

Pure intuition: Miranda Fricker on the economy of prejudice

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ABSTRACT: Two aspects of Miranda Fricker's book are criticised: the implicit assumption that ethical theory can solve fundamental problems in epistemology, and the excessive reliance on testimony as a fundamental source of knowledge. Against the former, it is argued that ethical theories are based on cultural prejudices to a higher extent than epistemological theories. Against the latter, argumentation is proposed as a more important epistemic practice than testimony.

Keywords: epistemic virtue, prejudice, testimony, argumentation.

*I have a feeling inside,
and intuition's always been a woman's guide.
Shakira, Pure intuition*

*Y qué le voy a hacer, si yo
nací en el Mediterráneo.
(‘And what can I do, if I was born at the Mediterranean?’)
Joan Manuel Serrat, Mediterráneo.*

Having devoted a big part of my research to understanding the social constitution of knowledge from the point of view of (rational) action theory, it will not be me who will deny the importance of illuminating, as Miranda Fricker does in her impressive book *Epistemic Injustice*, the connection, or connections, between epistemic values and other aspects of practical reason. But I confess I have certain prejudices against the kind of approach chosen by her. Since my comment must be brief, my complaints are abundant and serious, and my English is poor, I fear that what follows will sound as too sanguine at times; I apologise for that, and insist in the fact that the book contains a lot of interesting and relevant arguments; it is just that I am concentrating on what I do not like. To make a long story short: I feel that, compared to epistemology and philosophy of science, moral philosophy is a bit of a mess, and hence the danger of falling into confusions and prejudices by analysing epistemic concepts by means of moral ones is more than big. I insist in recognising that probably my attitude is ‘just’ a prejudice, but the arguments I have seen until now against it had not made me stop thinking the way I do. This does not entail that I don't take the study of prejudices interesting, or even essential, but I prefer to ground the study on an epistemic approach, rather than on an ethical one, *at least as far as these two approaches can be kept separate*.

I say this because I feel (again, it's a question of feelings) that the main aim of Fricker's book is *to show how bad* some type of epistemic prejudices are, rather than to explain why they are bad (I mean: the latter goal is instrumental for the former), so 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. An easy example of this risk refers to the central concept of Fricker's work: justice. There are plenty of mutually incompatible theories about what justice "consists in"; still worse, what things do *seem* just or unjust to people is strongly dependent on lots of social and cultural factors, many of them not too well understood. One can be more or less sympathetic to Fricker's views on what actions constitute an 'injustice' (and I am *extremely* sympathetic!), but I would not like to ground a rational, scientific explanation of what is to *have* a prejudice, and what consequences follow from having it, on *my own* moral prejudices, not more than I would like to develop a theory about nutrition just on the ground of my own gastronomic tastes. In some way, this is even probably detrimental to me, for I might exploit Fricker's theory to apply it to the case at hand: not-anglo-saxon-based-analytic-philosophers, whose papers are systematically ignored or regarded as irrelevant by their colleagues from UK or US universities (who simply 'smell the accent in the writing' in a way I can not); Fricker's book could provide me with good arguments to show to the analytic-philosophy community that they suffer from a 'testimonial prejudice' against people who work out of the circle, but I shall resist the temptation, for I want to be faithful to my own positivist, fact-value-dicotomish prejudices, and keep here (just here) the discussion only at the level of epistemology.

Being persuaded *ex ante*, as I am, of how wrong it is to exclude people from the community of knowers, the major part of Fricker's arguments seem to me, if not redundant, at least a little bit superfluous, constantly insisting in the part of the problem that is more ethically laden and less in the questions one can see behind the ones Fricker discusses most of the time. *Of course* it is unjust to deny a person the status of a reasoner! *Of course* this is detrimental to her capacity of becoming an autonomous agent! *And of course* this is often based on identity prejudices! (I agree particularly on this —*all* identities are nothing but clusters of prejudices). After all, isn't knowing these obvious things an essential component of our western, twenty-first century prejudices? But we knew them long before we were said that testimonial injustice is a species of epistemic injustice on its own, and I don't think that people are going to be moved a little bit further because they learn that denying somebody the status as a witness or informant is a supplemental wrong we made to her besides having denied to her the access to culture and education (which, from my point of view, is the *summum malum* of all epistemic injustices). The question is, what does all this show us about the nature and working of knowledge? Fricker obviously resorts to the epistemology of testimony as that part of the current debate in epistemology that can do the best job in her strategy, and there she finds what I think is the most interesting contribution of her book to that debate: the necessity of taking 'testimonial justice' as a constitutive epistemic virtue, together with sincerity and accuracy.

