

Developing Gadamerian Virtues Against Epistemic Injustice: The Epistemic and Hermeneutic Dimensions of Ethics

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Abstract

In her groundbreaking text *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker evaluates types of harms incurred by individuals undergoing unrecognized and inarticulable oppression. At issue in epistemic and hermeneutic injustice are prejudicial compartments to, and evaluations of, reality. In the following, I focus on hermeneutic and epistemic injustice in relation to the formation of intellectual and ethical virtues. When reading Fricker and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics together, there is a clear pathway to improve ethical development. In particular, ethical development ought to cultivate the proper virtues that promote understanding. Gadamer's emphasis on the qualities of a researcher and the epistemic virtues that Fricker highlights reveal an educative path for addressing injustice. In other words, cultivating these virtues counteracts injustice wherein recognition and articulation of reality is challenged or at issue.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, ethics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Miranda Fricker, education

In the opening to his 1947 rectoral address, Hans-Georg Gadamer comments that, after “a war full of absurdity and crime” the institution of the university has become “questionable itself” (1992, p. 15). Indeed, Gadamer affirms that the university must establish new reasons for its existence amidst social and political reconstruction which he writes is only possible “from the fertile depths of our totality as social beings” (p. 16). While post-war Germany is a singular place

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and time, it seems that Gadamer's words might still speak to researchers and teachers in university settings. We might ask related questions, such as: What is the role of the university in light of disagreement and social erosion in the realm of politics? What type of education will produce a sufficiently just polis? I do not aim to offer a conclusive answer to such questions. Rather, I suggest an entry point for beginning to address such issues. Ethics education is a site for communal change, and it can be conceived as such in light of Miranda Fricker's analysis of epistemic and hermeneutic injustice. In my view, her work on epistemic injustice is bolstered by a Gadamerian account of hermeneutical experience. Read together, Fricker and Gadamer provide a blueprint for developing ethical hearing and speaking.

In this context, Fricker and Gadamer can be read in tandem to point to the virtues that protect one from epistemic injustice. In particular, ethics educators or ethicists ought to attend to virtues like "epistemic confidence" and "intellectual courage"; these are Fricker's terms (2007, pp. 47-59). Paraphrasing Gadamer's work in his rectoral address, they should emphasize humility, commitment to doubt, and absorption in truth. These virtues work together to actualize one's dialogical and epistemic capacities such that one does not lose sight of their convictions when faced with negative reactions. Moreover, they allow one to examine differing beliefs and judgments with a sense of openness, allowing one to change one's mind when appropriate.

In my paper, I first show how Fricker articulates the problem of epistemic injustice which takes shape in testimonial and hermeneutic situations. I suggest that ethical education can intervene in injustice at the level of virtue development. I then articulate the virtues necessary to deal with interpretive breakdown or opposition, on Fricker's view.¹ In response to the virtues that Fricker points to, I provide a Gadamerian response. In so doing, I shift the point of emphasis in Gadamer's hermeneutics from the "fusion of horizons" to a concern for the matter (*die Sache selbst*) (2013, p. 317). Finally, I speculate with the support of some texts on teaching ethics and applied hermeneutics about how ethical training might be reframed to cultivate these virtues.

Part One

Fricker articulates the epistemic contours of power relations and social hierarchies in her work *Epistemic Injustice*. The basic thrust of her argument is that hierarchies and relations orient both accesses to knowledge and capacities for articulation and recognition. With this, Fricker's analysis incorporates both the testimonial and hermeneutic dimensions of epistemology. The epistemic is thus deeply intertwined with the ethical/political domains in Fricker's view. To act ethically, one must properly orient themselves to epistemic concerns. Moreover, epistemic judgments are shaped, in part, by the political realm. As Fricker puts it in the opening of her text: "the ethical features in question result from the operation of social power in epistemic interactions, to reveal them is also to expose a politics of epistemic practice" (2007, pp. 1-2). These ethical features unfold interpersonally as we move through the world, and they are indicative of relational power structures. Thus, cultivating an ability to address epistemological injustice carries ethical and political weight.

