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Epistemic Injustice, Reasons, and Agency

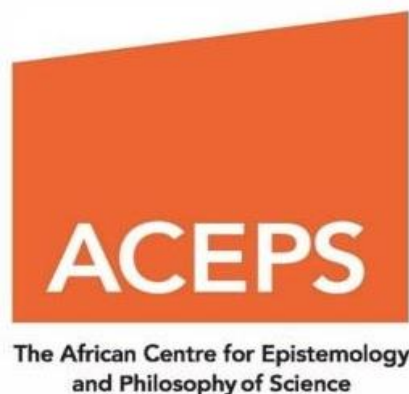
14th – 15th October 2021

African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science
(ACEPS)

Department of Philosophy

University of Johannesburg
South Africa

Zoom Link: <https://zoom.us/j/98687587577>



PROGRAMME

Times are in SAST (GMT +02:00)

Times	14th October
14:00 – 14:40	Bertille De Vlieger – <i>Describing emotions: the problem of introspective reports and epistemic injustice</i>
14:40 – 14:50	Break
14:50 – 15:30	Michael Wilde – <i>Power in medicine</i>
15:30 – 15:40	Break
15:40 – 16:20	Abraham Tobi – <i>Appreciative silencing in communicative exchanges</i>
16:20 – 16:30	Break
16:30 – 17:10	Keolebogile Mbebe – <i>Transitional justice and epistemic justice</i>
17:10 – 17:20	Break
17:20 – 18:00	Elliot Porter – <i>Futility thinking</i>
Times	15th October
14:00 – 14:40	Aderonke Ajiboro – <i>Anonymous testimony and testimonial injustice</i>
14:40 – 14:50	Break
14:50 – 15:30	Gilles Beauchamp – <i>No religious symbols for school teachers: Quebec's laicity law and hermeneutical marginalisation</i>
15:30 – 15:40	Break
15:40 – 16:20	Catharine Saint-Croix – <i>Rumination and wronging: the role of attention in epistemic morality</i>

ABSTRACTS

Describing emotions : the problem of introspective reports and epistemic injustice

Bertille De Vlieger

In this talk, I will highlight the inadequacy that exists between our emotional experiences, the concepts we use to identify and categorize them, and the words we use to describe them.

First, I will show that when we apprehend our emotional experiences through introspection, we deploy phenomenal concepts that allow us to conceptually identify our experiences. Phenomenal concepts refer directly to subjective experiences and their phenomenal properties. There are different types of phenomenal concepts (Balog, 2009) and of varying reliability. Their role is to make possible a form of interpretative work as well as the formation of judgements about the experience that is being introspected. It is a cognitive moment during which the individual seeks to make sense of his or her emotional experience by using concepts that would be likely to correspond to the phenomenal qualities of his or her emotional experience. Phenomenal concepts are often, but not always, considered to be the most likely to explain the epistemic relationship that exists between an individual and his conscious mental states. There are a significant number of different conceptions about the specific nature of phenomenal concepts, but I will focus on two broad types of phenomenal concepts: direct phenomenal concepts (Chalmers 2003; Gerlter 2011) and indirect phenomenal concepts.

Secondly, I will show that individuals often find themselves confronted with the limits of their own interpretative, conceptual, and lexical capacities when it comes to describing their emotional experiences. Indeed, different problems can arise during the process of describing their experience. An individual may either not be in possession of the adequate concept for interpreting his experience, or he may have the concept corresponding to his experience but not fully master the concept, or may master and hold the concept corresponding to his experience without having any element of his lexical repertoire associated with it (Sperber and Wilson, 1997). In all these cases, a description of the emotional experience will be difficult and subject to misinterpretation. This lack of relevance – and the recurring inability to correctly carry conceptual identification of one's emotional experiences and to provide adequate linguistic descriptions for them- could generate a sense of frustration and could also motivate a form of social exclusion (Anderson, 2017).

The aim is therefore to show that epistemic injustice, and more specifically hermeneutic epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) is rooted both in the approximate introspective apprehension of our emotional experiences, and in the lack of conceptual and lexical skills of individuals and societies.

