**Hermeneutical Injustice and Depression**

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. It is clear such experiences are not a trivial aspect; they are integral aspects to experiences of depression. The hermeneutic and communicative frustrations are complex – they take many forms, are shaped by interpersonal relations and tied into epistemic practices in all sorts of ways. Call this an *epistemic predicament*.

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? In asking these questions we are raising issues that are both epistemological and also practical. We must thus get clear on the exact nature of this predicament.

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 those later expanded forms her work inspired. Indeed, in recent years, the concept of *epistemic injustice* has become popular among philosophers, mental health nurses and others who are concerned with the epistemic predicament of persons diagnosed with a range of psychiatric conditions (see Kidd, Spencer, and Carel forthcoming).

It is easy to see why. First-person accounts from those diagnosed with psychiatric condition typically include 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, and so on. There are ubiquitous rhetorics of being ‘silenced’, of ‘voices’ unheard and complaints of injustice. All this resonates strongly with the idea of epistemic injustice.

The idea of epistemic injustice also resonates with communities of psychiatric scholarship and activism. Generations of sociological research confirms the persistence of systematic prejudices targeting people with psychiatric conditions. The ‘genealogies’ of psychiatry by Foucauldians are organised around rich themes of ethico-epistemic injustice and exclusion. Epistemic justice and the pursuit of social justice form a natural conceptual and political pairing. Nowhere will this feel truer than for those people diagnosed with psychiatric conditions.

No-one can seriously deny these institutional, cultural and political obstacles placed in the way of those with psychiatric conditions. Nor could it be denied that systemic epistemic injustice can be a persistent and painful feature of the life of those people. Of course, scholars will debate the details and differ in their explanations and emphases – a theme of a flourishing multidisciplinary literature on epistemic injustice and psychiatry. But we can and 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?

In what follows I argue that *epistemic injustice* is limited as a tool for articulating the predicament of those persons diagnosed with depression. This is because that predicament must be explained in terms of *phenomenological psychopathology.*

I focus on hermeneutical injustice.

**Hermeneutical injustice.**

Miranda Fricker, in her 2007 book, described two kinds of epistemic injustice: most of her analysis was focused on testimonial injustice and only one chapter was devoted to hermeneutical injustice. I quote her standard account of the latter:

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)

This account has various components and lots of nuance that is missed if one only quotes that little passage. Fricker elaborates on, for instance, ideas such as hermeneutical marginalisation, the nature of hermeneutical or interpretive resources, and an important distinction between generic or specific kinds of hermeneutical injustice. (One could drop the reference to ‘structural identity prejudice’, for instance, to capture more generic cases where the person has their social experiences obscured, but without any specific prejudice being at work: see Fricker 2007: 158).

Subsequent scholars did useful work to revise, expand and correct Fricker’s original account of hermeneutical injustice. Consider two examples:

1. Rebecca Mason distinguished hermeneutical injustices that involve *absence of conceptual resources* from those involving the *collective refusal of uptake* of conceptual resources that are available in specific communities. It is an important distinction. In many cases, a group of people may be perfectly capable of making sense of their own distinctive experiences; the problem is that relevant resources are not taken up by other groups. It misdescribes their situation quite badly to say that they have *no* interpretive resources: they do. Their *achievement* is to have created their resources through imaginative collective labor (Mason, 2011).
2. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. challenged Fricker’s claim that hermeneutical injustice is an exclusively structural phenomenon. Pohlhaus Jr. suggests that dominantly situated individuals can often have a degree of agency in relation to ‘local’ hermeneutical resources; they could embrace them, give them uptake, derogate or suppress them and so on. In many cases, then, there is genuine individual-level resistance to certain kinds of hermeneutical resources. Individuals can willfully act to *generate* and to *sustain* collective-level hermeneutical injustice. If so, we should recognize *wilful hermeneutical* *injustice*, too (Pohlhaus Jr., 2012).

