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Epistemic Injustice and Religious Experience

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Abstract: I connect recent work in feminist epistemology to the philosophy of religion. Specifically, I apply the concept of epistemic injustice to religious experience. In her canonical work on epistemic injustice Miranda Fricker (2007) explains that there are two kinds of epistemic injustice. First, testimonial injustice occurs when the epistemic worth of the testimony of a speaker is unfairly downgraded by the hearer. Second, hermeneutical injustice occurs when an agent lacks the interpretative resources she needs accurately to explain and understand her social experiences, and this puts her at a disadvantage. Epistemic injustice has interesting, and currently underexplored, implications for our assessments of the veracity of religious experiences. I argue that those who report and hence testify about their religious experiences are sometimes subject to epistemic injustice of both sorts. Their testimony is often unfairly downgraded because of prejudices about the speaker's credibility as a testifier. I also argue that as the West increasingly understands itself in naturalistic terms it's also possible that hermeneutical injustice sometimes occurs with respect to religious experience. For instance, someone who understands the world in (mostly) naturalistic terms may lack the conceptual resources fully to understand and explain her religious experiences. My modest conclusion is that if reports and experiences of a religious nature were not subject to epistemic injustice, then there would be more reason to include such experiences as evidence, including sometimes as evidence for non-naturalism.

I. Introduction

This project/chapter connects work in feminist epistemology and the transformative experience literature to the philosophy of religion. Specifically, I apply the concept of epistemic injustice to religious experience. In her work on epistemic injustice Miranda Fricker (2007) explains that there are two kinds of epistemic injustice. First, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly lowered. For instance, the speaker is disbelieved because of their race. Second, hermeneutical injustice occurs when an agent lacks the interpretative resources they need accurately to explain and understand their social experiences and this puts them at a disadvantage (Fricker 2007, 1). For example, a woman is unable to understand her experience in the workplace as a victim of sexual harassment because her society lacks the concept of sexual harassment. She lacks the concept because her group lacks social power.

Epistemic injustice has interesting, and currently underexplored, implications for our assessments of the veracity of transformative experiences. I offer three relatively modest arguments in this chapter. First, I will argue that both speakers and hearers of transformative experiences are sometimes subject to epistemic injustice. Since at least some religious experiences are

transformative experiences, it's possible that individuals who have religious experiences are subject to testimonial injustice on the basis of those experiences. Second, I will argue that those who report and hence testify about their religious experiences are in fact sometimes subject to testimonial injustice. Their testimony (and here I have in mind particularly those in the contemporary global West) is unfairly downgraded because of prejudices about the speaker's epistemic reliability as a testifier. This isn't, strictly speaking, a project in social science and as such I make no claims about how often this type of injustice occurs. I make only the claim that it does in fact occur. Third, I suggest that as the West increasingly understands itself in naturalistic terms it's also possible that hermeneutical injustice sometimes occurs with respect to religious experience. For instance, someone who understands the world in (mostly) naturalistic terms may lack the conceptual resources fully to understand and explain her own religious experience (if indeed she has one). Again, I make no claims about the frequency with which this type of injustice occurs.

II. What is Epistemic Injustice?

Before exploring the connection I want to make between epistemic injustice and religious experience it's important to be clear about what constitutes epistemic injustice. In this section I explain testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. I will make no attempt at a complete survey of the epistemic injustice literature here.¹ I'll only highlight some the main themes in the literature, with particular reliance on Fricker's canonical work, which will be sufficient for my purposes.

1. *Testimonial Injustice*

Testimonial injustice occurs when a testifier is given less credibility in her report about proposition P than is (epistemically) deserved, simply because she is part of a certain social group. Fricker believes that part of the intrinsic value of humans is their rational capacity, and thus harming someone as a knower ultimately constitutes an intrinsic harm. She rightly observes that epistemic injustice also hurts the perpetrator since she might fail to gain new knowledge.

