What does pragmatist philosophy have to offer accounts of epistemic injustice? In this chapter, I answer that question by reading Miranda Fricker’s groundbreaking *Epistemic Injustice* (2007) through a pragmatist lens. In particular, I examine the type of harms caused by testimonial and hermeneutical injustice and argue that Fricker’s account of epistemic harm would be improved by the pragmatist epistemology provided by John Dewey. While Fricker’s discussion of epistemic injustice tends to rely on a representational account of knowledge, Dewey’s pragmatism understands knowledge as transactional. This means that for Dewey, knowing is not a process of mirroring reality (to borrow Richard Rorty’s [1979] Deweyan-inspired words), but instead an activity undertaken by a bodily organism-in-the-world who helps shape what is known. Considering knowledge as transactional rather than representational recasts the harm of epistemic injustice as a harm done to the flourishing of a human organism, rather than as an unfair exclusion from a process of pooling of knowledge. Conceiving the harm of epistemic injustice as a type of ontological-environmental damage can help feminists, critical philosophers of race, and others more effectively understand and counter the harmful effects of testimonial injustice. This notion of harm also better explains what Fricker herself is trying to achieve when she describes the effects of hermeneutical injustice as damaging constructions of selfhood.

I. Fricker’s representational epistemology

Epistemic injustice occurs when a person is treated unjustly in her capacity as a knower, and on Fricker’s account, it can take two different forms. The primary form of epistemic injustice is testimonial: when a person is making a claim to knowledge (“testifying”), the credibility of her claim is undercut because of prejudice on the part of the hearer toward the speaker (Fricker 2007, 1). In the case of testimonial injustice, the hearer doesn’t bother to weigh the merits of what the speaker is claiming before discounting it, or the hearer perhaps does weigh what the speaker says but in a prejudicial (pre-judging) manner. The hearer already knows, so to speak, that what the speaker is saying is dubious, irrelevant, false, or otherwise easily dismissible, and this is because of who the speaker is. For this reason, Fricker associates testimonial injustice with what she calls identity prejudice (2007, 4). Prejudices concerning gender and race are key contributors to testimonial injustice in many societies, but other status markers such as age, disability, and class also can have similar epistemological effects. A quick example of testimonial injustice is a man
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ridiculing a woman’s claim about why a car’s engine is broken because the man “knows” that women don’t understand cars (see, e.g., Frye 1983). Exactly how testimonial injustice is at work in any given situation can vary, and the specifics of those different situations as they interplay with different identities deserve careful attention.

The second form of epistemic injustice is hermeneutical, and it occurs when a society or culture lacks the concepts to describe or understand a particular person’s experience (Fricker 2007, 6). While testimonial injustice tends to focus on the individual and how she is treated by her interlocutors, hermeneutical injustice occurs on the social level. For example, the concept of marital rape did not come into existence in the United States until the mid-1970s, and it did not gain broader social and legal status until 1993, when marital rape was finally made a crime in all fifty states (www.rainn.org/public-policy/sexual-assault-issues/marital-rape). Lacking a concept of marital rape, American women who were forced by their husbands to have sex could not understand their experience as one of rape even as they might have felt that something about the experience was wrong. Rape wasn’t conceivable as happening between a husband and a wife, so the “wrong” in question had to be something else: a miscommunication between two people, a misalignment of their desires, perhaps even a failure on the woman’s part to anticipate “properly” her husband’s needs, and so on. Raped wives, in other words, could not understand the event that occurred in their own lives as an ethical wrong, which the law in turn should acknowledge and punish.

As this last example demonstrates, even though hermeneutical injustice is social, it also has effects on the individual. The wife who cannot understand her rape as a rape is an individual who is harmed, just as the female auto mechanic is. But the epistemic harm done to the raped wife, unlike that inflicted upon the female auto mechanic, occurs because of “a gap in collective hermeneutical resources” (Fricker 2007, 7). In the case of testimonial injustice, an individual (or possibly a group of people, such as a jury) epistemically harms another individual, whose credibility is undercut. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, a society creates a context in which non-epistemic harm, such as that of sexual violence, takes on an epistemic character. The husband who rapes his wife, physically and emotionally harms her, to be sure, but he does not epistemically harm her when he forces her to have sex. The latter form of harm occurs because of a societal failure, often enacted by particular people in particular interactions, to provide the raped wife with a robust epistemic toolbox of concepts with which to adequately and justly understand her experience.