It should be clear these distinctions can be useful when thinking about the epistemic predicament of those with psychiatric diagnoses. There can be cases of gaps in a 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 where the dominant groups, whoever they may be, actively suppress those local-level resources. Injustices of a hermeneutical kind can be accompanied by acts of hermeneutical innovation and resistance – this point being accepted by Fricker:

Medina is right to emphasise that the intersectional ignorances created by the possession and non-possession of this or that cluster of interpretive concepts growing out of this or that area of social experience tell a ‘polyphonic’ or multi-voiced story of power and resistance, societal conceptual impoverishment and localised interpretive sophistication and creativity.

(Fricker 2016: 167)

The fullest account of hermeneutical injustice is offered by José Medina. He offers four useful distinctions to help us explore the various forms of hermeneutical injustice—looking at these will help set up my main claim that the concept of an epistemic injustice, even in an expanded form, is not able to fully characterise the predicaments of those diagnosed with depression).

Medina suggests we think about hermeneutical injustice along four parameters. My aim in going through these is to show that even this expanded conception of hermeneutical injustice can’t fully accommodate the realities of the predicament of those diagnosed with depression.

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*:

*Interpersonal* *dynamics* either 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*. I might, for instance, respond to your attempts to invoke certain hermeneutical resources, or to deploy certain expressive styles by ‘zoning out’, frowning, scoffing, rolling my eyes, and in all sorts of other ways communicate to you my resistance to *those* resources and to *those* styles—and, thus, to the kinds of interpretive possibilities and forms of understanding that they would enable.

After the *sources* and *dynamics* of hermeneutical injustices, Medina addresses *breadth* and *depth*:

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 ‘because the meanings and expressive/interpretive resources in question are beyond the reach of the community’ (see Medina 2016: 46, cf. Fricker 2016).
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’:

[In these cases] the hermeneutical harms become so pervasive that they compromise one’s epistemic life and status as a meaning-making subject in expressive and interpretative practices. In the latter, marrow-of-the-bone cases, the effects of hermeneutical injustice are totalizing, and they reverberate across all the corners of one’s epistemic life, affecting one’s entire hermeneutical subjectivity, that is, one’s voice and capacity to make sense and be understood.

(Medina 2016: 47)

I find this a useful way of categorising the range of forms of hermeneutical injustice. It also helps us to appreciate salient features of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression:

* 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.
* 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.
* 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.
* 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*.

Of course, this account will need to be elaborated on several points (for instance, we need detail on the difference between the *meaning-making* and *meaning-sharing* capacities; we also need help to accommodate cases where a person is to a degree themselves a cause of hermeneutical injustices).

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 sort 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 which systematically impede, erode, and 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* of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression. It is fine to include an appreciation of the contingent interpersonal and social dimensions of that predicament. But those dimensions are, in an important sense, secondary. If we only look to unjust interpersonal and socio-structural factors, we miss the deeper dimensions integral to experiences of depression which lie at the heart of the epistemic predicament.

Here is one way to put the point:

A focus on unjust agents or structures must not occlude alternative possibilities. The epistemic predicament of those with depression is far more complex. Their inabilities to communicate and to make sense of their experiences can be *worsened* by interpersonal, institutional or cultural failings. However, those inabilities would still obtain even in a world filled with testimonially sensitive folk, in cultures with lavish stores of rich interpretive resources. The *deep source* of the predicament are *not* contingent epistemic injustices.

So, Medina’s account, useful as it is, does not accommodate an important possibility: profound *hermeneutical frustration is integral to certain kinds of human experience*.

To develop this claim, I will now turn to 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. Our experiential worlds are typically sustained by a range of structures and capacities, which usually remain invisible as long as they are intact and working properly. Unfortunately, if the structures and capacities are disrupted or lost, the effect is a disturbance of our experiential world. Such experiences are typically disturbing for the person, of course, although they allow us a useful opportunity to study those structures. Something like this general claim is integral to the existential phenomenological tradition.