Fricker explains that "social power is a capacity we have as social agents to influence how things go in the social world" (2007, 9). Likewise, "[w]hen there is an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon such shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, then *identity power* is at work" (2007, 14). The two types of identity power Fricker most often refers to are gender and racial power. She contends that the identity power is involved with how knowledge is passed from speaker to hearer (2007, 16). With respect to this testimonial exchange between speaker and hearer, Fricker suggests that hearers need to use social stereotypes to assess quickly the speaker's credibility. Stereotypes "are widely held associations between a given social

¹ Since Fricker's 2007 book the literature on epistemic injustice has exploded. Likewise, in the last decade the literature social epistemology has exploded more generally.

group and one or more attributes” (Fricker 2007, 30).² Of course, it depends on the specific stereotype in question as to whether it is accurate or misleading with respect to the type of assessment of the speaker that it elicits. Fricker contends that when the stereotype is prejudice *against* the credibility of the speaker there are two harms. First, there is what she calls an ‘epistemic dysfunction’ between the speaker and hearer. By wrongly assessing the speaker’s credibility the hearer loses out on knowledge. Second, the hearer has done something immoral since she undermines the rational capacity of the speaker as a knower (Fricker 2007, 16-17). The ideal hearer, then, needs to “match the level of credibility she attributes to her interlocutor to the evidence that she is offering the truth” (Fricker 2007, 19). She continues:

We are picturing hearers as confronted with the immediate task of gauging how likely it is that what a speaker has said is true. Barring a wealth of personal knowledge of the speaker as an individual, such a judgement of credibility must reflect some kind of social generalization about the epistemic trustworthiness – the competence and sincerity – or people of the speaker’s social type, so that it is inevitable (and desirable) that the hearer should spontaneously avail himself of the relevant generalization in the shorthand form of (reliable) stereotypes. Without such a heuristic aid he will not be able to achieve the normal spontaneity of credibility judgement that is characteristic of everyday testimonial exchange (Fricker 2007, 32).

Of course identity prejudice can inform stereotypes and this can lead to what Fricker refers to as a *negative* identity-prejudicial stereotype. She defines this as “[a] widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment” (Fricker 2007, 35). When this consistently happens it is what Fricker refers to as a *systematic testimonial injustice*. Fricker’s favourite example of a systematic testimonial injustice is from the all-white jury in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the members of which refuse to believe the testimony of a black defendant (23-27).³ In sum, Fricker explains that:

There is of course a purely epistemic harm done when prejudicial stereotypes distort credibility judgements: knowledge that would be passed on to a hearer is not received. This is an epistemic disadvantage to the individual hearer, and a moment of dysfunction in the overall epistemic practice or system. That testimonial injustice damages the epistemic system is directly relevant to social epistemologies such as Goldman’s veritism, for prejudices presents an obstacle to truth, either directly by causing the hearer to miss out on a particular truth, or indirectly by creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas. Further, the fact that prejudice can prevent speakers from successfully putting knowledge into the public domain reveals testimonial

² Fricker points to psychological literature to support her understanding of biases and heuristics. See Shelly E. Taylor 1982; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky 1973, 1974. She believes this understanding is consistent with the current psychological literature which I won’t explore here.

³ The setting of the novel is 1935 Maycomb County, Alabama, where racial tension between the black and white populations is high. In this fictional, though highly realistic story, the black defendant’s testimony is unfairly downgraded and disbelieved because of racial prejudice. The white woman he is accused of assaulting is given a higher degree of credibility than she deserves, again because of racial prejudice.

injustice as a serious form of unfreedom in our collective speech situation – and on Kantian conception, the freedom of our speech situation is fundamental to the authority of the polity, even to the authority of reason itself.” (43)

It's safe to conclude that testimonial injustice does indeed occur and that it is epistemically significant. While Fricker is right to focus much of her book on the ethical harm of testimonial injustice, I will focus on the epistemic harms associated with wrongly assessing the credibility of the speaker who reports religious experience. In particular I'm going to be interested in assessments which give an unfairly low assessment of the speaker's credibility.

2. *Hermeneutical Injustice*

The second kind of epistemic injustice that Fricker examines is what she terms *hermeneutical injustice*. This occurs when someone lacks the conceptual resources to fully understand her experiences because of the social group to which she belongs. For instance, a woman may be unable to understand her experience of sexual harassment in the workplace in such terms because her society lacks the concept of sexual harassment. But it lacks the concept of sexual harassment because the group in question (i.e., women in the workforce) lack the requisite social power.⁴ Thus, hermeneutical injustice is “the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2007, 155). Fricker explains that:

One way of taking the epistemological suggestion that social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understandings is to think of our shared understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups, and to entertain the idea that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible (2007, 148).

