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On hermeneutical openness and wilful hermeneutical ignorance

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Abstract

*In this paper I argue for the relevance of the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer for contemporary feminist scholarship on epistemic injustice and oppression. Specifically, I set out to argue for the Gadamerian notion of hermeneutical openness as an important hermeneutic virtue, and a potential remedy for existing epistemic injustices. In doing so I follow feminist philosophers such as Linda Martín Alcoff and Georgia Warnke that have adopted the insights of Gadamer for the purpose of social and feminist philosophy. Further, this paper is positioned in relation to a recent book chapter by Cynthia Nielsen and David Utsler in which they argue for the complementarity, and intersecting themes and concerns of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice. However, Nielsen and Utsler solely focus on Fricker's conception of epistemic injustice and the two forms of epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, that she identifies. In this paper I expand their analysis by considering other forms of epistemic injustice such as wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. Thus, this paper contributes to the budding literature on the relevance of Gadamer's work for the debates pertaining to epistemic injustice and oppression by expanding such analysis to other forms of epistemic injustice, and by further arguing for the strength of Gadamer's work in terms of offering relevant insights for the reduction and remedy of existing epistemic injustices.*

**Keywords:** Gadamer, hermeneutics, epistemic injustice, wilful ignorance, hermeneutical openness

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1. Introduction

This article is primarily an argument for the relevance of Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004, 1976) hermeneutics for contemporary scholarship on epistemic injustice and oppression. Specifically, I argue for the Gadamerian notion of *hermeneutical openness* as a hermeneutic virtue, and a potential remedy for existing epistemic injustice and oppression. In doing so I follow feminist philosophers such as Linda Martín Alcoff (2005), Georgia Warnke (2015) and Lauren Swayne Barthold (2016) who draw upon the insights of Gadamer in their social and

feminist philosophy. This article is positioned in direct relation to a recent book chapter by Cynthia Nielsen and David Utsler (2022), in which they argue for the complementarity and intersecting themes of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice. I expand Nielsen & Utsler's (2022) analysis beyond the initial Frickerian conception of epistemic injustice and consider further forms of epistemic injustice. The forms of epistemic injustice that are the main focus of this article are wilful hermeneutical ignorance as identified by Gaile Pohlhaus (2012), and contributory injustice as defined by Kristie Dotson (2012). I argue that we can understand cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance as cases where the hearer fails to exercise appropriate hermeneutical openness, which in turn also situates such a failure as a partial cause of contributory injustice. Thus, this article contributes to the nascent literature on the relevance of Gadamer's work for the debates pertaining to epistemic injustice and oppression by considering other forms of epistemic injustice, and by further arguing for the strength of Gadamer's work in terms of offering relevant insights for both identifying the wrongs in cases of epistemic injustice, but also for offering pathways towards the reduction and remedy of existing epistemic injustices.

This article proceeds in the following manner. The second section consists of a brief overview of feminist engagements with Gadamerian hermeneutics before turning to the recent scholarship that combines the insights of Gadamer with feminist theories of epistemic injustice and oppression that has inspired this article. Section 3 is dedicated to outlining hermeneutical openness as a hermeneutical virtue of both epistemic and ethical significance. In section 4 the two forms of epistemic injustice that are the focus of this article, wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice, are introduced. In the penultimate section, section 5, I argue that hermeneutical openness can serve as a counterfactual that makes it possible to pin down the epistemic, and ethical failure of the wilfully ignorant and that the virtue of hermeneutical openness would serve well as a corrective to the agential dimension of cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. Thus, the virtue of hermeneutical openness has a role to play in the alleviation of such epistemic injustices. The article then concludes in section 6, where I summarize the arguments made, and their contribution to the existing scholarship on the intersection of Gadamer's hermeneutics and epistemic injustice.