To consider the ethical and political implication of Fricker's work, it is necessary to understand her emphasis on the epistemic. Epistemic injustice is produced in testimonial and hermeneutic modalities. In the mode of testimonial injustice, epistemic practices are distorted by some kind of

prejudice (Fricker, 2007, p. 43). Such injustice produces a harm against a speaker who does not receive basic respect from the hearer. This lack of respect undermines their testimony as epistemologically weighty, and this can lead to further consequences for the speaker (2007, p. 44).

By contrast, according to Fricker, when such testimonial injustices occur at a structural level there is a hermeneutic injustice at play. This can amount to hermeneutical marginalization which serves to obscure experiences of injustice, such that they are barely comprehensible or articulable. Marginalizations are generated through power relations and social hierarchies. That is, hermeneutic marginalization is a result of experiences or events going unrecognized or unacknowledged by those with the social power to influence collective hermeneutic resources. Simply put, “if you have material power, then you will tend to have an influence in those practices by which social meanings are generated” (Fricker, 2007, p. 147). In this way, those with less material power also have less epistemic power.² Such marginalization renders the “collective hermeneutical resource *structurally prejudiced*” because groups in power have a disproportionate influence on collective resources (2007, p. 155). This structural prejudice shows up through “hermeneutical lacunae” (2007, p. 154).³ These lacunae are gaps in the social imaginary that obscure certain experiences.

While the particular harms that Fricker lists are reprehensible, she suggests that there is one underlying harm that reinforces the power structure described above. Fricker explains that a one-off moment of testimonial injustice, such as a court ruling against an innocent party on the basis of counter testimony or a misjudgment of one’s competence, can diminish the speaker’s intellectual confidence (2007, p. 46). When one undergoes a prolonged state of self-doubt in relation to their capacity as a knower, Fricker argues that one loses a particular type of confidence (2007, pp. 47-48). I consider this one of the most detrimental harms because without intellectual confidence, which enables “epistemic confidence,” “intellectual courage,” and “social self-knowledge,” individuals are limited in contributing to social epistemic resources (Fricker 2006, pp. 102-108).⁴ One way of addressing the issue of epistemic injustice, then, is to foster more intellectual confidence. Below I consider how Fricker addresses the intellectual virtues necessary for combatting testimonial injustice.

Part Two

Fricker highlights the virtues a person must develop to protect against epistemic disadvantages (2006, p. 104). One such virtue is epistemic confidence. Fricker identifies epistemic confidence as a characteristic that allows an individual to incorporate new knowledge without undermining themselves. The epistemically confident person can ask incisive questions and develop their epistemic. After repeated instances of epistemic injustice, one’s epistemic confidence is liable to be eroded. As Fricker puts it,

the implications for someone who meets with persistent testimonial injustice are grim: not only is he repeatedly subject to intrinsic epistemic insult that is the primary injustice, but where this persistent intellectual undermining causes him to lose confidence in his beliefs and/or his justification for them, he literally loses knowledge. (2007, p. 49)

Without the confidence to compare one's sense of reality with another's, one loses the opportunity to continue to learn more. One's knowledge of something in particular might even be washed away by another raising questions against it. Without confidence, one might assume views from another without question or they might lose the capacity to raise questions.

There is a further risk that one loses intellectual courage. Intellectual courage refers to one's capacity to resist backing down too quickly when engaged in a discussion (Fricker, 2007, p. 49). Fricker cites James Montmarquet's conception of intellectual courage as "the willingness to conceive and examine alternatives to popularly held beliefs, (the) perseverance in the face of opposition from others (until one is convinced one is mistaken), and the determination required to see such a project through to its completion" (2007, pp. 49-50; from Montmarquet, 1993, p. 23). Without the confidence to continue to develop one's orientation as a knower and have a sense of one's social self, one might lose knowledge as well as the courage to challenge popular ideas and affirm one's knowledge or even to change one's mind. So, Fricker contends that ongoing epistemic development in the social sphere is contingent on an individual being both capable of continuing to learn and develop their knowledge (epistemic confidence) and capable of holding firm when confronted with opposition (intellectual courage).

