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Who's to Blame? Hermeneutical Misfire, Forward-Looking Responsibility, and Collective Accountability

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to investigate how sexist ideology distorts our conceptions of sexual violence and the hermeneutical gaps such an ideology yields. I propose that we can understand the problematic issue of hermeneutical gaps about sexual violence with the help of Fricker's theory of hermeneutical injustice. By distinguishing between hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical misfire, we can distinguish between the hermeneutical gap and its consequences for the victim of sexual violence and those of the perpetrator of such violence. I then argue that perpetrators are both morally responsible and accountable for their acts, even if they are the result of a hermeneutical misfire. Ultimately, I show that with regard to sexual violence, we should opt for accountability to change the behaviour of the perpetrator and the social structure. Content warning: The paper discusses sexual violence and difficulties conceptualising experiences of such violence.

KEYWORDS

Sexist ideology;
hermeneutical injustice;
hermeneutical misfire;
blame; moral responsibility;
accountability

1. Introduction

Many feminist philosophers argue that rape and sexual violence are elements of a broader sexist ideological framework (cf. Frye 1983, 1992; MacKinnon 1987, 1989; Hänel 2018a, 2018b; Manne 2018; Alcoff 2018). While these scholars differ in their theories, they all subscribe to the idea that a sexist, patriarchal, or male supremacist social structure underlies our everyday practices. I argue elsewhere that 'a sexist ideology is a social structure, constituted by ritualized social practices, and rationalized by a coherent cultural framework that organizes social agents into binary gender relations of domination and subordination' (Hänel 2018b, 900). Additionally, said ideology 'constrains our actions as well as our epistemic tools for interpreting those actions' (902). Alcoff similarly argues that our experiences of sexual violence 'are discursively and historically constituted [...] by the happenstance of the cultures we are born into' (2018, 56) and that we are, in fact, socialised within rape cultures. Both myself and Alcoff take this to imply that we sometimes fail to make intelligible our experiences and actions both when it comes to experiencing and enacting sexual violence. Alcoff writes that perpetrators can genuinely experience 'their victims as inviting the encounter, as not being harmed by it, or even enjoying it' (Alcoff 2018, 56), but this is 'only because of their socialization within rape cultures' (57). I argue that some men fail to understand their actions due to the underlying sexist framework that distorts what counts as sexual violence by, for example, persistent rape myths and correlated stigmatisation of victims, as I show in the following section (cf. Hänel 2018b).

Research has shown that the more participants believe in rape myths,¹ the more they blame the victim and the less they blame the perpetrator, and the closer the relationship between the victim

and the perpetrator the stronger this effect (cf. Krahé, Temkin, and Bieneck 2007). Furthermore, a 2004 study by Peterson and Muehlenhard found an interesting correlation between rape myths acceptance and the inability to label the experience adequately.² According to the study, some of the women reported experiences that matched the legal definition of rape but were unwilling to label the experience as such. One might think that there are many reasons for victims of rape not to use this particular label to describe their experience. For example, psychological studies show that attaching the label 'rape' to an experience can hinder the healing process the victim is going through (cf. Draucker et al. 2009). Researchers Zoë Peterson and Charlene L. Muehlenhard also found, however, that some women who were unwilling to correctly label their experiences as rape were 'were more likely (a) to accept rape myths, and (b) to have been raped in circumstances which matched the rape myths they accepted' (Jenkins 2016, 3). Their findings suggest a link between the acceptance of rape myths and the inability to understand one's experience adequately. Katharine Jenkins draws a similar conclusion in a paper on rape myths as hermeneutical injustices, stating that the 'research strongly suggests that one effect of rape myths is to prevent some victims of rape from conceptualising their experience as one of rape' (2016, 3). Research such as this suggests that if we are all inculcated with sexist ideology, then all of us are influenced (in different ways and to different degrees) by rape myths and other false assumptions about sexual violence. Furthermore, some of us lack the adequate concepts necessary to understand sexual violence or articulate our experiences adequately.

Research also shows positive correlations between rape myth acceptance and sexual violence and coercion (cf. Klein, Kennedy, and Gorzalka 2008). Helmus, Kelly, and Karl (2013) note that cognitive distortions are a risk factor with predictive validity for sexual recidivism and that rape myth acceptance is one of these cognitive distortions. There is also evidence of rape myth acceptance amongst convicted rapists, using myths to rationalise their behaviours (Chiroro et al. 2004). If we assume that we all are shaped by sexist ideology as described above, it is only reasonable to assume that perpetrators of sexual violence are also affected by the distorted framework that the ideology provides.