## **2. Gadamerian hermeneutics, feminist philosophy and epistemic injustice**

Feminist philosophers have had an ambivalent relationship to the philosophy of Hans-George Gadamer. Gadamer has been criticized by feminists for his failure

to address issues of power and privilege, the inaudibility of marginal voices in his work, the lack of attention paid to embodiment, his attempt to rehabilitate prejudice and tradition, as well as for his view that philosophy is politically incompetent (Code 2003; Warnke 2015). Lorraine Code (2003) has argued that for feminists who are aware of the social and political exclusion and oppression of women throughout history it is hard work to find a social-political ally, or even a silent friend of feminist projects in Gadamer. This leads Code (2003) to suggest feminist readers of Gadamer often read him "against the grain". That is, they read Gadamer beyond the omission of women and the marginalised Other in order to unearth valuable insight and tools from the Gadamerian approach to language, history, knowledge and the arts. Similarly, Veronica Vasterling (2003) has argued that while there is much for feminisms to resist in the thought of Gadamer, there is also much to gain from reading him. The Gadamerian project shares many themes and presuppositions with feminist thinking, which makes it less surprising that at least some feminist philosophers have turned to Gadamer rather than discounting him as a source of insight. Lorraine Code (2003) argued already in 2003 that that turning to Gadamerian hermeneutics, if critically enacted, opens the possibility of developing a responsible, situated knowing.

Gadamer (2004) illustrates in *Truth and Method* that hermeneutic understanding is complex and multifaceted, both historically conscious and conscious of its own historicity. Lorraine Code (2003) argues that Gadamerian hermeneutics, in which knowing is thought of as engaged, situated, dialogic and sensitive to history offers important tools and insights for feminist theorists of subjectivity, agency, history, and knowledge. However, while the scholarship on epistemic injustice is explicitly situated at the intersection of epistemology and ethics, it is important to note that Gadamer himself, at least in his early work, did not conceive of his hermeneutics as an epistemology (Code 2003). However, considering how central notions such as understanding and interpretation are for Gadamer, it is no surprise that feminists interested in epistemology have found value in his hermeneutics. One prominent feminist philosopher who have drawn upon Gadamer's hermeneutics for the purposes of feminist epistemology is Linda Martín Alcoff (1996; 2003; 2005). Alcoff (2003) argues that there is plenty of value in Gadamer's hermeneutics and highlight, among other things, his openness to alterity and the move from knowledge to understanding as of particular interest for feminists. Likewise, Susan-Judith Hoffman (2003) argues that many of Gadamer's ideas are in solidarity with feminist theorizing. Hoffman (2003) similarly to Alcoff (2003) highlights how Gadamer's emphasises the importance of difference, but also his notion of understanding as an inclusive dialogue, his account of prejudices as positive conditions of an understanding

that must always remain provisional, and his account of language as on-going, developing project.

The literature on the intersection of Gadamerian hermeneutics and epistemic injustice is relatively small, albeit growing. The existing engagements with the philosophy of Gadamer in relation to questions of epistemic injustice has so far has primarily been concerned with the two types of epistemic injustice identified by Fricker in her seminal book from 2007, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Cynthia Nielsen & David Utsler's (2022) account is the primary focus in this paper, and they are mainly concerned with testimonial injustice. Georgia Warnke's (2015) analysis is primarily focused on hermeneutical injustice, and Burke (2022) engages with both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. However, scholars of epistemic injustice have identified a range of different types of epistemic injustice beyond the initial two forms identified by Fricker (2007). In the last few sections of this paper, I expand the analysis offered in the existing literature on Gadamer and epistemic injustice by considering two further forms of epistemic injustice: Wilful Hermeneutical Ignorance as theorised by Gaile Pohlhaus (2012), and contributory injustice as theorised by Kristie Dotson (2012). In doing so, I aspire to not only expand the scope of the literature, but also to illustrate the relevance, and strength of Gadamer's thought as both a diagnostic tool for identifying the wrong in epistemic injustices, but also for offering action-guiding proposal towards possible remedies to existing epistemic injustices.

Nielsen & Utsler (2022) argue that while the work of Gadamer, Fricker and Axel Honneth (1995) constitute important contributions to the theorisation of mutual recognition on their own, the three accounts also complement each other. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on their account of the complementarity between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Fricker's theorisation of epistemic injustice in order to identify and spell out the virtue of hermeneutical openness. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) highlight several intersecting themes and concerns between the Gadamerian, and the Frickerian projects. One such intersecting theme is the role of prejudice in our epistemic lives.