What precisely is the nature of the epistemic harm produced by testimonial and hermeneutical injustice? Beginning with the first form of epistemic injustice, Fricker argues that testimonial injustice harms a person in two related ways. First, she is harmed in her capacity as a giver of knowledge, as someone who could contribute to the pool of knowledge that a society is accumulating (Fricker 2007, 5, 115). Second, since she is seen as incapable of producing knowledge, she can lose confidence in her epistemic abilities as such, which can harm her capacity to gain knowledge from others and/or herself (2007, 49). I will return shortly to the issue of epistemic self-confidence, focusing for now on Fricker’s description of the knower as a giver of knowledge and of the activity of knowing as the pooling of knowledge.

The language of “giving” and “pooling” information shows up repeatedly in Epistemic Injustice. For Fricker, “essentially what it is to be a knower is to participate in the sharing of information,” that is, to engage in “a co-operative practice of pooling information” (2007, 145). The identity prejudice of testimonial injustice presents an obstacle to this process “either directly by causing the hearer to miss out on a particular truth, or indirectly by creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas” (2007, 43). Either way, a person can’t engage in the activity of knowing and thus has been “wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge” (2007, 145). This
epistemic capacity, furthermore, is a component of a human being's more fundamental capacity for reason. To undercut a person's capacity as a giver of knowledge thus “can cut deep” because it “undermines them in their very humanity” (2007, 45).

Without naming it as such, Fricker operates with a banking model of knowledge that implicitly relies on a representational epistemology. As pieces of information, knowledge is an accurate representation of the world that can be deposited to and withdrawn from a common account. Knowing, in turn, is the activity either of developing accurate representations to deposit to the bank or of withdrawing knowledge from it that others have contributed. Because of this model, the virtues of Accuracy, Sincerity, and Testimonial Justice are crucial to Fricker's project. Testimonial justice is a virtue in the hearer that counters identity prejudice so that blockages in the circulation of ideas in and out of the pool do not occur. On the speaker's part, the virtues of Accuracy and Sincerity ensure that false pieces of knowledge do not poison the common pool (2007, 116, 120–122). Testimonial justice thus is a simultaneously ethical and epistemological virtue that enables all people to have an equal shot at contributing accurate representations of the world to the common pool (2007, 121).

The loss of epistemic self-confidence sometimes caused by testimonial injustice is connected to the epistemic harms that hermeneutical injustice can produce. All those harms involve a person's self-development and her relationship to herself. First, when a society lacks certain concepts, a person cannot understand adequately or accurately her own experiences. People in this situation cannot develop a “proper understanding” or “proper interpretation” of what is happening, effectively creating a “cognitive disablement” that leaves them troubled and confused (Fricker 2007, 151, 152). Second, hermeneutical injustice – and the crisis of self-confidence that it can produce – can affect the very “formation of self,” helping constitute a person as the identity that the prejudice in question assumes her to be (2007, 55). The epistemic damage here is also ontological, constraining “who the person can be” and not merely how she is perceived by other people (2007, 58). In that way, hermeneutical injustice cuts very deep, preventing people “from becoming who they are” (2007, 168).

II. Dewey's transactional epistemology

Fricker's representational account of knowledge depends problematically on the implicit adoption of a view from nowhere. On this view, the real world can be known only when one has freed oneself from the bias of specific, located perspectives – hence the paradoxical epistemetic site of “nowhere.” Those perspectives are like dirt on clear glass, clouding a distinct, accurate view of the world. Operating with a sharp distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, this approach to knowledge tends to shun anything associated with the subjective and to assume that human knowers are capable of doing the same. It is this view that virtually all forms of pragmatism reject. Pragmatist philosophies understand human knowers as necessarily embodied and thus as inevitably situated and perspectival beings. Maybe a god can occupy a view from nowhere, hovering outside the world that it seeks to know, but human beings cannot.

Rorty's (1979) particular criticism of the view from nowhere argues for abandoning epistemology, implicitly collapsing the latter into attempts to mirror nature and advocating what he calls hermeneutics in its place. While I share his concerns about the mirror of nature, I find Rorty's avoidance of epistemology to be troubling. This is because by offering no alternative to knowledge as mirroring, Rorty ultimately leaves that definition in place. As Fricker (1994, 95) rightly claims, “we cannot tear down the house and build nothing in its place,” and this is precisely what Rorty's criticism of the mirror of nature does. It is devastatingly on-target but stops short. Perhaps this is why Fricker tends to lump Rorty's pragmatism together with postmodern
philosophy, the latter of which Fricker considers to be treacherous for feminism. Setting that issue aside here, I agree with Fricker that feminists and others concerned about epistemic injustice need more than Rorty can provide. We need a way to judge some beliefs about the world as true and others as false. Likewise we need a way to judge some actions as just and others as unjust.