If this is the case, one could feel tempted to argue that perpetrators are not responsible for their violent acts. Such an argument, however, would be undesirable from a feminist, moral, and political perspective, as it obscures how we are responsible for our actions despite cognitive ideological distortions. When considering these deeply troubling problems, we can never forget that actual persons deeply and lastingly harm others through their acts of sexual violence and sexist ideology in general. Additionally, those harmed and those harming are often members of very specific social groups. Sexual violence is a gendered and often racialized crime. Cis-men mostly perpetrate sexual violence against women and gender non-conforming individuals, often from marginalised social groups with respect to race. On the other hand, we should take seriously the holistic and self-operative ways in which ideology works (more below) and consider questions of responsibility to find fruitful ways to dismantle the sexist ideology and to tackle sexual violence. In other words, we have to tread carefully – not allowing our questions to obscure the deeply harmful experiences of sexual violence while at the same time accurately presenting and critically discussing the ways in which sexist ideology distorts our conceptions of such violence.

Before I outline the structure of the paper, let me clarify that I here distinguish between (a) sexual violence that is in line with inaccurate but persistent rape myths and, hence, committed in full knowledge even by perpetrator who believe in such myths and (b) sexual violence that is not in line with such myths and can, in some cases, as discussed above, not be made intelligible as acts of rape by victims as well as perpetrators alike. While the first describes cases that count as rape even within the sexist ideology and that are tracked by the dominant understanding of sexual violence (more about this below), the second describes cases in which the attacker should have known better but does not and in which their embeddedness in the sexist ideology might prevent them from doing so. In what follows, I exclusively discuss the second, and what I say should in no case be applied to cases that perpetrators commit with full knowledge, or in cases where there is verbal or physical refusal or

in which the victim is incapable of consent. However, most acts of sexual violence are not tracked by the dominant understanding of sexual violence, making this investigation even more important as it can highlight the problems of such a distorted understanding and propose possible solutions to it.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate how sexist ideology distorts our conceptions of such violence and the hermeneutical gaps such an ideology yields. I propose that we can understand the problematic issue of hermeneutical gaps with regard to sexual violence with the help of Fricker's theory of hermeneutical injustice. In Section 1, I briefly show that victims of sexual violence are often also victims of hermeneutical injustice, i.e. they are incapable of understanding their own experiences adequately and they fail to make their experiences intelligible to others. But if we assume – and there are good reasons to do so – that we are all to some extent inculcated with sexist ideology, then it seems plausible to say that not merely victims but also perpetrators suffer from the distorted collective hermeneutical resource to make their experiences intelligible.³ In Section 2, I argue that there is a difference between the cognitive disadvantage of the victim and the perpetrator. The perpetrator, unlike the victim, suffers not from hermeneutical injustice but hermeneutical misfiring. In Section 3, I consider the question of blame and moral responsibility for actions performed under hermeneutical misfiring and responsibility for hermeneutical injustice. To do so, I highlight the distinction between backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility. I argue that perpetrators have forward-looking responsibility by drawing on Iris Marion Young's theory of political responsibility and insights from community accountability practices.

2. Hermeneutical Injustice within Sexist Ideology

If we assume – and we have good reasons to do so (cf. Hänel 2018a, 2018b) – that we live within a society stamped by sexist ideology, then we can also reasonably assume that there are consequences for theories of hermeneutical injustice as laid out by Fricker. According to Fricker's theory, due to a distorted hermeneutical resource, victims of sexual harassment and women who experience postnatal depression cannot adequately understand or communicate their suffering. We can translate this theory to cases of sexual violence: because of so-called rape myths and other false assumptions about sexual violence, victims sometimes cannot make intelligible their own experiences of sexual violence. Hence, they suffer both from the violent acts themselves as well as from their inability to understand and articulate their experiences. This inability can lead to self-blame and lack of trust in their interpretative and epistemic capacities.⁴

Jenkins (2016, 2) argues that rape myths, such as the myth that 'rape always involves overwhelming physical force, and that victims of rape always physically resist their attacker,' constitute hermeneutical injustice. According to her, 'rape myths are inaccurate perceptions concerning rape' (Ibid.). She then draws our attention to research that strongly suggests that victims who accept certain rape myths are less likely to understand their own experience of sexual violence accurately. In other words, rape myths can prevent victims from conceptualising their own rape *as* rape. Hence, they are likely also to suffer the consequences of hermeneutical injustice, which is 'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization' (Fricker 2007, 158). While Jenkins focuses on how rape myths affect victims of sexual violence and causes them to suffer from hermeneutical injustice, this phenomenon is not necessarily limited to victims.