In the case of psychiatry, the guiding claim of phenomenological psychopathology is that many psychiatric conditions involve radical disruptions of the structures of human experience. Ordinarily taken-for-granted capacities that underlie our life cease to function. Certain structures that enabled us to experience the world in ways that sustained our habits and practices are disrupted. By careful phenomenological investigation of these changes in the structure of experience, one can understand something integral to the character of psychiatric conditions.

I will focus on work on the *phenomenology of depression* the Matthew Ratcliffe. One of his key claims is that depression involves a change in the kinds of possibility that a person can experience. Our experience ordinarily incorporates a sense of the possible—we experience objects, places, and people in terms of all kinds of *possibilities*. These can be perceptual, practical, or interpersonal, and these can be integrated together in complex ways that are temporally extended. Edmund Husserl in a helpful term called this the *horizonal* structure of experience.

Consider – to use a standard example – sitting in a nice coffee shop writing a conference talk on phenomenology. The environment incorporates a range of possibilities—food to order, coffees to drink, tables to sit at, magazines to flick through, a window with a nice view of the canal to gaze at and ducks to observe. The experience builds in a range of interconnected possibilities to perceive, act, and interact with others. The possibilities are also experienced as *significant* in various ways in relation to my interests, preferences, and goals. A possibility can be experienced as *enticing*, *weird*, *useful*, *fun*, *threatening*, *familiar*, and so on. Such descriptions of experience may seem banal, but it should be appreciated just how complex and just how automatic all of these experiential successes really are. The fact my experience is structured in these coherent and dynamic ways is a taken-for-granted *phenomenological achievement* – to use a term in the phenomenological tradition.

Unfortunately, our phenomenological abilities can be lost or disrupted. The consequences are disturbance of and disruptions to our experiential worlds. Ratcliffe argues that expression involves such disruption: specifically, loss of an ability to experience *kinds of possibility*.

Consider this account by Ratcliffe of the ways that a simple experience, like seeing a cup, really incorporate a range of different possibilities:

[W]e can draw a distinction between *instances* of possibility, such as ‘this cup can be touched’ or ‘this cup has the potential to be seen by others’, and *kinds* of possibility, such as ‘being tangible’ or ‘being perceivable by others’. In order to encounter anything as ‘tangible’, ‘perceptually or practically accessible to others’, ‘relevant to a project’, ‘enticing’ or ‘fascinating’, we must first have access to the relevant *kinds* of possibility

(Ratcliffe 2018: 51)

If I can experience possibilities, then the cup will appear to me in terms of further possible actions. I could pick it up, leave it be, drink from it, throw it across the room, play catch with it and so on. It incorporates all many *kinds* of possibility that can be *salient* in all sorts of ways:

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. And changes in the overall style of experience, in existential feeling, are shifts in the kinds of possibility one is receptive to

(Ratcliffe 2018:51)

Our experience of the cup incorporates a system of possibilities which is, itself, continuous with a much wider horizontal system of possibilities. As Ratcliffe puts it, the world is a ‘possibility space’. Our ability to generate and sustain this possibility space is a phenomenological achievement, and a precondition for a human life. However, it is also an ability that can be disrupted, and for Ratcliffe, these disruptions involve loss or disruption of our ability to experience kinds of possibility.

Here it is useful to look at an example: ‘Renee’, author of *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, which in the following passage describes a brief, unexpected, glorious restoration of this ability to experience possibilities:

[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’ once again experiences objects, events, and people in terms of practical and interpersonal possibilities. Things are *useful* once again – once again connected to what Jean-Paul Sartre called ‘the world of tasks’. The restoration of a sense of salience – of modes of meaning – brings with it a renewed sense of *agency*. For a moment, ‘Renee’ once again inhabits a world rich in possibilities, a world where things *matter* once again, in ways the rest of us take for granted.