Part Three

The obvious Gadamerian response to the kind of injustices discussed above take place through genuine conversation whereby one's prejudices are brought into question and mutual understanding is reached.⁵ This takes place through confrontations with exteriority that destabilize previously held beliefs or, as Gadamer calls them, prejudices (*Vorurteile*). One can only go through this process if they have, as Theodore George calls it, the "capacity for displacement" (2020, p. 47). When one is a successful hearer on Gadamer's account, they are able to reverse biases or prejudices through understanding. This capacity is constituted by the features of prejudice and openness.

George characterizes Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutical experience as being essentially constituted by prejudice (2020, p. 52). He writes: "As a fore-structure of understanding, prejudice always makes possible, as well as limits, every effort to understand" (George, 2020, p. 52). Prejudice, then, is a condition for the possibility of understanding, but its content or "limit" is always undergoing development (George, 2020, p. 54). Indeed, it is prejudice that undergoes a transformation when one is participating in a hermeneutical situation.

When one encounters a view that is contrary to their own or if they are met with an interlocutor who does not immediately admit of having the status as a knower, one might dismiss or ignore such an encounter. Such a disposition for both Fricker and Gadamer should be avoided. If an understanding is to be reached or if epistemic injustice is to be overcome, ethical hearers must allow themselves to reconsider their views in light of what the speaker contributes. A prejudice can only be displaced if one is sufficiently open to the text or to a speaker. Undogmatic openness is the second trait of an ethical hearer.

The truth of what is disclosed in a genuine I-thou relation must be understood in order for one to partake in a hermeneutical experience. The Thou is treated as a person who is a participant in the

I-thou relationship; the relationship itself is mutual and participants constitute its reality (Gadamer, 2013, p. 367). For this bond to give way to true understanding, Gadamer writes that there must be “openness to one another” (2013, p. 369). Reiterating this point, Nancy Moules, in her chapter “Hermeneutic Practice: What Gadamer has to Teach Nursing,” distinguishes between types of dialogue partners. She writes: “when we listen to find the truth in another, we are truly listening; when we listen to find how what the other says agrees with what we know, we are only listening to ourselves” (Moules, 2021, p. 380). To truly experience the Thou, then, hearers must listen for the truth of what is presented. Such expansive listening might include, as Jose Medina suggests it should, attention “to the emotional side of communication” (2020, p. 222). Sufficient openness means treating the Thou as a participant who may nevertheless be subject to injustices that affect their status as a knower. Still, undogmatic openness dictates that a hearer take seriously what is said.

The capacity for displacement, constituted by prejudice and undogmatic openness, is a condition of the “fusion of horizons.” Such a fusion takes place when genuine understanding between the speakers is reached. As George summarizes this: “Gadamer’s concern for the whole of our factual lives leads him to the ethical consideration that the excellence of such a life is its openness to what brings our prejudices into question, what loosens our horizons, and what thus, in turn, allows always for new interpenetration and fusion with other horizons” (2020, p. 66). If a new understanding is reached, the prejudice that was originally displaced in the hermeneutical situation, then, is rethought and is transformative of the whole subject in what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons.

As useful as these elements of Gadamer’s hermeneutics are, the emphasis on a fusion of horizons through an event of understanding after a displacement of one’s prejudices deemphasizes one of the epistemic virtues that Fricker points to as necessary for working against epistemic injustice, namely, intellectual courage.⁶ Learning to be displaced and to listen despite prejudices is, however, a first step and one that supports epistemic confidence. What is required for both Fricker and Gadamer is the development of further particular virtues that allow a hearer to discern when displacements ought to develop into fusions.

Gadamer makes evident that particular epistemic virtues are necessary for politically responsible university research in his 1947 rectoral address. These virtues are primordial aspects of science, in Gadamer’s view, and they were forgotten during the rise of the National Socialist Party. Gadamer affirms that within the realm of science: “opinions do not count but only reasons,” he continues, emphasizing the difficulty of this aim, “what an enormous demand on the weakness of humans, all of whom so very much love their own opinions and being right in discussions” (1992, p. 19). Indeed, it must be in the realm of reason that the truth of some matter is accessed. Gadamer is emphasizing the role of science, here, in an attempt to rethink the university after the National Socialist party, with the support of many academics, took hold of Germany. In other words, Gadamer is speaking directly to distortions of reality that gave way to terrible injustices.