Power in medicine

Michael Wilde (University of Kent)

Why is mainstream medicine so mainstream? One answer appeals to the claim that mainstream medicine is the type of medicine best supported by the currently available evidence. However, this sort of answer has recently been threatened by some arguments due to Jacob Stegenga (2018). Stegenga argues for *medical nihilism*, that is, the thesis that there is little support for the claim that the interventions of mainstream medicine are in fact effective. An alternative answer attempts to explain the dominance of mainstream medicine as the result of political forces. It is this sort of answer that sometimes motivates calls to decolonize medicine. *But what exactly does it mean to decolonize medicine?*

One proposal is to understand medical decolonization in terms of getting all people equal access to medicine. Such an answer appeals to the fact that 'there is unequal access to healthcare, both in accessing the clinic and in accessing medical treatment after entering the clinic, and this unequal access follows the tediously familiar lines of race, gender, and socioeconomic class' (Broadbent 2019: 246). However, Alex Broadbent has recently argued against this way of understanding medical decolonization on the grounds that it might entrench underlying power relations, given that the medicine universally provided is likely to be the medicine of the political elite. He says that the problem is 'most obvious when the system of medicine favored by the elite is culturally and historically quite different from the system of medicine that predated the elite' (2019: 247). Instead, Broadbent prefers to understand medical decolonization in terms of *critical decolonization*, where critical decolonization draws upon his *medical cosmopolitanism*, which requires:

(i) commitment to a fact of the matter; (ii) a commitment to epistemic humility; (iii) a commitment to treating interlocutors as having equal moral worth; (iv) a commitment to the primacy of practice (2019: 181-207, 239-261).

In this paper, I will try to defend the claim that calls for decolonizing medicine should in fact be understood as calls for getting all people equal access to mainstream medicine. In particular, I will argue that unequal access to healthcare as a result of race, gender, and socioeconomic class is a more immediate practical problem than the problems that motivate an understanding of medical decolonization in terms of medical cosmopolitanism. I suggest this on the grounds that mainstream medicine is mainstream not only as a result of political forces but also because there is a good deal of support for the claim that the interventions of mainstream medicine are in fact effective. In doing this, I rely on the argument against medical nihilism provided by Broadbent himself (cf. Broadbent 2019: 157-180). In fact, I think that understanding medical decolonization in terms of getting all people equal access to medicine may more generally fit better with medical cosmopolitanism, since on this understanding, medical decolonization promotes the universal provision of a medicine that at least to some extent already shares the commitments of medical cosmopolitanism.

Appreciative silencing in communicative exchange

Abraham Tobi (University of Johannesburg)

If a woman experiences harassment in the work place for a promotion and her testimony about this does not get the uptake it deserves due to prejudicial stereotypes about women, she is a victim of testimonial injustice. The range of emotions that this injustice may elicit from her could include frustration, anger, despair, et cetera. This would be a valid response to the injustice she experiences. However, if she is convinced that what she has experienced is not an injustice but a norm to attain success in the workplace and she accepts this version of events, then we have an untheorized phenomenon on our hands. This is more the case if she is thankful for the ‘success’ that the system offers. This kind of scenario is possible because of the norms of patriarchy that she accepts due to its hegemonic nature. Here, we have a victim of testimonial injustice that shows the counterintuitive emotional response of appreciation to the injustice she faces. In this paper, I argue for a novel kind of epistemic silencing that makes sense of this sort of scenario. I tag this appreciative silencing.

Transitional justice and epistemic injustice

Keolebogile Mbebe

South Africa is widely considered to have transitioned from an unjust and unequal nation in the early 90’s into a democratic society that is governed by a constitution which enshrines the equality of all persons in the country. The preamble of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 1995, the legislation behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, includes the aspirations to “recognise” and “heal the divisions of the past”. The ways in which this “healing” would be facilitated, among other methods, were through the pursuit of certain responses by the victims, such as understanding, reparation, and ubuntu. These were juxtaposed to responses based on retribution, such as vengeance, retaliation, and victimization. In my paper, I aim to make the case that these requirements of the victims to respond in a certain way to their victimhood were an instance of epistemic injustice. I aim to show that the epistemic injustice that victims experienced pertained to the dismissal of their agency as victims, and the ensuing disempowerment that accompanied that dismissal. My goal is to show that when victims of injustice are dispossessed of their right to respond on their own terms, they suffer a double injustice, even in mechanisms that are created for their pain to be acknowledged.

