**Depression and Hermeneutical Injustice**

**Preamble**

Persons diagnosed with major depression usually report negative epistemic experiences – inability to properly make sense of their experiences, or to find the words to communicate what they feel to others (cf. Kidd, Spencer, and Carel).

How should we understand the predicament of persons experiencing depression? What concepts might be most useful? What sorts of methods and styles of explanation are most relevant?

**Epistemic injustice.**

An obvious candidate for a useful concept is that of an *epistemic injustice*—in the original sense of that term articulated by Miranda Fricker or later modified and alternative forms (cf Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus).

* reports of not being listened to or not being taken seriously
* inabilities to make sense of one’s experiences
* frustration of failing to get others to take seriously what one has to say
* a sense that others cannot understand or make sense of one’s experiences
* rhetorics of being ‘silenced’, of ‘voices’ unheard and complaints of injustice.

Generations of sociological research confirms the persistence of systematic prejudices targeting people with psychiatric conditions.

Epistemic justice and the pursuit of social justice form a natural conceptual and political pairing.

But we should ask the following questions:

1. Can the concept of an epistemic injustice give us a comprehensive account of the nature and significance of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression?
2. Are there aspects of that predicament that are not properly captured by analyses in terms of epistemic injustice?
3. Can use of the concept of epistemic injustice occlude certain aspects of the predicament in question?
4. What other concepts might also be relevant to understanding that predicament?

**My claim**: *epistemic injustice* is limited as a tool for articulating the predicament of those persons diagnosed with depression. That predicament has a far more complex character – involving a set of

1. contingent interpersonal and social factors
2. features intrinsic to the character of those experiences – something we explain only by *phenomenological psychopathology.*

**Hermeneutical injustice.**

Fricker 2007:

Hermeneutical injustice is:

*the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.*

(Fricker 2007: 155)

Subsequent revisions (Mason, Pohlhaus etc.):

* there can be gaps in the shared collective hermeneutical resource.
* there can be local resources apt for the task of interpreting certain experiences which fail to get wider uptake.
* there can be cases of dominant groups, actively suppressing local resources.
* HI can involve the *absence* of good sorts of resources and/or the *presence* of bad sorts of resources.

José Medina’s four parameters for distinguishing varieties of hermeneutical injustice:

1. *Sources of hermeneutical injustice*:

*Semantically produced*, where relevant labels and concepts are unavailable; there are ‘gaps’ or ‘lacuna’, in the terms used by Fricker.

*Performatively produced*, where subjects are judged an unintelligible or less intelligible in relation to other subjects because of their use of specific communicative performances and expressive styles (certain accents, ‘eccentric’ interpersonal styles, and so on).

(Medina 2016: 45-46)

1. *Dynamics of hermeneutical injustice*:

*Institutional* *dynamics*: structural conditions and/or institutional designs which tend or are intended to (i) prevent the use of certain hermeneutical resources or expressive styles and/or (ii) favour certain hermeneutical communities and practices and disadvantage others.

*Interpersonal dynamics* are committed in and through interpersonal dynamics – exchanges, conversation, or interactions characterised by what Medina (using micro-aggressions as his example) dubs *hermeneutical* *intimidations*.

1. *Breadth* – how far the injustice reaches across the social fabric. Fricker had distinguished an *incidental* from a *systemic* injustice and later added *radical* (or *maximal*) cases in which no one, even the subject themselves, can achieve understanding.
2. *Depth* – defined in terms of ‘how deep the hermeneutical harm goes in undermining or destroying the meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities of the victims of such harms’ (Medina 2016: 47). These range from ‘skin-deep cases’ – that leave intact the subject’s interpretive capacities – through to ‘marrow-of-the-bone cases’.

These parameters help us to appreciate salient features of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression:

* *Sources*

The epistemic predicament can have both *semantic* and *performative* sources. It can be caused the absence of interpretive and expressive resources and practices and/or the negative reactions of other persons to one’s hermeneutical performances.

* *Dynamics*

The epistemic predicament can have both *interpersonal* and *institutional* sources, as caused by the negative reactions of others and unjust structural and institutional and social arrangements. In most cases, there will be no firm distinction here, of course.

* *Scope*

The epistemic predicament can vary in its *breadth*—ranging from being confined to some specific area of one’s life through to more radical cases where *every* encounter and *every* situation entails a hermeneutic injustice: *no-one*, even the *subject*, is able to make sense of their experiences.

