

Mediating Epistemic Harm: Identity and the Wages of Whiteness

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Do poor and working class whites experience epistemic injustice (EI) in circumstances where they collectively act against their own best interest? In the paper under discussion, this claim serves the larger purpose of constraining an “epistemology of ignorance” as the sole belief system motivating white racialized oppression and institutional racism. The author argues for EI on two levels. It is experienced in the forming of beliefs, *formative epistemic injustice*, which is a first degree and non-material harm and in a second degree epistemic harm that is material in nature. The paradigm of this harm is Metz’s account of poor or working class whites in Missouri, Tennessee, and Kansas who consistently have resisted supporting public policies associated with progressive liberalism to the detriment of their physical safety, their children’s education, and public health.¹ It is asserted that whites, although racially privileged, are epistemically exploited and deprived of access to beliefs that aid “self-formation” and full agency.

The author claims to have “located a unique feature of structural ignorance not captured by standard conceptions of willful ignorance.” It is not only active where there is positive interest, but also where there is harm, suggesting that the claim to the benefits of willful ignorance for whites is overstated as an explanation for its persistence. There is an obvious *non sequitur* here. From the fact that willful ignorance harms whites as well as Blacks, it does not follow that its benefits do not underwrite and motivate the persistence of racism. On a more generous rendering, I explore whether the author’s EI analysis is appropriate, and, proposing the contrary, offer an alternative that foregrounds the overriding and pervasive rewards of whiteness.

One reason that the paper’s thesis that whites experience EI is questionable is that they do not meet the *prima facie* criterion of being victims of racial subordination when they support policies that are not in their best interest. The author argues that when whites (Person S) hear and disregard claims *that p* about gun safety, education funding, and Medicare benefits, they are harmed

“in being misinformed about things that one has a strong interest in knowing.” By contrast, Fricker predicates *testimonial injustice*, the meta-category in which EI fits, on prevailing interpersonal relations of power within social hierarchies.² That there is a moral status assigned to knowledge deprivation is consistent with Fricker’s view; so that, if poorer health, weakened public schools, and abiding threats to physical safety of gun ownership resulted from the otherizations of S, EI would obtain. S would then have experienced *prejudicial credibility deficit* which is the undermining of S *qua* knower.³ In the interpersonal relation of speaker and hearer, Fricker’s virtue epistemological account of the latter role’s responsible stance is analogous to the moral theory of ethical virtues. Individuals bear the moral weight in dyadic exchanges of taking seriously a person’s first-hand statements.⁴ For Metzl’s cases, it is not easily clear that S would conform to the speaker in Fricker’s speaker-hearer relation of epistemic harm.

The paper make moves to support the assertion that whites could be disadvantaged epistemically in this way. Gesturing to the inchoate workings of social systems that economically marginalize poor and working class whites, the author departs from the person to person transaction of testimonial injustice to situate the social condition of whites in the broader, systemic and structural forces. It is not a move that fully avails itself of the resources in Fricker’s framework and, in particular, *hermeneutical injustice*, which is the other component of testimonial injustice that addresses political, social, and other institutional harms that can systemically marginalize persons as knowers. Hermeneutical injustice expresses the unfair influence of “social power” on “collective forms of social understanding” in “hermeneutical contexts such as our knowledge of the social world, material and ontological questions.⁵ Even on this account, whether Metzl’s cases qualify is underexplored. The hermeneutical marginalization of which Fricker writes relates to “exclusion from some practice that would have value to the participant.”⁶ Metzl shows that none of these goods (e.g. education, health, and public safety) hold overriding value for this population. It could be argued that they have been manipulated into taking this perspective since their reasons for not supporting the various policies remain ultimately unclear. A discussion of the hermeneutical harm would have considered this aspect.

