'I Know What It's Like': Epistemic Arrogance, Disability, and Race

ABSTRACT: *Understanding and empathy on the part of those in privileged positions are often cited as powerful tools in the fight against oppression. Too often, however, those in positions of power assume they know what it is like to be less well off when, in actuality, they do not. This kind of assumption represents a thinking vice we dub* synecdoche epistemic arrogance. *In instances of synecdoche epistemic arrogance, a person who has privilege wrongly assumes, based on limited experiences, that she can know what it is like to experience a particular form of oppression. We argue two main points. First, synecdoche epistemic arrogance can lead to a variety of moral harms. Second, synecdoche epistemic arrogance is often tied to other troubling epistemic patterns, which we discuss in the context of disability and race simulations. Overall, the essay helps demonstrate how synecdoche epistemic arrogance can contribute to injustice.*

KEYWORDS: disability, racism, epistemic arrogance, social epistemology, oppression

1. Synecdoche Epistemic Arrogance

In 2005, talk show host and model Tyra Banks donned a body suit that gave her the appearance of being 350 pounds (Associated Press 2005). She wore her disguise outside as she went about her daily routine. Banks was motivated to understand the discrimination that women who are fat regularly experience and to educate her viewers about this injustice. Underlying Banks's actions was the assumption that going undercover for a few hours as a fat person would give her knowledge about what it is like to be oppressed with regard to body size (Associated Press 2005). In 2020, actor Kevin Spacey equated his experience of losing his job due to allegations of sexual misconduct to the experience of those who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis (Weddeling 2020).

We draw a connection between Spacey's and Banks's actions. Both assume that they know what it is like to experience a particular kind of hardship, basing the assumption on their own limited experiences. Yet the experiences they assume give them firsthand knowledge of others' oppression are insufficient to give them the sort of epistemic credibility they claim to have. Both examples represent a form of thinking vice we dub *synecdoche epistemic arrogance*.[1] The rhetorical term *synecdoche* refers to a figure of speech where a part is used to represent a whole.

[1] Our use of *synecdoche* is drawn from Adrienne Asch and David Wasserman (2005).

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For instance, instead of referring to 'the board of directors', if the board is composed of elders, one might refer to the 'gray hairs'. We use *synecdoche* because we are interested in cases where someone takes their own limited experiences to be indicative of another's complete experience with a particular type of oppression:

> *Synecdoche epistemic arrogance* occurs when person P who has privilege along a particular axis A assumes that she can know what it is like to be oppressed with regard to A; and this assumption is based off of limited experiences P has had that P inaccurately (consciously or unconsciously) believes enable her to know what it is like to be oppressed with regard to A.

Synecdoche epistemic arrogance entails two steps: first, drawing a false (or overly generous) comparison between one's own set of experiences and the whole, much more complex, experience of being oppressed in a particular way; second, assuming that this supposed similarity between experiences provides one with epistemic authority regarding the experience of being oppressed along a particular axis (such as race, gender, or class). Banks assumed her handful of hours in a fat suit gave her understanding and epistemic authority regarding what it is like to live every day as a fat woman in a fatphobic society. Spacey equated his experience of losing his job (due to his alleged sexual misconduct) to the plight of the working class during the COVID-19 pandemic and he claimed that this similarity provides him with the epistemic esteem to empathize.

Those who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance purport to have access to the qualia of oppression; they mistakenly believe that they possess what Devora Shapiro (2012) calls "experiential knowledge" about being oppressed along a particular axis. Experiential knowledge is embodied, subjective, and not reducible to propositional claims or 'know how'. Shapiro uses the example of childbirth to illustrate experiential knowledge: a person who gives birth may explain the experience to a friend who has not given birth, however, that friend will not fully know what it is like to give birth since they have neither done so nor been able to reflect on the experience from a first-person perspective (Shapiro 2012: 70–71). Experiential knowledge is also applicable to group-specific experiences, where inclusion in a particular identity group shapes one's experiences so that they are often similar (although still unique) (Shapiro 2012: 71). A Korean American woman's experiences will be shaped by her membership in her racial and cultural group in such a way that she can say she knows what it is like to be Korean American and experience the world as a part of that group. Those who are not Korean American do not have access to that particular experiential knowledge because they lack the relevant identities, group membership, and, thus, experiences. To engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance, then, is to claim knowledge that requires membership into a particular identity group to which one does not belong.

Synecdoche epistemic arrogance can occur only in contexts with social inequality or unjust distributions of social power. As Rachel McKinnon and Adam Sennet (2017) discuss, in these contexts, certain groups have privileges that other groups lack, and individual members of these groups derive privileges from their group

membership. A white person can engage in racial synecdoche epistemic arrogance because they are privileged along the axis of race. Synecdoche epistemic arrogance is made possible by a context of social inequality. As such, progress made to reduce social inequality and thereby the presence of unjust group privileges can also reduce instances of synecdoche epistemic arrogance. In a just society without unjust distributions of power and inequality, synecdoche epistemic arrogance would not occur.

Epistemic arrogance is often understood as a *character vice* or trait distinguished by 'enjoying too much cognitive esteem—having an unquestioned epistemic reputability', 'letting one's perspective go unchecked', and 'becoming immune to contestation' (Medina 2013: 32). In contrast, we conceive of synecdoche epistemic arrogance as a *thinking vice*: 'as a quality of a particular kind of thinking . . . an epistemically vicious way of thinking or "thinking style"' that leads to flawed judgments (Cassam 2019: 56). Vicious thinking is committed unintentionally the vast majority of the time. Those who commit synecdoche epistemic arrogance engage in the logical fallacy of false equivalence: they inaccurately believe their experiences are the same as (or very similar to) those who are oppressed and thus make flawed judgments based on this assumption. This thinking is therefore *vicious*. While we characterize synecdoche epistemic arrogance as vicious thinking, our project goes deeper to expose the social context and impact that this type of thinking has. Indeed, synecdoche epistemic arrogance represents a widespread practice that is in part caused by—and simultaneously contributes to—social oppression. To grasp fully the pernicious nature of synecdoche epistemic arrogance, we therefore analyze it in terms of its problematic social origins and ramifications.

