

Note: This is a shortened version of a longer paper, please ask permission before quoting.

EPISTEMIC INTEMPERANCE

Miranda Fricker's book *Epistemic Injustice* has been an inspiration for epistemologists and moral philosophers in general, as she has done a fantastic job at training our sights on the relations obtaining between epistemology and morality which are substantial and practical, and certainly of more than mere academic value. Despite my desire to praise it more, since my time is so short, I'll jump right to the quick. Whereas I think Fricker has done an excellent job in discussing the plight of the victims of epistemic injustice, I also think that her diagnosis of the causes of it are only partly on the mark, and, with regard its perpetrators, in fact I think she misses the lion's share of the problem.

What I find to be an error all happens in a moment in the book, in fact in one short sentence. This occurs at page 92, after Fricker has introduced the idea that prejudice is the culprit which inspires epistemic injustice and the idea that there is an "anti-prejudicial virtue" or a virtue which "neutralizes prejudice in...judgements of credibility". In identifying this virtue, she writes (and here's the moment), "Let us call it (what else?) the virtue of *testimonial justice*". It is a seems like a perfectly reasonable inference to make: if the harm done to someone is a form of injustice, then the cause of the harm is due to the injustice of the perpetrating judge. Unfortunately, the inference is only weakly reliably. While all agents who perpetrate injustice are themselves to that extent unjust, this does not necessarily imply that the cause of the injustice is itself injustice.

The point can easily be seen through an exchange in the literature on moral virtue between Rosalind Hursthouse and Christine Swanton.¹ Consider a military quartermaster who steals chocolate from his or her comrades for the sake of selling the chocolate on the black market at a high wartime profit. Here, it seems clear, that the injustice done to the soldiers was done from an arrogant appropriation of their property in a way that is characteristic of injustice. But consider another case, one in which quartermaster steals the chocolate, not to resell it, but because he or she is a glutton whose desire for chocolate is overwhelming, and steals it simply to binge until sated. In this case, the soldiers are certainly done an equal injustice to the case of

¹ Hursthouse, "A False Doctrine of the Mean", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81: 57–72, 1980–81, at p. 64; Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2003, p. 21.

theft for profit, they are harmed in the same way and to the same degree, but the cause of the injustice is not injustice but rather intemperance. And as soon as we see it in this light, we can also see injustices arising through cowardice or recklessness, foolishness or lack of prudence, or even sloth or negligence.

Given this, we need to revisit prejudice and look more carefully at its causes, for when we do, I think it will become apparent that the primary cause of testimonial injustice, when this is considered as the harm done to a victim, is not epistemic injustice but rather epistemic intemperance. The claim is not that testimonial injustice is never the result of epistemic injustice. Despite Aristotle never saying that justice is a mean, I think we can see it properly as a mean between arrogance and servility. If so, then those cases in which testimony is arbitrarily discounted due to arrogance, or inflated due to servility, then the injustice perpetrated is due to lack of justice. Still, I do not think that most of the cases Fricker is most centrally concerned with – racism, sexism, and the like – fall into this category.

We may approach epistemic intemperance by first noting that temperance itself is the least well understood of the cardinal virtues (courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom). What is truly odd, at least to my mind, is the fascination philosophers have with the vice of *akrasia* or weakness of will, while seeming to not be very interested in virtue of temperance: it is as if we are trying to understand what makes a mechanism fail prior to gaining an understanding of how it works when it is functioning properly. It's reasonable, therefore, to try to catch hold of epistemic intemperance first through a general sketch of temperance and epistemic temperance first in hand.

Temperance can be glossed as the state of character in which we live in peace with our conative and affective capacities, that is, our desires, needs, passions, emotions, etc. Moral temperance is when we are not tempted by what we ought not to be tempted by. It is, of course, good to desire and be tempted by one's beloved, assuming one's beloved is good, and fine to indulge one's passion for one's beloved as well. The problems arise only when we are tempted by what is bad or when we are prone to indulge in good passions in bad ways or at the wrong times, etc. The Platonic dialogue that focuses most on temperance is *Charmides* and it is surprisingly epistemic. The positive account of temperance presented begins with most well-known dictum of Western philosophy, *Know Thyself*, where Critias denies that this should be thought of as a greeting but, rather, understood as explicitly practical advice to those entering the oracle at Delphi: one says "Know Thyself" to someone, or to oneself, when one is inappropriately tempted by something, so it is akin to saying, "Be Temperate", or "Nothing in excess", or "Don't let your eyes be bigger than your stomach" (164d-65b). Socrates sums up this practical yet epistemic conception of *temperance* as follows:

So, the [temperate] man alone will know himself and be able to examine what he in fact knows and what he doesn't, and he will be capable of looking at other people in the same way to see what any of them knows and thinks he knows, if he *does* know; and what, on the other hand, he thinks he knows, but does not. No one else will be able to do that. In fact, that is being [temperate] and [temperance] and knowing oneself – knowing what one knows and what one doesn't (167a).²

Everyone recognizes the absurdity of letting people be the judges of their own cases, and yet this is exactly what self-knowledge requires. But if you have the temperament to make reliable self-assessments, then you possess the virtue of temperance. The key to self-knowledge, and one of the keys to epistemology more generally, is to be found in not allowing one's affections to have an undue influence on one's judgment. Turning to epistemology generally, our judgment making faculties and belief forming mechanisms are designed to detect the truth, and they malfunction if they rightly the content of the beliefs we form are "stained" by our attitudes or affections, our desires or emotions.