The primordial scientist is a perfect exemplar of the person who focuses on reason rather than opinion. Gadamer highlights three features that constitute the scientist’s virtue: humility, a commitment to the feeling of self-doubt, and an involvement with the matter at hand. From the perspective of humility, an educated person of science can “divest himself of all arrogance

concerning his own position” (1992, p. 21). Humility, in this context, echoes the undogmatic openness discussed above.

As for self-doubt, Gadamer writes that “the man of science lives through doubting himself in the course of his work and this could grow into despair” because it is “difficult to do justice to the inner demands of truth and cognition instead of to one’s environment” (1992, pp. 20-21). In the context of distortion or ideology, as the case may be, Gadamer suggests that the scientist must look beyond their time and toward truth. A scientist’s judgment of truth stands over and against accommodation to distorted realities or convictions. Indeed, this trait echoes *Truth and Method* where Gadamer states that true understanding “does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires” (2013, p. 369). An aspect of hearing ethically is determining for oneself how to judge what is being said.

In addition to these virtues, Gadamer highlights involvement in truth as a crucial virtue for the scientist. Absorption in the subject matter is identical with “unconditional involvement” (1992, p. 20). Such involvement brackets the influence of ideology and, indeed, practical matters. Gadamer notes that Thales embodied this trait in a particular way when he falls into a well while contemplating the cosmos (1992, p. 20). Gadamer takes care to suggest that this virtue comes with special “weight” and cannot come at the cost of worldly ignorance. Yet, this virtue, in my view, points to a care or participation in the subject matter such that one is not overly influenced by distorted opinion. Indeed, science “stands above because it considers carefully the subject matter [*Sache selbst*] and its true foundation” (Gadamer, 1992, p. 20). Care to the subject matter opposes “glittering opinion” (1992, p. 20).

I highlight this aspect of Gadamer in order to point out the difficulty of enacting these hermeneutic virtues. Taking part in conversation such that one is always open to revising their prejudice is risky. In the rectoral address, Gadamer places a point of emphasis on the practical risk of his hermeneutic view. In order for a genuine conversation to take place, one must not only be open to being shown that they are wrong, but they must also have an eye to truth and persevere through self-doubt when necessary. Fricker’s invocation of epistemic confidence and intellectual courage can be read in conjunction with Gadamer, on this score.

Part Four

In the context of ethics training, we ought to consider the problem that Fricker touched on in relation to her views on character development. She writes:

the value of an intellectual virtue is not reducible to the value of those particular items of knowledge it might bring, but derives also from its place in the harmony of a person’s intellectual character as a whole...an enduring loss of intellectual confidence entails a certain regrettable malformation of epistemic character. (Fricker, 2006, p. 105)

Epistemic injustice is a result of social hierarchies distorting social knowledge through the enforcement of skewed epistemic resources. Fricker points to virtues that might be cultivated to work against testimonial injustices. Read with Gadamer’s convictions about conversational and

scientific virtues, ethical education works against epistemic injustice and might even address hermeneutical injustices.

So, given that the formation of an ethical person (at least in part) requires becoming a hearer with epistemic confidence and intellectual courage which are pronounced when one is undergoing displacement brought on by discernment and being involved with the truth of the matter, what resources do we have for cultivating such capacities in the context of ethical training?

Gadamer, in raising the question of the role of the university, advises us to think of ourselves in light of our community. In considering the university in relation to community, educators can be expansive in their approach to education. Such an expansion is clearly necessary in the realm of ethics as the vast majority of applied ethics textbooks focus solely on ethical and professional training with little reference to broader humanistic insights, such as historical events, the history of ideas, critical self-assessment, and dialogue. Indeed, Jeremy Rehwaldt's study of contemporary North American ethics textbooks yields that "most focus either on exploring moral theories and approaches in detail or on describing moral theories and then applying them to contemporary issues" (2019, p. 35). The epistemic and hermeneutical aspects are, thus, left out of a vast majority of ethics curriculum in North America.

