one's belief will influence the truth. For example, if I am about to take a math exam, perhaps the evidence I have about stereotype threat permits me to believe that I will do well, since if I believe that, I likely will do well. Or if I am teaching a math class with this evidence, perhaps I am permitted to believe that my female students will do very well, since this belief on my part is likely to influence their performance positively. There are four problems with this view.

First, I argued above and in the previous chapter that the context of women's math performance is almost always a context of stereotype threat—normal conditions are threatening

conditions. So, in the absence of further information, a decision to withhold belief requires one to ignore evidence, namely the evidence that threatening conditions are much more likely than non-threatening conditions. Insofar as this objection to my view requires that one ignore or discount evidence, it is a non-starter for the evidentialist attempting to explain what is epistemically bad about (3).

Second, note that the account of evidentialism presented permits this option of withholding belief or disbelieving, if it does at all (which I have just expressed doubts about), but cannot require it. It would, on the same grounds, permit believing that I or my female students will do poorly on an exam. This option may be more palatable than the one on which evidence demands that we believe that men will outperform women, but there are no resources in the account to make disbelief in the proposition required. This strikes me as a problem for the view, particularly in light of the following two considerations.

Third, there are many cases of maker's knowledge or other self-fulfilling beliefs for which we do not have the kind of extensive evidence provided by the stereotype threat literature. The extent to which things are the way they are as a result of maker's knowledge is difficult to know. This presents itself first as a problem of unknown unknowns—we do not know that we do not know about such cases—but can evolve into a problem of known unknowns—we can at least suspect that there are other cases of this sort, and we may be able to develop heuristics for identifying further areas of study. Certainly many feminists have argued that much of the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of women result from their constrained circumstances, and that the constraints themselves may be difficult to see (see de Beauvoir 1949, Jaggar 1983, 1987, MacKinnon 1989, and Mill 1869).

We might never have known about stereotype threat; that is, we might not have had the wealth of scientific research on it that we now have. But even without this research we should have found something troubling about women scoring worse than men on math exams. “Women workers who are not feminists may know that they receive unequal pay for equal work, but they may think the arrangement is just; the feminist sees this situation as an instance of exploitation and an occasion for struggle. Feminists are not aware of different things than other people; they are aware of the same things differently (Bartky 1975: 429).”

Fourth, but related, the evidence we do have about stereotype threat was a result of someone's undermining of evidentialist norms at some point. That is, in order to have the evidence we have, someone had to have thought that the evidence of differences in performance along race or sex lines was suspect. We have just such an account.

In *Whistling Vivaldi*, Claude Steele gives the fascinating account of how he and his colleagues came to research stereotype threat. Steele describes the decision to begin researching the effect of race on academic achievement:

Despite the image of science as a formal and prescribed affair, scientific inquiries have choice points, places where the investigator has to decide what to do next without much formal guidance. Intuition and best guesses come into play. We needed a better look at what caused underperformance, and my best hunch was that it was stigmatization, the downward constitution that some groups might experience in a school environment. Of course, underperformance could just as well come from something about the group itself. I favored the stigmatization idea. I confess that I liked it better than the idea that underperformance was rooted in some biological difference between groups—to me a discouraging and potentially dehumanizing idea. But there was also the fact that scholastic underperformance happened in several groups—blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, women in math classes. Could there be something biological about all of these groups that caused them to underperform? Possibly, but I could also imagine that these groups shared an experience of stigmatization—different in form, of course, but nonetheless a group-based stigmatization in precisely those areas where they underperformed (Steele 2010: Ch 2).

What this bit of insight—along with Steele's own experiences of racism and the accounts of others he meets—reveals is the extent to which the evidence of underperformance presents itself as a problem. Steele's anti-racist commitments and consciousness gave him both an interest in the problem and the “hunch” that stigmatization played a role.

Perhaps Steele following his hunch was no rejection of evidentialism, or at least not of the truth goal. After all, the process of forming hypotheses is in the so-called context of discovery, not justification. It is true that nothing about evidentialism prevents us from developing hypotheses and testing them or from looking for evidence where none currently exists. But this issue points to the inadequacy of calling on evidence *alone* to guide beliefs, particularly predictive or probabilistic beliefs about social matters. Evidence often underdetermines the most plausible hypothesis. What seems plausible or implausible depends largely on the background assumptions we have adopted (see Anderson 1995b and Longino 1990). These background assumptions may themselves be adopted implicitly or explicitly, and may be politically, morally, or epistemically motivated. It might be tempting to push the role of evidence back and claim that background assumptions, too, are to be adopted or rejected on the strength of evidence. But this move risks an infinite regress, since the background assumptions that guide our hypothesis choices are, themselves, likely adopted on the strength of both evidence and background assumptions, and so on.

For these reasons, I do not think that evidentialist concerns provide adequate guidance about what makes claims like (3) and (4) epistemically problematic.

#### **4. Haslanger's Puzzle About Belief**

Langton's discussion of maker's knowledge provides a helpful starting place for thinking

about stereotypes. But it is still not clear what we ought to believe about the contents of stereotypes when they exhibit the features of maker's knowledge. That is, if we cannot explain the epistemic failings of probabilistic stereotypic beliefs in terms of falsity or resistance to counter-evidence, then what is it about being maker's knowledge that makes something at least potentially epistemically problematic?

Haslanger expresses the general puzzle about epistemic obligations regarding this kind of belief in this way:

*HP* “it is true that  $p$  so you should believe that  $p$ ; but believing  $p$  makes it true, and it would be better if  $p$  weren't true; so you shouldn't believe that  $p$ ” (Haslanger 2007: 73).

Haslanger's phrasing makes it easy to see the epistemic problem posed by maker's knowledge. That is, there seem to be compelling reasons both to believe and not to believe a single proposition. That the proposition is true counts in favor of believing it. On the other hand, part of what makes the proposition true is that people believe it, and there is something epistemically suspect about this way of making something true.

#### **4.1. Some Examples of Haslanger's Puzzle**

In this section, I outline three different sorts of claims that may serve as examples of Haslanger's puzzle: evaluative, natural, and probabilistic. In the following section, I discuss ways of solving the puzzle for each sort of claim.

##### **4.1.1. Evaluative Claims**

By evaluative claims, I mean claims that assert of something that it has some normative feature. Two examples of such claims are:

- (5) Seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute.
- (6) Male domination is sexy.

(5) asserts of crop-tops that, when worn by seventh-grade girls, they have some feature, namely cuteness. This is the example around which Haslanger (2007) develops her account of this puzzle. It seems correct to recognize that cuteness depends on what people think is cute, and seventh-grade girls think that crop-tops are cute. But it also seems correct for the parents of a seventh-grade girl to object to this claim: “it would be better if seventh grade (roughly age 12) girls were wearing ordinary—midriff covering—tops instead (because the croptops sexualize the girls who wear them, further marginalize the chubby girls, etc.)” (Haslanger 2007: 72). Thus, we can plug (5) into Haslanger's puzzle and generate the following:

*HP5* It is true that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute* so you should believe that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*; but believing *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*; so you shouldn't believe that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*.

(6) is similar. Recall hooks's (1994) discussion of sexuality in the context of dominance.

They desire men not to be sexist, even as they say, 'But I want him to be masculine.' When pushed to define 'masculine,' they fall back on sexist representations. I was surprised by the number of young black women who repudiated the notion of male domination, but who would then go on to insist that they could not desire a brother who could not take charge, take care of business, be in control (hooks 1994: 130).

