

Replies to critics

Miranda FRICKER

BIBLID [0495-4548 (2008) 23: 61; pp. 81-86]

It is an honour to have colleagues read and comment on one's work, and I thank Francisco Javier Gil Martin and Jesus Zamora Bonilla for sharing their reactions to my work (and moreover for sharing them in English).

FJG explains some of the central ideas of my characterization of the two sorts of epistemic injustice I identify and explore in the book, namely testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. To reiterate, 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 in making sense of their social experiences. An example of the first might be that a jury does not believe someone because of the colour of her skin; an example of the second might be that someone cannot make sense of his homosexual desire because he lives at a historical-cultural moment when the only available understandings of homosexuality are distorted and negative. We can see too how the two sorts of injustice might be compounded, as when someone might try to explain an experience of harassment at a time when that idea is not properly understood, and is subject in addition to an identity prejudice which independently deflates the credibility they receive when they attempt to communicate their experience. JZB describes my characterization of these injustices as 'if not redundant, at least a little bit superfluous' on the ground that it is obvious that 'it is unjust to deny a person the status of a reasoner' (p. 78) and obvious too that this is detrimental to her capacity to become an autonomous agent. I can agree that these things are obviously true when they are properly described. But we have not until now had a worked out philosophical account that either explores the dual nature of the wrong, or attempts to situate it in a proper epistemological setting. These are two of the key aims of my book.

I spend most of the book first identifying and then exploring the wrong of testimonial injustice; I turn to hermeneutical injustice only in the final chapter, as much of the groundwork that goes into explaining the general phenomenon of epistemic injustice has been achieved in relation to testimonial injustice. JZB criticizes me for attending so closely to testimony, saying I should have paid 'more attention to the "economy of arguments"... than just to what the new mainstream (or just last fashion) in analytic epistemology is discussing' (p. 79). But it is absurd to criticize a book that is largely about a testimonial phenomenon for focusing on testimony. If you are bored of testimony, fair enough; but it cannot be a criticism of a book on epistemic injustice that it attends to testimony any more than it can be a criticism of a book about the mind that it focuses on consciousness.



FJG's comments are concentrated on testimonial injustice, and he asks some constructive questions about the way I identify what I call the central case of testimonial injustice. In brief, I identify the central case as follows. I argue that when a speaker's credibility is deflated by a prejudice of any sort, then a testimonial injustice is done; but when the prejudice is the sort of prejudice that tracks the subject through different dimensions of social activity (so that the same prejudice renders them susceptible not only to epistemic injustice but also to injustices in other domains such as economic, political, medical, educational, professional, legal...) then the testimonial injustice is *systematic*. Systematic testimonial injustices display a lateral connectivity with other forms of social injustice to which the subject is susceptible owing to the same prejudice. The most common (perhaps the only) prejudices that track the subject in this way are what I call identity prejudices —prejudices relating to a category of social identity. Examples of identity prejudice are those relating to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. Testimonial injustices triggered by these sorts of prejudices are central, in my picture, because they are central from the point of view of an interest in how forms of epistemic injustice interweave with other kinds of social injustice.

FJG asks (in (3)) whether it is really only prejudices that cause testimonial injustice. What about other affective states that can clearly affect levels of credibility given to a speaker, such as 'envies, passions, desires and so on'? I agree that many affective states can deflate credibility in a way that is epistemically dysfunctional (it leads to a blockage in the flow of knowledge). But I think they will always, or almost always, constitute prejudice of some kind. Let me explain. I characterize prejudice as a form of motivated irrationality: resistance to evidence, where the resistance is motivated by some affective state. The affective state might be directed at a particular social group (in which case it is an identity prejudice and the testimonial injustice is systematic), or it might be directed at some other thing —for example, a scientist might be prejudiced against a newfangled scientific method insofar as his feeling professionally threatened by it causes him to close his mind to its merits. (In this example the testimonial injustice is not systematic but more localized and one-off —what I call *incidental*.) Prejudice can take many forms. Now, to take a case that involves envy, for instance: if a hearer's envy motivates her to be resistant to the evidence for p constituted by the speaker's word that p , then the hearer is indeed perpetrating a testimonial injustice. In the book my focus is on the particular sort of prejudice that I call identity prejudice; but any prejudice might produce a testimonial injustice. And on the whole I am inclined to think that the only way in which envy, passions and other desires can cause credibility deficit is by motivating some resistance to evidence, and, if so, then all such cases will constitute testimonial injustice.