Throughout her book Fricker explores how both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice can be avoided by appealing to virtue theory. But my focus will not be on how to avoid epistemic injustice. Likewise, it's worth observing that the concept of hermeneutical injustice has received decidedly less attention in the literature than testimonial injustice. However, I will argue that it has an important role to play when examining epistemic injustice with respect to religious experience.

III. What is Religious Experience?

1. *Introduction to Religious Experience*

⁴ Of course, the workplace is hardly the only place that such harassment can occur.

As stated in the introduction my main goals for this chapter involve applying epistemic injustice to religious experience. I believe that epistemic injustice has had a negative impact on the epistemic assessments of religious experiences both for those who have such experiences, and those who hear testimony about them. But before making these arguments, it's important to get clear on one more concept: religious experience. The difficulty in getting a grasp on religious experience – either in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions or something weaker like Wittgenstein's family resemblance – is that it is a wide-ranging and highly problematized subject. By this I mean it is (and has been) an object of (partial) study by numerous disciplines including, but not limited to, anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, sociology, theology, and even the medical sciences. For the sake of clarity and simplicity (and indeed feasibility) I will focus on just one type of religious experience, namely *intuitive knowing*. I'll also limit my examples of intuitive knowing to an analysis conducted by the philosopher Phillip H. Wiebe. Wiebe works from a database of *reported* religious experiences which will make the application to epistemic injustice all the more obvious.⁵ Of course, what I here will be able to generalize to other types of religious experiences which I will not discuss in this chapter.

2. *Intuitive Knowing*

Wiebe explains that intuitive knowledge represents the “[t]he power of the intellect to grasp concepts and truths intuitively that are neither derivable from sense perception, such as the concept of infinity, nor justifiable by empirical evidence, such as inviolable principles of ethics, has been widely considered a characteristic that sets humans apart from all other earthly creatures” (Wiebe 2015, 1). Plato and Aristotle both held that intuitive knowing was knowledge pertaining to matters that are eternal. In other words, “[t]he intellect came to be seen as capable not only of intuiting the reality of natural laws, a moral order, and an ontological order that includes God, but also of proving our immortality” (Wiebe 2015, 2-3). Augustine thought that intuitive knowing existed in intellectual visions; these are the visions that Wiebe examines in his study (2015, 3-5). These are distinct from corporeal visions (apparitions or ghost sightings). Part of my reason for limiting my discussion of religious experience to intellectual visions is because, at least historically, it is believed that they are superior to other types of religious experience (Wiebe 2015, 5). Finally, the fact that they are not repeatable and hence are directly inaccessible for people who haven't experienced them means knowledge of them can be gained *only via testimony*.⁶ To get a firmer grasp on what constitutes intuitive knowing let's look at two examples of it that Wiebe takes from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Center:

Example 1

Amelia: “It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said ‘God’. I

⁵ Wiebe's entire career has been devoted to the study of religious experience, including corporeal visions. For more see Wiebe 2015, 2014, 2004, 1997.

⁶ They aren't repeatable in the way that scientific experiments can be repeated. There is a clear course of action one can take to repeat a scientific experiment. A religious experience might occur more than once, but it's repeatable in the scientific sense.

knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of ‘that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst’. Of course, I didn’t put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God.” Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that “God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him” (Wiebe 2015, 66).⁷

Example 2

Carol: “I looked up at the snows, but immediately lost all normal consciousness and became engulfed as it were in a great cloud of light and ecstasy of knowing and understanding all the secrets of the universe, and sense of goodness of the Being in whom it seemed all were finally enclosed, and yet in that enclosure utterly liberated. I ‘saw’ nothing in the physical sense... it was as if I were blinded by an internal light. And yet I was ‘looking outward’. It was *not* a ‘dream’, but utterly different, in that the content was of the utmost significance to me and in universal terms. Gradually this sense of ecstasy faded and slowly I came to my ordinary sense and perceived I was sitting as usual and the mountains were as usual in daily beauty.” Carol says that the aftermath of the experience was in the form of a wonderful mental and spiritual glow, and then adds: “I became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthy reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding. This conviction has remained with me, but in an intellectual form; it has not, however, prevented me from feeling acute personal depression and disappointment time and again, throughout my life.” She also relates that later in life in she developed a strong interest in Buddhism, but after that felt that it was founded on a negative premise, whereas the universe seemed to her to be positive (Wiebe 2015, 71).⁸