The epistemic harm as theorized is not an analytic that excavates the

structural impediments hampering their “collective hermeneutical resources” in being able to view particular social policies as being in their best interest, *qua poor and working class whites*, which is the interpretative force the testimonial justice analytic invokes.⁷ As the paper discusses, the epistemic harm is partly explainable in terms of their economic marginalization from political power. However, wealthy whites also advocate such views that are not reducible to raw accumulation of political power. Elizabeth Anderson’s corrective of Fricker’s account of epistemic harm from primarily one of individual actors and responsibility for mitigating these harms to undertaking structural approaches does point the way to expanding relevance beyond groups that have been historically marginalized and by suggesting policy remedies to systemic issues.⁸

In offering an alternate interpretation of Metzler’s cases, I propose, first, that the “willful ignorance” that Mills attributes to white supremacy derives from an inchoate but dedicated social identity based on race.⁹ It is predicated ironically on advancing colorblindness. Willfulness manifests as the choice to unreflectively identify with whiteness in a way that is continuous with a colorblind perspective. Scholarship in the philosophy of race and critical whiteness theory take this view.¹⁰ For example, although MacMullan does not invoke the term “identity,” in his pragmatic theorizing about race, conforming to “habits of whiteness” is the basis of this formal racial category.¹¹ Elaborating on these preconscious and in-grained practices of whiteness and dominance, MacMullan decries the “invisibility of whites and the extent to which liberatory ‘colorblindness’ has become problematic ‘color evasiveness.’” He maintains that whiteness has a “vested interest in eliminating race talk in order to minimize the extent to which we notice and discuss the lingering effects of white racism.”¹² In this way, colorblindness invoked from a positionality of whiteness contributes to perpetuating white supremacy.

Alcoff explores the epistemological implications of white identity.¹³ On this view, in being a perspective from which persons interpret their experiences, whiteness is not different than other social identities and their shaping of belief formation. Alcoff explains that “social identities are differentiated by perceptual orientations, which involves bodily comportments that serve as the background for knowledge, learned practices of perception, and narratives of

meaning within which new observations become incorporated.”¹⁴ In the historical precedent of asserting white dominance while obscuring its influence, the colorblind perspective conceals “the partiality of their perceptions, which will make it less likely they will be able to foreground their perceptual practice.”¹⁵ Similarly Frankenberg, a philosopher of race, writes of the “continual processes of slippage, condensation, and displacement among the constructs of ‘race,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘culture’” that “continue to ‘unmark’ white people while consistently marking and racializing the other.”¹⁶

For Metzl’s white protagonists—who are persons fulfilling the basic phenotypical conditions of whiteness—it is their identification with whiteness and its “color evasive” understanding of education policy, gun safety, and medical services that structures their ignorance. Further, they occupy this position, in common, with others, *qua white persons*. Although there is evidence of structural harm to their status as knowers, the lack of proximity of the choice does not mean that they are not experiencing some degree of agency in their decision. Historian Roediger draws on this paradox in his well-regarded work that makes a claim to the “wages of whiteness” for working class individuals in labor unions in the twentieth century.¹⁷ This state of affairs constitutes willful ignorance as an epistemological indicator of white identity while presupposing a color-blind perspective regarding the historical construction of race in the United States. In this way, the choice to so identify with this group’s collective support of these bad public policies qualifies as a willful decision to deny white privilege, discount critical race interpretation of persistent racial inequality in the United States, and perpetuate notions of white moral and racial superiority.

1 Jonathan Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland* (New York: Basic Book, 2019).

2 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 60.

4 See John Christman, Comments on Elizabeth Anderson, “Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*

1, no. 7 (2012): 15–16.

5 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

6 Fricker, 148.

7 Fricker, 1.

8 Elizabeth Anderson, “Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions,” *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 163–173.

9 Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

10 See Charles Mills, *Whiteness Visible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ruth Frankenberg *White women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993);

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

11 Terrance MacMullan, *Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatic Reconstruction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

12 MacMullan, *Habits of Whiteness*, 152.

13 Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

14 Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 128.

15 Alcoff, 209.

16 Ruth Frankenberg, ed., *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.

17 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and The Making of The American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2017).