The claim that male domination is sexy, then, like the claim about crop-tops being cute, captures something about the social world. Many women find male domination sexy, and part of what it means to be sexy just is that it is sexually arousing to the relevant parties. But it would be better, even by the lights of those same people, if it were not so. We can make sense of a denial of (6): male domination is not sexy, in fact it is objectionable and wrong, and we should not consider it sexy. Hence, the puzzle arises again:

*HP6* It is true that *male domination is sexy* so you should believe that *male domination is sexy*; but believing *male domination is sexy* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't

true that *male domination is sexy*; so you shouldn't believe that *male domination is sexy*.

#### 4.1.2. Natural Claims

By natural claims I mean claims about something or some group which implicate (but do not imply or simply say) something about the nature of the thing or group. Haslanger (2011) argues that generics often have the effect of suggesting that what is predicated of a thing is proper to the thing by nature. Here are three examples:

(7) Cows are food.

(8) Women are sexually submissive.

(9) Men are better than women at math.

Each of these seems to suggest something about the nature of cows, women, and men: that they are, respectively, naturally suited to being eaten, naturally suited to being sexually submissive, and naturally suited to being better at math than women. So while there is something true about (7)-(9), what they implicate about the nature of those things is false.

Haslanger (2011) provides the example of (7). “Of course, humans can consume and digest dead cows. But being edible is not the same as being food. There are many edible things, even nutritious things, that don't count as food because they taste bad or smell bad; they are associated with disgusting things; they are too intelligent; they are our pets or our children. Food, I submit, is a cultural and normative category” (Haslanger 2011: 192). Insofar as things that people commonly eat are considered food, cows are food. But insofar as food has normative dimensions—Haslanger's point that not all edible things are food—cows should not be considered food. Or expressed in the form of the puzzle:

*HP7* It is true that *cows are food* so you should believe that *cows are food*; but believing *cows are food* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *cows are food*; so you shouldn't believe that *cows are food*.

Likewise, the claim in (8) that women are sexually submissive has the implicature that women are sexually submissive by nature, rather than by socialization. But it is partially this belief—that women are sexually submissive by nature—that makes it so (see Haslanger 1993, Langton 2000). As noted in the discussion of (6), it would be better if women were not sexually submissive, and much better if we denied the natural submissiveness of women.

*HP8* It is true that *women are sexually submissive* so you should believe that *women are sexually submissive*; but believing *women are sexually submissive* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *women are sexually submissive*; so you shouldn't believe that *women are sexually submissive*.

Of course, there is a very similar story for (9). When many of us think of the stereotype that men are better than women at math, we think that the stereotype indicates something about the natural abilities of men and women. I noted above that this is one part of the content of the stereotype.

So while it is true that men are better than women at math in that they perform better under normal, threatening conditions, it is not true that they are naturally or inevitably better.

*HP9* It is true that *men are better than women at math* so you should believe that *men are better than women at math*; but believing *men are better than women at math* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *men are better than women at math*; so you shouldn't believe that *men are better than women at math*.

#### 4.1.3. Probabilistic Claims

I have already discussed what I mean by probabilistic claims: they are claims about what is likely. I have also given some examples of probabilistic claims that may show up in the contents of stereotypes. Here are two examples I have discussed already:

- (3) Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- (4) Women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways.

(3) and (4), I have argued, are currently true; they are empirically well-supported. But, like (5)-(9) we should reject them because they are true in part because we believe them, and it would be better if they were not true.

*HP3* It is true that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams* so you should believe that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*; but believing *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*; so you shouldn't believe that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*.

*HP4* It is true that *women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways* so you should believe that *women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways*; but believing *women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways*; so you shouldn't believe that *women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways*.

Probabilistic claims present, I think, a particularly difficult form of Haslanger's puzzle. I explain why I think the existing solutions to the puzzle do not work for these claims in the next section.

## 5. Dealing with the Puzzle

The core of Haslanger's puzzle is the claim that one both should and should not believe some proposition. In the following subsections, I canvas solutions to the puzzle. Haslanger (2007, 2011) provides the resources to solve the puzzle for evaluative and natural claims. I argue that these solutions do not always work for the probabilistic claims, however, and I argue that the puzzle should be seen as an expression of conflicting *prima facie* epistemic duties.

### 5.1. Ambiguous 'Should'

Haslanger considers and quickly rejects one solution. The solution is to say that there are two senses of 'should' involved in the puzzle: one epistemic, one moral. As I noted in Chapter 2, we have many sets of norms that are sensitive to different goals and contexts. For example,

consider the seemingly contradictory statement: *you should keep your arms straight and you should not keep your arms straight*. There is no puzzle here if what I mean is that, while rock-climbing, you should keep your arms straight, but that, while cooking, you should not keep your arms straight. We can disambiguate the contradictory statement so that it is unproblematic: *you should<sub>(rockclimbing)</sub> keep your arms straight and you should<sub>(cooking)</sub> not keep your arms straight*.

In the case of the general puzzle, that it is true that  $p$  means you epistemically should believe  $p$ , but that it would be better if  $p$  were false and believing that  $p$  makes it true, means that you morally should not believe that  $p$ . Haslanger is right to reject this solution. Though it is true that there may be moral reasons to reject  $p$ , there may also be epistemic reasons (Haslanger 2007: 74). There can be different sorts of reasons to do the same thing. There are epistemic reasons to trust a friend (she has never lied to me, she is well-informed, etc.), but there are also moral reasons to trust my friend (it will help to foster our friendship and sense of connection to each other) (see Alston 1988 for such an example). In cases where epistemic reasons seem to count both in favor of and against belief, then, the proposed disambiguation is unhelpful.

In the examples I have given, there are quite strong moral or political reasons to reject the propositions. These reasons might even be strong enough on their own to override the epistemic reasons to accept them. But I am hoping that the discussion of maker's knowledge, and in particular the curious direction of fit involved, will make us at least suspect that there is something *epistemically* suspicious about such propositions. That such propositions generate the evidence that verifies their truth is worth epistemic consideration. Perhaps it will turn out that there is no puzzle because epistemic reasons are straightforwardly about truth, and whatever reasons there are against belief in stereotypic propositions are not, but in the rest of this chapter, I

challenge this view. I argue that there are overriding epistemic reasons to reject the such propositions.

## **5.2. Milieu-Relative Truth**

Haslanger (2007) offers a preferred solution to the puzzle when it concerns what I have called evaluative claims. She suggests that some social facts have milieu-relative truth conditions. Of the parties involved in the crop-tops dispute, she notes: “The girl and her parents are members of different social groups (age-wise), have different experiences, beliefs, and frameworks for understanding what actions and events mean. Both seem to have important social knowledge, but they are also deeply at odds.” This insight that different people occupy different social positions, which may generate competing, but legitimate, claims about the world forms the core of Haslanger's response.

### **5.2.1. Milieus**

Haslanger defines a person's milieu by reference to social structures, which are themselves defined by reference to a combination of social schemas and resources (2007: 80). Each of us operates in multiple milieus, though some particular milieu may be primary at a given time. “One's workplace, place of worship, civic space, and home are structured spaces; each of these structures are inflected by race, gender, class, nationality, age, and sexuality to name a few relevant factors. So it will be important to specify an individual's milieu at a time and place and possible in relation to specified others” (Haslanger 2007: 80).