Instances of synecdoche epistemic arrogance do not just represent vicious thinking; they represent *arrogant* vicious thinking because one's epistemic error is caused by overconfidence. To make the leap from one's own limited experience to others' lived experiences of oppression is not only logically flawed but it is also an example of giving oneself too much cognitive esteem and allowing one's perspective to go unchecked.

We consider synecdoche epistemic arrogance to be a form of arrogant vicious thinking not only because it involves a person gaining more cognitive esteem and incontestability than one deserves, but also because engaging in synecdoche epistemic arrogance causes one to assume one is entitled to certain epistemic privileges due to their purported ability to know what it is like to be oppressed in some way (Tanesini 2016: 75). Synecdoche epistemic arrogance is therefore a form of arrogant vicious thinking. One need not have the full-blown character trait of epistemic arrogance to engage in vicious thinking in the form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance; however, those who repeatedly engage in arrogant, vicious thinking (like synecdoche epistemic arrogance) will also demonstrate epistemic arrogance in their character.

Synecdoche epistemic arrogance is not limited to the rich and the famous. Consider an experience that our friend Cal (not his real name), who is a white transgendered man, shared with us. Cal spoke on a panel about the painful experience of being misgendered. He bravely shared just how hurtful the act of

gender misrecognition can be by explaining that to be misgendered feels like a rejection of a gift he has carefully and lovingly created that captures his authentic self. After the panel, a cisgendered man of color, Rob (not his real name), approached Cal and equated the experience of being misgendered as a transperson with his *own* experiences of racial and ethnic misrecognition. He criticized Cal's gift metaphor, saying that it does not 'work on one's race or gender, really'. Cal responded by suggesting 'maybe race works in a different way, but I'm talking about [my] transgender experience'. Not only did Rob assume his experience with *racial* misrecognition was synonymous with the experience of being misgendered as a trans person, but he assumed this similarity gave him the epistemic authority to critique and reject Cal's analysis *of his own lived experience* as a transgendered person. Rob's comments exemplify synecdoche epistemic arrogance, since he assumed his experiences with racial misrecognition enabled him to know what it is like to be misgendered as a trans person. This example helps underscore that synecdoche epistemic arrogance has to do with privilege along a particular axis, in this case privilege with regard to being cisgender. Even though Rob has less racial privilege than Cal, Rob still committed synecdoche epistemic arrogance due to his privilege as cisgender. And, while Rob might not have the full-blown character vice of epistemic arrogance, our contention is simply that his assumption that he understands what it is like to be misgendered as a trans person represents arrogant, vicious thinking in the form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

Not all examples of synecdoche epistemic arrogance are obvious or as explicitly stated as the examples we have given. Indeed, often synecdoche epistemic arrogance infiltrates unnoticed, tacitly affecting cognition in ways that support oppressive ideologies. These cases are harder to pinpoint because they flow deep under the surface of our interactions with others. But synecdoche epistemic arrogance, both blatant and subtle, plays a pivotal role in sustaining oppressive ideology and contexts in everyday life, often despite good intentions.

What is at stake when one engages in synecdoche epistemic arrogance? There are moral dangers associated with synecdoche epistemic arrogance. In what follows, we focus on two particular forms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance—(1) the assumption that nondisabled people can understand what it is like to live with a disability in an ableist society and (2) the assumption that white people can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society—to expose the moral harms this thinking vice causes. Illustrating how synecdoche epistemic arrogance mutually sustains other cognitive patterns (widely shared assumptions, preferences, beliefs, and attitudes) that perpetuate oppression helps to contextualize synecdoche epistemic arrogance and explains how common epistemic patterns can operate on the micro-level to uphold larger-scale injustice.

Because many instances of synecdoche epistemic arrogance occur tacitly and are difficult to uncover, we focus our discussion on race and disability simulations. These simulations prove useful sites for highlighting synecdoche epistemic arrogance in a way that helps to uncover how it operates and relates to other harmful epistemic patterns. We do not directly address the question of whether perspective taking, via synecdoche epistemic arrogance, is important for moral understanding (for such discussion, see Young 1997). Rather, our analysis exposes what can go

wrong when one engages in synecdoche epistemic arrogance and how it is related to other harmful attitudes and beliefs.

2. The Moral Harms of Synecdoche Epistemic Arrogance

We see four particular moral harms associated with synecdoche epistemic arrogance: ignorance, disregard for full persons, false moral purity, and cultural co-opting.[2] While these four moral harms are not the only harms caused, and while they can occur in the context of other forms of arrogant vicious thinking or epistemic arrogance, we believe that these four harms are particularly salient with regard to synecdoche epistemic arrogance because the assumption that one knows what it is like to be oppressed can help privileged people feel particularly licensed to engage in the sorts of behaviors and cognitive patterns we outline below.

We use the term *moral harm* to refer to a broad range of structural and interpersonal harms. Structurally, synecdoche epistemic arrogance contributes to and reinforces large-scale patterns of domination and subordination in which oppressed groups are curtailed in their ability to gain full dignity and rights. It is this oppressive and unjust social backdrop that also paves the way for the interpersonal moral harms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance: it can cause a reduction in respect, trust, or recognition in the context of interpersonal relationships.

