



What's Wrong with Unhelpful Comments? Conversational Helpfulness and Unhelpfulness and Why They Matter

ABSTRACT: *It is common to criticize certain comments as 'unhelpful'. This criticism is richer than it might first appear. In this paper, I sketch an account of conversational helpfulness and unhelpfulness, the reasons why they matter, and the utility of calling out comments as helpful or unhelpful. First, some unhelpful comments are or easily could be demoralizing for proponents of projects, and criticizing them as such can diminish, deflect, or defend against that demoralization. Second, some unhelpful comments redirect or derail conversations away from their projects and criticizing comments as unhelpful can steer conversations back. Third, some unhelpful comments are made out of a lack of epistemic effort and criticizing them as such can help maintain epistemic standards, standards of respect for other people and their projects, and can ensure that such comments do not receive more attention and consideration than they deserve.*

KEYWORDS: virtue epistemology, virtue ethics, social epistemology, ethics, helpfulness

Introduction

Some comments or questions or critiques are just plain unhelpful. But what exactly does it mean for a comment to be unhelpful? Further, what exactly, if anything, is problematic about unhelpful comments? Further still, when should we criticize certain comments as unhelpful or praise others as helpful? My aim here is to sketch answers to these questions: to provide a rough account of conversational helpfulness and unhelpfulness, why they matter, and most important, how we should respond to them. On this sketch, comments are unhelpful insofar as they fail to advance a conversation (or, using the terminology I will adopt for convenience, they fail to advance the relevant project or projects of a conversation). We can be justified in criticizing a comment as unhelpful or praising it as helpful for a variety of (typical or atypical, standard or strange) reasons, but actual usage of the criticism and the praise points to three especially interesting ways in which comments can be helpful or unhelpful that merit

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criticism or praise. First, some (but not all) unhelpful comments can be especially demoralizing. Criticizing them as unhelpful can diminish, deflect, or defend against this demoralization. Second, some (but not all) unhelpful comments are, consciously or unconsciously, aimed at controlling or redirecting a conversation, and criticizing them as unhelpful can help resist that control or redirection. Third, some (but not all) unhelpful comments are made out of a criticizable intellectual laziness or lack of epistemic effort. Criticizing such comments as unhelpful can ensure that they do not receive more attention than they deserve and that participants in a conversation are held to certain minimal epistemic standards and standards of respectfulness for other persons and their projects.

To appreciate better why the helpfulness or unhelpfulness of comments and our reasons for praising or criticizing them as such are worth our attention, we'll need to delve into some of the problems that unhelpful comments, the motivations behind them, and the climates that facilitate them tend to generate, and we will need to examine some of the benefits that helpful comments, their underlying motives, and the climates that facilitate them tend to provide. As I'll explain, unhelpful comments can pose interpersonal and moral problems, but the issues I am most interested in here are epistemic. Unhelpful comments and the motives and climates that foster them provide some straightforward but noteworthy epistemic obstacles insofar as they stem from and lead to or perpetuate misunderstandings or misinterpretations and can discourage those with pertinent information from sharing it. Some of these epistemic obstacles, however, are more pernicious. There has been an explosion of important work examining how common and everyday social practices and interactions can cause epistemic damage and even contribute to and sustain epistemic violence, oppression, and marginalization (see, for example, Mills 2007; Fricker 2009; Dotson 2011, 2012; Medina 2013; Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus Jr. 2017; Ivy 2017; Pohlhaus Jr. 2011, 2012). Unhelpful comments and climates that foster them can play a small but significant and noteworthy role in this epistemic violence, marginalization, and oppression. The plan is as follows: in section 1, I will provide a rough sketch of conversational helpfulness and unhelpfulness. In section 2, I will utilize that sketch to examine the interpersonal, moral, and epistemic damage that unhelpful comments tend to do, which will allow us to explore three paradigmatic ways in which we are justified in criticizing comments as unhelpful or praising them as helpful.

1. Unhelpful Comments

My goal in this section is primarily to investigate the ordinary language phenomenon of calling out comments as helpful or unhelpful. I should mention some caveats. First, my goal here is not to develop or apply any account of (moral) helpfulness or unhelpfulness in general. There are numerous conceptual and ethical issues concerning general helpfulness and unhelpfulness—for example, how helpfulness differs from kindness (Hare 2013; Wilson 2016), generosity (Miller 2018), charity, friendliness, cooperativeness, magnanimity (Keys 2003; Corsa 2015), usefulness, or supportiveness. While the sense of *conversational* helpfulness I am interested in here unsurprisingly does have some strong connections and affinities