Haslanger's conception of milieu maps roughly onto what I have called epistemic communities. Such communities have different sets of shared background assumptions, common points of reference, and accepted values. Though, as Haslanger notes, one can be a member of a

milieu without fully accepting all of its schemas (2007: 80). One could be in a milieu that operates with a sexist schema while explicitly rejecting this schema. I would consider myself a member of a milieu of young adult (aged 25 to 30) Americans; I understand shared cultural references, I accept certain political positions that most in my milieu (but not other age and location-defined milieu) accept, like support for gay rights, but I also disavow other aspects of the milieu, like its focus on starting a family or its bizarre worship of bacon.

Once one has this basic understanding of what a milieu is, it becomes clear that milieus might have disagreements about how to interpret things and that they will develop internally consistent ways of using language and concepts that might be inconsistent with use in other milieus. Though we sometimes agree about what is cool—Bob Dylan is cool—my dad and I often disagree about what is cool. This disagreement should not be understood merely as a difference in taste, but as a difference in milieu, which helps to shape tastes, understandings of what 'cool' means, and so on.

### 5.2.2. Milieu-Relativity and HP—Evaluative Claims

Recall Haslanger's initial version of the puzzle about crop-tops.

*HP5* It is true that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute* so you should believe that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*; but believing *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*; so you shouldn't believe that *seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute*.

From a seventh-grade girl's perspective, it is true that seventh-grade girls who wear crop-tops are cute, but from the parents' perspective, it is false. Part of the problem is that both the seventh-grade girl and the parents are saying something “true and important” (Haslanger 2007: 85), yet they appear to contradict each other. This puzzle is resolved once one notes that the daughter and

the parents operate in different milieus that provide them with different understandings of what is cute when worn by seventh-grade girls. She is not advocating for relativism about the truth in general, but rather for a more limited relativism about at least some social truths, where truth depends crucially on the context. After all, such claims may vary across time and space, their meanings are malleable, and they are always contested. That social truth value might vary depending on milieu does not mean that there is no hope for debate or persuasion across milieus, nor does it mean that the truth of any particular milieu is as good as the truth of any other (Haslanger 2007: 86-88).

We can provide a similar explanation of *HP6*.

*HP6* It is true that *male domination is sexy* so you should believe that *male domination is sexy*; but believing *male domination is sexy* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *male domination is sexy*; so you shouldn't believe that *male domination is sexy*.

It is slightly more difficult here to see which milieus' understandings of sexiness are at work, but because of this, it is a good example of how individuals can operate in many different milieus, some of which are at odds with each other. I say this because it seems that the best way of defining the relevant milieus here is in terms of context and political commitments.

When evaluated in the context of unreflective reporting of facts (in a particular time and place—the United States of America in 2013, a deeply sexist place), it may be true that many people find male domination to be sexy in so far as it appeals to the prurient interests of those people. But when evaluated from the context of critical reflection on our sexual desires, and in particular on the political nature of our desires, we may think it false that male domination is sexy because we take the concept to involve more than mere prurient interests, but also some moral or political dimension that outlines what *ought* to be considered sexually arousing. Indeed,

I take it to be part of hooks's (1994) point in “Seduced by Violence No More” to create space for such a milieu of criticism, engagement, and resistance of harmful sexual desires. We can make sense of the claim that male domination is sexy without accepting it as a given or as unproblematic. Here the conflict between milieus may be one internal to an individual (as contrasted with the crop-tops case where the conflict is between daughter and parents), as it is in hooks's case: she is committed to anti-sexism, including anti-domination, yet she finds male domination sexy (1994). In this case, as in the crop-tops case, there is a possibility of critique across milieus, and we need not accept the truths of multiple milieus as equally acceptable.

Nevertheless, we can now make sense of the puzzle by indexing the claims about what is true—and what we should believe—to milieus, which may have different truth conditions for evaluative concepts like cool and sexy.

### **5.3. Blocking False Implicature—Natural Claims**

Despite working well as a solution to the puzzle for evaluative claims, the strategy of relativizing to milieus is less successful for natural claims which arise out of the *common ground* of a single milieu.

Conversation conveys information by means other than by what is explicitly stated. One way inexplicit communication occurs is through *implicature*, another through *presupposition accomodation*. The idea is that in ordinary conversations in which we judge each other to be competent and cooperative, we aim to achieve and maintain equilibrium in the common ground, to share presuppositions at least for the purposes of the conversation. [...] Whenever something said in conversation introduces a new element into the common ground, the interlocutor has the option of blocking the move. Lewis uses the metaphor of “scorekeeping in a language game” to capture the dynamic process of updating. Negation is one device for blocking. Even if a statement made in conversation is literally true, one can deny the statement as a way to block what the statement conveys (either the implicature or the presupposition) [...] Updating of the common ground is not a matter of what is *semantically* presupposed or implied by the proposition expressed by the speaker. Rather, common ground is a *pragmatic* notion that concerns what is presupposed by the speaker and what is implicated, given certain

conversational maxims, by her utterance (Haslanger 2011: 188-189).

What is at issue in natural claims is what they implicate within a milieu, rather than how they are interpreted cross-milieu. Haslanger (2011) makes the case that generics of the sort I have called natural claims have false implicatures about the nature of the things described. In denying such claims, then, our aim is to deny the false implicature.

Consider *HP7*.

*HP7* It is true that *cows are food* so you should believe that *cows are food*; but believing *cows are food* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *cows are food*; so you shouldn't believe that *cows are food*.

What is at issue here could perhaps be described as a conflict between milieus—between those who eat meat and those who do not, perhaps. But it is more fruitful to explain the conflict as one about whether we as members of the same milieu should accept or reject the implicature about cows being naturally suited to being eaten, which is part of the common ground we share as members of a particular milieu in which most people do eat meat. In denying that cows are food, Haslanger does not deny that people eat cows, but rather that cows are food by nature and that it is morally appropriate to eat cows (2011: 192). So from the perspective of someone who accepts this common ground, it is true that cows are food, but for the purposes of blocking the problematic implicature, it makes sense to deny this claim.

Now consider *HP8*.

*HP8* It is true that *women are sexually submissive* so you should believe that *women are sexually submissive*; but believing *women are sexually submissive* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *women are sexually submissive*; so you shouldn't believe that *women are sexually submissive*.

Again, it seems the puzzle can be solved by understanding the denial of the claim that women are sexually submissive not as a claim about the sexual habits of individual women, but as a denial

of the false implicature that women are, by nature, sexually submissive. Contrast this with my analysis of *HP6*. The two cases are similar, so it is helpful to tease out what distinguishes the two responses as appropriate. I claimed in the case of *HP6* that the denial of the sexiness of male domination was a rejection of one milieu's interpretation of sexiness, and the acceptance of another's. But in *HP8*, the denial happens from within a single milieu: even if women in this milieu are sexually submissive, it is not the case that they are so by nature. One could also disambiguate *HP6* by this method. For example, one might deny that male domination is sexy as a way of blocking the implicature that male domination is, by nature, in the prurient interest. I do not think that there is any problem with seeing different versions of the puzzle as solvable in different ways. But what remains distinct about the strategies for *HP6* and *HP8* I discuss here is whether the criticism is inter- or intra-milieu, and there is always room for both sorts of criticism.

Finally, consider *HP9*.

*HP9* It is true that *men are better than women at math* so you should believe that *men are better than women at math*; but believing *men are better than women at math* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *men are better than women at math*; so you shouldn't believe that *men are better than women at math*.

As in the previous two examples, the denial of the claim that men are better than women at math can be understood as a denial of the implicature that this is so because of natural inferiority.