This is, of course, not new news. Nowadays, confirmation bias is a widely recognized phenomenon, though the idea was familiar to the ancients. Raymond Nickerson, in a widely cited article on it, defines confirmation bias as "the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand." In general, we are apt to believe that what makes us *feel* comfortable and disbelieve what discomfits us. Little is more familiar, little is more human. So, there is no surprise here. What is surprising is that the culprit, the vice of epistemic intemperance, has never been properly diagnosed. If true judgments are to be made and true beliefs to be formed, one ought not to allow arbitrary factors such as our personal passions, emotions, and desires to play a role. When they do, they only skew the results and lace them with falsehood.

Notice, there need be no continence involved, nor is this typically akratic, since there certainly need be no tension within one's psychology characteristic of continence or akrasia, such that we either struggle successfully with or are overcome by our desires or wants. Such ambivalence is possible but certainly isn't necessary. We can easily be "of one mind" when it comes the judgments we make that are in fact epistemically intemperate, indeed, most often epistemic intemperance is invisible to ourselves to the point where even when new facts arise which contradict what we want to believe, we are remarkably adept at rationalizing and defending our intemperate judgments and beliefs. Indeed, there may be cases in which we are

² *Charmides* in Plato, *Early Socratic Dialogues*, translated by Donald Watt, edited by T. J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books). I have substituted "temperance" and "temperate" for Watt's use of "self-control" and "self-controlled".

psychologically incapable of being brought to a place from which we can acknowledge our mistake. How is this possible? The answer is self-deception.

A very plausible view of *self-deception* in its own right happens to be most amenable to the current account of epistemic intemperance. The view can be derived from work by Robert Audi, who understands the state of “being in self-deception” as primary, and defines it as follows:

A person, *S*...is in self-deception, with respect to a proposition, *p*, if and only if *S* (1) unconsciously knows that not-*p* (or has reason to believe, and unconsciously and truly believes that not-*p*); (2) sincerely avows, or is disposed to avow sincerely, that *p*; and (3) has at least one want which explains, in part, why *S*’s belief that not-*p* is unconscious and why *S* is disposed to avow that *p*, even when presented with what he sees is evidence against *p*.³

Now, this seems too narrow a definition, since clause (1) requires the self-deceived person to have at least some epistemic grasp of the truth, say not-*p*, and to be in denial of it. It is not hard, however, to imagine people who deceive themselves into believing something because they want to believe it is true, but who are unaware of the way in which their beliefs are inappropriately affected by their wants and, as a result, have no unconscious belief or reason to believe they have erred from the epistemic point of view. So, if, for example, all of my self-assessments are improperly partial and therefore to that degree unjustified and yet there is no way for me to psychologically grasp my own mistakes, in what sense am I self-deceived? True, I have a false belief about myself, but in what way am I deceiving myself? The answer is that I am deceiving myself about my own objectivity and rectitude: I am fooling myself into believing that I am a good and fair judge of myself when in fact I am not.

What makes this account of self-deception so helpful is that it points so clearly in clause (3) to the fact that it is our wants or desires or our other affective capacities that cause our cognitive mechanisms to fail to work as they are designed to work. If epistemically temperate people are proficient at keeping their desires from improperly influencing their beliefs, epistemically intemperate people cannot do so. It is difficult for people to give up their biases because holding onto them is what they *want* to do, they are pleased with the results of the self-deception.

And so, we come to prejudice. Just as *akrasia* is often thought of in terms of irrationality, it is not uncommon to attribute the wrongs of prejudice to irrationality as well. We find this thought in the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who appeals to failures of Kantian

³ “Self-deception, Rationalization, and the Ethics of Belief” in his *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1997, p. 132.

universalizability to explain racism.⁴ This seems thin at best. A richer account is given by Franz Fanon, who writes, “The racist’s purpose has become a purpose haunted by bad conscience. He can find salvation only in a passion driven commitment such as is found in certain psychoses.”⁵ And while it is doubtful that Fanon’s existentialism is necessary for understanding racial prejudice, the quote gives the clue: behind racism is a “passion driven commitment”, and such a commitment need not be, strictly speaking, irrational, however mistaken, arational, or non-rational it may be. Indeed, insofar as our “passion driven commitments” may have an evolutionarily driven rationale, there is reason to think they are, in some sense, “rational”, even if they end up distorting our perception of reality instead of revealing it, as our other cognitive adaptations are designed to do.