Futility thinking

Elliot Porter (University of Kent)

Depression is often characterised by a particularly nihilistic normative outlook, and one which is unlikely to be changed by argumentation, good news, or sunny days. Despite being both grim and usually temporally bound, I take it that this normative outlook is the agent’s own, and speaks for the agent. Agents in such depressions are unlikely to recognise the virtues or any significant meaning in the projects they

have in hand or the options that remain before them, however will still remain sensitive to grim or unpleasant descriptions of the world, their place in it, and the practical life they lead. This outlook overlaps significantly with philosophical nihilism without being identical to it. Ratchliffe suggests that these moods are grounded in particular existential feelings, with depressions of this sort being grounded in existential feelings of hopelessness, deep guilt, and de-situatedness from the world. The result of all this is alteration of one's moral sight. One can no longer see the world in the particular moral colour one once did, and consequently, one cannot recognise the considerations which previously motivated one as reasons to pursue one's projects. Nihilistic depression occurs when this altered moral sight becomes so pervasive as to touch one's every experience of value. I take for granted that philosophical nihilism is false, and consequently, that we have good reasons to avoid and reject a nihilistic normative outlook. This raises a particular problem for the interactions between nihilistically depressed people and those they interact with, particularly when support is being offered. This paper will explore how support for depressed people might be offered in ways which push back on nihilistic normative outlooks, without disregarding the authority of that agent's own normative outlook.

Anonymous testimony and testimonial injustice

Aderonke Ajiboro (Rhodes University)

Anonymous testimony can be broadly construed as a testimony received without the knowledge of the source or speaker. Testimonial injustice occurs when credibility deficit is accrued to a speaker, and epistemic harm is caused when credibility deficit influences the hearer's belief-formation as a result of identity or structural prejudice (M. Fricker, 2007). The anonymity of the speaker is an obstruction to carrying out any credibility assessment of the speaker *per se*. How then can testimonial injustice be done at all?

Consider this basic example: Brenda gets home from work and finds a note at her door which reads that her husband is cheating. Brenda has no clue who the writer is as there is no name or address on the note. She begins to reflect on what to believe. She decides on believing it must be from someone trying to break up her marriage. Brenda's belief tends to show that the speaker has been assessed as a home-breaker. A reason to have this belief could be the hope of an enduring marriage. There is an injustice towards the anonymous speaker as Brenda makes an assessment of the speaker without knowledge of who the writer is. In this paper, I argue that it is an injustice to attach a credibility assessment to an anonymous speaker. Although harm may not be directed towards the anonymous speaker, beliefs from such credibility assessment may perpetuate epistemic harm in the community. I also argue that the credibility assessment of an anonymous speaker derives only from the hearer's attitude towards the content of the assertion. Hence, when a hearer receives anonymous testimony, believing the testimony depends on the hearer's background beliefs and practical interests and imputing the responsibility to the anonymous speaker is an injustice.

Epistemic justice as a challenge to the status quo

Machteld Genskens

Epistemic injustice, as introduced by Miranda Fricker (2007, 1998), is a notion that presupposes a social conception of knowledge, while it offers a new social-epistemic angle on theorizing justice, too. For this reason, as can be seen when examining attempts to analyse or further elucidate the notion, epistemic justice is hard to accommodate within methodologically individualistic theories of justice, without loss of its powerful appeal: the notion is either reduced or is rendered so complex as to defy its intuitive, ready applications. It may then seem that the intuitively powerful notion of epistemic injustice is not all that relevant or philosophically potent. However, I argue that practice has proven otherwise: the notion has widespread appeal, precisely because it connects the moral and political with the (social) epistemic. That is, I think that Fricker was right that epistemic (in)justice is a subcategory of justice which has its own dual moral-epistemic and political-epistemic normativity. To validate this point, I argue against the reduction by James Bohman (2012) and the complex analysis of Morton Byskov (2021), while providing my own criticisms of Fricker's characterization of the notion of an epistemic injustice 'as a harm done to someone in their capacity as a knower or as a subject of knowledge'. That characterisation is too broad

and too narrow. Instead, we should come to understand that epistemic justice concerns the regulation of epistemic power – the ability to shape what comes to pass as knowledge in society and who qualify as knowers (Geuskens 2018). The importance of epistemic justice is that epistemic power needs to be regulated for there to be viable claims to truth and justice within our social practices. As I explain, epistemic injustices are failings of either the exercise or the allocation of epistemic power. I argue, then, against Bohman and Byskov that rather than reducing the notion of epistemic (in)justice or providing an ad hoc analysis of the notion, we should view epistemic (in)justice as a challenge to the current theories of knowledge and justice.