While the claim itself (that men are better than women at math) does not take a stand about the cause of the difference, part of the common ground we have is the content of the stereotype that women are naturally inferior, particularly when it comes to quantitative reasoning.

There is some interesting empirical work to support this claim. Some research on stereotype threat indicates that the threat can be reduced if women are told that differences in performances along gendered lines is not a result of natural differences. Dar-Nimrod and Heine

(2006) tested this by having women take GRE-like tests that included both quantitative and verbal sections. They varied the content of the verbal sections to increase or reduce stereotype threat. Women who took tests that included verbal sections arguing either that there is no difference in math performance or that experiential differences account for differences in math performance scored about equally well (Dar-Nimrod and Heine 2006: 435). Women who took tests that included a verbal section that either primed them to think about their sex, but with no mention of differences in performance (a standard stereotype threat trigger) or attributed sex differences to genetics performed about equally well and significantly worse than the other groups (Dar-Nimrod and Heine 2006: 435). These results are consistent with other research showing that emphasizing the role of effort or experience, and de-emphasizing the role of genetics or natural ability, can reduce stereotype threat (see Aronson et al. 2002, Good et al. 2003, Thoman et al. 2008). What this research suggests is that part of our common ground includes both an understanding of stereotypes as implicating something about natural differences and an understanding of intelligence as being a natural attribute. Disrupting either or both assumptions by explicitly denying them seems to reduce stereotype threat significantly.

#### **5.4. Epistemic Value Pluralism and Conflicting *Prima Facie* Duties—Probabilistic Claims**

So far I have given Haslanger's two strategies for solving the puzzle: we can understand the puzzle as a conflict between competing milieu-dependent understandings of concepts (2007), and/or we can understand the puzzle as a conflict between intra-milieu disagreement over common ground (2011). In this section, I want to note one common feature of these two solutions, argue that these two solutions are ill-equipped to deal with probabilistic claims, and propose a solution to versions of the puzzle that involve these claims.

#### 5.4.1. Epistemic Value Monism in the Previous Solutions

The suggestion that social knowledge has milieu-relative truth conditions is consistent with the view that the only epistemically relevant value is truth, but that truth may vary depending on milieu. Much of the rest of Haslanger's treatment of the question revolves around the crucial question of how to engage in critique across milieus. The ultimate goal of this critique is to convince others that the interpretation of some social phenomena offered by some particular milieu is to be preferred in this context. In Haslanger's example, this means an attempt to convince the seventh-grade girl that crop-tops are not cute, *pace* her seventh-grade milieu. "The idea is that if some milieus are epistemically privileged relative to others, those in less (epistemically) privileged milieus ought to accept the critique of a practice from a more (epistemically) privileged milieu" (Haslanger 2007: 86-87). But, as she notes, what makes one milieu epistemically (or morally or politically) privileged is up for debate, and there may be no milieu-independent way of settling this question (Haslanger 2007: 87). "This is less of a problem in domains where there is an independence of fact against which we can evaluate different epistemic standards: is this practice truth-conducive or not? But in the social domain our epistemic practices, like other practices, can generate facts to be known, and even if a practice is truth-conducive, it may be problematic" (Haslanger 2007: 87).

Truth is also taken to be the ultimate arbiter of what we ought to believe about the puzzle in the second solution, but the truth of what is implied by a statement is separate from the truth of what is implicated by a statement. Thus, we understand the puzzle as a conflict between what is stated and part of what is meant in stating it. Though the claims may be true, the implicature that they are true by nature or necessity is not. Both of these solutions, then, are consistent with (but

do not require) the view that truth is the only thing of epistemic value.

#### **5.4.2. Milieu-Relativity and Probabilistic Claims**

I do not think that milieu-relativity provides a promising solution to versions of *HP* involving probabilistic claims because either: there are no clear milieus in which truth of such claims might be dependent but variable, or the milieus in which the truth value of such claims are variable are so limited that they do not solve the puzzle. I consider each of these claims in turn.

First, it does not seem that there are easily-identifiable milieus in which the truth of these claims about probability will vary. Recall the two examples:

- (3) Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- (4) Women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways.

If these claims are understood as claims about what is likely to happen in general, then the assessment of likelihood will not vary depending on milieu.

Second, one might object that there are at least some milieus in which these claims will be false. Think of Treisman's study groups for women in calculus. If a group like this counts as a milieu, then we could imagine members of the group denying (3) on the grounds that it is clearly false within the milieu. But in denying that (3) is true for members of this milieu, they would not be denying (3) as a general claim, only (3) as a claim about likelihood among a smaller comparison class. Or perhaps the relevant milieu is people who know about the effects of stereotype threat. But within this milieu, too, it is not clear how one might deny the truth of (3) as a claim about general performance, since it is clear that stereotype threat conditions are the norm, rather than the exception. The same difficulty arises for (4). It is true that there are milieus in which women do not behave in sexually submissive ways, but a denial of the claim from such a milieu does not have the reach required to deny the general claim.

My concern with this strategy for solving the puzzle is that it does not seem strong enough to generate the result I advocate: that we all should reject the claims, in this case, that men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams and that women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways. Part of my unease with this solution is that the claims (insofar as they are claims about probability) do seem independently verifiable, which makes them poor candidates for milieu-relativity (Haslanger 2007: 87). However, this might make them good candidates for the second solution. Perhaps the problem lies not in what is implied by the claims (simple statements of probability), but what is implicated by them.

#### **5.4.3. Blocking False Implicature and Probabilistic Claims**

Perhaps (3) is similar to (9), and (4) to (8), in that what we want to accomplish in denying them is a denial of the implicature that observed differences are natural. Compare the pairs:

- (3) Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- (9) Men are better than women at math.
  
- (4) Women are likely to behave in sexually submissive ways.
- (8) Women are sexually submissive.

In making claims about what is likely, do we implicate claims about what is natural? Sometimes we do. We might say of a fair coin that it is likely to come up heads half the time (when flipped over a sufficiently large sample, under normal conditions). In saying this, part of what we intend to convey is something about the nature of the coin: its fairness and its two-sided-ness, which, together with the external conditions, generate its probability distribution. Think of another claim: it is likely that Jason will drink coffee in the morning. In saying this, I do not implicate anything about Jason's nature. I only mean that Jason drinks coffee most mornings, and I suspect that the future will be like the past. Contrast these claims with (3) and (4). In saying that men are

more likely than women to perform very well on math exams, one does not have to be committed to the implicature that this is a result of natural differences. In most normal cases it does not seem like probabilistic claims are taken to imply anything about the nature of things. Rather, they make inferences from how things are to how they will be.

No doubt, there are cases where someone uttering (or believing or hearing) (3) or (4) does have working in the background the idea that differences are natural. In such cases, I think the strategy of denying the claim to block the implicature can work well. However, we could imagine someone asserting (3) or (4) without taking a stand on the implicature, or just denying it outright. The following conversation might occur:

- A: Men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.
- B: No, that is incorrect. The differences in performance do not reflect natural differences.
- A: Indeed, I did not mean to imply that. I only meant that, given past performance, men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.

This is a limited victory for the defender of this second strategy. Blocking the implication that differences in performance are natural might be enough (it certainly cannot hurt, as the empirical research I presented above suggests). But I still want to explore a stronger solution that always requires a rejection of such probabilistic stereotypic claims. After all, though one might assert over again that one does not mean to implicate anything about the natural abilities of men and women, such claims may still have the effect of reifying the differences they note. In other words, I want to show that even the most innocent, well-intentioned utterance of, or belief in, a claim like (3) is epistemically bad.