For Gadamer (2004) prejudice is both inescapable and can have positive value. Prejudice orients hermeneutical engagements, functions as a condition for understanding and can serve a corrective role for understandings once they become exposed in interactions with others. James Risser (1997:68) has described Gadamer's view on prejudice as one in which "prejudice need not be taken in its pejorative sense as one-sided distortion of the truth, but is simply that condition in which we at first experience something". For Gadamer (2004, 1976), the role of prejudice in hermeneutical engagements intersects with his

emphasis on how historical situatedness, language, tradition, and community shapes one's understanding of oneself and the world. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) emphasises that for Gadamer human beings are historically and socially shaped beings who inherit various prejudices, customs and practices, which in turn can be revised and changed through our interactions with others. However, one alone does not control the various ways in which one's understanding is culturally, historically and communally shaped (Nielsen & Utsler 2022).

Warnke (2015) argues that Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition is more benign than what the somewhat provocative terminology might suggest. Warnke (2015) posits that for Gadamer 'tradition' signals shared understandings that history pass onto us, and prejudices reflect the pre-orientations, or pre-judgements that it offers us. Warnke (2015) elaborates the Gadamerian view starting from the recognition that one cannot escape or deny participating in history. Rather, one comes to one's projects in media res, that is within a world that one did not create, and that has already formed interpretations of its possibilities and limitations. It is possible to intervene in this world, and to rethink and change these interpretations but one cannot begin anew. Thus, we are inescapably prejudiced, in the sense that prejudice means historically situated and always directed towards that which we are trying to understand. However, our historical traditions are themselves clearly not benign (Warnke 2015). While Gadamer (2004) is primarily concerned with the richness of what history brings, such as ideals to aspire to and values and norms worth preserving. Historical traditions also undoubtedly include problematic aspects such as racism, sexism, homophobia among many other troubling dimensions (Warnke 2015). It is this, the more problematic aspects of shared understanding that Fricker (2007) targets with her conception of hermeneutical injustice. She targets lacunae in the collective hermeneutical resource available to individuals and groups to articulate their experiences.

Gadamer (2004) offers an account of prejudice that highlights the function of prejudice as a condition for understanding, and for correcting misunderstanding. Nielsen and Utsler (2022) describes this corrective dimension as one that takes place when our prejudices are revealed to be flawed or problematic when exposed to the claims of the others, and thus in need of revision. That way prejudice can facilitate opportunities for greater understanding, as they make possible further understanding. This stands in contrast to Miranda Fricker's focus on the role of prejudice in instances of epistemic injustice. In her seminal book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Miranda Fricker shines a light on ethical aspects of two basic epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others through telling them and making sense of our

own social experiences. Fricker's (2007) aim is to develop an account of a type of injustice that is distinctively epistemic. An injustice that consists fundamentally of a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower, such as being mistreated, dismissed or put at an unfair disadvantage as a knower. Fricker (2007) identifies two forms of distinctively epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer gives less credibility to a speaker's word than they ought to due to an identity prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage to testimonial injustice, it occurs when a gap in collective hermeneutical resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of, or expressing their social experience. Fricker's conception of epistemic injustice posits that they are both epistemic, and ethical wrongs. With her conception of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker's analysis goes beyond just considering the ways tradition shape collective understanding, to instead consider the conditions of how those understandings were generated. Thus Fricker illuminates how shared hermeneutical resources can be skewed to the advantage of some, and to the disadvantage of others. Following Fricker one might want to fault Gadamer's attempt to rehabilitate prejudice and tradition for ignoring damaging prejudices that marginalize certain groups and preventing them from contributing to tradition and its projections of meaning. In this sense, traditions are not only sets of collective hermeneutic resources, but also products of power, exclusion and misrepresentations (Warnke 2015). However, as Warnke argues, it is not clear that Gadamer was as indifferent to these issues as one might think as a great of deal his work is concern with the possibility of going beyond one's hermeneutic limits and assumptions. A key to doing so for Gadamer is rejecting the kind of epistemic relations of power that Fricker is concerned with (Warnke 2015).

At the heart of Fricker's paradigmatic cases of testimonial injustice lies what she calls negative identity prejudices. That is prejudices with a negative valence held against some people qua their social type. These prejudices distort the hearer's perception of speakers from that social type, and thus their credibility judgement of the testimony of those speakers (Fricker 2007, 35-36). Nielsen & Utsler (2022) similarly describe this type of prejudice, as a type of prejudice that decide in advance what specific groups of people are, and what they are capable of as knowers. They argue that these identity prejudices function as distorting lenses that impede genuine exchanges between speaker and hearer. That is, the distorting lense shapes the hearer's perception such that the claim of the other is forced to conform to the hearer's perception of, and prejudice towards, the Other. Thus, testimonial injustice forecloses the possibility for dialogue in which the hearer can learn and be challenged by the testimony of the speaker

as the speaker is assigned less credibility than they are due, and thus effectively silenced.