to the general notion of helpfulness, conversational helpfulness is not necessarily or straightforwardly an instance of general helpfulness. For example, if I interrupt a conversation to warn someone of an incoming danger, my comment is generally quite helpful but (plausibly) not conversationally helpful in the sense I am interested in here. There is also a plausible distinction between epistemic helpfulness and conversational helpfulness, since (on my view) comments can be conversationally helpful even when they are false, unjustified, or otherwise present obstacles to knowledge acquisition, maintenance, or dispersion (see Cassam 2016). Second, I am most interested here in understanding what is problematic about unhelpful comments (or beneficial about helpful comments) themselves, and I am slightly less concerned about a personal virtue of conversational helpfulness or a vice of conversational unhelpfulness. I hope that what I say here could provide useful groundwork for an account of these virtues and vices, but that is not my primary goal. Third, though I speak most explicitly about helpful or unhelpful comments, a plethora of communications and utterances, such as genuine questions (Watson 2015, 2018), rhetorical questions, sustained critiques, offhand remarks, diatribes, rants, grunts, guffaws, sneers, smiles, nods, and incredulous stares, can be helpful or unhelpful. I use ‘comments’ just for convenient shorthand. Fourth, I take it that some comments, such as political or marketing slogans, protest chants, or personal mantras, which occur outside of typical or direct conversational contexts, can be still be, perhaps speaking loosely, conversationally helpful or unhelpful when they are interpreted as part of an imagined conversation. Thus, while my discussion will focus on typical, direct conversations, the account of conversational helpfulness I will develop applies a bit more broadly. Fifth, the sketch of conversational helpfulness and unhelpfulness I’ll provide here is intended to be just that. I do not aim to provide a complete decision procedure for identifying any helpful or unhelpful comment as such, since we will not need one to comprehend and appreciate the social, moral, and epistemic benefits and dangers of helpful and unhelpful comments or of the social, moral, and epistemic utility of praising or criticizing them as such.

Let us begin our analysis by looking at four examples of criticizing comments as unhelpful:

1. A graduate student asks her professor to give feedback on her seminar paper. The professor’s feedback is simply ‘I don’t like it—don’t think you’re right about this’. The graduate student is frustrated at the ‘sheer unhelpfulness’ of that feedback.
2. In a conversation about the US Electoral College, one person criticizes the system as failing to be democratic enough. Someone else dismisses that claim, saying that ‘The United States is a republic, not a democracy’. That dismissal is in turn criticized as being unhelpful.
3. A teenager has severe depression, and her father suggests to her that if she were to ‘just stop thinking about negative things so much and be more positive’ she would not be depressed anymore. She replies that that kind of advice is completely unhelpful to her.

4. In an online conversation about racism and the American justice system, a white commenter writes 'Everyone wants to blame everything on race, but my cousin was sentenced to two whole years in prison for selling a tiny amount of marijuana and he's not black—sometimes it's just not about race'. Others respond that this comment is unhelpful.

These four examples provide numerous clues for understanding conversational unhelpfulness. For many readers, the obvious place to begin our analysis is Gricean work on conversational pragmatics. We might, for example, treat unhelpful comments as contributions in talk exchanges that flout or fail to meet Grice's cooperative principle or conversational maxims. The cooperative principle states: 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice 1989: 26). The relevant portions of the maxims of *quantity* and *relevance* state: 'Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)' and 'be relevant', respectively (Grice 1989: 26–27). For example, if the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange between the professor and graduate student is to provide genuinely useful feedback on the graduate student's writing, the professor's feedback 'I don't like it' certainly fails to meet the cooperative principle, the maxim of quantity, and likely fails to meet the maxim of relevance.

However, for our purposes, I prefer to adopt temporarily a separate idiom: that of conversational *projects*. The 'project of a conversation' is shorthand for the bundle of various relevant commitments of its participants that underlie the conversation. Typically, this will include commitments to one or more topics, to specific goals, to certain background beliefs or assumptions and general desires, to certain standpoints or perspectives, and to certain expectations for how others should engage with the project. The project or projects of a conversation originate from the projects of the people involved in it. In some cases (such as a lecture or research presentation) the project of the conversation is taken to be the speaker's project or projects. In other cases, the project of the conversation is actively (explicitly or implicitly) negotiated and constantly renegotiated by the participants in the conversation. My use of 'commitment' here is not intended to imply that speakers endorse or are even aware of their various commitments (in fact, they might be happy to repudiate or relinquish certain commitments on becoming aware of them). Importantly, the project of a conversation is not identical with its topic since some unhelpful comments are perfectly well on-topic.

In using the metaphor of the project of a conversation, I am not offering any general approach or theory or attempting to provide a robust alternative to Gricean pragmatics. I take it that a great deal of what I say about what makes comments helpful or unhelpful could be translated into a Gricean framework without terribly much difficulty. In fact, thinking of conversations in terms of projects could plausibly be understood as accentuating features of the Gricean framework. Admittedly, some challenges might arise in attempting to do so. For example, some technically but perhaps not paradigmatically or exemplary helpful

comments can be more informative, obscure, ambiguous, and less concise or orderly than urged by the maxims of quantity and manner (Grice 1989: 26–27). Further, disagreements about the exact nature of cooperation in Grice’s cooperative principle (see especially Lumsden 2008 for an excellent summary; Grice 1989; Taillard 2004; Wilson and Sperber 1981; Davies 2000; Pavlidou 1991) might suggest worries for such an analysis since many unhelpful comments are simultaneously cooperative in some aspects and uncooperative in others. Also pertinent to such a project is important work in feminist argumentation theory on the degree to and ways in which scholarly and philosophical discussions and arguments are adversarial (see, for example Rooney 2010, 2012; Hundleby 2013; Govier 1999).

Instead, I prefer to adopt temporarily the ‘project’ idiom because it is convenient and conducive for highlighting and discussing certain features of ourselves and how we engage in and react to conversations. By way of preview, the metaphor of a project will help foreground those aims, purposes, and commitments that we have put effort into, that are especially vulnerable or are especially meaningful to us, and that need our care, enthusiasm, and the support of others to survive and develop. The metaphor highlights that our projects are typically works-in-progress, incomplete or even inchoate, that they often carry our hopes and anxieties with them, that their viability and even possibility depends on getting the right kinds of uptake from others, and that the various commitments that underlie them can be deeply rich, complex, tangled, opaque, or muddled. It also makes salient that when we agree to take on a shared (personal, nonconversational) project, we agree to take on temporarily certain aims, purposes, goals, and constraints that are not necessarily our own and that we inherit ideas, perspectives, and strategies for how to go about completing them.