* *Depth*

The epistemic predicament can vary in its *depth*—and the most severe will be those ‘marrow-of-the-bone’ cases that could be tantamount to what Medina in other work has called *hermeneutical death*.

We might therefore propose something like an account of the epistemic predicament of persons diagnosed with depression of this sort:

*Persons diagnosed with depression are victims of a complex set of hermeneutical injustices whose scope is broad and whose harms are deep.* *These hermeneutical injustices find their sources in the interplay of interpersonal and/or institutional factors that systematically impede, erode, or even destroy the meaning-making and meaning-sharing of those persons.*

I think *something like* this account is plausible. It is, however, importantly *limited* as an account of the *sources* and *depth* of the predicament of those diagnosed with depression.

Why?

1. There are deeper and non-contingent sources of the epistemic predicament.
2. Medina’s account does not accommodate a vital possibility: *hermeneutical frustration and inability is integral to certain kinds of human experiences*.

To defend these claims, we need to consider phenomenological psychopathology.

**Phenomenological psychopathology.**

Phenomenological psychopathologists argue that many psychiatric conditions can be understood in terms of radical changes in the structure of one’s experience.

PP argues many psychiatric conditions involve *disruptions to the structure of human experience*.

Matthew Ratcliffe: depression involves loss of an ability to experience *kinds of possibility*:

Our access to kinds of possibility is itself integral to our experience […] To find oneself in a world is to have a sense of the various *ways* in which things might be encountered—as perceptually or practically accessible, as somehow significant, as available to others.

(Ratcliffe 2018:51)

Our experience of an object, situation, or person is part of a wider dynamic system of possibilities.

‘Renee’, *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*:

[W]hen we were outside I realized that my perception of things had completely changed. Instead of infinite space, unreal, where everything was cut off, naked and isolated, I saw Reality, marvellous Reality, for the first time. The people whom we encountered were no longer automatons, phantoms, revolving around, gesticulating without meaning; they were men and women with their own individual characteristics, their own individuality. It was the same with things. They were useful things, having sense, capable of giving pleasure. Here was an automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. […] for the first time I dared to handle the chairs, to change the arrangement of the furniture. What an unknown joy, to have an influence on things; to do with them what I liked and especially to have the pleasure of wanting the change.

(Sechehaye 1970: 105-106)

‘Renee’ again inhabits an experiential world rich in possibilities, a world where things *matter* once again, in ways the rest of us take for granted.

I now want to develop this idea to support the claims that

1. the epistemic predicament of those with depression necessarily involves changes at a *phenomenological* level.
2. the concept of epistemic injustice has only a limited purchase on these phenomenological changes.
3. analyses of those predicaments in terms of contingent interpersonal, social, institutional sources without appreciation of alterations to the structure of experience risk being *banal* (ie lacking a relevant kind of depth: see Kidd on banality as a kind of *pathophobia*).

**Predicaments.**

Here are my closing claims:

1. The epistemic predicament of depression can and usually do include various hermeneutical frustrations and harms.
2. The hermeneutical frustrations are *broad* and typically extend to what Fricker called those *maximal* cases where the subject is incapable of understanding their own experiences.
3. The hermeneutical frustrations are *deep*; they affect all one’s experiences and tend to cause severe hermeneutical harm.

The main problem with the hermeneutic injustice interpretation of the predicament of depression is that it identifies their *source* in contingent social, interpersonal, and institutional conditions. It will therefore tend to exclude – or at least occlude – a further set of important possibilities, namely, that

* certain experiences can be *intrinsically* difficult, even impossible, to articulate and describe.
* certain experiences can *intrinsically* erode our hermeneutic capacities.
* certain experiences can resist intelligible articulation *because* one of their characteristics is loss of access to the kinds of possibilities which our everyday hermeneutical abilities, practices, skills, and resources presuppose.

My point: the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression is much deeper and so far more complex than analyses focused on social obstacles of contingent kind can accommodate. I accept that hermeneutical injustices play various roles - but mainly that of *exacerbating* those deep hermeneutical frustrations that are integral to the experiences in question.

Our analysis is *limited* if we confine ourselves to:

* contingent gaps in a shared hermeneutical resource;
* unjust refusals of uptake to marginalised-but-extant interpretive resources;
* wilful resistance to the communicative practices and the expressive styles of value to those diagnosed with depression.

If one tries to analysis the predicament in terms only of contingent social/interpersonal factors, the real source and nature of that predicament will be concealed. To provide a fuller account, we must ‘go phenomenological’.

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