While Fricker herself doesn't cite Gadamer, she is aware of the role that prejudice plays in our everyday epistemic lives. She is aware of the ubiquity of prejudice and argues that without prejudgments and heuristics it would not be possible to achieve the spontaneity of everyday testimonial exchanges (Fricker 2007, 32). Further, she suggests that much of everyday testimony requires the hearer to put speakers into social categories, and that prejudice and stereotypes 'grease the wheels' in testimonial exchanges (Fricker 2007, 32). However, with questions of how individuals and groups can be wronged being the main occupation of Fricker's (2007) project, it is unsurprising that her focus is primarily on negative social stereotypes and how they affect our epistemic lives. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) highlight an important difference between Fricker's work and that of Gadamer. Fricker's analysis sheds light on identity prejudices that are directed towards a person qua their belonging to a particular social group. In cases of testimonial injustice, the unfair credibility deficit is imposed upon the person's testimony because they belong to a particular social group. In contrast, in his discussions of genuine dialogical engagements Gadamer (2004) is primarily focused on the subject at hand, rather than on prejudgments about the epistemic, and moral status of the speaker.

However, as Nielsen & Utsler (2022) point out, this does not necessarily mean that Fricker's and Gadamer's accounts of prejudice are fundamentally at odds or incompatible. They instead argue that we ought to keep in mind the different aims of the two projects. Fricker's is primarily interested in cases where dialogues break down and fail, while Gadamer primarily is focused on what counts as genuine dialogue. Thus, Nielsen & Utsler (2022) suggest that we can think of Fricker and Gadamer's engagements with prejudice as not in contention, but rather as complementary and mutually strengthening. Fricker's analysis of the detrimental epistemic, and ethical consequences of identity-prejudicial credibility deficits that go beyond Gadamer's focus on the role of prejudice in genuine dialogues, is on Nielsen & Utsler's (2022) view a complement, and a welcome addition to Gadamerian hermeneutics, as it offers a substantial analysis of engagements in which the voice of the Other is silenced. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) astutely points out that while Gadamer's project in *Truth and Method* did not focus on negative stereotypes, or identity prejudice in the Frickerian sense, he was not unaware of harmful unequal relations of power, manipulative discourses, and exploitation that harm both humans (Nielsen & Utsler 2022). Rather, Nielsen & Utsler find in Gadamer an emphasis on openness, and anticipatory listening that is directed towards a different way of being in the world. A

being in which others are not seen as mere resources or means, but rather as irreplaceable others from whom one can learn.

### **3. Hermeneutical Openness as a hermeneutical virtue**

By bringing together Gadamer and Fricker, Nielsen & Utsler (2022) develops an answer to critiques levied against Fricker's project by scholars such as Linda Martín Alcoff (2010) and the aforementioned Warnke (2015). Both Alcoff (2010), and Warnke (2015) are troubled by Fricker's move to put neutrality at the centre of her considerations pertaining to identity, justice, and virtue. A neutrality, or absence of prejudice, that Gadamer would reject the possibility of. This neutrality according to Fricker (2007) is one where one is able to correctly, and fairly assess the credibility of the speaker, and when doing so one is able to discern cases in which identity, and identity prejudice, is at play and when they are not. Both Alcoff (2010) and Warnke (2015) has criticized these appeals to neutrality, and Fricker's claim that it is possible to discern the appropriate amount of credibility that would have been given were it not for identity prejudice. Warnke (2015) emphasises that for Gadamer, rather than neutralizing or rising above one's prejudices, one ought to suppose the truth of what one reads, or what the Other says in order to find out what one's prejudices are. One's prejudices become apparent when challenged, and by supposing the truth of what one reads or hears, one put one's prejudices up for being challenged. Further, doing so also constitutes a concession that one's prejudices may be inadequate and in need of revision. It is in acknowledging one's ignorance and limitations that one puts one's prejudices up for challenge, and allows them to be confirmed, rejected or shown to be in need of revision (Warnke 2015).