Laura Beeby (2011) points out that hermeneutical injustice is an *epistemic* problem and that we should be able to ask whether the perpetrator of sexual harassment (or, in our case, sexual violence) is a victim of hermeneutical injustice as well. Beeby draws our attention to why Fricker maintains that, in her example, Carmita Wood is a victim of hermeneutical injustice while the harasser is not. Carmita Wood suffered from sexual harassment at her workplace in the early 1970s at a time when there was no concept of sexual harassment. Due to the inability to adequately understand her experience and articulate it to others, she suffered significant physical and psychological distress as well as economic consequences when she finally – with no other options – left the job. It was

because of Carmita Wood and a group of other women that the term 'sexual harassment' was finally coined in an attempt to gain legal protection from unwelcome advances in the workplace. Fricker's main idea is that there exists a collective hermeneutical resource that holds the concepts everyone can draw upon and that some people, depending on their social group membership, can contribute to the resource better than others. Because Carmita Wood was a black woman, her social group membership prevented her from contributing to the collective resource.⁵ Often, it is not that there is no concept available at all; rather, as in Wood's case, the dominant interpretation of the behaviour is distorted because the collective resource more readily accepts the contributions of men – including harassers – than those suffering from the harassment. This represents a problem of epistemic ignorance.⁶ Mostly, it is not in the interest of the privileged to understand the suffering of the oppressed in accurate terms. And it is this asymmetry that Fricker focuses on in her theory.

Beeby argues that both Carmita Wood and her harasser suffer from a cognitive disadvantage – in fact, they suffer from the *same* cognitive disadvantage: they lack the concept of *sexual harassment* due to a gap in the collective (or, as I prefer, dominant) hermeneutical resource. Yet, Beeby takes this thought a step further in arguing that both Wood and her harasser are thus 'affected by a climate of hermeneutical marginalization' because they are 'vulnerable to failures of understanding and communication' (2011, 482). And, if this is the case, then both might be suffering from hermeneutical injustice. Clearly, this is not what Fricker would say. Fricker makes it very clear that Carmita Wood is wronged in a way that her harasser is not. But, according to Beeby, this difference between Wood and her harasser is not epistemic disadvantages, but background conditions such as sexism that put Wood in a position of marginalisation. With respect to the epistemic disadvantages, they are, Beeby argues, *on a par*.⁷ And so it might be possible to think that Wood's perpetrator might be both a perpetrator of sexual violence *and* a victim of hermeneutical injustice. According to Beeby, we could ask, 'Would the harasser's behaviour have been different if he had a sufficient understanding of gender roles in the workplace?' (484). Beeby here focuses exclusively on the epistemic dimension of hermeneutical injustice and argues that 'under certain circumstances' the harasser's behaviour could 'be seen as a tragedy or injustice' (485). Thus, she claims, we should change Fricker's account such that it is distinctly about epistemic injustice and not a fusion of ethical, social, and epistemic problems.

Instead of reducing hermeneutical injustices to purely epistemic problems, I want to suggest that it is indeed the case that perpetrators (can) suffer from hermeneutical gaps without also making them victims of hermeneutical injustice. In fact, even when we concentrate, as Beeby proposes, exclusively on the epistemic dimension of hermeneutical injustice, we cannot dismiss the social background conditions as it is due to those conditions that the gap in the hermeneutical resource exists in the first place. I propose instead to distinguish between hermeneutical injustices and what I call 'hermeneutical misfiring'. By 'hermeneutical misfiring,' I mean having one's significant experience obscured from the collective understanding without being hermeneutically marginalised oneself. This, hopefully, makes it possible to explicate and critique the workings of sexist ideology without putting victims and perpetrators *on a par* and risking making excuses for what is inexcusable.

Laura Beeby seeks an account that 'allows us to see the breadth of damage done by epistemic injustice: both more powerful and less powerful people are epistemically compromised by distortions and deficits in the communal resource' (2011, 485). While this is an interesting move towards understanding the ways in which everyone is affected by sexist ideology, I think it misrepresents the epistemic character of Wood's suffering. Even though both Wood and her harasser lack the concepts necessary to understand their behaviour and experience, it is Wood who suffers secondary epistemic disadvantages, not her harasser. She might come to doubt her epistemic capacities, her capabilities of making sense of the world, her epistemic self-confidence, and so on. In fact, as I argue elsewhere, not being able to understand significant experiences – such as sexual violence – can seriously restrict one's self-development and identity formation (Hänel 2020). Hence, the secondary epistemic

disadvantages that Wood suffers from are deeply problematic and go well beyond the 'mere' lack of understanding a given incident.