“Just-so” stories are notoriously easy to tell and hard to verify, but as hypotheses to explain phenomenon in evolutionary terms, they can be more or less plausible and the beginning of a true account. So, consider an evolutionary genealogy of racism and sexism, both of which arose when life was briefer, nastier, and even more brutish than it is now. People lived in small groups, whom they could more or less trust, but everyone else was considered dangerous. Often, when threatened by the unknown, we are made to feel insecure and, to fortify ourselves against this insecurity, we comfort ourselves by telling ourselves that what inspires our fear is inferior to us, however physically threatening it may be. In this way, we treat what we fear with disdain and subjugate it or even kill it if this is convenient. In this way, we can see racism as a psychological defense mechanism to hedge against these feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Something similar can be said about sexism: I recall Laurence Thomas once saying that the greatest evolutionary difference between the sexes is that women can be 100% sure that their children are their own, whereas men cannot be. For a man to raise another man’s child as his own is a huge evolutionary mistake, and to avoid this, men have therefore historically subjugated their women, keeping them covered up and as isolated from other men as possible. So, again, we can see sexism as a defense mechanism to protect us from feeling weak and insecure. In general, we try to think and act as if we are superior to what makes us insecure.

However much these practices make evolutionary sense, prejudice and sexism are best seen today as vestigial traits which we have been left with evolutionarily. Given contemporary environments, these traits are maladaptive and are the result of the malfunction of our belief-forming mechanisms. Whether or not the just-so stories given above are true, it seems even more likely that however these pernicious traits arose, they are not based on truth-seeking

⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Racisms”, in *Anatomy of Racism*, edited by D. T. Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1990, 3-17.

⁵ Fanon, “Racism and Culture” in *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press) 1969, p. 36.

cognition but on emotional or psychological need. Evidence for this is how resistant die-hard racists and sexists can be to changing their false views in the face of incontrovertible evidence, or even how they struggle in vain to find evidence, explanations, or theories – like phrenology – to confirm their false beliefs. Prejudicial beliefs are ultimately based on what we want to be true rather than on what is true. As such, they are models for epistemic intemperance.

None of this is to suggest that this is completely lost on Fricker. Indeed, she builds an affective component explicitly into her “general conception” of prejudice:

Prejudices are judgments, which may have a positive or negative valence, and which may display some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject (p. 35).

This seems correct, insofar as it appeals to affect to explain how prejudices are maintained, though it ignores the role of affect in explaining how prejudices arise in the first place. I would also suggest that prejudices are not themselves judgments but are the psychological mechanism by which judgments are inappropriately distorted by the “affective investment”. Notice too, the role of affect in the maintenance of prejudice takes the form of the self-deception discussed above, which (as noted) serves to explain why these false beliefs are so hard to change.

So, these are the reasons that I think the chief cause of testimonial injustice is epistemic intemperance. Perhaps the most common and invasive force that perverts our cognition is the inappropriate “bleed-through” of our affective capacities into our belief-forming and judgment-making processes. As difficult as it can be to see how credible the testimony of other people is, it is more complicated once we factor in the many ways in which we, as evaluators of testimony, can be subtly and not so subtly influenced in our judgments of the testimony’s credence by our own affective capacities that may lead us into confirmation bias and testimonial injustice. Importantly, while the influences may, they need not have anything directly to do with the particular case at hand. I may disbelieve someone just because I’m in a bad mood or because I had a bad day at work. If I am weighing the testimony of a witness or an expert on a case, I may discount it (or inflate it) because the content of the testimony goes against (or defends) the view that I already hold of cases of that kind. In such situations, we may say I have a vested interest in the case at hand and, to that degree, my evaluation of the testimony is colored by these interests and not by the particular facts of the case or characteristics of the witness. But I can also be influenced by properties of the person testifying which are objectively irrelevant to the facts about which the testimony is being given. This is not confirmation bias, since the content of the testimony is not what is influencing my evaluation of it. We may discount or inflate the testimony of a person, based on the race or class or gender of the person as a result of prejudices we hold: if we hold a witness in high esteem, or even if we are impressed or pleased by the tone

of voice or accent of the witness so that we are more likely to believe what they say, regardless of the content, we are guilty of testimonial injustice. Similarly, if we are prejudiced against the type of person testifying, we will tend to discount what they say, regardless of what they say. While we like to think we are not prejudiced, most of us are in fact biased in ways in which we are only marginally aware of, if aware at all. The solution is to improve our temperance. And while I have some thoughts about how to learn to be more temperate, I won't give into the temptation to talk more. Thank you very much.