Ratcliffe proposes that what ‘Renee’ describes is integral to experiences of depression. This is a claim consistent with due acknowledgment of the diversity of those experiences. A disruption of an ability to experience kinds of possibility can take a range of forms. Phenomenology, done well, can do fidelity to the richness of our experiences. The experiences of depression discussed by Ratcliffe, after all, acknowledge multiple ways in which an experience world can be disrupted. Things seem *different* in hard-to-describe ways – as ‘weird’ or ‘unreal’. One can feel estranged from the world. There can be a sense of ‘incarceration’, of being, somehow, ‘trapped’ or ‘encased’. The world may feel *cold*, *dark*, *empty* – an endless night, a winter without end. Objects and events that would once have seem enticing in all sorts of ways now seem

horribly emptied of possibilities. Ratcliffe argues that a unifying theme of these experiences – hard as they are to describe – is altered access to kinds of possibility. In such cases, one feels the loss of something vital to one’s life but whose existence was unknown until it was lost. The whole world, somehow, seems different – *lesser*, *diminished* – in ways that are extremely difficult to describe or explain or make sense of.

To summarise: experiences of depression, for Ratcliffe at least, involve radical alteration to the experiential world of a person. The ‘world’ of the depressed person is defined in terms of absent or diminished access to kinds of possibility – whole systems of possibility most of us take for granted suddenly collapse or contract. This experience is itself difficult to describe and understand and this makes sense: what the person is undergoing is the disturbance of deep phenomenological structures of which they were unaware.

I now want to develop this idea to support the claims that (a) the epistemic predicament of those with depression is essentially *phenomenological* in character and, that being so, (b) the concept of an epistemic injustice has only a limited purchase on it and (c) analyses of that predicament in terms of contingent interpersonal, social or institutional sources without appreciation of the alterations to the structure of experience risk being *banal*.

**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. Most extreme is what Medina has called *hermeneutical death*, where the subject’s interpretive capacities and agency are utterly devastated; they suffer ‘the loss (or radical curtailment) of one’s … interpretative capacities, or … status as a participant in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices’ (Medina 2016: 41).

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 see inabilities to make sense of one’s experiences as something generated by the bad hermeneutical behaviour of others, or bad institutional practices and structures, or a combination of these. But the interpersonal and institutional sources are not the deep sources of these hermeneutical frustrations. Certain experiences can be *intrinsically* difficult, even impossible, to articulate and describe, even if one were the most eloquent person to grace the Earth. Certain experiences can *intrinsically* erode our hermeneutic capacities. Certain experiences can resist intelligible articulation because one of their characteristics is a loss of access to the kinds of possibilities which our everyday interpretative practices and resources presuppose.

My point: the hermeneutic frustrations typical of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression find their source, their causes, in alterations at the phenomenological level. Their experiential world has become radically different from what it was, and from the worlds of most of the rest of us. Our worlds still incorporate various kinds of possibility; theirs does not. These ‘gaps’ are not caused by contingent lacuna in a shared hermeneutical resource; nor by the unjust refusal of uptake to marginalised-but-extant interpretive resources; nor by discriminatory resistance to the communicative practices and expressive styles of the person diagnosed with depression. Of course, those hermeneutical injustices can occur, but the effect is to *exacerbate* the predicament, not *cause* it. If one tries to analysis the predicament in terms of contingent social and interpersonal factors, the real source and nature of the predicament will be obscured.

To summarise: the epistemic predicament typical of those diagnosed with depression reflects deep alterations in the structure of experience. If right, their predicament flows from phenomenological differences, not contingent defects in interpretive resources. Where such injustices occur, they will be secondary and contingent – *intensifying* rather than *cause* the hermeneutical frustrations.

I think, therefore, that the concept of epistemic injustice can play only a secondary role. The key resource is *phenomenological psychopathology*.

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