Before being in a position to formulate my arguments, I need to explain why experiences of intuitive knowing are transformative experiences. I also need to show that intellectual visions do sometimes constitute evidence for particular propositions. After that I will be in a position to argue that there are cases where reports of intuitive knowing (among other types of religious experiences) are subject to epistemic injustice.⁹

⁷ Here’s an example of intersubjective sensory experience examined by Emma Heathcote-James, and hence *not* one an example of intuitive knowing: “Suddenly there was a man in white standing in front of the [baptismal] font about eighteen inches away. He was a man but he was totally, utterly different from the rest of us. He was wearing something long, like a robe, but it was so white it was almost transparent... He was just looking at us. It was the most wondering feeling. Not a word was spoken; various people began to touch their arms because it felt like having warm oiled poured over you. The children came forward with their mouths wide open. Then all of a sudden – I suppose it was a few seconds, but time seemed to stop – the angel was gone. Everyone who was there was quite convinced that an angel came to encourage us” (Wiebe 2015, 47). For more on other types of religious experiences not of intuitive knowing see Heathcote-James 2012; Maxwell and Tschudin 1990; Wiebe 1997.

⁸ There are underexplored connections between intuitive knowing and reformed epistemology. Indeed, it could be argued that reports of intuitive knowing somehow confirm the truth of reformed epistemology. This is a connection worth exploring, but it is well beyond the scope of this chapter. See Plantinga 2000 for more.

⁹ There might be important connections between religious experience and L.A. Paul’s recent work on transformative experience. However, much of Paul’s work focuses on the *choice* of whether to engage in a (potentially) transformative

3. *Intuitive Knowing as Evidence*

These two cases of intuitive knowing are meant, in part, to have evidential value similar to the way Fricker's examples are meant to have evidential value. The black defendant's testimony is *evidence* about the truth of whether he committed the crime. It's evidence for or against a particular proposition. The cases of intuitive knowing are analogous to this in that they're also evidence. Recall that Amelia says that she became aware of that 'sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst'. She subsequently identifies this feeling with God. Her experience led her to be convinced that God exists. It constituted evidence for the truth of the proposition 'God exists'. Likewise, Carol says that as a result of her experience she 'became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthly reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding.' While at one time she identified this as support for a Buddhist understanding of universe, she seems to have concluded that some sort of positive divine reality exists. Carol's account is probably too vague to conclude that she believes in a theistic God because of her experience. But it seems this experience did constitute evidence for non-naturalism in some important sense.

We can't accurately assess the credibility of Amelia or Carol as testifiers since their accounts are anonymous reports without detailed background information. However, the type of case I have in mind is one from a testifiers who are generally reliable testifiers in other domains. They are trustworthy people in general. This assumes that if an agent is trustworthy in a domain Y that they are also trustworthy in domain X. It would be *prima facie* irrational not to trust that agent with respect to X without a defeater for doing so. The defeater could be specific to the particular agent with respect to X, or it could be a defeater the trustworthiness of the domain of X in general. The former seems unlikely in the cases of intuitive knowing, but perhaps the latter type of defeater might be raised here. For one might think that religious experiences (i.e. the domain in question) are generally unreliable. But arguments for this conclusion (i.e. explaining the defeater) would be required. And of course, a detailed discussion whether religious experiences are reliable is beyond the scope of this chapter. For my concern is about testimony of such experiences. In sum, while I can't evaluate Amelia's or Carol's credibility I assume that experiences of intuitive knowing have been reported by trustworthy people in the past. Thus, for my purposes I'm going to assume that Amelia and Carol are examples of reliable testifiers.