2.1 Ignorance

In the case of synecdoche epistemic arrogance, a person in a position of privilege (along a particular axis) assumes that they know what it is like to have the experience of someone who is oppressed and they make this assumption off of inadequate data: from experiences the person believes are representative of the complete experience of those who lack the type of privilege in question. Making the leap from having a few experiences to assuming *one knows what it is like* to be oppressed represents arrogant vicious thinking because the subject's thought process includes an inflated sense of cognitive authority. If someone assumes that they can accurately understand another identity group's experience of oppression due to their own experience, they may be less receptive to alternative or challenging information about what it *really* is like to experience the world as a member of that group. William Hart et al. (2009) explore this tendency in their work on the 'congeniality bias': the tendency for people to favor information that confirms what they already believe they know and reject information which does not fit into their existing framework (556). They found that '[p]eople are almost two times . . . more likely to select information congenial rather than uncongenial to their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors' (579). Furthermore, they found that the desire to defend one's existing attitudes and beliefs is strengthened the more highly attached a person is to the beliefs or attitudes in question. Because

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[2] See Tanesini (2016) for a discussion about the moral harms associated with other forms of epistemic arrogance.

those who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance base their understanding of what it is like to be oppressed on *their own experiences* (albeit inappropriately), this could cause them to feel more highly attached to the beliefs they form under synecdoche epistemic arrogance: they feel a personal connection to these beliefs. Those who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance might therefore be more likely to *reject* unconsciously (without good reason) information that does not correspond to their beliefs formed under synecdoche epistemic arrogance. For instance, this bias might lead one to disregard testimony from those who are actually oppressed that might challenge one's beliefs formed via synecdoche epistemic arrogance. If this testimony is about the ways in which those who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance are complicit in oppression, the combination of synecdoche epistemic arrogance and the congeniality bias can cause those in positions of privilege to reject information that could help them grasp their role in maintaining systemic injustice.

On an individual level, this ignorance about the nature of oppression and one's role in it can thwart those who occupy positions of privilege from changing their behaviors, engaging in meaningful advocacy work and alliance, and working to support the real-life needs (as opposed to imagined needs) of those who are oppressed. Synecdoche epistemic arrogance can thus lead to a lack of anti-oppressive praxis and a complacency with behaviors that reinforce an inequitable status quo. The way that synecdoche epistemic arrogance has an impact on a subject's epistemic practices can prevent substantive engagement with anti-oppressive behaviors.

Critical philosophers of race have outlined similar moral harms stemming from what they call 'white ignorance': widespread ignorance, especially among white people, about the nature and extent of race and racial injustice (Mills 2007). When white people engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance about race, it can lead to and reinforce white ignorance. Assuming that one knows what it is like to be a person of color can contribute to a sense of complacency and a false understanding about the reality of racism. Additionally, an individual who is ignorant about the nature and extent of racial injustice may be prone to engaging in synecdoche epistemic arrogance because their truncated understanding of race and racism might enable them to assume they know what it is like to be racially oppressed. The relationship between synecdoche epistemic arrogance and white ignorance is therefore mutually sustaining. However, both remain distinct concepts that play unique roles in the reproduction of white supremacy.

On a structural level, widespread misunderstandings and ignorance about racism can lead to policy that supports white supremacy. As Michael Kraus et al. (2019) found, many white Americans are ignorant about the extent of the racial wealth gap. Respondents estimated that 'for every $100 dollars in wealth held by a White family, a Black family has $90 when, in reality, a Black family has $10' (Kraus et al. 2019: 917). Patterns of synecdoche epistemic arrogance among white Americans who assume they know what it is like to be Black adds to collective ignorance about the magnitude of racial inequality and has implications regarding support for policy that might address racial injustice.

2.2 Disregard for Full Persons

Fundamentally, synecdoche entails allowing a part to stand in for a whole. Synecdoche epistemic arrogance involves assumptions about what is knowable about the experience of being oppressed. By homing in on one particular experience, synecdoche epistemic arrogance encourages a one-dimensional perspective on the oppressed individual. As Asch and Wasserman (2005: 193) state, the 'sin of synecdoche' involves, 'the assumption that a single-known characteristic will dominate a myriad of unknown characteristics' in one's relationship with and understanding of another. In contrast, to treat a person with full respect is to view them as more than an instantiation of a singular trait or a limited set of experiences.

Elizabeth Spelman (1978: 153) also cautions against assuming that one understands a person just because one knows (or thinks one knows, as in the case of synecdoche epistemic arrogance) something about them or their experience. Attempting to understand and appreciate how another person sees themselves and 'recognizing and responding to that person's conception of herself or himself' is an integral part of treating others as full persons (Spelman 1978: 151). Because those who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance make assumptions about what it is like to be a member of an oppressed group based on their own experiences, they do not strive to understand how others see themselves. This lack of responsiveness to the other's self-conception helps showcase why synecdoche epistemic arrogance is a form of arrogant thinking. It involves the presumption of one's epistemic authority and often stems from a predisposition to ignore the perspective of others (Medina 2013). Thus, not only can synecdoche epistemic arrogance lead to the neglect of the full scope of what makes a person unique by fetishizing one part of their identity, but it also encourages an oversimplified understanding of those in oppressed groups that ignores their self-conception.

The disregard for full persons that can arise from synecdoche epistemic arrogance is clearly interpersonally problematic. Additionally, when those with privilege and power only see truncated versions of those in marginalized positions and neglect the ways the oppressed in fact see themselves, resulting policies will perpetuate inequalities and injustices towards oppressed groups. The work of Anita Silvers (1995) and Iris Marion Young (1997) shows how failure to understand the perspective of others can result in oppressive policy. Silvers offers the example of a state allocating health care funding based on voter priorities expressed in a poll. The majority of those polled were ablebodied, and they reported their lives would not be worth living if they acquired a disability. However, people with disabilities often deem their lives perfectly worthy. Funding allocations based on supposed knowledge of disability runs the risk of generating policy that treats those who are disabled as less than full persons.