I think the limitation of both of Haslanger's solutions lie in their attempt to make sense of epistemic obligation by reference to truth alone.

#### 5.4.4. Epistemic Dilemmas

In this section I argue that we can see the puzzle as an expression of conflicting epistemic values. If we take truth to be one epistemically valuable thing among others (or at least one other), then we can see some instances of the puzzle as cases where epistemic values are in conflict. I have argued in Chapter 2 that epistemic obligations and norms arise out of epistemic value and that epistemic value pluralism is plausible. If this is so, then we may sometimes find ourselves drawn toward different epistemic goals when those goals are in conflict. The same thing may happen in moral or political contexts when goals or values conflict.

In the moral domain such conflicts occur when we recognize more than one thing as being morally valuable. Ross has what is, perhaps, the best-known pluralist view of moral value. He gives an example in which the value of producing the best state of affairs (the optimific state of affairs from the utilitarian perspective) comes into conflict with the value of keeping a promise. If I make a promise to you, the fulfillment of which would confer on you 1,000 units of good, but the breaking of which would confer on someone else 1,001 units of good, what should I do? Ross thinks that we have a *prima facie* duty to keep the promise, but if the disparity in good produced were high enough, this *prima facie* duty could be overridden (Ross 1930: 34-35). We might say in general that you *should* keep your promises and that you *should* produce the most good. But when these two things come into conflict, this careless way of speaking seems to generate a contradiction. I should keep my promise, but I should break my promise.

The puzzle can be resolved by noting that the first 'should' arises out of the good of keeping one's promises, the second out of the good of producing the optimific state of affairs. Of course, we need not stop there in resolving the contradiction since we still want to know what we

ought to do—break the promise or not. Depending on the values at stake, we can say that the contradiction is only apparent. In Ross' view, for example, you have not only a *prima facie* duty to keep your promise, you should, all moral things considered, keep your promise in the case described. Despite the conflicting *prima facie* duties, the all things considered moral duty is to keep your promises; the duty to keep your promise is not overridden by the duty to produce the optimific state of affairs. So while we can make sense of saying that I both should and should not keep my promise, we can also see the sense in which saying this may rest on a mistake.

Of course, some philosophers think there can be genuine moral dilemmas—i.e. cases in which one is genuinely obligated both to do and to refrain from doing some act (Sinnott-Armstrong 1985, 1987a, 1987b, 1988). Dilemmas might arise because the value of the things at stake are incomparable or incommensurable. In the epistemic case, one might think that the instance of Haslanger's puzzle I have presented is a genuine epistemic dilemma. No matter what you believe, you do something epistemically wrong.

Another option when a conflict arises is to simply reject part of what gave rise to the conflict. In the example from Ross, a value monist (for example, a hedonistic utilitarian) may resolve the conflict by simply rejecting the claim that one is obliged to keep one's promises except insofar as doing so produces the optimific outcome. The truth monist does this in the epistemic case by rejecting the claim that one should not believe, for example, that men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams.

I think the best way to make sense of Haslanger's puzzle, at least in the case of probabilistic claims, is as a resolvable conflict between *prima facie* epistemic duties. It makes sense to say that we have a *prima facie* epistemic duty to believe true things, but perhaps this

duty can be overridden in the face of stronger epistemic reasons to believe otherwise.

## 6. Obligations Grounded in Epistemic Community

There is something epistemically suspect about the contents of stereotypes, and especially about probabilistic stereotypic claims. “When social knowledge goes wrong, it may be because it has constituted a reality—and perhaps accurately represents that reality—that nevertheless falls short in some way” (Haslanger 2007: 71). What is going wrong in these cases might be serious enough to generate an obligation that overrides the *prima facie* duty to believe the truth. In the final section of this chapter I argue that what is going wrong is a violation of the epistemic value of well-functioning epistemic communities. So we might see the puzzle as disambiguated in the following way:

It is true that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams* so you should<sub>(truth)</sub> believe that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*; but believing *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams* makes it true, and it would be better if it weren't true that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*; so you shouldn't<sub>(well-functioning epistemic communities)</sub> believe that *men are more likely than women to perform very well on math exams*.

It would then be an open question which obligation, if any, overrides the other. I think that the obligation arising out of our concern for well-functioning epistemic communities is the more powerful one in this case, particularly given the limitations of the truth goal in cases involving social knowledge.

I have argued in the previous chapter that the harms of stereotype threat are attributable to poorly-functioning epistemic communities and that developing and maintaining well-functioning epistemic communities can serve to counteract the damaging effects of stereotype threat. But here I suggest that the value of WFECs require each of us, individually, to reject claims like (3) and (4); the interests in being inclusive, nurturing, and encouraging of re-interpretation of social

experience require it.

In the previous chapter I noted that inclusivity cues are powerful ways of regulating who does and does not feel welcome in an epistemic community, as well as which ideas and arguments are welcome. Denying a claim like (3) can have the effect of making women feel more at home in an epistemic community. It is a signal that they will not be thought less capable in virtue of being women. Issuing such a denial in the context of a test reduces the threatening condition (Good et al, 2008, Quinn and Spencer 2001, Spencer et al 1999). It would be even better—epistemically—if our common ground included such a blanket denial of (3). Likewise, denial of (3) and (4) provide space for re-interpretation of the experience of, in this case, women. There is no need to deny the fact of past performance, but in denying the claim about what is likely, an epistemic community can offer its members a way of seeing themselves as having a different future.

I argued in the previous chapter that a poorly-functioning epistemic community accepts the underperformance of Black students or women or other disadvantaged groups as normal, unproblematic, or not worth further thought. In accepting the inference from past performance to future performance, we accept the differences as normal and unproblematic (which does not require us to accept them as natural). In doing so, no further investigation is required. However, if we look at past performance that shows differences, but insist that it need not continue to be this way, we open up a space for improved performance (as Treisman did in developing his workshops) as well as re-interpretation of the experiences of people under the thumb of maker's knowledge.

Perhaps the math example is getting old. Here is another example that demonstrates how

denial of an empirically well-supported probabilistic claim might be required by the goal of developing and maintaining WFECs: racial profiling. Racial profiling is stereotype threat writ large. Some defenders of racial profiling defend it on the grounds that it is a rational, empirically well-supported way of catching people who break the law. Boonin summarizes this way of thinking:

If there's a difference between black and white crime rates for some sorts of criminal offenses, and if the difference between black and white elasticity rates for those sorts of offenses is sufficiently small, then it seems clear that racial profiling for those offenses will increase arrests and decrease crime. And since it seems clear that increasing arrests and decreasing crime would be a rational thing to do, it should seem clear that racial profiling would be a rational thing to do under such circumstances, even if it turns out to be morally objectionable (Boonin 2011: 323).

Boonin's claim is that if it is true that Black people on average commit more crimes than white people on average, it would be rational for police to engage in racial profiling. One step in this argument is structurally identical to (3):

(10) Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to break the law (Boonin 2011: 325).

Assume that this statement is true for the purposes of the discussion (it is controversial, of course, though Boonin offers some defense of it). If we objected to (10) by attempting to block the implicature that Black Americans are not more likely *by nature* than white Americans to break the law, Boonin would likely respond that he agrees: all that is meant here is a claim about who is likely to break the law, and the best guide we have for that is past law-breaking.