To respond to these critiques Nielsen & Utsler (2022) suggest to read Fricker's (2007) appeals to 'neutralise' as counteracting the effects of negative prejudicial judgements, rather than as appeals to true neutrality. Such a reading brings the call for 'neutrality' away from the notion of credibility judgements completely free from prejudice, which Gadamer undoubtedly would reject, to a call for neutralising the influence of identity prejudices on credibility judgements. Doing so would bring Fricker's account much closer to Gadamer's (2004) emphasis on assuming that the other has something meaningful to say, and thus might challenge the hearer's prejudices. Such a reading allows Nielsen & Utsler (2022) to conclude that despite Fricker's emphasis on neutrality, one can foreground other aspects of her account to alleviate some of the tension between her and Gadamer's (2004) accounts.

Nielsen & Utsler (2022) find further support for their reading of Fricker (2007) in Fricker's account of the virtue of testimonial justice. In setting out the virtue of testimonial justice, Fricker (2007, 92) argues that the virtuous hearer is one that neutralises the impact of prejudice in their credibility judgements. In line with their alternate reading of Fricker's call to neutralise, they suggest to read the virtue of testimonial justice, as one that when developed and practiced makes the hearer increasingly aware of how identity prejudices operate in dialogical exchanges, and one that calls of intentional habituation towards adopting positive prejudices towards the speaker, and their credibility (Nielsen & Utsler 2022:20). This brings their reading of Fricker very close Gadamer's call to assume that the speaker has something meaningful and truthful to say, and that hearer might be wrong, and thus might need to revise their prejudgements. As Warnke (2015) has argued, both Gadamer (2004) and Fricker (2007) conceive of listening to the Other as both a virtue, and an epistemic demand (Warnke 2015). Likewise, Alcoff (2003) argues that Gadamer's philosophy widens the debates pertaining to what virtues are the most valuable for achieving reliable knowledge. One of the core arguments of Fricker's (2007) book is that cases of epistemic injustice are both ethical and epistemic wrongs. This intersection of ethics and epistemology is also not unknown to Gadamer who conceives of openness to the Other as not only an epistemic good that provides the hearer with a corrective to their own prejudices, but also as of ethical significance. Gadamer (2004) argues that hearers can fail to treat speakers ethically in two distinct manners. They can objectify them by explaining their claims as symptoms of some underlying cause or issue. Further, hearers can patronize speakers and claim that they know what the speaker is trying to convey better than the speaker themselves. By objectifying the other, Gadamer argues that one treats the Other as a means, and in patronizing the other one robs the Other's claim of its legitimacy. Warnke (2015) argues that each of these two wrongs reflect perpetuations of relationships of power, and in each of them the hearer fails to display the appropriate openness, and thus for Gadamer (2004) there is no 'genuine bond' between speaker and hearer.

Bringing together Fricker and Gadamer in this manner leads Nielsen & Utsler (2022) to argue that deeper understanding, and acknowledgment of prejudgments will lead to the openness, and anticipatory listening emphasised in Gadamer's project. Simultaneously, if one understands the reality of prejudgments, one is in a better position to hear the voice of the other and conceiving of the other as someone who has something meaningful, and truthful to say. Hermeneutical openness and anticipatory listening, they argue is the basis for Fricker's virtue of testimonial justice. They argue that it is possible to conceive of

cases of testimonial injustice as cases in which prejudgements work in a negative manner resulting in a lack of openness to the other as a genuine, and meaningful interlocutor (Nielsen & Utsler 2022).