Nancy Fraser (2020) offers another explanation of how the failure to recognize fully those with subordinated identities can lead to unjust social policy and distribution of resources. Fraser states, "To be misrecognized . . . [is] to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively

unworthy of respect or esteem' (2020: 113–14; see also Fraser and Honneth 2003). When one practices synecdoche epistemic arrogance and does not see another as a full person, misrecognition occurs. On an institutional level, this leads to policies that perpetuate injustice. For example, institutional patterns that disregard single mothers as full persons can result in economic policy (such as welfare policy) that perpetuates socio-economic inequities and further misrecognition and oppression (Fraser 2020: 114). By contributing to this disregard for full persons (and thus misrecognition), synecdoche epistemic arrogance sustains economic and social injustices at a policy level. Simultaneously, synecdoche epistemic arrogance is borne of a society that practices institutionalized misrecognition, for it is the product of an unjust social context characterized by power and privilege differentials.

2.3 False Moral Purity

Because privileged individuals who engage in synecdoche epistemic arrogance think they know what it is like to be oppressed along a particular axis, they can come to believe that they are off the moral hook for the unearned, unjust privileges they benefit from. 'Yes, I may have privilege' they might think. 'However, I know what those who are oppressed are going through and so I am not a part of the problem'. However, these feelings of absolution can lead to interpersonal moral harms and play a role in the reproduction of structural injustice.

As noted above, one of the underlying features in all cases of synecdoche epistemic arrogance is the presence of a social privilege differential along a particular axis, such as gender, religion, race, sexual orientation. Imagine two friends, Maria and Patty, who come from different class backgrounds: Maria's family is wealthy, while Patty's is working class. Imagine that Maria lives on a budget for the first time during graduate school. If Maria assumes that this experience of living on a small income allows her to know what it is like to be poor or working class, then Maria engages in synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

If Maria's experience of living on a budget for the first time leads her to assume she knows what it's like to be poor, this might allow her to *distance* herself from her role in maintaining oppressive class systems. She might think to herself, 'I know what poverty feels like. I'm not a part of the problem'. However, Maria benefits from, is complicit with, and contributes to the oppressive systems that lead to poverty and exploitation of the poor and working class.

This sense of moral purity derived from synecdoche epistemic arrogance can damage relationships. Perhaps Maria tells Patty, 'Look, I lived off of $15,000 last year, and it wasn't that difficult! If I can do it, you can too!' Or she states, 'I knows what it's like to be working class as well'. Not only are these kinds of statements inaccurate, but they can also create breakdowns of trust and respect in relationships.

Moving from the interpersonal to the structural, feelings of moral absolution on the part of the privileged can help sustain group-level patterns of domination and injustice. Widespread complacency with the status quo is fed by a sense of moral purity that inhibits moral responsibility taking and anti-oppressive praxis.

This sentiment of moral absolution and purity is also reflected in (and helps sustain) policy that maintains inequities. Take, for instance, neoliberal policy that proposes to solve inequality through capitalist meritocracy. The ideological support for such measures is often couched in the mentality of 'We worked hard and earned our successes without governmental handouts and so should everyone else!' This sort of narrative often involves synecdoche epistemic arrogance and the belief that those who are privileged have experienced hardships similar to those who are oppressed. Take, for example, Ann Romney's August 2012 Convention speech, where she framed her early married life with Mitt Romney as one of poverty (in reality, both had access to family wealth): 'We got married and moved into a basement apartment . . . and ate a lot of pasta and tuna fish. Our desk was a door propped up on sawhorses. Our dining room table was a fold down ironing board in the kitchen.' Later in the speech she asserts, 'as his partner on this amazing journey, I can tell you Mitt Romney was not handed success' (Romney 2012).

Her statements reveal Romney as engaged in synecdoche epistemic arrogance: she claims to know what it is like to be poor based on experiences she inaccurately equates with poverty. This type of self-narrative and diluted sense of moral purity infused with synecdoche epistemic arrogance helps to support conservative economic policy: the same year as the convention, Mitt Romney had opposed raises to the minimum wage and evoked the welfare queen trope to oppose government assistance for poor and working-class families (Lillis 2012; Gilman 2014). Synecdoche epistemic arrogance as a practice fuels policy and ideology that substantially reproduces harmful inequalities and injustices.

2.4 Cultural Co-opting

Lastly, synecdoche epistemic arrogance harms the oppressed by licensing those in privileged positions to consider the activism of the oppressed as potentially applicable to the privileged as well. This leads to the dilution and co-opting of the creative activist work that oppressed peoples engage in to support their own survival. Synecdoche epistemic arrogance leads those in privileged positions to co-opt comfortably these tools, which include language, social movements, and ideologies. This can also be a form of cultural imperialism, which exacerbates the marginalization and subordination of oppressed groups. This co-opting not only harms those who are marginalized but often materially benefits dominant groups.

