

Imagining Epistemic Justice

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Trayvon Martin is dead. He died with a can of iced tea and a bag of Skittles in his possession. This seventeen-year-old black man was shot on February 27, 2012, in a gated townhouse community near Orlando by a male block captain who was not black and who had a handgun in his possession. Trayvon was in the community with his father visiting friends and left briefly for a “snack run” to the 7-Eleven.

Drew Lovejoy is also seventeen, joyfully alive and the reigning world-champion Irish stepdancer. His father is a black Baptist from Georgia and his mother is a white Jewish woman from Iowa. He now lives in Greenville, Ohio, where it is not really okay to be either black or a male dancer. He is home-schooled because of bullying. He does not walk the dog after dark: “I feel like I have to watch my back.”

Sally Sayles-Hannon has offered a rich and interesting analysis of epistemic authority and epistemic injustice in what she refers to as “the social justice classroom.” I very much appreciate the acuity with which she has identified critical elements in the consideration of epistemic injustice with respect to testimonial assessment: engrained prejudice, trust, the testifier’s social location, affect, unconscious belief, the cyclical and self-confirming pattern of epistemic injustice, and a lack of epistemic humility. And she does all this in a relatively short and remarkably concise essay.

Nonetheless, as I read Sayles-Hannon on “epistemic harm,” I was not completely satisfied with her formulation and I struggled to determine why. Does Sayles-Hannon rely too heavily on individual thought and feeling? Does she split cognition and affect in indefensible ways? Does she take a prescriptive rather than pedagogical stance when her action focus is clearly pedagogical? Does her focus on “epistemic harm” mire her in retrospective blame rather than situate her in a prospective responsibility frame?

I also wondered whether her characterization of the social justice classroom — as a place where (dominant group) students are made “more aware of their possible complicity in the replication of” a system of injustice that is not merely epistemic — perhaps constrains rather than assists her. If guilt, fear, trust, and other emotion-laden experiences, both conscious and unconscious, are implicated in testimonial assessment as Sayles-Hannon clearly maintains, then it is hard to imagine how an instructor intentionally can elicit an acknowledgment of complicity short of psychoanalysis.¹ Therapy is not, I contend, the teacher’s business, so what can the proper pedagogical stance be?

But none of these questions articulated what was bothering me. Sayles-Hannon’s moves are all right but there is still something missing. That something is the reality of Trayvon and Drew and their experiences in the world. They have been and are being harmed — epistemically, hermeneutically, psychologically, physically.

Bringing them into the story provides both the pedagogical possibility for rich reflecting integrating cognition and the emotion that Sayles-Hannon knows is needed, *and* provides a critical clue illuminating what is at stake in any testimonial assessment.

To bring the experience of these two young men into Sayles-Hannon's consideration of epistemic authority in a vivid way, I turn for assistance to José Medina.² I use Medina's recent extension of Miranda Fricker's work to extend Sayles-Hannon's. Medina argues that Fricker misses the boat when she fails to take the harm in credibility excess (when a speaker is granted too much epistemic authority) seriously, not recognizing that epistemic injustices are "temporally and socially extended." That is:

[E]pistemic injustices have robust temporal and social dimensions, which involve complex histories and chains of social interactions that go beyond particular pairs and clusters of subjects. And these thick historicity and sociality are lost if our analysis is restricted to particular interactions between individuals at particular moments.³

In other words, epistemic injustice is not a transaction between Mary and the African-American woman in the video. It is a contextualized event whose meaning can only be understood holistically. Epistemic injustices call for "a sociohistorical analysis that contextualizes and connects sustained chains of interactions, being able to uncover how contributions to justice and injustice appear and develop in and across concrete sociohistorical contexts."⁴

Medina utilizes several observations about the phenomenon of credibility excess to ground this claim that epistemic justice is interactive, comparative, and contrastive. First, hearers as well as speakers "can contribute to the formation and perpetuation of injustices," a possibility to which Sayles-Hannon alludes. Second, "[C]redibility judgments have effects (both proximal and distal) not only on their recipients, but also on others involved in the interaction as well as others indirectly related to it (predecessors and successors of the exchange)."⁵ Again, I believe Sayles-Hannon might agree. But by relying on Fricker as a primary source, she stays confined to the moment of Mary's question and does not incorporate the temporal and the social in robust ways. Medina focuses on the "crucial role played by the social imaginary in creating and sustaining epistemic injustices," and this is where Fricker and Sayles-Hannon do not tell the whole story.