On the other hand, if, for the sake of argument, we allow that there could be some cases where an emotion on the part of the hearer causes him to give deflated credibility to the speaker's word, yet where there is no resistance to evidence, then I would resist casting them as testimonial injustices. There are many different things, after all, that lead to the epistemic error of credibility deflation —not only emotions but also false beliefs or inferential errors. But in my analysis, the essential ingredient that renders a credibility deficit a case of testimonial injustice is the wronging, insulting, or

undermining of the speaker. In cases where there is no motivated resistance to the evidence of their word, I see no justification for casting the credibility deficit as unjust. It would rather be some kind of ethically innocent error. The error may be epistemically culpable, or non-culpable, but so long as it is ethically innocent, then it is not a testimonial injustice. The approach I have taken effectively deems any motivated irrationality that deflates credibility to be ethically non-innocent (and so ethically bad in some measure), even though I allow of course that not all motivations to irrationality are intrinsically ethically bad. If, to pick up our scientist example, some scientists on the review panel of a science journal have a prejudice against a new scientific method, where that resistance is motivated by a feeling of loyalty to traditional methods, then they may do a testimonial injustice to would-be journal contributors who employ innovative methods. While such a methodological conservatism is not intrinsically ethically bad, still the resistance it motivates on this occasion to the evidence (the written word of the would-be contributor) is ethically bad enough to introduce something ethically bad into the credibility judgement, and so the credibility deflation qualifies as a testimonial injustice. To summarize, any prejudice causing credibility deflation effects a testimonial injustice, as there is something wrongful in any motivated credibility deflation. But, more acutely, when the affective investment is targeted against a particular social group (as is the case with any negative identity prejudice such as sexism, racism, or homophobia, for instance) then the affective investment imports its own independent ethical badness that compounds the badness of motivated credibility deflation *per se*. This is so in cases of systematic testimonial injustice, and it is why I regard them as central: the kind of ethical badness that distinguishes them (that which comes from negative identity prejudice) connects them up with other injustices driven by the same unethical affective investment. This is how I delineate the phenomenon in the book, and while I would acknowledge there could be other delineations (for instance, which insisted there had to be something intrinsically ethically bad about the motivating emotion) I hold that this is, on balance, a good way to delineate testimonial injustice.

JZB says he ‘would not like to ground a rational, scientific explanation of what it is to *have* a prejudice, and what consequences follow from having it, on [his] own moral prejudices’ (p. 78). My account of prejudice is a philosophical account. I have no idea what a ‘scientific’ explanation of prejudice would be, unless it was a social scientific study of who tends to have which prejudices (an empirical study of a particular society). He seems to help himself to a moral relativism that calls all moral views ‘prejudice’, and which is motivated by the thought that ‘there are plenty of mutually incompatible theories about what justice “consists in”; still worse, what things *seem* just or unjust to people is strongly dependent on lots of social and cultural factors, many of them not too well understood’ (p. 78). So what? I give arguments for the view that there is a phenomenon of testimonial injustice that is curiously hybrid: it is jointly constituted by an epistemic dysfunction (the flow of knowledge is blocked) and something ethically bad (the discrimination that undermines someone’s status as knower). Apparently he finds my account of epistemic injustice to be at once so obvious it is barely worth arguing for *and* too ethically controversial to be mentioned in the same

breath as anything epistemological. He misunderstands my project: I am not doing epistemology by doing ethics; not ‘analysing epistemic concepts by means of moral ones’ (p. 77). My aim is to look and see what is out there in our epistemic practices, and to explore the combined epistemological structure and ethical character of two phenomena which display the curious hybridity I mentioned. Both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice are at once epistemically bad and ethically bad. The corrective virtues of testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice are at once epistemically good and ethically good. Such hybridity is indeed unusual, and it is at the heart of what makes these phenomena philosophically interesting.

I do understand JZB’s general concern that mixing epistemology and ethics can be overdone. He expresses, for instance, the worry that ‘the book responds basically to a moral or political agenda, and, in such a case, we all know that epistemological considerations run the risk of being distorted by our non-epistemic goals...’ (p. 77). One can sympathize that this risk applies in strong programmes of virtue epistemology — programmes such as Linda Zagzebski’s, for example, which explicitly aims to colonize epistemology as a branch of ethics. But when JZB adds to the sentence just quoted the claim that ‘An easy example of this risk refers to the central concept of Fricker’s work: justice’, I am astonished. Firstly, my localized inquiry into epistemic injustice is entirely neutral about the possibility of any grand virtue epistemological programme. The whole point is precisely that we find in the phenomena I study a ready-made mixture of the epistemic and the ethical. Certainly I propose a virtue approach to testimony, and I go on to identify the virtues of testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice, but it is a mistake to assume that any talk of intellectual virtue implies a grand virtue epistemological programme. It doesn’t. We are free to talk of intellectual virtues in a localized way while remaining neutral about whether there could be a monolithic virtue epistemology to end the traditional epistemological questions in one fell blow. Indeed, one of the liberating things about the virtue idiom in epistemology is precisely that it helps open up new, more localized fields of inquiry for epistemologists, and I consider issues of epistemic injustice to be a case in point. Secondly, all JZB provides to support his charge against ‘the central concept of Fricker’s work: justice’ is some hand waving about how dodgy and culturally variable all things ethical are compared with the ‘science’ he asserts we need in epistemology. But this cuts no ice: ethics is not so uncertain, and epistemology need not be scientific.