That conversational exchanges can embed and reference underlying projects is perhaps most easily discernible in cases of conversations initiated by straightforward questions such as ‘What time is the department meeting today?’ or ‘Does the purple line metro have a stop at the American Embassy?’ In cases such as these, the project in question is (roughly) to quickly gain the information sought. Here, useful responses are quick, clear, and accurate. However, typically the project of a conversation is a loose, inchoate, dynamic, shared, and constantly negotiated set of commitments that the participants in a conversation temporarily adopt out of their own commitments (which are, of course, often loose, inchoate, and dynamic themselves). Importantly, not all projects will include all categories of commitments, and some categories of commitments generate further categories of commitments. For example, if one of the goals of a project is to solve a problem, then typically there will be commitments for or against particular strategies for solving the problem. Thus, to take a somewhat prosaic example, if a colleague is trying to develop her own purely consequentialist account of human rights, and I tell her that ‘actually, if your account was Kantian instead, this all would be much easier for you’, I have provided an unhelpful comment because I have ignored the committed strategies of the relevant project.

Conversational projects are further shaped by unwritten (and sometimes written) expectations, rules, and norms particular to various social settings and contexts. For

example, the types of questions or comments that seem to audience members to be helpful or even pertinent to the project of a conversation in the Q&A session of a departmental colloquium presentation on Book 10 of Plato's *Republic* will depend a great deal on whether that colloquium is occurring in a philosophy, classics, literature & rhetoric, or religious studies department (thanks to Catherine Elgin for this example). Different groups have different shared metaphors and collections of allusions that can influence not only what comments seem helpful but also how we go about trying to provide helpful or unhelpful comments themselves. A well-known example of this that has received much attention is the metaphor of argument as war (Hundleby 2013; Rooney 2010; Govier 1999; Cohen 1995).

The question of which projects are relevant for a given conversation has no simple answer. After all, in any given conversation, there are a host of projects (and their underlying commitments) that could be relevant for evaluating the helpfulness of a comment. There are active projects and commitments that participants in the conversation are aware of and consciously responding to. There are short-term projects that aim, in part, to serve longer-term projects. There are overt projects we are happy to draw attention to, and there can be covert projects that we have not yet disclosed (though we might not mind disclosing them) or that we hope to keep hidden (in general or from particular audiences). As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, covert projects need not be sinister—though many sinister projects have covert elements. For example, an overt project of investigating some narrow interpretive issue in Margaret Cavendish's arguments for materialism might be coupled with a covert project of expanding the canon of early modern philosophy. There are background projects and commitments the participants hold but currently are not focusing on or aware of. There are projects and commitments the participants would hold if they gained additional information or shifted perspectives or came to realize that their held commitments entailed the new commitments. There are projects and commitments that participants do not (and perhaps would not) hold but should hold, given some of their other commitments, given certain descriptive or normative facts, or given the intersubjective commitments of general projects they are aiming to contribute to.

As difficult as it is to weigh all of these considerations against each other, in practice we often succeed (and have a sense when someone has failed at doing so). We typically weigh values of politeness and consideration heavily, and we typically defer to antecedent and narrow projects of a conversation (a person who constantly appropriates conversations for their own projects is a poor conversationalist). We typically find it permissible to shift projects when the stakes are low or no participants in the conversation have a vested and justified interest in continuing a particular project of a conversation. If we find it obligatory to shift conversational projects, it is typically because we find aspects of those projects morally or epistemically too problematic to continue. In the following discussion, I will not, beyond the common-sensical points just raised, propose any robust account or decision procedure to determine which projects of a conversation are most relevant, but I will note that practically a more intentional and explicit

concern for conversational helpfulness can lead to more direct conversations about the competing projects of a conversation, and this in turn can be fruitful.

These issues aside, it seems that a key feature of what makes a comment unhelpful is that it is not useful for a particular conversational project, given that project's commitments. That is, the comment does not advance that project given that project's commitments. This should not come as a surprise. Colloquially, it is not uncommon for people who criticize a comment as unhelpful to mean merely that it is not useful. Imagine that someone breathlessly stops me to ask for directions to the restaurant Thai Delight because they are running late for a first date, and I suggest that instead they go to Siam Bistro to try their pad see ew. Because the project of the conversation aimed at getting clear and accurate directions to the correct restaurant, my contribution to it failed to be useful (though it might have been useful in a different conversational context, for example if the person was trying to decide on a location for a future first date). Further, consider two of our initial cases of unhelpful comments. First, when the professor's sole piece of feedback on a graduate student's paper was 'I don't like it – don't think you're right about this', the comment fails to be useful because it does not provide substantive direct or even indirect actionable information about how to improve the paper or how to improve as a writer of academic philosophy, both plausibly the project of the conversation, as understood by the graduate student. In the second case, if a person's project is to overcome or at least manage severe depression, advice to simply stop thinking negatively does nothing to advance that project given that as part of the project, the person is committed to strategies of overcoming or managing depression that would actually be implementable or effective.