For example, the body positivity movement is a social justice movement with roots in the 'Black is beautiful' Black feminist movements of the 1960s (Miller 2016: 12). In its early days, the body positivity movement was created to push back against the forces of structural racism and other intersecting forms of oppression that worked to denigrate and devalue Black and Brown women's bodies (Miller 2016: 12). Marquiesele Mercedes (2020) writes about the co-opting of these 'body positivity' and 'anti-diet' movements. She explains how white women have taken up the rhetoric of the body positivity movement yet distanced it from its original focus on structural, racial oppression by focusing instead on empowering mostly thin, white women. Mercedes writes to these white

women: 'By implying you are equally hurt by diet culture as a fat Black or Brown person is, you're just straight up lying for your own gain' (2020). Thin white women who assume that their individual difficulties with accepting an 'imperfect' body allow them to know what it is like to be structurally oppressed as a fat Black or Brown woman is a clear form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance. It is precisely through engaging in this sort of synecdoche epistemic arrogance that thin white women were able to brand themselves as practitioners and beneficiaries of the body positivity movement. And this use of synecdoche epistemic arrogance helped pave the way for the co-opting of the body liberation space; thin white women diluted what *body positivity* means as a political concept and who the body positivity movement was meant to serve. Because body positivity has been co-opted by thin white women, the concept can no longer do the in-group, affirmational, radical work for which it was intended. In the case of the body positivity movement, not only was the movement stripped of its power to combat structural oppression faced by fat Black and Brown women, but its rhetoric was repurposed to support white beauty ideals and in so doing amplified racially problematic ideologies. Thus, as others have claimed about cultural appropriation, the harm of this sort of cultural co-opting lies in how it helps to reproduce oppression (Matthes 2019). Synecdoche epistemic arrogance can help derail social justice movements, thereby hindering opposition to structural oppression.

3. 'Knowing' Disability

The extent to which synecdoche epistemic arrogance causes moral harms can be seen in two specific forms of this thinking vice: the assumption that nondisabled people can know what it is like to live with a disability in an ableist society and the assumption that white people can know what it is like to be Black living in a racist society. Examining these two forms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance in depth reveals the epistemic contexts in which they arise and the harms they lead to.

We understand the term *disabled* as including all who identify or are identified by others as having a disability, including those who with intellectual or developmental disabilities as well as the neurodiverse. We use *nondisabled* as a synonym for *ablebodied*. Historically, nondisabled people have presumed, from the outset, to have ultimate knowledge of both ability and disability *by virtue of their own positionality, experience, and expertise as nondisabled* (Barnes 2016: 120). This presumption has been expressed in decisions about medical treatment, institutionalization, sterilization, and assimilation for people with disabilities. While any kind of awareness or consideration by nondisabled people of the experience of those with disabilities is an advancement, synecdoche epistemic arrogance about disability continues to perpetuate harmful patterns.

The assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled in an ableist society is a form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance. One thing that is distinctive about assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled is that it is often communicated directly to people who have disabilities. Statements like, 'If I were in your situation, I would kill myself' appeal both to the knowability of disability and the perceived deep undesirability of

disability, and these assumptions are considered so basic that they are often shamelessly and blatantly communicated. This assumption is thus often epistemically and morally unexamined.

In order to understand how assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled functions, it will be helpful to examine the beliefs and ideologies that lead to this assumption. Here, we examine two such common cognitive patterns shared by nondisabled people about what it means to be disabled. We call the first *disability as loss*. Disability as loss entails thinking of disability merely as the lack of function or ability that an ablebodied person has. We will call the second cognitive pattern *the sameness of disability*. The sameness of disability occurs when ablebodied people assume disability creates *similarity* between different disabled people. In discussing the sameness of disability as it relates to perceived similarity between those with the same disability, as well as perceived similarity between those with different disabilities, we aim to show that synecdoche epistemic arrogance about disability does not arise in a vacuum. *Disability as loss* and *the sameness of disability* function, generate assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled, and lead to the moral harms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

Many presume that the experience of being disabled is simply to lack a function or ability (Gregory 2020). The idea of disability as loss is predominant within historical bioethics literature and defining disability as a type of loss is still predominant within both legal frameworks and analytic philosophy. Perceiving disability as loss allows for an ablebodied person to assume they can know what it is like to be disabled. If a person who is ablebodied conceptualizes disability as the experience of merely lacking a function or an ability, they need only imagine something missing or removed from their own embodiment in order to know what it is like to be disabled. For example, many conceive of deafness as simply the lack of hearing. Disability as loss states that a deaf person equals a hearing person minus the ability to hear. For an ablebodied person to understand disability, they must simply lose the experiential knowledge they have of what it is like to in fact possess a particular function, or ability. And so, for a hearing person to understand deafness, they need simply conceptualize themselves and subtract their ability to hear.

When ablebodied people find themselves lacking functions or abilities, they often turn to the language of the disabled community. A recent example of this is the appropriation of Miserandino's spoon theory" (2003). Spoon theory is the idea that those with chronic illnesses have a limited number of spoons, where *spoons* represents the amount of the energy one has to complete tasks of daily living. Miserandino describes how living with lupus means she has only a particular number of spoons, or amount of energy, and that she must carefully plan out how she wants to 'spend her spoons' each day. Spoon theory was hailed as a useful explanatory tool by others with invisible disabilities and chronic illness, and now is also used by people who do not have disabilities to describe fatigue. This is objectionable to some who see spoon theory as a valuable tool to describe precisely what is unique about invisible disabilities and chronic illness: a distinctive phenomenological experience of fatigue and the need to plan one's tasks accordingly in ways that those without disabilities do not experience

(Chainey 2016). Cultural co-opting quells explanatorily useful interpretive resources for people with disabilities. This contributes to epistemic injustice—and hermeneutical epistemic injustice in particular—by undermining and constraining the number of interpretive resources available for people with disabilities to make sense of their own experiences (Fricker 2007). In short, nondisabled people use their own ablebodied experiences with loss of energy to assume they know what it is like to have a chronic illness and to use 'spoons'. In doing so, they undermine a helpful explanatory tool that originates from the disabled experience. The use of spoon theory by nondisabled people is an example of the moral harm of synecdoche epistemic arrogance in the form of cultural co-opting, and it is closely related to notions of disability as loss.