IV. **Epistemic Injustice and Religious Experience**

In this section I argue that those who have religious experiences are sometimes subject to epistemic injustice, at least within the social context of the educated classes in the West. Thus, part of establishing my claims rests on establishing a particular understanding of the social status of religion in the West. Inasmuch as the social status of religion is marginalized, the reports of religious experience sometimes will be rejected because of negative stereotypes. Here are some

experience. While the experiences I am examining here are indeed transformative they individuals did not choose to experience them. For more see Paul 2014.

examples from public figures which represent the type of sentiment about religion that I have in mind:

Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience.

- Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007, 56)

You don't get to advertise all the good that your religion does without first scrupulously subtracting all the harm it does and considering seriously the question of whether some other religion, or no religion at all, does better.

- Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006, 56)

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

- Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006, 51)

The New Atheists and their kin represent an attitude toward religion and religious believers that is growing in the West. There is a very real sentiment that that religious believers are dumb, naïve, behind the times, and fundamentally irrational. Thus, my motivation in presenting these quotes isn't to evaluate their truth value. I simply intend them to be representative of how an increasing number of people in the West view religion.

1. Testimonial Injustice and Religious Experience

I'm now in a position to offer my first argument about religious experience and epistemic injustice. Here's an argument for the conclusion that those who report religious experiences and are sometimes subject to testimonial injustice. Of course, this implies that those who receive such reports potentially lose out on knowledge:

- (1) T is a generally reliable and trustworthy testifier about their experiences.
- (2) If hearer H rejects testifier T's testimony about a religious experience R because of testimonial injustice, then both H and T are harmed.
- (3) Hearer H rejects T's testimony about religious experience R because of testimonial injustice.

Therefore,

- (4) H and T are harmed. (T isn't believed and H loses out on the truth about R)

Notice that the harms in question here are *epistemic*. We could also add another conclusion which is that T is harmed in her rational capacity as a knower. But again, this isn't going to be my focus. Let's examine this argument in more detail. Premise (1) is simply the assumption that T is generally reliable with respect to R. Premise (2) represents the conditional statement that rejecting testimony because of epistemic injustice is a harm. (3) is the interesting premise and the one in need of an explanation. I'm not making any specific claims about how often (3) obtains. My suspicion is that it occurs quite frequently, but it only needs to happen once in order for this argument to apply to real-world cases. Though admittedly, this project becomes much less interesting if something like (3) rarely, if ever, obtains. A key to understanding (3) is to understand *why* when someone rejects a report of religious experience it could constitute a form of testimonial injustice.

If a testifier's report of religious experience is rejected on grounds akin to the ones in the above mentioned quotes (which could very well be partly unconscious on the hearer's part) then it has been rejected unfairly. It has been rejected because of negative *prejudicial stereotypes* about the social group(s) to which the testifier (i.e. the religious believer) belongs.¹⁰ Part of what I'm assuming here is that the New Atheist's attitude toward religion is epistemically irrational. If one takes them to have proven naturalism to be true, then their bias against religious belief is not necessarily unjust.¹¹ But if T is generally unreliable then it seems unfair to dismiss her testimony as having positive evidential value, even if one is a committed naturalist. Thus, in the argument about testimonial injustice occurs and the hearer is epistemically harmed. Conclusion (4) logically follows from (1) through (3).

None of this is to say that reports of religious experience must always be believed if testimonial injustice is to be avoided. If the testifier in question is known to be unreliable on such matters then the hearer is within her epistemic rights to ignore or reject the testifier's report. Maybe the testifier is known to use psychedelic drugs, or prone to exaggeration, or often inappropriately posits supernatural explanations for events that have much simpler (and more obvious) naturalistic explanations. Nothing in my argument rules out rejecting testimony about religious experience based on these and other relevant considerations. In other words, it's possible for there to be (partial) defeaters to T's testimony about R. But if T is generally reliable, and in the case in question isn't experiencing cognitive dysfunction, etc., non-question-begging defeaters don't seem easily forthcoming. When reports of a religious experience are rejected merely for the reason that they happen to be religious, and not because of doubts about the testifier's reliability, it becomes an open question whether testimonial injustice has occurred. This concludes my first argument about religious experience and epistemic injustice.