Approaching the ethical matter at hand from the perspective of hermeneutics and social epistemology might look like asking students to develop a narrative about their ethical development. Applied biomedical ethics, for instance, implements "ethics autobiography" which provides greater opportunity to uncover epistemic and hermeneutic prejudices, especially when shared with others (Zhu & Woodson 2020). Moreover, putting into language one's ethical identity provides one with a robust sense of self that may persevere through self-doubt.

Recently, Glen Miller (2018) has argued for a holistic approach to professional ethics, wherein the individual's personal values bear on their capacity to choose rightly in a professional context. Indeed, he contends that asking students to answer what Charles Taylor calls "qualitative questions," develops student's individual sense of ethical responsibility (2018, p. 100). With a robust sense of one's ethical self, students are able to integrate their personal values with professional goals and practices. Such an existential approach to ethical development suggests a commitment to the virtues outlined above.

Creating tensions in classrooms can also serve to teach students to judge for themselves if they are maintaining epistemic confidence and intellectual courage. As Nicholas Davey has described it, hermeneutical education aspires "to the public and private pursuit of those 'free spaces' capable of drawing out those yet to be realized possibilities already at play within our various horizons of understanding" (2017, p. 11). When addressing prejudice, hermeneutical education and dialogue can serve to chip away at meanings that obscure rather than reveal truth. Moreover, engaging in such practices empowers individuals to question biases and to reaffirm knowledge of injustices to serve a more just and truthful end.

Conclusion

Fricker and Gadamer are both concerned with understanding that achieves justice and truth. Whereas Fricker emphasizes intellectual courage and epistemic confidence, which contribute to one's ability to question as well as maintain convictions when necessary, Gadamer highlights prejudices and openness which may lead to understanding through displacements and fusions. Beyond this, Gadamer also recognizes the importance of caring about the matter. Without this element, displacements and fusions would not be anchored to anything but opinion.

As it concerns ethics education, curriculum ought to broaden its scope to include epistemic and hermeneutic elements. Learning to take oneself, others, and the matter seriously is a crucial step to ethical development. Beyond this, it will contribute to solving the injustices that Fricker reveals. Gadamer places education at the heart of social justice. He affirms, as I have already shown, that the task of social progress "is a responsibility for the teacher as well as the student of science. And it should be so, even if it is not always so" (1992, p. 21).

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¹ Fricker points to virtues such as epistemic confidence and intellectual courage and social self-knowledge, whereas Gadamer, in his 1947 rectoral address, discusses virtues of involvement, discernment, and humility.

² One of Fricker's examples of hermeneutic injustice is Carmita Wood's encounter with sexual harassment. In the time before movements like #metoo and others, sexual harassment was a "hermeneutical lacuna" (Fricker, 2007, p. 152). That is, the experience of sexual harassment fell outside of the domain of meaningful sense-making such that the experience was wrong, uncomfortable, and unwelcome but nevertheless indeterminate at the level of articulation.

³ Of this general type, marginalization can occur systematically when a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutic resource leads to some significant area of one's social experience being obscured from the collective understanding (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). It can also occur incidentally, when there is a particular instance that does not have to do with social powerlessness.

⁴ Fricker also considers that such a harm directly distorts one's identity. She writes: "In certain social contexts, hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interest to be. Thus, we can say without essentializing that they are prevented from becoming who they really are" (Fricker, 2006, p. 107).

⁵ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (2013) highlights conversation as the process by which understanding is reached through language (pp. 401-407). He emphasizes the importance of translating between languages or contexts, writing: “having to rely on translation is tantamount to two people giving up their independent authority” (2013, p. 402). Indeed, in a genuine conversation, each speaker seeks to learn from the other such that understanding really takes place.

⁶ Indeed, the scholarly literature on Gadamer and ethics paint Gadamer as an anti-realist or postmodernist. John Caputo provides good reason for viewing Gadamer as a particular kind of postmodernist in “Gadamer and Postmodern Mind” (2021). For a refutation against reading Gadamer as an anti-realist, see Markus Gabriel’s “The Ontology of the Work of Art and The Universality of Hermeneutics Reconsidered: Gadamer and New Realism” (2021).