Following Fricker, Medina links epistemic injustice (both credibility deficit and credibility excess) to hermeneutical injustice, in which "a collective hermeneutical gap prevents members of a group from making sense of an experience that is in their interest to render intelligible."⁶ But Medina breaks from Fricker when he roots hermeneutical injustice in the social imaginary (following Cornelius Castoriadis⁷). It is "obstacles and limitations in the social imaginary that produce the inability to see and hear certain things, social forms of blindness and deafness that limit the communicative and epistemic capacities of certain members of certain groups and preclude a genuine understanding of their experiences, problems, and situations."⁸ Deep epistemic injustice — "rooted in the cultural oppression inscribed in a biased social imaginary" — is parasitic on hermeneutical injustice.

Responding to Fricker, Medina describes the jury in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as both hermeneutically blind *and* meta-blind, that is, blind to its own blindness. He suggests “epistemic friction,” the active search for more alternatives than are readily available, as the tool that will elicit and leverage the diversity of ideas from the members of the jury (or in Sayles-Hannon’s case, the class). But Medina acknowledges that epistemic friction cannot do its work until “meta-blindness” is corrected. “The problem is both social and personal. And the personal failure is both — and simultaneously — cognitive and emotive: it involves the inability to see the relevant epistemic saliences and also the inability to *feel* the interpersonal relation of *trust* required for the transmission of knowledge.”⁹

Meta-blindness, says Medina, is a function not only of cognitive limitation but of “rigid and impoverished affective structures.” In the realm of race and race relations in twenty-first century in America, nearly 150 years after the “end” of slavery, meta-blindness is shaped not just by and as a lack of empathy and trust, but by an actual antipathy.

It is here that Trayvon and Drew re-enter, for their stories paint in vivid color the antipathy that taps the cognitive and affective soil of the social imaginary existing in the here and now as it extends back and forward in time, fills much of our social space, and infects ongoing interaction. Says Medina, “[T]hese injustices can only be repaired through *radical transformations of the social imaginary* and through the creation of a fertile social soil for the cultivation of epistemic virtues.”¹⁰ Both cognitive and affective restructuring are required in the interactive space that is at once personal and interpersonal, at once in the moment and projected into the past and the future.

Sayles-Hannon knows that affect plays a critical role. But she does not tap the power of the social imaginary, thus limiting her analysis in ways that I suspect she does not want to. And Sayles-Hannon is quite right that it is “a worthy goal for the social justice classroom to call attention to the process of testimonial assessment and the potential epistemic injustices”. Her desire, following Fricker, for “reflexive critical openness” is praiseworthy but still prescriptive rather than pedagogical,¹¹ that is, it articulates the educational goal rather than the instructional path. Her focus on a community of negotiation is definitely desirable but easier said than done in the presence of meta-blindness.

I prefer Medina’s non-therapeutic but defensibly pedagogical focus on “epistemic friction” and suggest that telling — and interrogating — the stories of Trayvon and Drew (and any of thousands of such stories, historical and contemporary) have more potential to accomplish the cognitive and affective disjunction needed to shift understanding and remake the social imaginary. This too will not be easy, since high drama stories like Trayvon’s and Drew’s can reinforce preexisting prejudices as easily as they can undo the social imaginary that those prejudices keep in place.

Mary does not yet “get” that she is complicit in the perpetuation of racial injustice. As her teacher, in or out of a social justice classroom, my task is not to get

her to accept her complicity. My task is to create the conditions for the practice of just epistemic assessment — and that entails far more than critical reflexivity on the part of individuals. Still, just epistemic assessment *is* intimately tied to what passes for justice in the world. Sayles-Hannon is right to say so.

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1. I am grateful to Mario Martinez for pointing this out to me in class conversation.
 2. José Medina, “The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary,” *Social Epistemology* 25, no. 1 (2011).
 3. *Ibid.*, 17.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*, 18.
 6. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), quoted in Medina, “The Relevance of Credibility Excess,” 27.
 7. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
 8. Medina, “The Relevance of Credibility Excess,” 27.
 9. *Ibid.*, 31.
 10. *Ibid.*, 32.
 11. I am grateful to Stephen Santana for problematizing “reflexive critical openness” as a different challenge for the oppressed individual or group than it might be for a dominant individual or group.

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