Unfortunately, epistemic virtue theory is too much contaminated by the mixing of ethical and epistemological concerns. The problem is that most virtues, if not all, are strongly culture dependent and subjective: what is a virtue for me can be a vice for you. This makes virtues unsuitable to serve as the ground for a philosophical theory of anything, less still epistemology! If we identify something that sounds like a virtue, and without which we think no epistemic social system could 'work', perhaps we are sim-

ply enslaved by the limits of our imagination, and systems very different from those exist or are conceivable (by others). Furthermore, if there are some ‘epistemic virtues’ which are a universal possibility condition on all social knowledge systems, surely this will be due to the biological properties of our cognitive apparatuses, and so, in order to grasp them in an appropriate way, it will be better to start our philosophical investigation just studying neuroscience, rather than ethics. On the other hand, the fact that virtues are *comparative* entails that one has to study how a social knowledge system can work with different people having those virtues in different degrees. One has to reflect, so to say, not on what would happen if people were not accurate, or just in their testimonial attributions, but what would it happen if different combinations of degrees in different virtues existed: perhaps it is possible that some societies ‘work’ with a low level of justice and a high level of accuracy and sincerity (and viceversa), and what is worse for epistemic virtue theory, perhaps people would prefer to live in a society where virtues are not always exemplified at the maximum degree, for being virtuous is costly, sometimes even for other people. Besides developing a theory (or catechism?) telling us how to be virtuous in epistemic matters, we epistemologists should offer a theory about the possible social knowledge systems, their pros and cons, and how to extract the maximum profit from them (even at the cost of being a little bit vicious sometimes). If there exists an *economy* of prejudices, as Fricker says, what we need is a powerful *economics* about them, and not only an ethics! I do not deny the importance of having such an ethics (actually, I would approve our having *lots* of mutually incompatible epistemic ethics; after all, *de moralibus gustibus non est disputandum*), but it is also necessary to understand how that economy works, not only how it should work.

Lastly, another aspect I do not like in the book is its insistence on testimony. I acknowledge that this was the ‘forgotten’ side in previous work on epistemology, and that it is essential if we want to study knowledge as a fundamental part of a big social phenomenon. But having said that, I have the feeling inside that the classics (from Plato to Quine) had a good reason to consider testimony a *rather secondary* section in the epistemology project: what they were looking for were strategies for reliably *gaining* new knowledge, not just for reliably *transmitting* existing knowledge. Their problem was that, with few exceptions, they had an inappropriate, ‘Robinson Crusoe’ view of knowledge systems. In this sense, I think that an ‘economic’ approach, like the one I have followed elsewhere,¹ is still more appropriate than an ‘ethical’ one, for economics has basically to do with the interactions between ‘demanders’ and ‘suppliers’ of valuable items (and, by the way, with the implication of different agents having different valuations of the same items, something the ethical approach tends to forget, by insisting in ‘the’ value of knowledge as a single, objective quality). Fricker rightly insists in the fact that testimonial injustice wrongs people by denying their status, not just as ‘witnesses’, but as *reasoners*, as providers *and users* of reasons. But I think this should have made her pay more attention to the ‘economy of arguments’, so to say, than just

¹ See, e.g., J. Zamora Bonilla, “Science studies and the theory of games”, *Perspectives on Science* 14, 639-671, 2006, and “Rhetoric, induction, and the free speech dilemma”, *Philosophy of Science* 73,175-193, 2006.

to what the new mainstream (or just last fashion) in analytic epistemology is discussing.

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