3. Hermeneutical Injustice versus Hermeneutical Misfire

What is needed is an account that allows us to understand how people with more and with less power are differently affected by sexist ideology. Drawing on work in feminist philosophy of pornography, I suggest that we can capture these differences by distinguishing between hermeneutical injustice and what I call 'hermeneutical misfiring'.⁸ Hornsby and Langton (1998) as well as Langton (1993) argue that pornographic speech can silence women in contexts in which it is of utmost importance for them not to be silenced, that is, in situations where they cannot refuse unwanted sex. In more detail, Langton and Hornsby show that pornographic speech can illocutionarily silence women's speech acts; a woman's verbal 'no' intended to refuse unwanted sex can misfire due to specific communicative conditions brought about by pornography. In these cases, women's refusal does not count as a refusal because it lacks uptake.⁹ The idea is that due to pornographic speech (which, for example, forms the expectation that women mean 'yes' when they say 'no'), the hearer fails to understand the woman's 'no' as an act of refusal. The utterance misfires; the woman is silenced.

I contend that the pornography case runs parallel to the cases I am interested in here. Due to sexist ideology, there is a gap or distortion in our dominant hermeneutical resource. Victims and perpetrators of sexual violence may fail to understand their experiences and behaviour adequately. In the case of victims, this is an instance of hermeneutical injustice. I propose that in the case of perpetrators, this is an instance of hermeneutical misfiring. Due to rape myths, perpetrators may be unable to understand their behaviour for what it is and, hence, fail to understand passiveness of the victim as intended refusal. Note that the focus here is not on the intended act of refusal that misfires (as in the pornography case above) but on hermeneutical misfiring. The perpetrator has a mistaken understanding of the situation; his conceptual grasp of what is going on *misfires*. This I call 'hermeneutical misfiring'.

While someone has to be hermeneutically marginalised to be a victim of hermeneutical injustice, this is not the case with hermeneutical misfiring. In cases of hermeneutical misfiring, a person either uses wrong or distorted conceptual tools to understand a significant experience. Hermeneutical misfiring thus explains what happens when both the victim and the perpetrator of sexual violence suffer from a hermeneutical distortion or cognitive gap. While cases of hermeneutical misfiring can have serious consequences, they do not amount to cases of injustice. This is due to the fact that they describe what goes wrong epistemically without yet taking into account the background conditions of social injustice. In other words, while victims of hermeneutical injustice suffer from a cognitive gap, they also suffer from being unable to contribute to the dominant hermeneutical resource, to resist dominant interpretations of their experiences, to develop epistemic confidence, and to align their sense of moral injury with descriptions of the experience. These sufferings are mostly due to their social position of power and the very structural ways in which their experiences cannot access the dominant hermeneutical resource. Hermeneutical misfiring, on the other hand, describes merely the cognitive gap that can result in deeply problematic experiences as well as deeply problematic behaviour. Thus, in some cases, Beeby might be right. A perpetrator might act differently had they access to adequate concepts and, hence, were not to suffer from hermeneutical misfiring.

Hermeneutical misfiring, in the case of perpetrators, often stems from epistemic ignorance. Epistemic ignorance is structural and, as such, has effects on knowledge production, epistemic credibility, and social injustice. Here, I am interested in its effects on social injustice and knowledge production. That is, it is due to epistemic ignorance that there is no adequate concept for sexual violence in the dominant hermeneutical resource. The relation of epistemic ignorance and social injustice suggests that epistemic ignorance is not merely an epistemic matter but, similar to hermeneutical injustice, fuses epistemic and political (or ethical) problems. It may seem that,

contrary to what I have been arguing above, hermeneutical misfiring cannot be a purely epistemic problem. A possible answer is that hermeneutical misfiring is a case of structural epistemic ignorance – that is, it is due to the position of social power that the perpetrator is ignorant of their behaviour. If this is the case, then I would need to revise my account of hermeneutical misfiring to argue it occurs when a person, *due to their epistemic ignorance* (stemming from a social position of power and privilege), either uses wrong or distorted conceptual tools to understand a significant experience.¹⁰ This new definition raises the question of whether the epistemic ignorance at play is wilful ignorance or whether it is what might be called ‘ideological ignorance’. For now, I understand wilful ignorance as a carefully constructed oblivion that helps to maintain dominance or privilege. (cf. Bailey 2007; Mills 2007; Sullivan and Tuana 2007) Ideological ignorance, on the other hand, is an internalised ignorance that helps to maintain structural injustices, perhaps close to what is called ‘false consciousness’ in critical theory. The significant difference is that the former would imply that the social agent is responsible for his lack of understanding – even if such lack is due to structural reasons. The latter suggests that the social agent is so deeply embedded in the ideological structure that they are incapable of seeing beyond the distorted and limited dominant hermeneutical resource. I consider this question in the next section.