Haslanger (2011) considers as one of her examples the claim that Blacks are violent, meaning criminal or dangerous. Her strategy is to block the implicature that this is by nature and then to deny the truth of the generic (it is not true of many or even most Black people that they are violent, so the generic is false). But (10) is importantly different. Even if we attempt to block

a problematic implicature, the defender of (10) can go on to assert that no such claim was intended, and reiterate the truth of the probabilistic claim. Like (3) and (4) it infers from past events to how things will be in the future. But like (3) and (4), there is an overlooked epistemic problem with its assertion. In asserting (10) one takes the past to be normal and not in need of intervention. It serves as a cue to Black people that they are already considered suspicious. Even if this suspicion is not a result of any claim about their nature, it is a claim about their *group*. This conditions the lives of Black people so that they are always already on guard. They have to use mental and physical energy being wary of their own actions and the actions of others in a way that white people do not. Indeed, recent research finds that racism is bad for one's health for these reasons (see Alvarez and Shin 2013, Holmes 2013, Paradies and Cunningham 2012, Silverstein 2013).

Claims like (10) often end up having the self-fulfilling character that is common to maker's knowledge, with the result that their assertion generates the evidence needed to verify the truth of the claim. I have already given some of the empirical evidence for this phenomenon in the previous chapters. Anderson provides two general accounts:

Some theories of the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy focus on dyadic interactions between stereotype-holding perceivers and the targets of the stereotype. The general idea is that people will treat blacks and whites differently because of their racial stereotypes; this differential treatment will in turn elicit stereotype-confirming behavior from black and white subjects. [...] Other theories of stereotype confirmation look beyond dyadic interactions to the causal impact of stigma, understood as a public stamp of dishonor on a group (Anderson 2010: 55).

The act of asserting a claim like (3), (4), or (10) is not an innocent, neutral, or dispassionately rational report of facts, even in its most innocent form where one is careful not to imply anything about natural differences or inferiority. Rather, such assertions are self-fulfilling cases of maker's

knowledge. As such, they are epistemically problematic enough to warrant overriding our epistemic goal of believing what is true and following our evidence. Instead, we should reject such claims in order to facilitate both well-functioning epistemic communities and treatment of others as epistemic agents worthy of respect.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this chapter and the previous one I have argued that stereotype threat presents a serious epistemic, in addition to moral and political, problem. In the previous chapter I argued that well-functioning epistemic communities could counteract the harms of stereotype threat at the community level. In this chapter I have argued that each of us, individually, ought to reject the claims that make up the contents of stereotypes even when those claims seem to be empirically well-supported.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

#### 1. Introduction

I have argued for some revisions to the way we think about our epistemic obligations as moral agents. Currently accepted moral method places inappropriate emphasis on individuals in abstraction from their social contexts and communities. I have proposed shifting the discussion away from these abstractions. Instead, I argue that we should recognize the situatedness of knowers and knowledge, and focus on epistemic communities when we think about what is epistemically required of us—individually and as groups. I have argued that we should develop and maintain well-functioning epistemic communities, and that each of us has obligations to seek moral testimony from certain others, to defer to that moral testimony under some circumstances, and to ignore some kinds of evidence.

In this final chapter I will explore some methodological implications and outline areas of future research. The following section provides three methodological suggestions for philosophy: an increased emphasis on interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary work, a general stance of epistemic humility, and a need for diversity. In the final section, I provide some suggestions for future research. I give a brief sketch of an argument for institutional change in the laws of evidence.

#### 2. Methodological Implications

In this section I discuss some of the methodological implications of my previous

arguments. Because I have focused on moral method and especially on epistemic obligations, there are clear implications for philosophical methodology. Chief among these is a need for interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary work. That is, philosophers cannot be content to discuss their work—particularly in ethics and social/political philosophy, but also in philosophy of language, metaphysics, and so on—only with other philosophers. Philosophers should engage academics from other disciplines, as well as non-academics. This engagement can mean many things. In some cases it may mean giving talks outside one's discipline, going to the talks held by other departments, reading work by people outside of philosophy, or outside of the typical literature base within philosophy, teaching courses in cognate disciplines, reading empirical work, doing empirical work, and even activism or community service. It may also mean embarking on interdisciplinary research projects that engage experts in other disciplines as well as field work. One model of such work is the Femgov project, which aims to generate new and better poverty metrics by drawing upon interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary insights.

This research project seeks to provide an answer to the question: what is a just and justifiable measure of poverty that is truly gender sensitive and capable of revealing gender disparities? An interdisciplinary team of academics has partnered with leading NGOs to investigate this question by combining the expertise and insights of poor men and women with leading figures from a variety of disciplines (“Measuring Poverty and Gender Disparity” 2013: online).

A second methodological implication of my research is the suggestion of a stance of epistemic humility on the part of philosophers. The view of human cognition on which we are all able to access, understand, and weigh reasons and arguments in a straightforward and accurate way is still largely accepted in philosophical circles. I have argued (in Chapters 3 and 4) that this view is false, and taking it to be true hampers our ability to correct epistemic and moral problems. A general disposition toward epistemic humility would improve philosophical

investigation by encouraging philosophers to look for guidance and insight in new places, to doubt themselves, and to take more seriously the likelihood that they are affected by cognitive biases. Recall the bias blind spot phenomenon I discussed in Chapter 3 (Pronin et al 2002, Pronin and Kugler 2006). We all think that other people are biased and we are not, and this problem may get worse in so-called “cognitively sophisticated” people—those who score highly on measures of cognitive sophistication (West et al 2012). One part of this epistemic humility should be an understanding that we are always fallible, and should include an openness to criticism, especially from members of underrepresented groups, even criticism that might initially seem off-base, trivial, silly, or easily refuted. The first thought should be that there is something about us (philosophers) and our concepts that are lacking, not that there is something in members of underrepresented groups lacking. A general stance of humility also tells against making universal, timeless claims. This is not because such claims are impossible to make, but because currently accepted methods cannot justify them.

On the flip side, philosophers (or non-professional philosophers engaged in philosophical thought) who are themselves members of underrepresented groups should adopt an attitude of (what may seem like) inflated epistemic confidence. Because members of these groups are likely to see themselves as less credible and because they are likely to suffer from hermeneutical injustice, they should stick with ideas and thoughts longer after receiving negative or critical feedback. Others may fail to understand or appreciate their insights because of deficits and distortions in the epistemic community rather than in the insights themselves. This act of epistemic bravery will be easier in the context of a WFEC, which provides support and validation to those who have been systematically de-valued.

A final suggestion straddles the line between methodology and institutional intervention. The suggestion is that philosophy itself needs to make serious attempts to diversify. I have already noted that philosophy is quite homogenous, especially with respect to gender, sexuality, race, and class. Diversifying philosophy along these and other dimensions would enrich the discipline and make epistemic injustices—as suffered by philosophers and perpetrated or perpetuated by philosophers—less likely. Having a diverse group of people engaging each other in dialogue makes it less likely that claims particular to some group and its interests will be accepted as obvious and unassailable. In a relatively closed epistemic community it is easy both to get agreement and to think that no reasonable person could disagree. By diversifying the philosophical community, as well as working with people outside of the philosophical community, we make it more likely that contentious claims are recognized as contentious.