Thus, I am happy to treat unhelpful comments simply as those that fail to advance the relevant project of a conversation and to treat helpful comments as those that advance the relevant project of a conversation. On this treatment, it follows immediately that some (conversationally) helpful comments are morally or epistemically quite pernicious, if the project of the conversation itself was so, and sometimes we are obligated to provide decidedly (conversationally) unhelpful comments. So, the value of conversational helpfulness is a highly defeasible one. The questions of when and how one ought or ought not provide helpful comments are interesting and important, but I will not be able to answer them here. Similarly, there are difficult questions about how to determine which are the relevant projects of a conversation, especially when the participants knowingly or unknowingly disagree about them or when the underlying commitments of the project themselves are unclear to the participants or when it is unclear who the participants in a conversation are. Further, there are interesting but difficult questions about the degree to which intention matters for helpfulness (can there be surprisingly, accidentally, or unintentionally helpful comments?). Fortunately, we will not need fully developed answers to these questions to move on to what I take to be the most important issues surrounding helpful and unhelpful comments: the benefits and problems they tend to generate and when and why we are justified in praising or criticizing them.

2. What is Wrong with Unhelpful Comments?

To get a better grasp on when we are justified in criticizing comments as unhelpful or praising them as helpful, we should examine the problems unhelpful comments generate. Unhelpful comments can be interpersonally, socially, morally, or epistemically problematic. I will describe very briefly the interpersonal and moral problems of conversational unhelpfulness before turning to examine its epistemic problems in more detail, since (as we will see) epistemic worries are often at the heart of criticisms of a comment as unhelpful.

2.1 Social or Interpersonal Problems

The ethical importance and ethical challenges of civility and everyday social interaction, central topics in early Confucian moral philosophy (see Olberding 2016, 2015; Cline 2016; Sarkissian 2010; Lai 2006), have begun to receive more attention in contemporary ethics (see, for example, Calhoun 2000; Stohr 2012; Olberding 2019; Bejan 2017; Sherman 2005; McPherson 2018). Unhelpful comments can be interpersonally problematic. That is, they can be (among other things) rude, impolite, discourteous, or uncivil. It will be worthwhile here to pause and examine why rudeness and politeness are especially salient here.

To appreciate the connection between politeness and conversational helpfulness, we need to appreciate the degree to which the very practice of conversation embeds the social nature of having a personal project. The having of a project is often a social having (I am thankful to Amy Olberding for suggesting this point). So long as we were not born on a desert island, we cannot create or develop projects from scratch, in a complete social vacuum. In no small way, we learn our goals and the strategies and means we can consider for reaching them from others. Further, our personal projects are often meant and made to be shared in some form or another, and thus the success of projects in general depends on our willingness to take up the projects that others share with us. Conversation is typically a cooperative endeavor, but that cooperation requires that we acknowledge and respond to others' projects and to the antecedent fact that others have projects. When we feel that our projects are not being seen, are not taken seriously, or are being undermined or dismissed or derailed in conversation, we feel disrespected, insulted, and demoralized. Politeness, at its heart, is the practice of 'symbolically [demonstrating] pro-social values' (Olberding 2019: 10), of communicating and displaying with our immediate verbal and nonverbal behavior that we acknowledge and treat others as persons. Unhelpful comments can and often do communicate just the opposite: that we cannot be bothered with another person's project to make the effort of engaging it (or them) directly.

Thus, it is important to appreciate how unhelpful comments are often (though to varying extents) demoralizing to the people at whom they are directed. They make people feel less interested in, motivated by, or enthusiastic about a project and its chances of success. For example, in our first case of the professor's unhelpful feedback on the graduate student's paper, the graduate student very well might come to feel demoralized, deflated, unenthused, and disheartened about her

project, her capabilities, and herself. Of course, not all unhelpful comments are demoralizing or are equally demoralizing in practice because (among other reasons) the degree to which anything is demoralizing is partly subjective. A highly confident or even highly oblivious person might not become demoralized by something that many or most others would find very demoralizing. Still, we should take special note not only of unhelpful comments that actually demoralize someone but also, more loosely, those that in relevant contexts could be demoralizing for some significant and relevant broad array of people or, more perniciously, those that were intended to demoralize proponents of a project. Further, such comments might not, in certain circumstances, demoralize a person about their own projects, but about other people in general. This can lead to complex and intriguing internal tensions, such as when a thoroughly misanthropic scholar writes articles and essays for an audience she holds in complete disdain and conversely, it suggests the need to exercise fair judgment in our expectations of others and how helpful they are likely to be. (For a related discussion, see Jacquette [2014], an article suggested by an anonymous reviewer who also pointed out this possibility.)

2.2 Moral Problems

In addition to being interpersonally problematic, unhelpful comments can be morally problematic in other ways. Importantly, many morally problematic unhelpful comments are not morally problematic because they are unhelpful (or not solely because they are unhelpful), but primarily because they are straightforwardly hurtful or damaging, because they undermine some morally important cause or demoralize its proponents, or because of some other reason entirely. Such comments happen to be unhelpful but criticizing them as unhelpful does not indicate what is most or most fundamentally morally problematic about them. Recall the case of the white internet commenter dismissing the claim that the American justice system is racist because his white cousin also received an unjustly harsh prison sentence for a minor drug crime. The fact that the comment was unhelpful in the context of the conversation in which it occurred is not what is most problematic about the comment.