4. Holding Perpetrators Accountable

So far, I have argued that there is a difference between the cognitive disadvantage of the victim and the perpetrator. I have also proposed that the perpetrator does not suffer from hermeneutical injustice, but does suffer from hermeneutical misfiring. I now want to turn to the issue of moral responsibility. How can we be accountable for our actions if we suffer from a lack of understanding? I briefly suggest that perpetrators ought to be accountable for their actions even if performed under conditions of hermeneutical misfiring. For the remainder of the paper, I draw a distinction between backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility. Focusing on the latter, and drawing on the theory of political responsibility by Iris Marion Young, I argue that perpetrators have forward-looking responsibility.¹¹

I have argued above that hermeneutical misfiring happens when a person, *due to their epistemic ignorance* (stemming from a social position of power and privilege), uses wrong or distorted conceptual tools to understand a significant experience. Hence, we have to say something about the perpetrator’s ability to draw conclusions as to whether they are responsible. For now, I assume that the perpetrator acts in the way they do because of ideological ignorance; they have a cognitive gap due to wrong or distorted concepts of sexual violence in the dominant hermeneutical resource. They might even act differently had they access to other concepts. If I can show that an ideologically ignorant perpetrator is responsible, then a wilfully ignorant perpetrator is responsible too, yet this does not necessarily hold *vice versa*. Furthermore, the question of responsibility can be divided into two separate, but related questions: (1) Is the perpetrator responsible for the hermeneutical injustice from which the victim suffers? According to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is a structural injustice and, as such, does not involve a culprit. To involve a culprit, injustice needs to stem from someone’s wrongful act. However, the injustice of hermeneutical injustice stems from the subject’s hermeneutical marginalisation, i.e., the social – and, in Carmita Wood’s case, sexist and racist – background conditions. (2) Is the perpetrator responsible for a wrongful act done under conditions of ignorance? While some of what I say touches on (1), I here concentrate on (2).

How *can* we be responsible for our actions if performed under conditions of hermeneutical misfire? In mainstream philosophy, moral responsibility and blameworthiness are often coupled. Roughly, we are held morally responsible for our action if we are blameworthy for it. For example, according to Peter Strawson (2008), Gideon Rosen (2003) and others,¹² we can say that a person is responsible for an act if the person is liable to be blamed for the act. Yet, in some contexts, ignorance can serve as an excuse. For example, Rosen distinguishes cases in which a person (a) is ignorant and blameless and (b) ignorant but blameworthy, i.e., at fault for their own not knowing. In the first case,

a person fails to know the wrong they are doing, and there is no way that they should have known. In the second case, the person could and should have known and is therefore at fault for not knowing. In these cases – in which someone is wilfully ignorant – the ignorance is culpable and cannot serve as an excuse in the above sense. Accordingly, an action done from culpable ignorance is itself culpable. Thus, one can ask whether ideological ignorance should be considered culpable or non-culpable. While this is mainly a question about the holism of sexist ideology, we can look at recent work on epistemic ignorance and white ignorance in particular for guidance here, i.e. the idea that white social agents are epistemically unable to recognise and understand their racial identities, experiences, and social position. Drawing on this literature, I briefly present two arguments for why, contrary to Rosen and others, perpetrators of sexual violence are responsible for their acts even if performed under conditions of hermeneutical misfire. First, because there are many countervailing reasons for ignorance. Second, because holding on to ignorance in light of such reasons is wilful ignorance, and thus an active practice that functions to maintain one's powerful social position.¹³

First, as Medina (2012) and Mason (2011) have pointed out, there is not one but many hermeneutical resources from which we can draw our concepts. Medina argues for a pluralistic analysis of different interpretative communities and expressive practices that co-exist in social contexts. In fact, he argues that 'social silences and hermeneutical gaps are misrepresented if they are uniformly predicated of an entire social context' (2012, 201). Hence, when we think of which concepts are available to us, we have to consider that many of the needed concepts are actually available in other sub-communities. Thus, one reason for our ignorance is that our social power and privilege make it *unnecessary* for us to know about these resources. In other words, individuals in powerful social positions often lack the necessary experiences through which they could learn that they act wrongly or hold distorted views and concepts. They *also* lack the interests and necessity to educate themselves about other experiences (cf. Pohlhaus 2012). Instead, they put their own interests over others' interests, maintaining their powerful social positions as well as their ignorance. This, however, is a bad excuse. After all, it leads to more suffering of those who already suffer and more ignorance of those who are already ignorant. The luck of being in a powerful and privileged social position should come with sensibility towards and responsibility for injustices against the less fortunate.