No religious symbols for school teachers: Quebec’s laicity law and hermeneutical marginalization

Gilles Beauchamp (McGill University)

Visible religious symbols (other than Catholics) have worried citizens of the Canadian province of Quebec for a long time. The worry had reached a high point in 2007 with what was called the “accommodation crisis,” in response to which the government created the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences. The report¹ has played an important role over the next decade in discussions on laicity in Quebec. On June 16, 2019, claiming that we spoke of laicity long enough, the government of François Legault adopted *An Act respecting the laicity of the State*² which prohibits state employees in a position of authority (including teachers and school directors) from wearing visible religious symbols in the exercise of their function. The justification for the ban relies on the alleged fact that religious symbols worn by state employees undermine the appearance of neutrality of public institutions.

Even though the ban applies to every religious symbol, particular attention is given in public discourse on the hijab which is often perceived by the public as a symbol of inequality. The ban is thought to be acceptable, i.e. it is judged to be not excessively discriminatory, when one minimizes the importance of the wearing of the symbol for one’s identity (understood in terms of conviction of conscience or otherwise) and supposes that it is possible to simply take off a religious symbol while one is at work.

This interdiction can cause numerous injustices, but in this paper, I focus on injustices that affect an agent in her capacity as a knower, i.e. epistemic injustices, and their causes. More precisely, I focus on the hermeneutical marginalization and injustice that are at play in the current situation in Quebec. Following Miranda Fricker, I understand hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.”³ I argue that when the government assumes that religious employees could simply take off their religious symbols at work, the government relies on and further strengthens hermeneutical marginalization about the meaning of religious symbols and their importance for those who wear them, which in turn can cause hermeneutical injustices when one tries to express the meaning of one’s religious symbol and the reasons why one wears it.

This hermeneutical marginalization undermines the agency of persons wearing visible religious signs, and especially of Muslim women because the reasons that are given for wearing religious symbols and why one cannot simply take it off at work cannot be seen as legitimate ones nor the result of agency. On numerous occasions in the media, Muslim women have refused to give reasons⁴ for wearing the hijab knowing that they would not be understood as a genuine expression of agency.

In order to correct the hermeneutical marginalization, I argue that we should aim to have members of under-represented groups in important positions in society that shape shared knowledge to help bridge hermeneutical gaps. In other words, we need to have religious people wearing visible religious symbols in

¹ Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the Future, a Time for Reconciliation Report* (Québec: Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d’accomodement reliées aux différences culturelles, 2008).

² Simon Jolin-Barrette, ‘An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State’, Pub. L. No. 21 (2019).

³ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158.

⁴ Loi 21: Que vont faire les futures enseignantes voilées?, Urbania.ca, 10 November 2019, <https://urbania.ca/article/loi-21-que-vont-faire-les-futures-enseignantes-voilees/>.

a position of power to help shape the collective hermeneutical resources in an unprejudiced way. Unfortunately, Quebec's laicity law is doing exactly the opposite.

Rumination and wrongdoing: the role of attention in epistemic morality

Catharine Saint-Croix

The idea that our epistemic practices — from the ways we regard others' credibility, to our evidence-gathering practices, to the beliefs we harbor — can be harmful has been the core observation driving the growing literature on epistemic injustice, doxastic wrongdoing, and moral encroachment. But, one element of our epistemic practice has been starkly absent from this discussion of epistemic morality: attention.

While the topic of attention has been a mainstay of empirical literature in psychology and neuroscience, it has only recently become commonplace in philosophy of mind and related fields. The goal of this paper is to show that attention is a worthwhile focus for epistemology, especially for the field of epistemic morality. After presenting a new dilemma for proponents of doxastic wrongdoing, I will show how focusing on attention not only allows us to defuse that dilemma, but also helps to substantiate accounts of what goes wrong in cases of doxastic wrongdoing.