### **3. Future Research**

In this section, I explore some areas of future research on this topic. In particular, I suggest one strategy for thinking about institutional epistemic obligations. Anderson, writing about epistemic injustice, notes:

Answering a complex question, or interpreting some significant phenomena, typically requires that we elicit epistemic contributions from numerous individuals and connect them appropriately. The cumulative effects of how our epistemic system elicits, evaluates, and connects countless individual communicative acts can be unjust, even if no injustice has been committed in any particular epistemic transaction. Nor can we count on the practice of individual epistemic justice to correct for all of these global effects. Rather, the larger systems by which we organize the training of inquirers and the circulation, uptake, and incorporation of individuals' epistemic contributions to the construction of knowledge may need to be reformed to ensure that justice is done to each knower, and to groups of inquirers (Anderson 2012: 164-165).

I have discussed the many ways in which we rely on our epistemic communities to understand and interpret the world, and have stressed the structural aspects of epistemic injustice, but many

of my proposals have been limited to individual obligations in the face of this injustice. Here I will explore some institutional reforms. Anderson (2010, 2012) argues that racial integration is a powerful way of combating epistemic injustice at the institutional level. Here I want to suggest another sort of remedy to structural epistemic injustice: revisions to evidence law.

### **3.1. Epistemic Justice in Rule-Based Evidence Law**

Here I will briefly sketch one sort of institutional reform to counter epistemic injustice. The law of evidence is the epistemic element of the legal system, and it is explicitly normative. By that, I mean that the law of evidence is an explicit set of rules for gathering, using, restricting, and weighing evidence in order to determine the truth of some claim. It tells the legal system how it ought to engage in a specific kind of inquiry. Because the law of evidence is a highly formalized and influential epistemic system, it is a natural place to begin thinking about institutional reforms to counter epistemic injustice.

There is some debate in the philosophy of law over the legitimacy of rules that demand that whole classes of evidence—like hearsay, evidence gathered without a warrant, etc.—be excluded from review in courts. Philosophers of law, beginning with Bentham, have not looked favorably on these sorts of rules (Bentham 1827, Kirkpatrick 1992, Schauer 2006). Rule-based evidence law has the danger that it will tell in favor of ignoring evidence that is, in fact, good evidence for some proposition, i.e. probative evidence. Though hearsay is generally poorer evidence for something than first hand testimony, it may still be decent evidence, or at least worthy of some consideration, the argument goes.

Similarly, an epistemologist might argue that one's credence in some proposition ought to increase with even very minimal confirming evidence. For example, many accept as a solution to

the Raven Paradox (see Hempel 1945) that the existence of each non-black, non-raven should increase our credence in the proposition *All ravens are black*, though only very slightly. Thus, many epistemologists have been critical of such rules in law, as well as in epistemology (see Schauer 2008 for a nice discussion of this). Goldman: “In other words, adding true evidence to an already given body of evidence will generally help a cognitive agent assess the truth of a hypothesis, at least if the significance of the evidence is properly interpreted. This principle seems to speak against withholding any true item of evidence from the trier of fact. Exclusionary rules are veritistically suspect” (1999: 292).

Though most philosophers have been hostile toward rule-based laws of evidence because they may bar probative evidence, I will argue in this section that they have the potential to counter the sorts of systematic bias I have discussed previously. In particular, rule-based laws of evidence can be used to exclude evidence that may be a result of unjust structures, that would be given undue credence because of these structures, or evidence that, if used, might perpetuate those structures.

### **3.2. Rape Shield Laws**

There is some precedent for this sort of rule already; rape shield laws do just this. Evidence about a victim’s past sexual history is not allowed, though other sorts of character or reputation evidence often are. Ostensibly, these rules are intended to bar evidence that is irrelevant to the question at hand, but that is likely to influence a jury if presented. Consider two relevant sections of the Federal Rules of Evidence:

Rule 403: “The court may exclude relevant evidence if its probative value is substantially outweighed by a danger of one or more of the following: *unfair prejudice*, confusing the issues, misleading the jury, undue delay, wasting time, or needlessly presenting cumulative evidence” (*Federal Rules of Evidence* 2011:

online—emphasis mine).

Rule 412: “(a) Prohibited Uses. The following evidence is not admissible in a civil or criminal proceeding involving alleged sexual misconduct:

- (1) evidence offered to prove that a victim engaged in other sexual behavior; or
- (2) evidence offered to prove a victim’s sexual predisposition” (*Federal Rules of Evidence* 2011: online).

There are exceptions included in Rule 412 for both criminal and civil cases. Still, the intent of the rule is as follows: “The rule aims to safeguard the alleged victim against the invasion of privacy, potential embarrassment and sexual stereotyping that is associated with public disclosure of intimate sexual details and the infusion of sexual innuendo into the factfinding process” (*Federal Rules of Evidence* 2011: online). In this way, Rule 412 is intended to outline a specific sort of case where evidence may often be prejudiced even when probative.

Thus, as opposed to the normal balancing test provided by Federal Rule of Evidence 403, which requires the opponent to show that *danger of prejudice* substantially outweighs *probative value*, when a party seeks to introduce prior sexual history evidence, Rule 412 shifts the burden to the proponent and requires a showing that *probative value* substantially outweighs *unfair prejudice* (Hines 2011: 885).

Rape shield laws—Rule 412 is the *federal* rape shield law, but states have their own laws—serve as an institutional corrective to a certain kind of epistemic injustice. Hines notes that the sort of evidence barred by rape shield laws was one encouraged in court for its supposed probative value.

The rationale used for the admissibility of such evidence reflects traditional rape myths that persist today. First, pre-rape shield courts admitted evidence of sexual history to impeach a witness's credibility on the theory that a witness with “bad moral character” will be less truthful than one with “good moral character.” Second, courts considered evidence of sexual history to be probative on issues of consent. The idea that sexual propensity bears on credibility and consent is grounded in cultural attitudes and myths about sexual conduct, the crime of rape, and rape victims. For example, the perception of evidence in rape cases is affected by the degree to which the facts conform to the “ideal” rape case. The stereotype of an “ideal” rape victim involves a virtuous virgin, acting cautiously by remaining where she is “supposed” to be, who is suddenly ambushed by a crazed stranger. This ideal reflects several prevailing notions about women in society.

First, that only sex within heterosexual marriage is morally acceptable. [...] Second, it reflects the tendency to blame victims for precipitating the attack, or “asking for it.” [...] Third, the “ideal victim” stereotype is partly derived from a longstanding common law notion of women as property (Hines 2011: 882).

Rolled up in the epistemic injustice are several of the themes I have discussed in previous chapters: women suffer credibility deficits already as a result of pervasive sexism, but female rape victims suffer additional credibility deficits; there are stereotypes about how women ought to be chaste, careful, and responsible, and deviation is socially punished; there are also contradictory stereotypes about how women ought to be sexually available, passive, and weak, and deviation is socially punished. These considerations come to a head in sexual assault trials, where the combination of already low credibility for women meets an un-winnable double-bind of how women ought to behave.

Rape shield laws can be interpreted as an institutional attempt to protect individual community members from being harmed by epistemic injustice, but they can also be interpreted as attempts to alter the structural bases of those injustices. That is, the epistemic injustices arise out of community-developed linguistic and conceptual resources that disadvantage women as a group, and which enforce a gendered hierarchy. If evidence of past sexual history were allowed in court proceedings, it would reinforce and seem to justify the existing rationales for injustice. By blocking that move, rape shield laws might have some influence on those community conceptual resources by providing some force behind the objection that such information is used unfairly. “Law actively participates in this transformation of perspective into being. In liberal regimes, law is a particularly potent source and badge of legitimacy, and site and cloak of force. When life becomes law in such a system, the transformation is both formal and substantive” (MacKinnon 1989: 237). This claim cuts both ways. Law may enforce or undermine systems of

domination, though, in point of fact, it often does the former. My proposal here is that the law of evidence has the potential to undermine systems of epistemic domination that gain legitimacy in the legal system.