It is worth pointing out, however, that while criticizing otherwise problematic unhelpful comments might not amount to the most direct diagnosis of what is most morally problematic about them, doing so might be rhetorically effective. We can respond to certain problematic comments by criticizing them as unhelpful to dismiss them and thus deftly steer the conversation back to its original projects. In fact, doing so can often be more effective than criticizing such a comment directly, say as racist, xenophobic, or generally prejudiced, because doing so might steer the conversation toward analysis of the particular comment and thus give a platform for the maker of the unhelpful comment to take control over the conversation. I will return to this point shortly.

Some unhelpful comments of this more generally problematic sort deserve special attention because they lean on widespread unreflective or misinformed beliefs and perspectives and thus seem to large groups of people to not only be true but also

to be helpful, when they are in fact neither. To take an all-too-familiar example, consider a conversation about racial injustice in America and the Black Lives Matter movement in which someone butts in and pedantically asserts that '*All lives matter*'. This comment does not advance the project of addressing the problem of conscious and unconscious racially motivated police violence because (among other reasons) it totally mistakes the relevant project's commitment (treating it as '*only Black lives matter*' or '*Black lives matter more*' rather than '*Black lives matter too*'). But this is a misunderstanding ready and waiting to happen, given prevalent attitudes among white Americans primed toward uncharitably interpreting certain kinds of claims. In short, some unhelpful comments are dangerous because they are catchy to large groups of people—and the way in which they are catchy is closely tethered to the way in which they are unhelpful *and* to the ways in which they are harmful. Again, in such cases, criticizing these comments as unhelpful does not necessarily reflect what is most or most fundamentally problematic about them, but it can sometimes be rhetorically effective because those in peril are already in a rhetorical bind due to damaging and dangerous widespread beliefs and perspectives.

However, there are circumstances in which conversational unhelpfulness itself does seem to be a key part of the moral problem. For example, when a speaker has a special obligation to support a project or to encourage the person behind the project, failing to be helpful can be morally problematic. We saw this in our first case of the professor's unhelpful comments on the graduate student's paper: teachers by virtue of their role can hold (defeasible) special obligations to be conversationally helpful. Similarly, people, such as therapists, counselors, and physicians in caregiving roles whose caregiving relies on conversation, either as the medium of care or to gather information requisite for successful care, can hold (defeasible) special obligations of conversational helpfulness.

There is also a special obligation toward vulnerable projects and people. Consider again the graduate student receiving feedback on a project from the professor: the graduate student is vulnerable across a wide array of dimensions. Not only is she vulnerable generally for being a graduate student in academia, she is vulnerable in seeking feedback from her professor, whose support would be very valuable for her personal and professional growth. Further, people like the graduate student in this scenario are highly vulnerable to demoralization and its consequent harms. Nearly all academic projects are vulnerable in their early stages, and graduate students are especially susceptible to the harms of imposter syndrome (see Hawley 2019; Paul 2019). Of special importance here are projects that are vulnerable because they are the projects of the marginalized and oppressed and the projects that resist marginalization and oppression because such projects can be easily and unjustly dismissed by those with the social power to steer conversations. Even when such projects are not immediately dismissed, their ultimate success would require those with social power to understand and appreciate information that they are currently ignorant of or resistant to (see, for example, Mills 2007; Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012). But this issue is both moral and epistemic, and so I will turn in more detail to the epistemic problems of unhelpful comments.

2.3 Epistemic Problems

Unhelpful comments can be epistemically problematic insofar as they put obstacles and roadblocks on the paths to knowledge generation and sharing: they (to borrow a phrase) ‘get in the way of knowledge’ (Medina 2013: 30). It is useful here to divide the epistemic harms and losses generated by unhelpful comments into two rough categories. First, unhelpful comments can cause fairly direct and straightforward epistemic harm or loss by leaving potential knowledge gains on the table. Second, unhelpful comments can play key roles in more complex, pernicious, and deep epistemic harm or loss in that they contribute in their own small ways to structures and systems of epistemic injustice, oppression, and marginalization.

The first category of more straightforward epistemic harm and loss can occur in nearly any conversational context but can be felt acutely in circumstances where a central and salient goal of a conversation is to make some epistemic progress (such as academic and scholarly conversations). In these conversations, failure to attend to or advance the projects of a conversation hinders, impedes, or even undermines potential epistemic gains. In these circumstances, people often do not even realize that their comment is not helpful, either because they mistakenly believe that their comment is helpful or because it never occurred to them that they should care at all whether their comments are helpful or not. A person giving an unhelpfully nitpicky comment might believe they are providing a helpful pointed criticism worth addressing. A person who mounts their own hobby horse during a conversation, leading that conversation far afield from any beneficial direction for the original project might believe they are drawing a genuinely interesting connection between the speaker’s project and their own. A person who thinks they are situating a speaker’s view within broader debates might just be broadcasting or signaling their own allegiances in those debates. A person who fills in the details of a less-than-fully specified example or case uncharitably so that the case fails to show what it was intended to (when other, more charitable specifications were quite readily available) might believe that they have provided a helpful counterexample. A person who arrogantly and ignorantly dismisses an entire field of research or category of intellectual projects might believe that they have helpfully redirected a conversation away from lost causes.