Dewey’s pragmatism can do just that because his criticism of the view from nowhere also (re)constructs an alternative epistemology, and it does so by means of a particular Darwinian insight that is extremely helpful for feminist and critical race purposes. The most significant influence of Darwin upon philosophy, according to Dewey (1977, 1988), doesn’t concern the (in)famous notion of the survival of the fittest. It is instead the full appreciation of human beings as bodily animals in the world, engaged in the human equivalent of burrowing, nesting, foraging, and other animal activities. Human beings don’t adapt to their environments; instead they and their various environments co-constitute each other in a dynamic, ongoing fashion (Sullivan 2001). A live organism is a changing organism, just as the world with which it transacts is constantly changing and being changed. What is crucial for the purposes here is that these Darwinian insights about human animals hold just as much for their epistemic activities as for their non-epistemic ones. When human beings seek to know what the subject or any other part of the world really is, we are engaged not in a god-like observation of the world, but in practices and activities of knowing that all animals undertake in order to survive and thrive. Those activities might be different for humans than non-human animals due to the (perhaps) greater political, social, and other complexities of the human world, but this is a difference in degree, not kind. As in the case for all other live organisms, there is no perch outside this world for human knowers to occupy. Genuinely post-Darwinian philosophies must acknowledge that there is no view from nowhere from which to generate knowledge.

This does not mean, however, that knowledge is merely subjective or that anything goes concerning claims about how the world is. Dewey’s pragmatism argues that one can judge some claims to be true and others to be false without appealing to the view from nowhere. The criterion with which to make such judgments is not whether a claim accurately mirrors the world. It instead is whether, when acted upon, a claim brings about the desired transformations in the world. If it does, it is true, and if it does not, it is false. Put another way, even if oppressed groups were able to accurately mirror the world in ways that dominant groups could not, it’s not clear what good that ability would do them. They would still need a way to change the world so that their needs, interests, and experiences were taken seriously by others. On Deweyan terms, this transformation is what activities of knowing and claims to truth are all about: knowledge and truth become fully answerable to the needs, interests, and practices of all people, including the marginalized (Dewey 1985a, 1985b, 1988).

This definition of truth might sound like just the sort of subjective relativism that Fricker wants to avoid in her rejection of postmodernism, but a couple of concrete examples will help demonstrate the critical, experiential notion of objectivity that Deweyan pragmatism provides. It admittedly is one that is not diametrically opposed to subjectivity, but that is precisely the point: feminists and others interested in epistemic justice need an account of objectivity and truth that doesn’t depend on discarding human (particularly women’s and other oppressed groups’) perspectives, interests, and experiences. Take the simple claim that the table in front of me is 30 inches wide. Is this true? The answer depends upon the interest(s) that drive the need to know, which is not the same thing, I hasten to note, as saying that one answer is as good as any other. There is an objectively true, non-mirroring answer to the question. When I measure the table with a ruler, I discover that its width is 30 inches. So for my purposes and needs – having enough room for my laptop, books, and tea – it is true that the table is 30 inches wide. But this answer is true only to the extent that those particular interests are guiding the quest for knowledge.
If, for example, a carpenter needed to know the width of the table to construct a cozy alcove in which to put it, it might very well be false that the table is 30 inches wide. The table is 29.90 inches wide and that 0.10 inches is a difference that makes a difference to the table’s fit with the café’s tight contours. In the context of the carpenter’s interests – which are complexly material, economic, aesthetic, and perhaps even political, depending on the situation – it is objectively false that the table is 30 inches wide.11

What’s more to the point is that if someone were to claim that the table really is 29.90 inches wide – suggesting a level of accuracy that my rough ruler measurement lacked – this claim wouldn’t settle the truth of the matter, at least not once and for all. We could always find a different way to measure the table if a particular set of interests required it. A quantum physicist, for example, would be likely to have an entirely different assessment of the material features of the table, explicitly putting into question, moreover, any account that relied on an observer-independent reality of it (Frenkel 2015; Ringbauer et al. 2015). It’s not so much that the carpenter’s claim about reality is false – its falsity would be just as difficult to ascertain acontextually as its truth – as that perspective-free claims about reality tend to be red herrings: irrelevant and thus unhelpful.