### **3.3. Other Exclusions—Condoms as Evidence**

In this section I extend the justification for rape shield laws to another kind of case. While I think this sort of move can and should be made for many kinds of evidence, I focus on one topical example here: whether possession of condoms should be considered evidence of prostitution (particularly in New York City, but also other large US cities—see Human Rights Watch 2012). This case is actually a bit different from the rape shield case because possession of condoms is used most often by police, rather than courts, as evidence of probable cause to arrest or hold someone on suspicion of intent to engage in prostitution (see “Public Health Crisis” 2012). Though courts have not tended to accept possession of condoms as evidence, there is no rule prohibiting prosecutors from introducing it as evidence, and there is no rule prohibiting police from employing this heuristic in practice.

Possession of condoms is not a crime in New York. Additionally, there is no case law or statute that provides any basis on which to conclude that possession of condoms is probative of the intent to exchange sexual conduct for a fee. However, it is clear that in New York City, one factor police consider in determining whether probable cause exists to arrest someone for Prostitution or Loitering for the Purposes of Prostitution is whether they have condoms in their possession. In at least one borough, supporting depositions signed by arresting officers require documentation of the number and location of condoms found on the defendant upon arrest (see Appendix G). In 2010, Brooklyn Defenders Services provided data to the PROS Network revealing that condoms had been treated as evidence in at least 39 prostitution-related cases in the borough of Brooklyn alone during 2008 and 2009. [...] Most prostitution-related cases end in an agreement to plead to lesser charges and do not go to trial. As a result, condoms are rarely actually admitted as evidence in criminal court. However, the authors of this report are aware of several cases in recent years in which prosecutors have sought to introduce possession of condoms as evidence of intent to engage in prostitution at trial. In one Manhattan case in which the prosecution sought to introduce a single condom as evidence of prostitution,

the defendant's attorney moved to have that condom excluded from evidence on the grounds that it had no probative value ("Public Health Crisis" 2012: 12).

Stepping back from the particulars of this case for a moment, consider in general whether possession of condoms might have some probative value. Under normal conditions, we might expect that *all* sex workers would want to carry condoms regularly because they prevent disease and pregnancy, just like we might expect that all police officers would want to wear bullet-proof vests while on the job, all construction workers would want to wear hardhats, all writers would want to have a thesaurus on hand, and so on. Among the general population, we might expect that some or even many, but not all, women will carry condoms regularly. Some women might not intend to have sex, some might have a single partner and other means of contraception, some may be lesbians, and so on. Similarly, we might expect some non-police officers to want to wear bullet-proof vests, some non-construction workers to wear hardhats, and some non-writers to have a thesaurus.

If all I know about someone is that they are wearing a bullet-proof vest, then my guess will be that they are more likely to be a police officer than an architect because the probability of the former is higher given what I know. The same goes for people with hardhats or a thesaurus. Bullet-proof vests, hardhats, and thesauruses have some probative value with respect to occupation. A defender of the practices of the NYPD or a detractor of rule-based evidence law, then, might claim that the same goes for prostitution. Though any woman could be carrying condoms, we would expect all sex workers to carry condoms, so possession has some probative value, especially in concert with other indications.

But return again to the specific case. The supposed probative value of condom possession is used disproportionately to arrest women, especially women of color, transgender women,

homeless women, as well as gay men (see Crabapple 2012, “Public Health Crisis” 2012, Turkewitz 2012). And in a cruel ironic twist, this policy has resulted in sex workers *not* carrying condoms because of the policy, which undermines whatever *a priori* probative value we might expect possession to have (see “Public Health Crisis” 2012, Turkewitz 2012). “The Urban Justice Center recently conducted its own survey on the issue in New York City. Preliminary results released to the media show that 16 of 35 participating sex workers said they have not carried condoms when working because they feared they would get in trouble with the police. Fifteen of those respondents said that police had confiscated or damaged condoms the individuals were carrying” (Turkewitz 2012: online). This is particularly true of victims of sex trafficking, who are forced to engage in prostitution.

When condoms are taken as arrest evidence, or used to support criminal charges, the message to [victims of trafficking] is clear—better not to have condoms in their possession, even while being forced to engage in prostitution. In addition, if condoms are allowed to be used as evidence against their traffickers, we are very concerned about the practical impact—many traffickers simply will not allow those they control to carry and use condoms if there is a chance those condoms may expose traffickers themselves to criminal liability (The Legal Aid Society 2013: online).

As in the case of evidence related to sexual assault, the use of evidence related to prostitution both issues from and reinforces certain visions of gender and sexuality. There is a picture of what women should be like operating in the background, and this picture is at odds with the vision of sex worker women and gender-queer men. Most of the extant discussion of the policy focuses on the considerable public health catastrophe it invites, but the policy also presents epistemic questions. Those targeted most often by the policy are members of social groups afforded the least amount of credibility. But it is partially because these groups have little social power that they may indeed be more likely to engage in sex work, whether by force in the

traditional sense (as in the case of trafficked persons), or force in a more invisible sense, manifested as choice occasioned by constraint. I do not mean to suggest here that sex workers lack agency or “have no other options”, but I do mean to suggest that the context of sex work is, as all things (but to an even greater extent), infused with power relations. Further, sex work is often done by people at the intersection of many sorts of oppression, especially gendered, racial, and economic.

As others have noted, this condom policy has clear connections to stop-and-frisk policies profiling young Black and Latino men (see Red Umbrella Project 2013 for example).

The practice of condoms being used as evidence is a discriminatory one that is used as part of larger stop and frisk profiling practices. The use of condoms as evidence is very much a gendered version of stop and frisk – police typically stop trans and cis women, gender non-conforming people and people (including trans and cis men) who are perceived to be gay, people of color, and people who they perceive as dressing or acting like they are selling sex by wearing outfits the police deem as being sex worky, standing or walking in public places, talking with passers-by (Red Umbrella Project 2013: online).

Both policies allow police officers to be *prima facie* suspicious as a result of a person based on social identity, and both may initially seem to have some epistemic justification in so far as they may seem well-supported by evidence (or are at least the sort of thing that *could be* well-supported by evidence in a nearby possible world). But both have the effect of stigmatizing and stereotyping already vulnerable groups and denying them credibility.

Also consider what the pair of policies in one city, like New York City, means in terms of social identity. If one is (or is perceived to be): Black, Latino, a female, transgender, gay, and/or homeless, then one is already disproportionately vulnerable and considered suspicious enough to warrant further police investigation, possibly arrest. This has the effect of reinforcing traditional power structures and ensuring that the privileged maintain a sense of ease in their environments

denied to others. I suggest that, as in the case of rape shield laws, laws prohibiting the use of condom possession as evidence of prostitution would serve as an institutional correction to epistemic injustice (in addition to averting public health and social justice disasters). As in rape shield laws, such a policy could be institutionalized in the laws of evidence as an exclusion barring this type of evidence, which might discourage police use of condom possession as probable cause, though it should probably also be changed directly as a matter of police practice as well.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have drawn out some implications of the research presented in the previous chapters. Whereas the previous chapters focused more narrowly on individual epistemic obligations in the context of epistemic community, this chapter lays out some methodological implications and suggestions for institutional changes. Both of these topics warrant further, more sustained consideration. There are, no doubt, a number of institutional changes that ought to be made in trying to counter epistemic injustice. These should be made in many institutions: law, government, education, and elsewhere.

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