To be clear, the problems here in practice are often based in a lack of concern with identifying the project of a conversation and a lack of concern about understanding whether and how one’s own comment would help or hinder that project (or boost the morale of or demoralize its proponents). In failing to do so, we leave epistemic progress on the table. Importantly, these effects percolate. Not only do they cause the immediate negative epistemic implications we have just seen, but they also permeate social spaces, such as particular academic departments, conferences, research subfields or debates. Thus, in addition to immediate epistemic damage directly caused by unhelpful comments, downstream epistemic damage is produced via social spaces that undervalue conversational helpfulness or fail to disincentivize (or even valorize) conversational unhelpfulness. These types of social spaces are especially prone to certain epistemically problematic practices and especially hospitable to certain epistemically vicious patterns and participants.

If conversational helpfulness is not adequately valued in a social space, other virtues (or, more likely, vices) will be valued instead. Such social spaces will repulse those who do care for helpful comments, and thus these spaces might eventually be filled by those who do not, creating a negative epistemic feedback loop. This repulsion might have long-term effects because those causing and affected by these behaviors can enter and exit these particular social spaces. For example, experiences of severely unhelpful comments and questions might make people who are already deeply uncomfortable with entering into and participating in conversations feel even more uncomfortable doing so. Social and epistemic norms for cooperation, charity, and support are fragile enough without those in positions of epistemic authority flouting them, and a lack of wariness regarding unhelpfulness can pervert our ideals and exemplars (it can lead us to thinking of the good philosopher as the most quick, clever and belligerent critic or to valorizing and emulating Socrates the Gadfly rather than Socrates the Midwife). The relevant epistemic harm in both these immediate and downstream cases is fairly straightforward. Reliable epistemic progress via conversation typically requires some degree of mutual understanding. But in practice a lack of concern with conversational helpfulness is often accompanied by a lack of concern in understanding others' projects and how one's own comments would advance or undermine them. Undervaluing conversational helpfulness (and its attendant requirements to understand and respond to the actual projects of others) forces epistemic progress via conversation to depend too much on chance.

Of course, one might worry that a commitment to conversational helpfulness might strongly discourage (justified) critical comments. This could be especially relevant in epistemically oriented conversations, such as academic and scholarly discussions, where critical comments are often necessary for epistemic progress. Typically, a key signal and component of the quality of academic work is how well it can be defended against critique, and sometimes it actually is the project of a speaker to learn about new potential objections to a project to be able to rebut them better in the future. Further, if an overemphasis on critique can lead us astray, surely so, too, can an underemphasis on it: norms that would demand high degrees of conversational helpfulness risk leading to conversational spaces that are dangerously uncritical, that obsequiously favor flawed projects, or that amount to echo chambers (see Nguyen 2018, 2019). However, these concerns seem misplaced. Vitaly, a commitment to conversational helpfulness would not at all preclude critique. Some helpful comments *are* helpful critiques. My claim was not that critical comments are necessarily unhelpful or incompatible with a commitment to conversational helpfulness, but instead that conversational spaces that prize certain kinds of critique over conversational helpfulness risk pernicious epistemic consequences. For example, Phyllis Rooney (2012: 324–25) has insightfully described how the strong 'default skeptical stance' of academic philosophy conversations can disincentivize sharing information that one has good reason to prefer not be met with immediate skepticism. The question of whether or not to critique a project thus is distinct from the question of whether or not to provide a helpful comment for that project, and social spaces that value

conversational helpfulness are not necessarily uncritical (though their participants should be wary of becoming so).

Unhelpful comments also often contribute, in their own small but serious way, to patterns of epistemic oppression. Of course, a great deal more could be said on this front than I will be able to say here, but my main focus is on demonstrating that unhelpful comments are often intertwined in patterns of epistemic injustice, and so I will set aside the project of exploring each of these phenomena in as much detail as they deserve. In particular, I will only briefly mention five of the most well-known and widely discussed types of deep epistemic wrong that play critical roles in epistemic marginalization and injustice (testimonial injustice, gaslighting, hermeneutical injustice, contributory injustice, and motivated ignorance) with the hope that readers' familiarity with the scholarship on these topics will mitigate the lack of detail I can go into here. The upshot is that characteristically unhelpful comments often play important roles in sustaining these patterns and practices.

Unhelpful comments can and sometimes do actively undermine the credibility of an individual participant in a particular conversation. But they can also sustain and support widespread opinions about the credibility (or lack thereof) of groups of people and thus maintain patterns of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2009; Wanderer 2017). Testimonial injustice occurs when people are given unearned excesses of credibility or when they suffer a credibility deficit due to prejudices about their robust social identities (Fricker 2009: 1). For example, recall our earlier case of a father advising his daughter to 'just think less negatively' to overcome her severe clinical depression. People experiencing various forms of physical and mental illness are susceptible to testimonial injustice, especially in terms of their ability to report their own experiences reliably (see Carel and Kidd 2014). Comments dismissing these reports are characteristically unhelpful. They fail to advance, and in fact undermine, the project of seeking support, and when they come from trusted loved ones or healthcare authorities, they can easily be demoralizing to their recipients. Additional examples abound. First, consider the case of children struggling to articulate in detail their own experiences and having their testimony (which does contain clear, actionable information) dismissed in this way by doctors or other caregivers ('Oh, she is complaining about blurred vision but that's probably just because she isn't wearing her glasses'; see Carel and Györfy 2014). Second, consider doctors and male partners dismissing new mothers' descriptions of what would come to be called post-partum depression as just being 'down' (Fricker 2009: 149). Third, consider a jury that dismisses the true and well-corroborated testimony of a convicted felon because of his criminal history ('Well, we can't really trust that *type* of person'). Further, recall our earlier discussion of pernicious catchy unhelpful comments such as the '*all lives matter*' criticisms of the Black Lives Matter movement. These types of unhelpful comments function as what we might call 'epistemic dismissers'—they allow conversational participants to dismiss entirely some claim or argument by portraying it as so obviously flawed that only the foolish and therefore highly un-credible would put it forward.