As we have alluded to, there is a second presumption about disability that can lead to the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled. This assumption often relies not only on disability as loss but also on the notion that there is some common or universal way of 'being disabled'. It is often assumed that the way a disabled person experiences their disability—including the way they themselves might relate to it, identify with it, and choose to live with it—will be the same as that of everyone else who has that disability or even everyone else who is disabled. We call this idea *sameness of disability*.

The view that disabled people are 'the same' is a crucial component of the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled. When someone practices synecdoche epistemic arrogance, they assume that they can know something about what it is like to be a member of an oppressed group based on a personal experience. The notion of sameness of disability endorses the view that there is, in fact, some universal disabled experience one can come to know.

The presumption of the sameness of disability has two forms. First, it can entail thinking of those with the same disability, diagnosis, or impairment as being identical or even interchangeable. For example, Jennifer Scuro recounts a school meeting for her Autistic daughter in which a teacher told her, 'Once you've met someone with Autism, you've met someone with Autism', implying that all Autistic people are the same and displaying a great degree of indifference to the student as an individual (Scuro 2018: 113).

However, the presumption of the sameness of disability can also entail thinking of those with *different* disabilities as relevantly similar and can lead to lumping disabled people together on the basis of their being disabled. This occurs in disability spread. With disability spread, first 'nondisabled persons categorize a physically disabled individual in the general category of *impaired*' thereby tacitly assuming an underlying similarity that unites all those who 'are impaired' (Liesener and Mills 1999: 2084). Commonly, this entails '(over)generaliz[ation] from the physical impairment to other impairments' (Liesener and Mills 1999: 2084). For example, 'a sighted person, without thinking, speaks unusually loud to someone who is blind, as if lack of vision signified impaired hearing as well' (Wright 1983: 34–35).

Assumptions of sameness within a disability or across disabilities license the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled. If one experiences a loss of some function or capability, under disability as loss, they experience some modicum of disability. Because of sameness of disability, the

ablebodied person can believe that their experience of a particular disability is sufficiently similar to that of everyone with that particular disability (our first variation) or everyone with *any* disability (the second variation). This can lead to a false understanding of what it is like to have a particular disability in an ableist society, and it can hinder appreciation for the self-conception and individuality of disabled people. This is synecdoche epistemic arrogance in the form of the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled.

In disability simulations, ablebodied people aim to simulate the effects of having a disability. Educators and human resources personnel lead disability simulation exercises with the goal of helping nondisabled people accept, empathize with, and understand those who have disabilities. However, the presumptions of disability as loss and the sameness of disability license disability simulations that in turn lead to synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

There are many important criticisms of disability simulations that take issue with the way simulations perpetuate voyeurism (Brown 2013), misconstrue disability as mere impairment (Titchkosky, Healey, and Michalko 2019), and enforce or create stereotypes about the helplessness of the disabled (Silverman, Gwinn, and Van Boven 2015; Nario-Redmond, Gospodinov, and Cobb 2017). Our critique of disability simulations centers on how disability simulations perpetuate synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

In disability simulations the purported goal is for participants to understand the physical reality of having a disability, such as what it would feel like no longer to be able to see, hear, or walk. Some researchers have suggested that the goal of disability simulations should be to simulate the oppression or stigma of being disabled as opposed to the physical reality of having a disability (Siebers 2008; Lalvani and Broderick 2013). In the more common simulations of impairment, participants without an impairment are given tools to simulate an impairment: sighted people might wear blindfolds for a day, or hearing people might wear earplugs as they go about their typical routine. An important caveat often missing from the literature on disability simulations is that people who are blind, low-vision, or losing vision have used blindfolded blindness simulations to learn independent living skills. These disability simulations aim to equip people with disabilities with skills as opposed to having the primary goal of promoting disability awareness or empathy and thus are outside of our examination of synecdoche epistemic arrogance. Disability simulations are not concerned solely with sensory or physical disabilities. For instance, some simulations of dyslexia involve non-dyslexic participants attempting to read text where the words are deliberately scrambled. Simulations of disability are supported by the common assumptions outlined earlier.

These simulations legitimize the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled by relying on the notions of disability as loss and the sameness of disability. A disability simulation rests on the following argument:

1. To be disabled is just to have an impairment.
2. An impairment is simply the loss of some ability or function.
3. Therefore, if we take away some ability or function, people will know what it's like to have a particular disability, or to be disabled.

This argument is obviously derived from the assumption of disability as loss (premise 2). However, the assumption of the sameness of disability is also at play. Premise 1 and the conclusion hide the assumption that the impairment one is capable of experiencing in a disability simulation is relevantly similar to the way all disabled people with that impairment experience it. Even if we think of disability as merely an individual phenomenological experience, an enormous assumption about the ways other bodyminds[3] perceive themselves is at play; why think even a loss will be perceived similarly or given similar importance for different people?

Furthermore, while each simulation is specific to a particular *type* of disability, educators and participants treat the exercises as communicating something important about disability as a whole. In other words, educators do not generally instruct their sighted students to wear blindfolds for the sole end of teaching their students about blindness, but instead engage in such curricula with the ultimate goal of teaching their students something *about disability more generally.* When this occurs, it is an example of sameness of disability: one assumes all disabled people are similar.

Disability simulations thus lead to synecdoche epistemic arrogance by encouraging participants to feel as though they have experienced what it is like to have a disability, therefore supporting the idea that they know what it is like to be a disabled person living in an ableist society. Furthermore, the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled relies on and sustains harmful cognitive patterns with regard to disability: disability as loss and the sameness of disability. And we have shown how these related cognitive patterns work to promote this assumption and lead to the moral harms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance, namely cultural co-opting and the disregard for full persons. As we discuss next, in the context of race, synecdoche epistemic arrogance can lead to moral harms and is tied to other harmful epistemic patterns.