Nielsen & Utsler (2022) conceive of hermeneutical openness as a hermeneutical virtue, and one that is of relevant for issues of epistemic injustice and oppression. They argue that the hermeneutical openness they find in Gadamer's work functions as a hermeneutical virtue, paralleling Fricker's (2007) turn to virtue epistemology (Nielsen & Utsler 2022). Hermeneutical openness and anticipatory listening are excellences or virtues for hermeneutical practice that constitute an orientation toward the other that makes possible for one's prejudices to be challenged so that they might be corrected and thus improve one's understanding. Further, hermeneutical openness constitutes an orientation towards the other that respects their alterity and their status as an interlocutor with something important and meaningful to say. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) bring this intersection of the philosophies of Gadamer and Fricker into conversation with that of Axel Honneth (1995) to argue that a combination of the three would serve well in the development of a theory of recognition. While that is seemingly a promising project, I will not follow them in that regard. Rather, for the rest of this paper focus will remain on the Gadamerian virtue of hermeneutical openness, and I will argue for its relevance both in the identification of epistemic injustices, but also for its potential contribution to their remedy. Starting from Nielsen & Utsler's (2022) account, I will expand their analysis by considering other forms of epistemic injustice, thus further illustrating the relevance of Gadamer's philosophy for the debates pertaining to epistemic injustice, and epistemic oppression.

Nielsen & Utsler (2022) turn to Gadamer's later works further demonstrates that his emphasis on openness is sensitive to relations of power in its respect for alterity. Gadamer (1992) explicitly calls for respect for the other, and non-exploitative relationships between humans, and between humans and nature in his 1992 essay *The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future*. Illustrating that Gadamer himself was not ignorant of exploitation, abuses of power and manipulation, even if that was not his core concern in *Truth and Method*. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) argues that Gadamer's emphasis on openness is in contrast with treating others as mere means to an end, or silencing them as one has decided ahead of time that one knows better. Rather, Gadamer sets out a pathway to a co-existence with others in which they are seen as irreplaceable Others from whom one can learn, rather than an Other of one's own making.

Hermeneutical openness is based upon one's respect for the alterity of the other and hermeneutical openness is demonstrated in one's willingness to take

seriously what the Other has to say, and to regard their claims as potential correctives to one's own prejudice and present understanding (Nielsen & Utsler 2022). That being said, hermeneutical openness does not imply that one must agree with the Other. Rather, through the interaction with the Other, one might or might not come to agree with them. Hermeneutical openness does not entail giving up one's own views or barring one from defending them. Rather, it does entail remaining open to the possibility that one is wrong, and that one's present understanding can be improved by learning from the other. Hermeneutical openness is to situate oneself, and one's own understanding, in relation to the meaning of the other. In doing so one puts one's own prejudice to the test in relation to the claims of the Other. Nielsen & Utsler (2022) points out that doing so necessitates the exercise of a different hermeneutical virtue, namely that of hermeneutical humility. Further, as Nicholas Davey (2006) has argued, hermeneutical practice is not easy. Genuine hermeneutical engagement demands openness to taking part in hard and at times uncomfortable conversations, to self-discipline and to engagement. Of similar importance is that, as Nielsen & Utsler (2022) notes, both Gadamer (1992) and Fricker (2013) recognize that genuine transformation requires not only the exercise of virtues and change in one's individual practices and ways of seeing the Other, but also requires structural changes in practice and policy.

There is a wider, growing interest in Gadamerian virtues, and their relevance for issues of epistemic injustice. Beyond Nielsen & Utsler's (2022) recent work, Haley Irene Burke (2022) has argued in a recent paper that reading Gadamer & Fricker together elucidates the possibly for ethical development through the cultivation of virtues that promotes understanding. Burke (2022) argues that the cultivation of such virtues can counteract injustices wherein recognition of, or the articulation of reality is at stake. While Burke herself never discusses hermeneutical openness as conceived of here, I hope to show in this article that hermeneutical openness would be one such virtue that would both promote understanding and play a role in counteracting injustice. Similarly, we find explicit references to the notion of hermeneutical openness in José Medina's excellent book *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013). Medina himself never discusses or cites Gadamer directly, but like Nielsen & Utsler (2022) he finds in Fricker (2007) an account of hermeneutical virtue that includes the obligation to confront one's interpretative limitations and vulnerability in order to cultivate hermeneutical openness, echoing the Gadamerian emphasis on openness and challenging one's prejudices. Likewise, it would be a mistake to not mention the existing literature on the relationship between virtue and vice epistemology and issues of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression. Beyond

Fricker's engagement with virtue epistemology, authors such as José Medina (2013) and Heather Battaly (2017) among others have in great detail described the relationship between epistemic virtues and vices, and epistemic injustice. The virtue of hermeneutical openness that is the focus of this paper, while distinct, undoubtedly shares some qualities with the epistemic virtue open-mindedness which has received extensive attention in the subfield of virtue epistemology.