Rosen, on the other hand, thinks that awareness of counterarguments or other resources is not yet sufficient for being able to change one's cognitive framework (Rosen 2003, 67). But why not? Considering that our society is immensely complex and deeply fragmented and, thus, that there are not only sexist views – although these might be the dominant ones – but also a vast range of feminist or otherwise egalitarian views opposing sexism, is it really too much to hold each other to high standards? Or, asked differently, is the standard not to hold sexist views really that high and demanding? It is true that sexist ideology runs deep and, in fact, part of what makes the ideology pervasive is that despite the counterarguments, those in the grip of its sexist views find evidence and encouragement at every corner.¹⁴ Yet, especially in light of vast social movements such as #MeToo and changing norms of how to navigate the world, not critically questioning one's beliefs means to stay ignorant actively.

Second, Pohlhaus Jr. argues convincingly that while we cannot transcend our situatedness, we can change the direction of our gaze and our interests. In her words, 'with habitual practice epistemic resources can make more evident to the knower that which is not immediately obvious from her position in the world' (2012, 729). Thus, being and staying ignorant is not what necessarily follows from one's specific social position and embeddedness within the sexist ideology, but rather 'is a wilful refusal to acknowledge and to acquire the necessary tools for knowing parts of the world' (Ibid.). Epistemic ignorance is often an active social practice (cf. Alcoff 2007). Being wilfully ignorant is a choice. Or, as Moody-Adams argues, it is 'ignorance of what *can and should* already be known' (1999, 180, emphasis added). And as such, wilful ignorance is an obstacle to moral progress that is rooted in the social structures of sexist ideology but is not impossible to overcome. Rather, it is our responsibility as moral agents to do so.

I have suggested that there are good reasons for why we are responsible for our actions despite acting under conditions of hermeneutical misfiring. Furthermore, there is an important pragmatic suggestion to be made in light of moral responsibility in regard to sexual violence. If Rosen's discussion of ideological views tells us anything, it is that individuals in the grip of a pervasive ideology will need a learning process that brings them to question their previously accepted views critically. Yet recent psychological research suggests that shame and resentment have more negative outcomes than positive ones. Blame can lead to rejection, anger, shame, hopelessness, or desperation, feelings that undermine responsibility (cf. Barrett, Zahn-Waxler, and Cole 1993; Peters et al. 2014; Stuewig et al. 2010; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Tangney et al. 1992; Thomaes et al. 2011; Wright, Gudjonsson, and Young 2008; Oakberg 2016). These feelings are especially important for understanding sexual violence since the defence mechanism of externalising blame can lead to victim-blaming and reproduction of sexist views. Especially in contexts where we want to enable learning and change, 'it is essential to maintain responsibility and accountability [but] to avoid blame' (Pickard 2014, 10; see also 2011; Lamb 1999). Hence, blame is a bad advisor when it comes to rape myths, as the problem with rape myths and other sexist beliefs is that individuals hold them persistently against evidence. To counteract them requires a more serious, critical learning process.¹⁵ I am offering a pragmatic suggestion to refrain from blame in some contexts in light of psychological research. I am not, however, arguing that perpetrators of sexual violence are blameless as such.

Putting the question of blame aside, I propose to make use of the distinction of backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility. Roughly, backward-looking responsibility makes 'responsibility out to be a matter of having caused an existing – morally problematic – state of affairs' (Smiley 2014, 1), such as having sexually violated another person. Forward-looking responsibility makes 'responsibility out to be a matter of being morally charged with – responsible for – bringing about a state of affairs which we as a community take to be desirable' (Ibid.). Often the distinction between backward- and forward-looking responsibility is drawn in response to questions of collective responsibility, with backward-looking responsibility geared towards reparations and forward-looking responsibility oriented towards redressing structural injustices. However, many of the insights in regard to forward-looking responsibility can be helpful in our case. With the help of Iris Marion Young's theory of political responsibility, which is forward-looking, I argue that perpetrators of sexual violence have forward-looking responsibility and that this responsibility extends to the others in a more structural way.