4. 'Understanding' Black Lives

The Whiteness Project conducts interviews with white people about their perspectives on race. One of the interviewees from Buffalo, NY, Andrea, is a white woman sporting tattoos on her neck and chest along with multiple piercings and mauve hair. When asked to reflect on her whiteness, her tone communicates contempt and frustration: 'I get discriminated against just as much as a minority does . . . If I go into a store, I get treated as, let's say, a Black person does. So when I go out, I promise that I would get the same exact kind of thing as your [Black] partner would get' (Whiteness Project, https://whitenessproject.org/checkbox/andrea). While Andrea may experience prejudice due to her stylistic choices, the claim that her experience is *the exact same* as a Black person's is significant. This example represents another type of synecdoche epistemic

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[3] The term *bodymind* refers to the ways the body and the mind are not independent: the way one thinks and feels through the world is inseparable from their embodied experience (see Price 2014).

arrogance: the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society.

This form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance is closely related to similar, overlapping white cognitive patterns and rhetoric. As with the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled, the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society does not occur in vacuum. It is produced by a structural context of white supremacy that yields related assumptions that, in turn, sustain racial injustice. Recognizing this fact helps paint a realistic picture of how synecdoche epistemic arrogance operates as part of a larger set of oppressive epistemic mechanisms.

Robin DiAngelo (2018) lays out a set of common, cognitive patterns in which white people often engage. For example, many white people 'lack an understanding about what racism is' and tend to view themselves as 'individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization' (DiAngelo 2018: 68). Cognitive patterns like these represent problematic epistemic habits that enable white people to remain ignorant about racial injustice. As such, these cognitive patterns play a vital role in perpetuating racism. Consider one cognitive pattern in particular, the 'preference for racial segregation, and a lack of a sense of loss about segregation' (DiAngelo 2018: 68). The preference for racial segregation dictates where white people live, work, play, learn, and invest. All of this is tied to the distribution of material wealth and power in society and has been linked to widespread racial disparities. Thus, cognitive patterns can have concrete societal ramifications that reach far beyond individuals' preferences. The assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society is one assumption among a constellation of other common white cognitive patterns. To understand fully this assumption and its power, one must thus understand the larger context of related cognitive patterns.

We will outline three key cognitive patterns that support the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society to give a sense of this context. First, white people often hold a 'narrow understanding' about what racism is (Glazer and Liebow 2020: 57). They tend to equate racism to prejudice and treat all prejudices as interchangeable. In reality, white supremacy is far more complicated than a mere bias or prejudice. White supremacy is an all-encompassing system that affects economic, political, social, and material life (DiAngelo 2018: 30–31). It is deeply rooted in the structure and fabric of organizations, policies, and individual psychologies. By operating with a narrow understanding of what racism is, white Americans can more readily ignore the complexity, historical situatedness, and pervasiveness of racism. And this narrow understanding of racism allows white people to believe that their experiences with prejudice are representative of the experience of being Black in a racist society. This represents synecdoche epistemic arrogance in the form of the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society.

This assumption is borne from and leads to ignorance about how racism operates. First, the initial, narrow understanding of racism leads to synecdoche epistemic arrogance and helps facilitate the assumption that one's past experiences with

prejudice or discrimination allows them to know what it is like to be Black. The assumption that one knows what it is like to be Black then hinders curiosity, learning, and humility with regard to one's knowledge gaps about racism. If someone thinks they know what it is like to be Black in a racist society, they are less likely to spend time seeking out and learning from the genuine experiences and narratives from people of color.

Another related, common white cognitive pattern that supports the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society is the general fixation, focus, and prioritization of white experience. This mindset is called 'internalized white normativity,' and it 'is the result of complex social processes that make white bodies, white identities, and white cultural practices appear normal, natural, and right within a multiracial society' (Glazer and Liebow 2020: 52). Internalized white normativity often prevents white people from considering that people of color have experiences that are radically different from anything that they, as white people, have faced. This encourages synecdoche epistemic arrogance by allowing white people to draw false similarities between white and Black experience. A narrow understanding of racism coupled with white normativity promotes the assumption that it is not very difficult to understand what it is like to be Black. These assumptions make it so that white people often assume that racial minorities are simply white people with darker skin, when, in reality, to be Black is to inhabit a social position that is importantly different from a white racialized experience. This way of understanding racial difference in the context of white supremacy is therefore woefully incomplete and can lead to synecdoche epistemic arrogance.

Lastly, the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society is also related to 'white feelings of entitlement to racial comfort' (Glazer and Liebow 2020: 53). Because thinking about racism in an honest, meaningful way can feel uncomfortable for white people, many avoid doing so. Feelings of entitlement to racial comfort, internalized white normativity, and narrow understandings of racism all work together: White people assume that their perspectives on what it is like to be Black are accurate because they hold narrow understandings of racism and think that white ways of experiencing and perceiving the world are the norm. Feelings of entitlement to racial comfort prevent them from moving beyond these assumptions to a more accurate understanding of the scope and nature of white supremacy, which can be uncomfortable for white people to contemplate. Thus, entitlement to racial comfort along with the other cognitive patterns discussed enables white people to imagine racism on their own terms and allows them to assume that they can understand what it is like to be Black and living in a racist society.

What we call *race simulations*, like disability simulations, work to simulate the experience of an oppressed identity—in this case with regard to race as opposed to disability. As with disability simulations, race simulations often involve synecdoche epistemic arrogance and are thus helpful sites for uncovering synecdoche epistemic arrogance. For example, forms of media encourage white consumers to imagine themselves as Black. While some projects actively strive to simulate Blackness for white viewers, other forms of art do so in more subtle and perhaps unintentional ways.