#### **4. Wilful Hermeneutical Ignorance & Contributory Injustice**

In the years since Fricker's (2007) ground-breaking book was published plenty of philosophers have dedicated their time to questions of epistemic injustice and oppression. Some have set out to identify epistemically unjust practices and structures in different areas of the social world (See for example: Carel & Kidd 2014; Kidd & Carel 2017; Landström 2021). Other philosophers have criticized the narrowness of Fricker's (2007) account and set out to identify further forms of epistemic injustice. Two such examples are Gaile Pohlhaus' (2012) work on wilful hermeneutical ignorance, and Kristie Dotson's (2012) work on contributory injustice.

Pohlhaus (2012) argues that there are two senses in which the sociality of knowers is epistemically significant: their situatedness and their interdependence. The social situatedness of the knower is epistemically significant as it draws their attention to particular aspects of the world. For Pohlhaus (2012) situatedness is fundamentally about how relations to others positions the knower in relation to the world. Likewise, the interdependence of knowers is epistemically relevant as the epistemic resources needed to make sense of the world are collective. Epistemic resources such as language, concepts and criteria for evaluation lie beyond any one individual. Of particular importance for Pohlhaus is that these resources are not equally equipped for making sense of all experience. For example, in socially unequal and stratified societies some individuals are situated in positions that allow their experiences to play a larger role in the development and circulation of epistemic resources. This, Pohlhaus argues, illustrates the significance of the relationship between the situatedness of the knower, and their interdependence as the standards for knowing the world well is determined by what is salient in the experienced world itself, and one's experience of the world will depend on one's situatedness. For Pohlhaus, the relationship between the knower's situatedness and their interdependence is dialectical and can produce tensions. When these tensions are resolved, they can lead to an expansion of both shared, and possible knowledge. However, the dialectical

relationship between the knower's situatedness and interdependence can also lead to a distinct form of epistemic injustice, particularly in socially unequal and stratified societies. Pohlhaus calls this form of epistemic injustice wilful hermeneutical ignorance.

Pohlhaus argues that because of the dialectical relationship between situatedness and interdependence, marginally situated knowers are more likely to find gaps in predominant sets of epistemic resources for making sense of their experience based in their marginalised situatedness. She gives two arguments for this. First, due to their marginalisation, the marginalised knower must be aware of the concerns of those dominantly situated, while those dominantly situated need not to know about the concerns of the marginalised. This has the consequence that it behoves the marginalised to acquire and draw upon the epistemic resources that follow from being dominantly situated, while the epistemic resources of the marginalised is not immediately of use for those dominantly situated. Pohlhaus second argument is that social situatedness allows some to develop and disseminate epistemic resources more easily than others. In such cases, the interdependence between knowers is asymmetrical due to the relations of power between dominantly situated and marginally situated knowers. From this starting point Pohlhaus argues that those epistemic resources that become predominantly recognized are those which originate from the experienced world of dominantly situated knowers. This does not mean that those who are marginally situated are epistemically disadvantaged. Rather, Pohlhaus argues that those marginally situated are often well situated to know that there are whole parts of the world for which dominantly held epistemic resources are not well suited.

The problem that Pohlhaus identifies, and targets in her discussion of wilful hermeneutical ignorance is that while marginalised knowers are well situated to develop epistemic resources adequate for making sense of more parts of the experienced world, they often face problems when trying to convince those dominantly situated of the usefulness and importance of those epistemic resources. Pohlhaus provides two reasons as to why this is the case. The first is that dominantly situated knowers are not required by their situatedness to learn to navigate and investigate parts of the world based on the concerns of others. Further, it is not in the interest of the dominantly situated to acquire and maintain epistemic resources calibrated by those marginally situated since doing so would move epistemic power away from the dominantly situated.