Jane Addams (2001) provides another example of how attempting to mirror reality can be epistemologically off-target in her account of the Devil Baby that allegedly was housed at Hull House. Older, working-class, immigrant women in particular came in droves to Hull House to see the Devil Baby, who was said to be born in retribution for a husband’s neglect of his wife and their household. Initially exasperated by the women’s refusal to believe that there was no Devil Baby, Addams came to realize how the women used the Devil Baby as a tool for fighting testimonial injustice (to borrow Fricker’s term). The story of the Devil Baby helped them “secure . . . a hearing at home” and to grapple with “their double bewilderment, both that the younger generation was walking in such strange paths and that no one would listen to them” (2001, 16)

Let’s return now to the case of a woman’s claim that her husband raped her. Determining the truth of this claim does not involve somehow standing outside of a human (whose exactly?) perspective to judge the claim. Its truth is intimately bound up with at least some group of human beings’ interests, perspectives, and needs, and on pragmatist grounds, this is not necessarily problematic. It becomes problematic, however, if and when those perspectives and interests are denied in the name of alleged perspective-free objectivity. This denial doesn’t transport us to an epistemologically pure view from nowhere; instead it allows a particular set of interests and needs to operate uncritically in the guise of perspective-less objectivity. That set of interests – complexly material, economic, political, psychological, and so on – almost always is that of the dominant group, and thus the chimera of perspective-free objectivity tends to operate as the handmaiden of oppressive practices.

What then to say about the wife’s claim, especially if her husband and perhaps also society at large denies that he raped her? To best answer this question, feminists and other epistemologists need to dive deeper into situated interests, perspectives, and experiences, rather than flee from them. This does not reduce the question of the wife’s rape to a “mind-[dependent] reality [lacking] normative constraints upon what we may correctly believe about the world” (Fricker 1994, 98–99). The truth of a situation finds its test in experience, not divorced from it, and human experience includes far more than what people’s minds think about it. Undergoing this test requires asking, whose experience? Who are the interested parties in a particular situation or conflict, and how do we ensure that all of their perspectives and interests are included in knowing what happened? Pragmatically recasting the issue of truth so that it must reckon with experience has the benefit of insisting that the interests of women and other marginalized groups are included. These interests are part of the “real state[e] of affairs in the world” (Fricker 1994,
95) that constrains what can be truthfully said. When we include the wife’s experience (of pain, confusion, and so on) in the knowledge of what happened between her and her husband, we cannot truthfully say that it was an ethically acceptable sexual encounter.

Nor can we say, however, that the wife’s experience alone determines the truth of the situation. That would be merely to turn the mirror of nature upside down, so to speak, rather than to discard it altogether. The marginalized are no more able to occupy a view from nowhere than the dominant are, and so it would be equally problematic from a pragmatist perspective for marginalized groups to claim that they can represent the world independent of any particular point of view. A pragmatist rejection of the view from nowhere is radical because it is complete. Pragmatist reasons for valuing the perspectives of the marginalized do not concern whether they can generate accurate representations of the world, but this is not to say that their perspectives aren’t immensely epistemologically valuable. They are valuable because increased human flourishing depends upon their epistemic inclusion.

Fricker likely would ask whether pragmatism can give the wife’s claims enough epistemic authority such that they are more than an expression of a personal (or group-based) opinion (Fricker 2000, 150). On Fricker’s view, if we can’t judge that “some forms of social organization are just plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false,” then pragmatism is just as “hopelessly indiscriminate” as postmodernism allegedly is (2000, 150, 151). The answer to her question is yes, but only if we do not sneak a quest for certainty and universality into the notion of epistemic authority. One of the reasons it is difficult to let go of the idea of a view from nowhere is that it seems to offer epistemic certainty: a way of knowing that something is unjust or false without any doubt and without any contextual or historical qualifications. It is “just plain unjust” or “plain false,” period. But the quest for certainty is misguided (Dewey 1988); human knowing only takes place and makes sense in particular contexts, times, histories, and places. It wouldn’t be of any value to us if it didn’t. The particular contexts for knowledge need not be narrowly local or personal. We can create knowledge that is knit out of the interests and experiences of wide swaths of people, even across the globe. In that way, a large group of people might be able to agree that a particular social practice – such as raping women, one hopes – is unequivocally unjust. But that knowledge and its authority is a human achievement, a product of human activity and interests, not a static truth that exists prior to and independent of human (again, whose?) experience.