A number of virtual reality developers have created simulations that 'put the viewer in the shoes of non-white and threatened bodies' with the aim of increasing empathy as a pathway for disrupting 'interpersonal oppression, discrimination, and misperceptions' (Nakamura 2020: 51–52). For example, one immersive virtual reality, known as IVR, experience has been expressly designed to give non-Black users the experience of racism through computer-generated scenarios that take place as the avatar ages. As described by researcher Courtney Cogburn, 'At age 7, you experience racial discrimination from your peers (taunting) and your teacher (inequitable disciplinary response). At age 15, you have an encounter with police officers (inspired by data on Stop and Frisk practices in New York City). At age 30, you experience discrimination in a workplace setting while interviewing for a job' (Hill 2008).

The IVR experience strives to give non-Black users a sense of how racism is structurally embedded and affects individuals throughout their lifetime. Cogburn, a lead researcher on the project, argues that the lack of understanding about the impact of racism plays a significant role in perpetuating things like racial health disparities (Hill 2008). The IVR experience Cogburn's team has created seeks to ameliorate this lack of understanding among non-Black users. These simulations might achieve these goals to some extent, yet there is also the risk that the IVR experience emboldens white viewers to think that they know what it feels like to inhabit a Black body and live in a racist society. This is a form of synecdoche epistemic arrogance and can lead to the types of moral harms we outline above. In particular, despite the aim of spreading knowledge about the functioning of systemic racism, these kinds of IVR simulations run the risk of perpetuating ignorance and a false sense of moral purity. While Cogburn and others hope that the IVR experience will educate people about the realities of structural racism, existing white cognitive patterns make it easy for users to treat the experience as a path to moral absolution via synecdoche epistemic arrogance: 'I know what it's like to be Black and stopped by the police now; I experienced it'. But, of course, to be a non-Black person engaging in IVR is *not* the same as experiencing the world *as a Black person* and does not give one knowledge of what it's like. Furthermore, the IVR experience does not in fact make one the victim of racial injustice and this false sense of moral absolution can hinder antiracist praxis and knowledge. We should note that some evidence suggests that IVR experiences can indeed change the attitudes of users to be more in line with racial justice aims (Banakou, Hanumanthu, and Slater 2016). We do not deny that virtual reality experiences could potentially change users' attitudes in crucial ways. Rather, our point is that these virtual reality experiences encourage white viewers to simulate Blackness in a way that is conducive to synecdoche epistemic arrogance and all of the moral harms that come along with it.

Other, more subtle forms of race simulation are also fertile sites for synecdoche epistemic arrogance. Steve McQueen's 2013 Academy Award winning film *12 Years a Slave* presents the story of Solomon Northup, a Black freeman who, in 1841, was kidnapped in Washington, DC, and subsequently enslaved. The film was created with the purpose of allowing viewers to confront the violent and harsh realities of slavery and white supremacy, yet ironically, it facilitates racial

ignorance by obstructing critical racial consciousness (Mueller and Issa 2016). By focusing on a free black character who is portrayed in early scenes as exceptional and treated like a white person by white characters, *12 Years a Slave* invites white viewers to identify with Northup early on. The film thus tacitly suggests that white viewers can put themselves in Northup's shoes, even as Northrup goes on to experience slavery. As NPR's Terry Gross put it in an interview with McQueen and Chitwetel Ejiofor, who played Northup: 'It's a very painful film to watch because you are putting yourself, as a viewer, in the shoes of Solomon Northup . . . there's so much suffering that you endure secondhand in watching the movie' (NPR 2013: 18:00–34).

Gross not only gets at the idea that the film invites (white viewers) to imagine themselves as Northup, she also remarks that viewers must 'endure' suffering while watching the film. In this way, the film acts as a simulation of Blackness and the experience of slavery for white viewers. With regard to this point, Jennifer Muller and Rula Issa (2016) argue that the depiction of horrific racial brutality and violence in the film encourages white viewers to imagine themselves as having 'undergone' the horrors of slavery as they imagine themselves as Northrup.

This simulated enslavement has the effect of catharsis or absolution for many white filmgoers who view the experience as in some way providing moral purification with regard to complicity in white supremacy. And not only was this emotional catharsis anticipated, but it was celebrated: 'Probably the best movie I've seen in a long time! #12yearsaslave had me crying 3 times' (Mueller and Issa 2016: 142, citing viewer comments). The emotional experience many undergo while watching *12 Years a Slave* feels like labor to many white viewers, and it is easy for them to conflate this feeling with the actual emotional work that is required to engage more deeply and meaningfully with racism. As Mueller and Issa (2016) point out, this phenomenon mirrors Sherene Razack's notion of 'stealing the pain of others' (2007: 375–76)—the consumption of brutalities to confirm one's own moral purity. Thus, the assumption that white people can experience what it is like to be Black leads to the experience of catharsis and moral purification in viewers. This false sense of absolution allows white people to avoid critically interrogating their own complicity in systemic white supremacy.

5. Conclusion

Synecdoche epistemic arrogance is a thinking vice that can lead to moral harms— both structural and interpersonal. Specific forms of synecdoche epistemic arrogance such as the assumption that an ablebodied person can know what it is like to be disabled and the assumption that a white person can understand what it is like to be a Black person living in a racist society arise in conjunction with other morally concerning epistemic patterns. They also operate as part of a complex system of beliefs and attitudes and therefore can often occur in subtle, hard to identify ways. Simulations designed to create empathy and understanding in fact perpetuate synecdoche epistemic arrogance. In explicating synecdoche epistemic

arrogance and the damage it can cause, we hope that we have helped to advance the conversation on how particular epistemic patterns can contribute to injustice.

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