

José Medina

The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations

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"José Medina's *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* is absolutely a must-read book for anyone interested in epistemology, social and political philosophy, or race and gender."

José Medina's *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* picks up, in many ways, where Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007) leaves off. Medina takes Fricker's already path-breaking notion of distinctly epistemic injustices and our obligations in the face of them and makes some deeply insightful and interesting additions and alterations. The contributions of this book to epistemology, philosophy of race and gender, and political philosophy (and especially to topics at the intersections of these) are far-reaching. The book is difficult to categorize precisely because it breaks so much new ground, though we might call it a work in nonideal, normative social epistemology. As this categorization suggests, Medina begins, methodologically, from the fact of epistemic injustice and does not attempt to generate any unified theory of epistemic justice (11-13). Throughout the book, Medina argues for what he calls--in a play on Elizabeth Anderson's *The Imperative of Integration* (2010)--the Imperative of Epistemic Interaction as a way of confronting and resisting epistemic injustices.

In chapters 1-3 Medina offers his account of epistemic injustice, which departs from Fricker's in a number of interesting ways. Chapter 1 explores the idea of active ignorance, a culpable state arising out of a cluster of epistemic vices: arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness (39). Medina offers a compelling story--familiar to readers of standpoint theory--about how these vices tend to come about in the characters of privileged subjects. Although those in privileged social positions tend to be better off in many ways, Medina argues that they are epistemically disadvantaged. The oppressed, however, will tend to have the epistemic virtues that stand in opposition to the vices encouraged by privilege: humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness (42). Those who lack them may develop these virtues through experiencing "beneficial epistemic friction," which forces the knower to grapple with alternative views and generates dissonance that might cause a change in her beliefs or habits.

Chapter 2 focuses on Medina's account of testimonial injustice. Unlike Fricker, Medina argues that such injustice is always systematic because credibility is assessed in the context of social power. Also unlike Fricker, he argues that undue credibility excesses--not just undue deficits--are epistemic injustices. Returning to the epistemic vices and virtues that tend to accompany privilege and oppression, Medina argues that the vices tend to produce meta-insensitivity. That is, those with the epistemic vices he describes (who will tend to be privileged subjects) will develop insensitivity in the form of active ignorance, but will also develop an insensitivity to their insensitivity. They will be unable to recognize their own limitations. Here Medina ties the analysis of testimonial injustice to what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice. Meta-insensitivity arises in part because of the interpretive gaps in our collective conceptual resources. These gaps feed back into our credibility assessments, which are based in part on what seems intelligible or plausible.

The discussion of hermeneutical injustice continues in chapter 3. Medina proposes a polyphonic contextualism as an amendment to Fricker's account of silencing and hermeneutical injustice. This polyphonic contextualism rejects the notion that there is a single context of epistemic activity and evaluation. Instead, there are multiple, overlapping social contexts in which to evaluate epistemic injustices. Medina departs from Fricker in discussing the appropriate way to counter hermeneutical injustices as well. He argues--*pace* Fricker's claim that "no agent perpetrates hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker 2007, 159)--that each of us bears some shared responsibility for our (pluralistic, polyphonic) hermeneutical resources. Out of this shared responsibility comes a requirement that we meet with skepticism our own feelings that someone else's experiences are unintelligible. However, Medina notes that differently situated agents will have different obligations with respect to countering hermeneutical injustices. Indeed, sometimes it may be incumbent on (some of) us to maintain certain sorts of silences where those silences would help to protect vulnerable groups (116-17).

Medina offers his account of epistemic responsibility in chapters 4-6. It is, predictably, attentive to context and social power. Chapter 4 takes up the vexed relationship between agency and responsibility. Medina proposes that agency requires minimal self-knowledge, minimal social knowledge of others, and minimal empirical knowledge of the world, which he refers to as the thesis of cognitive minimums (127). Part of the ingenious payoff of this thesis is that epistemic failings cannot be heaped on the agent without considering her relationship to the world in a nuanced way, and typically cannot be heaped on her alone anyway. Medina gives several compelling examples. In one, a white student leaves a pig's head at the door of a Jewish community center (which also contains a vegetarian cafe) on the campus of Medina's own Vanderbilt University. The University appeals to the student's ignorance of the social meaning of his act in an effort to quell the understandable outrage that follows. The mainstream analysis of this might hold that the student's ignorance is exculpatory, but Medina notes that the student's ignorance--in itself--of the social meaning of his act is both an individual and community epistemic failure. "One's participation in the collective bodies of ignorance one has inherited becomes *active*, because one acts on it and fails to act against it, whether one knows it or not, and whether one wills it or not" (140-41). Medina shifts the burden of countering ignorance back on the community (that is, communities), and its members, particularly those members likely to display the active ignorance described in chapter 1.