Young's theory of political responsibility focuses on structural injustice for which there is not one agent guilty but a conglomerate of social practices, institutional rules, and individual action. In these cases, Young argues that we should turn to a concept of shared (future) responsibility. An agent is responsible in this manner 'if (a) the agent is causally embedded in processes that produce a problematic result and (b) the agent is in a position to assume ongoing forward-looking responsibility (in cooperation with others) for ameliorating those conditions' (Young 2011, xx, see also Chapter 4). In other words, '[t]o ascribe responsibility to a person is to say that they have a job to do' (2011, xv). Let us see how this plays out with regard to perpetrators of sexual violence. Clearly, the agent is causally embedded in the very (physical) process that produced the morally problematic result; in fact, the agent directly caused the problematic result even if they have done so via hermeneutical misfire. This is why, as I have hinted above, many would hold the perpetrator blameworthy such that they would also apply backward-looking responsibility to them. Yet, here, the question is not about whether they are blameworthy but whether they are causally related to the problematic result, such that we can say that they have forward-looking responsibility. Furthermore, as Young's theory originally focuses on collective or shared responsibility, we can say that the perpetrator is causally related to the act of sexual violence in two ways. First, they directly caused the particular act of violence against another person. Second, they partake in a sexist ideology that is reproduced by violent practices and the ignorance or justification of such violence. Furthermore, the agent is also in a position to take on forward-looking responsibility for ameliorating these problematic conditions. They can (a) help the victim in her healing process, for example, by making amends, by taking therapy or simply by staying out of the way, and (b) they can help dismantle

the enabling conditions of sexist ideology. Here, my arguments about with regard to epistemic ignorance play a significant role. I have argued that perpetrators of sexual violence acting under conditions of hermeneutical misfire are epistemically ignorant due to their social position of power and privilege. Being in a social position of power and privilege allows them to have their voices count, to contribute to the dominant hermeneutical resources, and, thus, to change the background conditions that make sexual violence prevalent.¹⁶

Obviously, for powerful actors to help dismantle sexist ideology and for a perpetrator to change the direction of their gaze and interest, a long process of critical reflection must take place. It is here that we come full circle. As I have argued above, such a process of critical reflection both on one's problematic moral actions and sexist ideology might be achieved better in the absence of blame. Instead, it is better to foreground these reflections in the idea of shared responsibility. The notion of shared responsibility is also the focus of community-based approaches, such as community accountability when addressing sexual and intimate violence without relying on the state or notions of victimisation, heteronormativity, sexism, and white supremacy.¹⁷ This practice has a long history within communities of women of colour, indigenous women, undocumented female immigrants, and refugees, who were historically (and in most cases still are) unable to seek help from legal institutions for various reasons, including racism and sexism.

According to Kelly (2010), community accountability 'popularizes the idea that when sexual violence takes place, everyone is affected'. Taking accountability or forward-looking responsibility highlights how the community is involved in changing the problematic background conditions; it is a process that involves the perpetrator as well as the community. It asks perpetrators to recognise the harm they have caused (even if the harm was caused unintentionally, as it is the case under hermeneutical misfiring). It also asks perpetrators to acknowledge the harm of the victim and the community and their respective needs, to take steps of restitution towards the victim and the community, and to develop skills to prevent further harms. Furthermore, it is the community's responsibility to prevent future harm, to help the victim in their needs, and to help the perpetrator to develop skills to prevent further harm. For the perpetrator to develop skills to prevent further harms and for the community to help with this task is in line with the idea that in cases of ideological ignorance, perpetrators need to learn how to critically question sexist beliefs like rape myths and use their social position – to the best of their ability and position – to make a change in the social structure and the dominant hermeneutical resource. Hence, both Young's theory of political responsibility and the insights from community accountability allow us to place forward-looking responsibility both on the perpetrator and their community. This is important since the focus on blame and backward-looking responsibility directed at an individual agent often distracts from the background conditions of sexist ideology and the future tasks involved in changing these conditions, as Young so impressively and rigorously argues.