2. *Pre-Emptive Testimonial Injustice and Religious Experience*

The above argument leads to a different argument about what I believe is a kind of pre-emptive testimonial injustice.¹² This type of argument isn't found directly in the epistemic injustice

¹⁰ It's true that someone who reports having a religious experience might not be a religious believer. Indeed, sometimes these experiences are influential in one's conversion. But it's true, strictly speaking, that the reports of an experience does not necessarily entail that she is a religious believer. However, as long as there is a negative prejudice about religious belief, testimonial injustice about such experiences can still occur regardless of whether a religious believer is the one reporting it.

¹¹ Though it might not be unjust in such a case, it's probably still unjust since it's rooted in biased reasoning.

¹² My idea for this argument (and indeed, this entire section) comes from Travis Dumsday.

literature, but it is closely related. There is social scientific evidence that *many* people fail to report their religious experience in the first place (or only report it to family members and close friends) because of the fear of prejudice. They fear that already existing (negative) prejudices about religion implies that their report won't be taken seriously by others. This is a kind of pre-emptive epistemic injustice since the negative biases of would-be hearers prevents the testimony from even occurring. This constitutes a kind of epistemic injustice because it is the bias of would-be hearers which causes the problem, along with the fact that the would-be hearer potentially loses out on the knowledge that would have been provided by the report.

(5) If hearer would H reject testifier T's testimony about a religious experience R because of testimonial injustice, then both H and T are harmed.

(6) If T reasonably believes that H would reject T's testimony about a religious experience R because of testimonial injustice then T doesn't report R to H at all.

(7) T reasonably believes that H would reject T's testimony about religious experience R.

Therefore,

(8) H never hears about R as a result of (pre-emptive) epistemic injustice.

Therefore,

(9) Both T and H are harmed. (T doesn't testify and H loses out on the truth about R)

I'm not claiming that some kind of pre-emptive testimonial injustice necessarily occurs if T fails to report her religious experience. But there is social scientific data suggesting that (7) obtains frequently enough to create a legitimate worry. If this is right, then it follows that knowledge is lost as a result of a kind of pre-emptive testimonial injustice.¹³

3. *Hermeneutical Injustice and Religious Experience*

The other argument I want to put forward is about hermeneutical injustice. Consider the following argument for the conclusion that those who have religious experiences are sometimes subject to hermeneutical injustice:

(10) If Agent S has religious experience R but rejects it (including to failing to understand it) because of hermeneutical injustice then S is harmed.

(11) Agent S has religious experience R but rejects it because of hermeneutical injustice.

Therefore,

¹³ If one objects that the concept of pre-emptive epistemic injustice is inconsistent with Fricker's work, then simply replace the term with whatever concept one prefers. One can simply understand my argument as inspired by epistemic injustice. The key point is that knowledge appears to be potentially lost because of prejudice about religious belief.

(12) S is harmed. (S loses out on the truth about R)

Premise (10) represents the conditional of a person rejecting a religious experience because of hermeneutical injustice. With respect to (11) it's worth observing that a growing number of people are raised in non-religious environments, particularly in the contemporary West. They do not have a specific shared religious faith within their family unit or her broader community. Likewise, their government does not take religious education to be one of its responsibilities. An increasing number of people in the West understand the world, from childhood even, in purely naturalistic terms. Not only that, but they tend to view religion in hostile terms. I make no normative claims about this situation in and of itself. Indeed, lessons from history may well suggest it's a good idea for governments to enforce religious freedom, while not embracing the truth of any one particular religion. This feature of liberal democratic societies is often viewed as a kind of moral progress. But all of this means that it's quite probable that there are people in the contemporary West who, if they had a genuine religious experience, would lack the conceptual resources to understand that experience as such. This isn't to assume that genuine religious experiences indeed occur. I'm merely making the observation that if they did occur there are people who couldn't make sense of them.

If (11) obtains it has the interesting result of possibly reinforcing naturalism even though the experience in question could actually be evidence *against* naturalism. This is because the person who has a religious experience and lacks the conceptual resources to count it as such won't count it as evidence against naturalism.