Relatedly, there has been growing scholarly interest in examining various (epistemic and nonepistemic) forms of gaslighting, some of which may be forms of

testimonial injustice (see, for example, Abramson 2014; Spear 2019; Ivy 2017; Stark 2019). Broadly speaking, gaslighting occurs when people or institutions unjustifiably and systematically undermine a person's confidence in their own experience or judgment to a severe degree. For example, consider a new assistant professor who reports to a colleague that their department chair has repeatedly made misogynistic remarks to her. Her older colleague unhelpfully responds 'Oh, that's just his [the department chair's] sense of humor, don't take it seriously. He doesn't mean it'. Part of the project of the conversation was to inform and discuss the comments *as* problematic, and the colleague undermined that project (and did so in a way that could easily be demoralizing). In doing so, the colleague undermined both the credibility of the new assistant professor and her ability to trust her own experience (Ivy discusses a structurally similar case; see Ivy 2017: 168).

Third, in circumstances where conversational helpfulness is not valued and understood, a preponderance of unhelpful comments and a lack of ready terminology or opportunity to criticize them as such can contribute to patterns of hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when oppressed people, due to the circumstances of their oppression, lack the interpretive resources to conceptualize and understand aspects of that oppression (see Fricker 2009; Medina 2017; Goetze 2018). Think here of how doctors' and husbands' unhelpful dismissals of new mothers' reports of experiencing severe difficulties after childbirth as merely being 'down' delayed an understanding of post-partum depression and inhibited appreciating how severely isolated new mothers often are (Fricker 2009: 148–49; see also Mauthner 1998). The dismissals of their experiences were characteristically unhelpful comments, and those dismissals in turn contributed to social circumstances that made it much more difficult to develop the hermeneutical tools to recognize that they were experiencing post-partum depression. Combating hermeneutical injustice typically requires social spaces that take the conversational projects of marginalized people seriously and facilitate advancing them through discussion (see Fricker 2009: 148–52).

Fourth, and relatedly, unhelpful comments can and often do play a key role in maintaining what Dotson (2012) has called 'contributory injustice'. Contributory injustice occurs when marginalized people understand perfectly well the conditions of their oppression (unlike circumstances of hermeneutical injustice) but are kept from communicating them to members of empowered groups because members of the empowered groups lack the hermeneutical resources (or the motivation) to understand that oppression—though I present them here as plainly distinct phenomena, there are thorny issues regarding how we should understand the relation between hermeneutical and contributory injustice (see Goetze 2018 for a nice summary). We saw earlier that certain unhelpful comments are especially dangerous because they are catchy or because they are especially effective at reinforcing widespread problematic beliefs and perspectives. It is exactly this type of comment that can be especially pernicious in sustaining contributory injustice. For example, imagine a conversation about privilege, in which a straight, cis-gendered, physically abled middle-class white man makes the unhelpful comment 'my family was fairly poor growing up, and I'm certainly not rich now—I don't have any privilege'. The comment expresses a non-accidentally

common misunderstanding of the concept of *privilege*, and some of the same features that make the comment unhelpful allow it to sustain patterns of contributory injustice. Additionally, as we saw earlier, conversational spaces that fail to value conversational helpfulness can be generally repulsive. But they might be (and often are) especially repulsive to people whose conversational projects would be oriented toward coming to understand the marginalization and oppression they face. Thus, a person might self-silence or smother their own testimony (see especially Dotson 2011; Rooney 2012) in conversational spaces where unhelpful comments abound. For example, a philosopher who is a member of a historically marginalized social group and who is working on philosophy of race might have avoided large gatherings at national philosophy conferences, or if she was compelled to attend, she might avoid discussing her work to avoid a barrage of unhelpful comments aimed at it (and thus at her, her expertise, and her ability to know and communicate knowledge of her own experience of oppression). Thus, a lack of appreciation for conversational helpfulness also plays a role in patterns of contributory injustice via encouraging testimonial self-silencing.

Fifth, widespread patterns of motivated ignorance are often sustained by unhelpful comments. The patterns of motivated ignorance we are most interested in here are those of dominant groups resisting and dismissing evidence of the past and present existence of oppression, domination, marginalization, harm, and injustice (Mills 2007; Alcoff 2007; Code 2004; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012; Medina 2013). Of course, there is a close connection between motivated ignorance and contributory injustice: motivated ignorance is typically a major component of contributory injustice. However, it is worth discussing motivated ignorance for a moment because unhelpful comments are often simply the verbalized expression of the internal patterns of rationalization a person uses to maintain their ignorance. Recall again our case of the white online commenter who reports that because his white cousin served time in prison for selling marijuana, the American justice system was not inherently racist. This comment was an expression of motivated ignorance in action—of the commenter resisting countervailing evidence to his entrenched perspective.