Notes

1. Rape myths are 'inaccurate perceptions concerning rape' (Jenkins 2016, 2) and include, for example, the myth that rape is only committed by strangers or that rape always involves aggravated physical force and that victims always resist their attacker. See Hänel 2018, chapter 1 for a detailed explanation.
2. See also Peterson and Muehlenhard (2011), Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that coming to terms with one's traumatic memory is a long process; sometimes it can take years for victims to label the given experience one of rape (cf. Littleton and Grills-Taquechel 2011; Artime, McCallum, and Peterson 2014; Harned 2005; Wilson and Miller 2016). Alcoff (2018) provides a thorough account of this.
3. It is hard to feel any sympathy with a perpetrator of sexual violence even when they suffered from hermeneutical misfiring, by which I mean a gap in the collective resource that cannot be overcome (for example, due to social privileges). And it is good that our feeling of sympathy is not easily forthcoming. We should hold on to the anger we instead feel towards perpetrators of sexual violence. However, part of the reason why our sympathy is not forthcoming is because we often think of cases of physically violent forms of rape when hearing the term 'sexual violence'. Indeed, it happens on a regular basis that other acts of sexual violence are not even seen as sexual violence. And in these other and less aggravated cases, sympathy or *himpathy* (Manne 2018) for the violator is quite common and often involves questioning the innocence of the victim and whether the act in question

really was an act of sexual violence. In other words, it is not because we want to *excuse* the behaviour of violators that we should engage with extremely hard questions of ideological distortion, responsibility, and blame-worthiness, but because we have to confront a social reality in which most acts of sexual violence are not acknowledged as sexual violence.

4. In a different paper, I show how the testimonial and hermeneutical injustice that victims of sexual violence often experience can lead to further losses and hinder victim's self-development and self-recognition (Hänel 2020).
5. Others have pointed out that Fricker is mistaken in assuming something like a collective hermeneutical resource and that this notion obscures the ways in which marginalised and oppressed social groups have their own concepts with which to understand and articulate their experiences. (cf. Medina 2012; Mason 2011) Although it is crucial to point to the very diverse ways in which members of marginalised groups contribute to hermeneutical resources and in which privileged groups are ignorant of already existing concepts, what is important for the content of the paper is the idea that there is a dominant resource that influences our lives. Think about rape myths and the way we take them on board or critically position ourselves against them – either way, they influence our behaviour, our experiences, and our possibilities to understand and articulate both.
6. I say more about epistemic and wilful ignorance below.
7. I will come to this in the next section as it seems far from obvious to me that they are.
8. I develop a detailed account of the difference between hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical misfire along these lines in a different paper.
9. Bird (2002) has critiqued this view, arguing that uptake is not necessary for an act to count as refusal. Here, I am merely interested in motivating the notion of *misfire* for the purposes at hand.
10. This implies that victims of hermeneutical injustice are not necessarily also victims of hermeneutical misfiring; often, hermeneutically marginalised groups are not in a social position of power and privilege that makes them epistemically ignorant in the ways I have outlined.
11. I consider the question of blame only fleetingly. I take up this question in more detail in another paper as well as in my book (Hänel 2018a).
12. See Smith (1983); Zimmerman (1997); Wünderlich (2017), to name only a few. Note that my suggestions draw mainly on Rosen and offer only a cursory picture of moral responsibility, blame and culpability; nevertheless, I hope that a thorough analysis of the issue could draw on my brief suggestions here.
13. Here, I will not dive deeper into the debate on moral responsibility but merely consider writings within the debate of epistemic ignorance. I should mention though, that even within the debate on moral responsibility and blameworthiness, some argue that ignorance alone is not an indicator for being blameless. For example, Mason (2015) argues that moral ignorance can be a form of bad will and, hence, agents can be blameworthy even when ignorant.
14. See Hänel (2018a) for a more detailed discussion.
15. I here concentrate on the psychological research. See Baldwin (1998); Arendt (2003); and Young (2011) for philosophical accounts of why blame and guilt can be counterproductive. Note that Bierria (2010) brings into focus another aspect of why we should avoid blame in specific contexts. She argues that blame can put especially black women in a deeply problematic position in so far as they have an impossible choice to make: betray the feminist movement or betray the black movement (by reproducing problematic stereotypes about black men). Furthermore, Young (2011) argues that by pinning blame on one individual, we often absolve others and ignore the shared responsibility that we have as a collective; this seems fitting in light of the fact that the sexist ideology for which we all bear responsibility plays a role in the pervasiveness of sexual violence.
16. See May and Strikwerda (1994) on collective responsibility for rape.
17. Philosophers have started to turn to these insights in recent years. For example, according to Zheng, we can distinguish between responsibility as *attributability* and responsibility as *accountability*. Responsibility as accountability 'depends on the social and institutional practices governing the distribution of duties and burdens across different roles and positions within a society' (2016, 62). Accordingly, a person X is morally responsible for their actions only when they can be held accountable for them; that is, when 'it is appropriate for others to enforce certain expectations and demands on those actions' (63).

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