Perhaps it is worth adding in this connection that the central concept of the book is not in fact justice, or even epistemic justice. The book is explicitly focused, rather, on epistemic *injustice*. This is no accident. I agree with Judith Shklar that injustice has tended to be ignored in philosophy, as there has tended to be an assumption that if one can work out what justice consists in, then we can get a workable idea of injustice for free as, simply, whatever fails to be just. But, I argue, this cannot be taken for granted, and in particular it is not the case in the epistemic domain, for so long as we focus our epistemology exclusively on what it takes to get things right —in the domain of testimony, for instance, on the idealized rationality of accepting another’s word— then so long do we stay blind to the phenomenon of justice and injustice in our epistemic practices. The ‘scientific’ style of epistemology that JZB advocates could

never shed light on testimonial injustice, nor hermeneutical injustice either, and that is manifestly a conclusive reason why a book that aims to identify and explore those phenomena should adopt a different style of epistemology.

Testimonial injustice, as I define it, is a kind of credibility deficit. But what about credibility excess? FJG asks (in (2)) why I characterize only credibility deficit as a testimonial injustice and not also credibility excess. My view on this has changed over time, and when I first wrote about these issues I characterized both credibility deficit and excess as an epistemic injustice.¹ As I was working on the book, however, I gradually came to the view that while it is certainly true that credibility excess is an epistemic dysfunction (knowledge is attributed where there is none), and while there can of course be cases of credibility excess that are zero sum so that one person's excess is another's deficit, it is only the cases of deficit that constitute a testimonial injustice. That is because in a case of credibility excess no one need be wronged; no one insulted, discriminated against, or otherwise undermined in their capacity as a knower. This is entirely compatible with the point that FJG makes about epistemic virtue to the effect that virtuous knowers will neutralize the influence of inflationary prejudices in their judgements, just as they will neutralize the influence of deflationary ones. I entirely agree. It is just that the particular corrective virtue I am concerned with (and which I call the virtue of testimonial justice) is a corrective to discrimination in our credibility judgements, and in straightforward cases of credibility excess there is no discrimination. FJG effectively points to the need for another virtue in the panoply of virtues and skills that the fully virtuous epistemic subject would possess, and it should be distinguished from the virtue I aim to characterize.

This connects with FJG's questions about the possible role for a distributive model of justice in relation to credibility ((1) and (4)). I certainly think the general notion of epistemic injustice could be used in relation to the distribution of epistemic goods (such as education or information, and perhaps even credibility in so far as that is measurable in specific comparative contexts —perhaps someone could look into the statistics on how far defendants of different social types tend to be believed by juries in relevantly similar court cases, for instance). I doubt, however, that the distributive model could be used to illuminate the phenomenon of testimonial injustice itself, since while matters of distribution can reflect patterns of discrimination, they are after the fact. My interest has been to reveal the structure of the discrimination itself, and for that I have needed to think outside the distributive paradigm. More generally, however, I certainly would not claim that we should not talk about social justice in terms of distribution. On the contrary. The point is simply that if we were to stick exclusively to the distributive framework, then we would not advance our understanding of the structure and ethical impact of injustices which are, at root, forms of discrimination.

¹ 'Rational Authority and Social Power. Towards a Truly Social Epistemology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCVIII (2), 1998.

This is, as FJG notes in the course of his final question, something that is lacking in the Kantian approach to what it is to live up to the Enlightenment motto ‘Think for yourself!’, or ‘Dare to think for yourself?’ (*Sapere Aude!*).² Kant is not concerned with the moral wrong of putting a speaker in credibility deficit. He does not discuss the issue of negative prejudice, and is most critical of the absurdity of insisting on something like proof for everything one might legitimately learn from another’s word. But, to answer FJG’s question, I would certainly acknowledge the relevance of certain Kantian ideals here. Not least, there is a potentially very fruitful connection with the idea that the authority of reason —at the very least the authority of reason as it is manifested in the polity— depends on a demanding ideal of freedom of speech being fulfilled in the social body: a conception according to which every thought may freely come to the fore.³ With that conception of the authority of public institutions in mind, I believe we can see an application for the virtues of testimonial and hermeneutical justice as criteria for the well functioning, if not the very authority, of our public institutions. But making that argument will have to be a project for the future.

Speaking of possible projects that explore testimonial injustice in different ways, a comment of JZB directs our attention to the possibility of a different sort of study from mine, a study of ‘how a social knowledge system can work with different people having those virtues in different degrees’ (p. 79), and he anticipates that it might be optimal, at least in some societies, for people to function with less than full virtue, in so far as developing virtue can be costly in terms of time and effort. Such a project, he suggests, might be conceived as providing an ‘economics’ of credibility, and I think that would be a fascinating project for an economically minded social epistemologist. For my own part, however, I am an ethically minded social epistemologist, and that is all right, for the ethics must come first if we are to understand the ethical and epistemic value of the virtues whose costs and benefits such an economics would attempt to track. Only once we understand the ethical significance of the various forms of epistemic injustice are we in a position to evaluate the potential trade-offs of ethical and epistemic value that an economics of credibility would study.

² Immanuel Kant, “An Answer To The Question: What Is Enlightenment?”, 1784.

³ For this interpretation of Kant, see Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, Chs. 1 and 2.