There are several immediate points I would like to make about these examples. First, I want to be careful to avoid misinterpretations here. My claim is not that epistemic injustice is sustained entirely, primarily, or largely via unhelpful comments. My claim is much weaker—that unhelpful comments are one of the many, many contributors to patterns of epistemic injustice. However, because so many unhelpful comments are quotidian or normalized in particular conversational spaces, their ordinariness makes them sometimes difficult to notice in the moment (see Shklar 1984), and thus as in the case of microaggressions, their weight can add up quickly. Second, as we saw earlier, criticizing unhelpful comments that contribute to epistemic marginalization can sometimes be a rhetorically effective strategy and epistemically useful tool. Of course, doing so will not, on its own, halt ingrained patterns of injustice, but it is often easier to notice, understand, criticize, or communicate how a comment is unhelpful (that is, how it fails to advance the relevant project of the conversation taking place) than it is to notice, understand, criticize, and communicate how that comment sustains

epistemic injustice. However, pointing out that a comment is unhelpful might help us analyze these relevant situations more deeply and thus come to understand them better. Even when closer examination is not possible or does not succeed, criticizing certain comments as unhelpful can allow them to be dismissed before they do much of their damage or derail a conversation (which is often enough the goal of certain unhelpful comments). In short, criticizing a comment as unhelpful can be rhetorically and epistemically useful. Thus, calling out such comments as unhelpful can slow or disrupt undesirable patterns in a conversation. It can allow us to ignore certain comments entirely or, as Rae Langton (2018) has insightfully investigated, block certain presuppositions from taking hold in the conversation. And (just as importantly) calling out such comments can open opportunities for closer examination of the more fundamental and initially opaque issues behind certain problematic comments. Third, these types of cases point to a key feature of criticisms of comments as unhelpful. When the daughter criticizes her father's misinformed advice for combatting depression as unhelpful, she is not merely criticizing the comment for failing to be useful to her or for being demoralizing. Further, she is not criticizing her father for intending to undermine her project because he intended to help. Instead, she is criticizing her father for not listening, for not considering her or her testimony, for not taking her and her projects seriously. The criticism is not merely that her father's suggestion failed to advance her projects, but that he did not bother to put in the epistemic effort required to do so. Similarly, when participants in an online conversation about racism in the justice system dismiss the 'sometimes it's just not about race' comment as unhelpful, they are in part criticizing that commenter for not putting in the epistemic effort in seeing how the existence of unfair punishments of white drug offenders fails to undermine claims of systemic racism in the justice system. When the junior faculty member thinks of her senior colleague's unhelpful dismissal of her reports of misogynistic remarks, she is critical of that colleague's lack of empathetic effort or effort to see outside of their perspective about the department chair's sense of humor. These cases strongly suggest another potential component for our account of conversational unhelpfulness. When people criticize comments as unhelpful, part of that criticism often seems to be that the comments stem from epistemic laziness on the part of the commenter. The commenter did not put in the cognitive, emotional, empathetic, or intellectual effort to be in a place where they understood the project of a conversation or how their comment would advance or undermine it. Often enough a root cause of this lack of effort is the concomitant underlying epistemic vice of intellectual laziness, but it is worth pointing out that other epistemic vices, such as intellectual arrogance or dogmatism can also lead to the types of lazy unhelpful comments that we feel compelled to criticize (and, as an anonymous reviewer rightly emphasized, this blameworthy lack of effort can stem from sources other than epistemic vices).

Now, none of this is to say that we should praise every helpful comment and criticize every unhelpful comment we notice. Obviously, sometimes other considerations are more important. Some comments might technically be helpful or unhelpful but not to a degree or in a way worth remarking on. Further, if one immediately grasps *how* a comment is unhelpful or demoralizing or lazy or

otherwise flawed, often one could simply point that out instead. The way in which we call out helpful or unhelpful comments should vary widely given our underlying goals. In some cases, we might not aim for any substantial change in the conversation. We might simply be expressing quick gratitude for a helpful comment. In other cases, we might hope for a substantial change in the conversation or its participants but not expect it, and so we might call out a comment as unhelpful just to express disapproval that we feel obligated to express. Other times, when we sense that something has gone amiss but cannot quite identify or articulate it, calling out the comment as unhelpful will succeed when it leads to identifying what has gone wrong. When we know exactly how a comment is unhelpful and our interlocutors have some responsibility to provide helpful comments, calling the comment unhelpful could encourage them to do so. In these circumstances, the person ideally realizes they have made a mistake and adjusts. Finally, in still other circumstances, our goal might be to redirect or block an avenue of conversation or to dismiss a comment altogether, and the success of the callout depends on our ability actually to redirect the conversation.

3. Conclusion

Earlier, I sketched a rough account of conversational helpfulness and unhelpfulness according to which helpful comments advance the relevant project or projects of a conversation while unhelpful comments fail to do so. I then examined in more detail the types of problems, harms, and wrongs that tend to be generated by unhelpful comments (or at least by unhelpful comments that we take notice of). In that discussion, a few patterns emerged. First, we saw that a great deal of noteworthy unhelpful comments were intended to or in fact did demoralize proponents of conversational projects. Second, we noticed that a great many of noteworthy unhelpful comments were made out of some lack of epistemic effort or some degree of epistemic laziness. Third, we noticed that in some situations, criticizing a comment as unhelpful could be epistemically useful or rhetorically effective. In short, we have found that criticisms of comments as unhelpful (or approbations of them as helpful) are not only much richer than we have might have expected, but provide much more interpersonal, moral, epistemic, and rhetorical utility than they initially appeared to.

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