V. Objections

1. *Religious Believers Don't Lack Social Power*

One might object to my arguments by noting that a lack of social power is essential in Fricker's account of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs because of the social group to which the testifier belongs. Hermeneutical injustice occurs because someone's social standing is so low that they don't have the conceptual resources to conceptualize appropriately the injustice. The objector might protest that those within who belong to the major world religious traditions are not downtrodden socially. Their social status precludes them from experiencing the type of epistemic injustice that I've been drawing upon from Fricker.

Reply:

In cases where believer's social status precludes them from experiencing epistemic injustice (with respect to reporting or recognizing religious experience) then it's true that my arguments don't apply to such cases. But notice that I've been careful to limit the scope of my arguments. I have claimed that in the West cases of epistemic injustice occur with respect to religious experience. I haven't made any claims about how often they occur. In fact, the group I've had in mind are the relatively educated middle and upper classes in liberal democratic societies. Of course in theocratic

states, or secular states with more deference for religion, my arguments won't apply. And I never claim as much.¹⁴

It's also worth noting that even in the contemporary West some religious believers are clearly epistemically underprivileged.¹⁵ For instance, a gay religious believer who claims to have had a pro-gay religious experience is a believer who lacks social power. They may not only experience epistemic injustice when testifying to those sceptical of religion, but they will may well experience injustice when testifying to other religious believers. The same could be true of women who have religious experiences directing them to go into religious ministries traditionally reserved for men. These ideas show that whether one experiences epistemic injustice with respect to reporting religious experiences is connected different social power which is a multifaceted phenomenon.

2. *Testimonial Injustice is Incidental, not Systematic*

In explaining the difference between incidental and systematic injustice Fricker asks us to:

Imagine, for instance... a panel of referees on a science journal have a dogmatic prejudice against a certain research method. It might reasonably be complained by a would-be contributor that authors who present hypotheses on the basis of the disfavoured method receive a prejudicially reduced level of credibility from the panel. Thus the prejudice is such as to generate a genuine testimonial injustice... Although such a testimonial injustice may be grievous for the careers of the would-be contributors, and perhaps even for the progress of science, none the less its impact on the subject's life is, let us assume, highly localized. That is to say, the prejudice in question (against a certain scientific method) does not render the subject vulnerable to any other kinds of injustice (legal, economic, political). Let us say that the testimonial injustice produce here is *incidental*." (27)

Fricker concludes that while this is clearly a form of legitimate testimonial injustice, it isn't systematic. This is because "[s]ystematic testimonial injustices... are produced not be prejudice *simpliciter*, but specifically by those prejudices that track the subject through different dimensions of social activity – economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious, and so on" (Fricker 2007, 27). The objection here is that epistemic injustice about religious experience is, at best, incidental and not systematic. This objection isn't so much a denial of the claim that those who report religious experiences are ever subject to testimonial injustice, it's an objection to the severity of the injustice I've discussed.

Reply:

Even if this is objection is right, it ultimately doesn't detract from my main claims. As it stands, it's probably fair to characterize testimonial injustice about religious experience as somewhere between Fricker's example in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the scientist example just mentioned in the objection. For my purposes, it does not matter whether this type of injustice turns out to be

¹⁴ While I haven't claimed as much for the kinds of cases I have in mind here, it is possible that certain religious minorities in the West (e.g. Jewish or Muslim groups) do lack the kind of social power Fricker mentions.

¹⁵ Thanks to Blake Hereth for brining this response and specific examples to my attention.

incidental or systematic. Even if it's only incidental, it still constitutes an epistemic harm in the particular cases in which it occurs. It still has the potential to limit a hearer's ability to gain new knowledge, or in this particular case evidence in favour of religious belief (or more broadly, against naturalism).

Likewise, while it's true that Fricker is primarily concerned with examining systematic epistemic injustice, she still acknowledges that incidental injustices are indeed injustices. For instance, she writes that "[t]o categorize a testimonial injustice as incidental is not to belittle it ethically. Localized prejudices and the injustices they produce may be utterly disastrous for the subject, especially if they are repeated frequently so that the injustice is *persistent*" (Fricker 2007, 29). This objection is about the scope and strength of the type of epistemic injustice I'm suggesting occurs with respect to religious experience. It does not hurt the main claims I've made here, even if it's right.¹⁶

3. *There are Conceptual Frameworks for Understanding Religious Experience*

A similar objection can be raised regarding the strength of the hermeneutical injustice that occurs with respect to religious experience. Part of the idea behind hermeneutical injustice is that an agent lacks the conceptual resources to understand her experiences. The objector could point out that this hardly applies to religious experience. The major world religions come with a rich history and tradition, including conceptual frameworks for understanding religious experiences. Thus, someone who has a religious experience cannot experience hermeneutical injustice.