Chapter 5 describes the virtuous counterpart of meta-insensitivity: meta-lucidity. This meta-lucidity can come about in the process of beneficial epistemic friction, even among those who exhibit the vices described earlier. Medina suggests that the double consciousness of oppressed subjects is often epistemically beneficial precisely because it has as a structural element an "internal epistemic friction" (194). Such epistemic friction is necessary to develop meta-lucidity, whether this friction comes from within or without. Medina argues against a reading of the history of epistemic breakthroughs as a series of sudden, heroic acts. He takes the examples of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Rosa Parks and argues that their acts of resistance were made possible in the context of, and gained power in virtue of being echoed in, particular social networks. "This points in the direction of a contextualized notion of solidarity that supports individual acts of resistance and sustains their echoing, thus facilitating the effective and mutually reinforcing interconnections and making chained actions possible" (249).

Finally, chapter 6 discusses the role of the imagination in epistemic resistance. Resistant imaginations, particularly when they are structural features of an epistemic system, encourage beneficial epistemic friction. "In my pluralistic and relational view, what is to be avoided is letting one particular imaginative horizon or frame rule the day and become hegemonic, without any other way of imagining offering resistance, and making the subjects who grow under their influence become insensitive to the blind spots of the frame" (257). Resistant imaginations ensure that a dominant narrative cannot go unchallenged. Medina notes that this is a good reason to have and encourage pluralistic communities where many views are put into conversation with one another. He also notes that this pluralism need not entail a fractured, warring community. Rather, there should be solidarity in difference and disagreement. "*Acknowledgment*, rather than agreement or disagreement, is the crucial normative relation that brings people together through a radically pluralistic sensibility" (280).

The Epistemology of Resistance is an exciting read--at least as philosophy goes--because it offers so much of value and interest to what is still a burgeoning area of inquiry. Medina's examples are vivid, real, and helpful. His account of epistemic injustice enriches Fricker's already rich account. He explains how injustice is done in inflated credibility assessments, connects testimonial and hermeneutical injustices more thoroughly, describes the epistemic setbacks of social privilege, and argues eloquently that there are epistemic benefits to social oppression.

Though I have no shortage of positive things to say about the book, I do have one critical concern. This concern, though, may be more a suggestion for future work in the area than a complaint about this particular book. My worry is that those of us working on epistemic injustice are getting too comfortable with the language and conceptual resources of virtue ethics and epistemology. It is unsurprising that both Fricker and Medina talk about epistemic virtue and vice, since much of the work in normative epistemology more generally has been in virtue epistemology. Because of this, the most well developed understandings of epistemic normativity have been cast in terms of virtue (see Zagzebski 1996). Here I see a need to expand philosophical theorizing in normative epistemology beyond the virtue model.

This is particularly true for social epistemologists who recognize the deeply social, contingent, and situated nature of knowledge-production and acquisition. It is curious that we would posit virtues and vices to talk about the norms that do or should regulate our epistemic activities when many of the distinctly epistemic injustices are features of institutions or communities rather than individuals. Saying that the legal system, for example, has (or is capable of having) epistemic virtues or vices seems weird, yet it is surely a key site of structural epistemic injustice. Perhaps this language extends without loss to the group level (see Anderson 2012 for some discussion of epistemically virtuous institutions), but it is worth asking whether it is the right language in the first place, and whether there might be other ways of talking about epistemic norms that reveal what virtue does not.

My suggestion is not so much that a virtue account of epistemic norms is false, but that as the philosophical discussion on this topic continues, we not limit ourselves to this way of thinking about epistemic normativity. This suggestion, I think, takes seriously Medina's point about the value of pluralism and epistemic friction. Putting virtue accounts of epistemic norms into conversation with other accounts can only end up advancing our understanding of the problems and solutions.

Medina notes early on that his Imperative of Epistemic Interaction requires the development of certain "habits" and "sensibilities" (9). Such language certainly lends itself to talk of virtue, and his discussion of epistemic virtues and vices, as well as their relation to epistemic injustice, is compelling. But there are other elements of Medina's (and Fricker's, for that matter) view that seem out of place in the virtue context. For example, epistemic interaction with an eye toward beneficial epistemic friction might be something an epistemically virtuous person would do, but it is also defensible on other grounds and in other terms. That is, one might argue that each of us, virtuous or not, has an epistemic obligation to interact with others who have diverging perspectives. Indeed, Medina's own argument for this does not seem to rely in any crucial way on the idea of virtue. The epistemically virtuous person may have an easier time doing this, and doing this might encourage one to develop the epistemic virtues, but it is an epistemic and moral requirement even if this is not so. A pluralization of frameworks for talking about epistemic injustice will, I think, draw more people into the conversation and yield more robust theoretical returns.

José Medina's *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* is absolutely a must-read book for anyone interested in epistemology, social and political philosophy, or race and gender. Indeed, it is a must-read for anyone who just wants to think more about how to approach the world--with all its injustice--in a responsible way.

References

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Annaleigh Curtis received her PhD from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2013, and is a student at Harvard Law School (JD, 2016). Her dissertation, directed by Alison Jaggar, explored the epistemic obligations moral agents have in a world structured by social injustice. Her philosophical interests include meta-ethics, epistemology, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of law. annaleighcurtis@gmail.com
