

# Epistemic Justice: a positive conception

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## Introductory remarks

1. A positive conception can work towards reducing injustices!
  2. Fricker: 'an epistemic injustice is a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower or as an epistemic subject'
- **Problems in identifying epistemic wrongs and injustices:**
    1. Testimonial injustice leaves out the side of putative knowledge receiver
    2. Distributive epistemic injustices are not identifiable by analogy to the discriminatory cases; they are added as a separate category.
  - Sub-conclusion: Identification of both epistemic wrongs and injustices appears ad hoc
  - **Problems in explaining epistemic injustices:**
    1. Hermeneutical injustice does not appear specifically epistemic
    2. Epistemic injustices appear to derive their unjust nature from non-epistemic power inequalities. If so, it would appear mere domination is constitutive (Bohman).
    3. Given the systemic/cumulative nature of epistemic injustices, ending epistemic injustices would appear to require first and foremost changes at institutional level.
  - Sub-conclusion: Epistemic injustices appear political rather than ethical; moreover, they appear to lack a specifically epistemic character.
  - **My analysis:**
    1. There is a dichotomy between epistemic **wrongs** and epistemic **injustices**<sup>1</sup>;
      - i. Epistemic wrongs are typically agential and are moral-epistemic failings; they tend to be intentional, non-structural, and are typically non-comparative.

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<sup>1</sup> My analysis applies Mill's distinction between moral wrongs and injustices, Chapter V (Mill)

- ii. Epistemic injustices are typically non-agential and political, even if they do harm a specific individual or group of individuals (harming interests which are rights or akin to rights in that they ought to incur societal sanctioning). They need *not* be caused by epistemic acts, but they have epistemic impact. The reason for speaking of an epistemic *injustice* is typically comparative: those suffering epistemic injustice are epistemically worse off than others while there is no epistemic reason which could justify it.
  - iii. There is some overlap. For instance, severe epistemic wrongs can be classed 'epistemic injustices' regardless of being agential.
- 2. This dichotomy is not a problem per se, but we would need to understand how epistemic wrongs and epistemic injustices differ and how both are specifically *epistemic*. For this, it seems we need a positive rationale: a norm which both epistemic wrongs and epistemic injustices violate.
- 3. Indeed, we need a rationale in order to single out all and only those cases of epistemic wrongs and of epistemic injustice, and which has room not only for discriminatory cases of epistemic injustice but also for distributive ones.
- Sub-conclusion: We need a rationale for identifying and explaining epistemic wrongs and epistemic injustices; this rationale should explain their moral-epistemic character.
- **My proposal: a positive conception which invokes the notion of *epistemic power*.**
  - 1. "epistemic power": 'one's ability to exert epistemic influence, which includes one's ability to enable or disable others from exerting such influence'.
    - i. What I mean by "exerting epistemic influence" is that one effects a change in the epistemic situation which one or more others are in, i.e. what beliefs they have and whether or not –and to what degree- they consider a belief to be true.
    - ii. Examples of exerting epistemic influence are: sharing one's knowledge that P, convincing someone that P, voicing an opinion that P, (publicly) questioning someone's belief that P – and all these at a relevant time.

2. "Epistemic justice": 'the proper use and allocation of epistemic power': it is a moral-epistemic norm which serves to protect us from *epistemic dominance*, whereby epistemic dominance is understood as an exercise or allocation of epistemic power which is *epistemically unjust*, i.e. one which lacks epistemic justification.
- Epistemic justice (from the perspective of an agent who wishes to prevent wronging another) is 'the proper inclusion and balancing of all epistemic sources'.
  - The moral valence of the norm of epistemic justice resides in the fact that epistemic practices are cooperative, and thus require reciprocity and fairness.
- **Why the positive conception of epistemic justice is better:**
    1. An injustice is centrally a wrongful use of power, or a comparatively undue assignment of power (i.e. an unwarranted lack or excess of credence).
    2. Invoking the notion of epistemic power relates to the non-domination agenda by Bohman and endorsed by Fricker, but without subordinating epistemic injustice to being defined as non-domination per se: instead, epistemic justice secure against forms of domination which are specifically epistemic.
    3. The conception provides a rationale for characterizing epistemic injustices, so as to include both comparative epistemic injustices and non-comparative epistemic wrongs; i.e. it caters for both discriminatory and distributive epistemic injustices.
    4. It does so in a way which shows why the wrong or injustice is specifically epistemic, namely they violate the norm of epistemic justice. Epistemic wrongs relate to an improper use of epistemic power, one denies another what is his or her due; epistemic injustices relate to an improper assignment of epistemic power, which can be the result of other forces, but which renders some worse-off than others epistemically without there being epistemic reasons which justify it. Violations of the norm of epistemic justice in turn are threats to successful epistemic cooperation.
  - **Added advantage of the new conception:** The new conception can delineate more clearly how epistemic justice relates to other types of social justice; it puts the analytical distinction

in place to allow for empirical research of how different types of social injustice interact, i.e. how (abuse of) one form of power – economic, political, epistemic – can result in the improper allocation of another.

- **Is epistemic power different from other forms of social power?**

1. Yes, epistemic power is enabled by epistemic credence, authority or knowledge. One can be included or excluded from those who are part of a community of knowledge.
2. Of course those who have one form of power often have another form of power as well; but the forms of power can be clearly separated, via what enables them.
3. Even politically or economically powerful people can and do fear epistemic power; but more to the point: even politically powerful or economically powerful people can suffer an epistemic wrong or an epistemic injustice. Indeed, when there are no political or economic means of winning from those in power, we tend to look to exclude them from information or knowledge, and/or to reveal their lack of these.

- **Conclusion:**

- In order to better identify and explain cases of epistemic wrongs and epistemic injustices, we need to invoke a specifically epistemic rationale which some exercises and allocations of epistemic power violate: this rationale is the moral-epistemic norm of epistemic justice, which is an inherent part of our epistemic practices.

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