III. The harms of epistemic injustice

We now can appreciate why it matters whether accounts of epistemic injustice operate with a transactional rather than a representational epistemology. The pragmatist answer – appropriately pragmatist – is not because we have discovered an accurate picture of what epistemology really is. It is because working with a transactional epistemology is more likely to improve human lives by eliminating the harms of epistemic injustice. A Deweyan approach to epistemic injustice would help us understand that the primary harm done by testimonial injustice is not that a speaker without credibility isn’t allowed to “pool” knowledge (i.e., represent the world) through her speech like everyone else. The harm instead is that the speaker isn’t allowed to epistemologically transact with the world in ways that enable her own, as well as others’ flourishing. In a similar fashion, the harm done by hermeneutic injustice is not merely that a speaker operating with a different worldview than a hearer is dismissed as unreasonable or crazy. This approach to injustice also operates with a problematic “pooling” or representational model of knowledge, writ large at the level of a culture or community. The harm is that being dismissed as crazy impacts the perceived reasonableness of the entire culture or community in question. That in turn impacts the culture’s
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or community’s ability to be an environment that encourages and enables the flourishing of all its members.

Epistemic injustice conceived as interference with transactional flourishing can happen as a deprivation, in which a person isn’t able to epistemologically engage the world. But even more importantly, it also can occur as a production, in which a person is produced as a kind of knower required to epistemologically engage the world in ways that undercut her. In the latter case, a person’s epistemic activity is particularly harmful because it is transactionally self-destructive: it forces a person to help shape and build a world that, in turn, tears her down. In the case of the wife who was forced to have sex with her husband, for example, she is epistemically harmed by her co-construction of a marriage in which her desires and needs are insignificant and perhaps even indistinguishable from those of her husband’s. This is, in my view, the important insight that Fricker is trying to capture when she points to the epistemic harm caused to constructions of selfhood. She need not back away from it out of a concern that it ushers in postmodernism or that it doesn’t make room for the possibility of a subject’s distortion. Debates over distortion versus accurate representation don’t get at the more relevant question of how to create a world in which everyone, including oppressed groups, can thrive. This question involves “a set of beliefs about real states of affairs,” as Fricker (1994, 99) would insist, “and in particular, real experiences had by women (and it makes no difference that these experiences are essentially mediated by culture, language and history),” as Fricker helpfully adds. It’s experience that matters, particularly those experiences that have been unjustly excluded from knowledge projects. Including them would go a long way toward achieving epistemic justice.

Related chapters: 2, 3, 4, 11, 23

Notes

1 While other pragmatist philosophers such as Jane Addams also offer resources to conceptualize epistemic harm as ontological and dynamically relational, I focus on Dewey because of the depth of his transactional account. I will return briefly to Addams in section II of this essay.

2 While Fricker uses the term “primary,” a debate in the literature is ongoing about the complex relationship of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice and whether one form of epistemic injustice is more foundational than the other (see, e.g., chapters 1–3 of Medina [2012]).

3 On testimonial injustice, especially in the form of speech, as structural rather than individual, see Ayala and Vasilyeva (2015).


5 See, e.g., chapter two of Freire (2000).

6 Fricker draws here on Williams (2002).

7 See, e.g., Nagel (1986). While Fricker might be seen as promoting a situated subject that is devoid of biases rather than a view from nowhere, I would argue that the former effectively is the latter. There is no such thing as a situated, embodied subject without particular biases or perspectives.

8 Fricker (2007, 148–154) explicitly uses the metaphor of dark glass, followed by imagery of occlusion, obscurity, and “hermeneutical darkness.”

9 See, e.g., Fricker (1994, 100, note 5); Fricker (2000, 151–152 and 159); and Fricker (2007, 2, 3, 55, and 176).

10 Although I use the language of “experience” rather than that of “standpoint” here, neither Dewey nor I am referring to unmediated experience, e.g., of the variety “I feel or think X, therefore I know X is true.” The pragmatist concept of experience is similar to that of a standpoint in feminist standpoint theory; for more on this point, see chapter six of Sullivan (2001, especially page 134).

11 Fricker (2007, 10) comes very close to endorsing a similar account of truth at the end of Epistemic Injustice.

12 For additional support of this point, see Medina (2012, 118).
References