Reply:

Fricker's argument for hermeneutical injustice is backwards looking in that up to the point of time at which an experience occurs there is no conceptual framework by which to understand said experience. My claim about religious experience is different in that it's forward looking in the sense that while in the past there may have been the conceptual resources required to understand the experience, such conceptual resources are no longer available for many people. It doesn't seem to matter which direction one looks. The main point is that one lacks the conceptual resources to understand the experience in question. This is true for the individuals in the West to which I refer, even if such conceptual frameworks exist for some.

4. *Religious Experience Doesn't Provide Knowledge*

The last objection I address suggests that reports of religious experience, even when not subject to epistemic injustice, do not provide evidence for religious belief. Religious experiences do not

¹⁶ It's worth noting that as I write this paper in Canada in 2018 I believe that there's a strong argument to be made that this type of epistemic injustice about religious experience is leaning toward systematic injustice if it's not already there. It's true that I write this from my own anecdotal experience and perspective. And I'm not sure how one could definitively demonstrate this to be the case. Perhaps a social scientist could survey responses of certain groups in the West in an attempt to establish this claim. Still one should reflect on the recent challenges to the charity tax exempt status of religious organizations, accreditation challenges to religious schools, and other legal and political challenges religious believers have recently faced within Canada. I won't press these points further, as doing so is well beyond the scope of my project.

support the truth of propositions whose content describes a feature or doctrine of a particular religion.

Reply:

It's simply not true that all cases of religious experience fail to support a specific proposition about religion. But I don't need to defend this claim in order to answer this objection. Fricker often uses the term 'knowledge' to refer to what the hearer may lose out on if she commits epistemic injustice. However, this understanding is consistent with a variety of epistemic ends such as true belief, rational belief, justified true belief, understanding, etc. One way to avoid positing specific religious propositions, the knowledge of which is lost out on when epistemic injustice occurs, is to claim simply that religious experiences like intuitive knowing are *evidence*. It's an open question what type and how much of evidence they constitute. It's an open question just what they support as evidence. But that naturalism has a difficult time explaining and understanding religious experience needs to be considered. Thus, religious experience may constitute evidence against naturalism, or evidence in favour or non-naturalism. I don't claim that my arguments say anything more than this about the epistemic significance of religious experience.¹⁷

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, it's worth observing that some may simply reject religious experience on the grounds that they're more sure that naturalism is true than that non-naturalism or super-naturalism is true. This is similar to the response that G.E. Moore offers in reply to the sceptic. I'm doubtful that this is a legitimate argumentative strategy, as it seems to do little more than beg-the-question against one's opponent. But even if this is an appropriate strategy the naturalist needs to acknowledge that when reports of religious experience occur, that they can't be legitimately ignored and that they might constitute evidence against naturalism. This is true even if she is rational to continue to believe that naturalism is true.

To date contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has had little to do with feminist epistemology in particular, and social epistemology more broadly. In this project I've offered one example of how to connect these two fields, though religious experience itself is hardly at the forefront of current research in the philosophy of religion either. I won't attempt to diagnose the reason(s) for this current state of affairs, but given the highly social nature of religious belief and practice there is surely much to be gained from making connections between those beliefs and practices with the ideas in social epistemology.¹⁸ Both fields can enrich one another and I look forward to that taking place.

¹⁷ Of course, it's true that naturalistic explanations of religious experience could undermine them without epistemic injustice occurring. But I'm not evaluating those explanations here.

¹⁸ The epistemology of disagreement is perhaps starting to be an exception. For example, see Dormandy forthcoming; Holley 2013; Kraft 2007; Lackey 2014; Pittard 2014; Reining 2016; Thune 2010. But epistemic injustice, the testimony literature more broadly, epistemic paternalism, etc., are topics which remain largely unexplored by philosophers of religion.

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