Distinguishing situatedness and interdependence in this manner allows Pohlhaus to develop a picture in which she maintains that being marginally situated can be epistemically advantageous, while also holding those dominantly

situated responsible for their ignorance of the experienced world of the marginally situated. The dominantly situated can not step outside their situatedness, however they can learn to draw upon and use epistemic resources developed from the experiences of marginalized knowers (Pohlhaus 2012). According to Pohlhaus, learning when and how to use the epistemic resources of the marginalised requires engagement with those who are skilled in their use, and to place oneself in encounters where it makes sense to draw upon them, making mistakes and being corrected. Here there are parallels between Pohlhaus (2012) account and Gadamer's (2004) emphasis on encounters with alterity, dialogue and learning from the other. However, as Davey (2006) said of genuine hermeneutical practice, learning to draw upon the epistemic resources of the marginalised is a difficult endeavour for dominantly situated knower. Pohlhaus mentions a few reasons as to why this is, including that it is disorienting, it opens one's eyes to aspects of one's situatedness that are hard to stomach such as unearned privilege, and marginalised knowers might not welcome the dominantly situated to the use of the epistemic resources that they have worked hard to develop.

Pohlhaus argues that even when it is seemingly the case that the dominantly situated knower appears to be open to the claims of those in marginalized positions, they can pre-emptively dismiss the epistemic resources necessary to make sense of those claims due to the dialectical relationship between interdependence and situatedness. Good epistemic resources make sense of the experienced world, and if one's situatedness does not make salient those aspects of the world for which those epistemic resources are useful, the dominantly situated knower can employ that fact in order to dismiss those resources before learning to use them. Pohlhaus (2012, 722) suggests that this sort of pre-emptive dismissal can be seen in the dismissal of concepts such as 'date rape', 'heteronormativity' and 'white privilege' by dominantly situated knowers. It is this kind of dismissal, and the dominantly situated knower's refusal to learn to use the epistemic resources developed from marginalised situatedness that Pohlhaus calls wilful hermeneutical ignorance. Pohlhaus suggests that wilful hermeneutical ignorance both falls under what the late Charles Mills (1997) has called 'epistemology of ignorance' and is a type of epistemic injustice. However, as Fricker (2007) in her original account does not consider different epistemic relations working in conjunction, the type of epistemic injustice that Pohlhaus (2012) identifies exposes a lacuna in the Frickerian account of epistemic injustice.

Wilful hermeneutical ignorance picks out instances in which dominantly situated knowers dismiss the possibility that there is something new to know about a particular aspect of the world and any epistemic resources to do

so, despite marginally situated knowers holding, or developing, epistemic resources for knowing that particular aspect of the world based on their experience (Pohlhaus 2012). Thus, wilful hermeneutical ignorance picks out cases in which marginally situated people cannot demonstrate to dominantly situated people that there is a part of the world that their epistemic resources are inadequate to know, and in which the marginally situated cannot call the attention of dominantly situated knowers to those parts of the experienced world because the epistemic resources necessary to do so are pre-emptively dismissed. That way, dominant groups with a vested interest in ignoring certain parts of the world can maintain their ignorance by simply refusing to recognize, and actively undermine newly developed epistemic resources that attend to aspects of the world that they are vested in ignoring. Further, it is important to note that these instances are not based in some sort of inherent inability on the part of the dominantly situated, but rather is a wilful act. It is an exercise of power in the relationships of interdependence to undermine, or to refuse to acknowledge the epistemic resources developed by those marginally situated in order to remain ignorant. Wilful hermeneutical ignorance is a wilful refusal to acknowledge, and to acquire the necessary tools for knowing and understanding parts of the world (Pohlhaus 2012, 729).

Pohlhaus (2012) draws on Sandra Harding's (1991) work to argue that one is not doomed to ignorance because of one's social position. Rather ignorance is something that one chooses to maintain. If those dominantly situated take active interest in how the world is experienced and understood from those marginally situated, they can participate in what Harding calls a critical standpoint. That is, a position in which there is a tension between the epistemic resources one draws upon and one's experienced world that signals a need to change the epistemic resources one draws upon, or create new epistemic resources for knowing the world more adequately. Both wilful ignorance and critical standpoints stem from the interest, or disinterest, one takes in the Other and their experiences, not from one's social position, to determine what one can know (Pohlhaus 2012). Pohlhaus argues that it is by considering the relationship between situatedness and interdependence that one can show that this is possible. If one genuinely aspires to know something about the world as experienced from those situated differently than oneself, one must draw upon the epistemic resources suited to, and developed from those differently situated. Doing so requires both allowing these resources to be developed well by those situated to do so, but also, to trust them to have done so well and to take an interest in learning from them how to utilize those epistemic resources. Thus, on Pohlhaus picture, even though one cannot leave one's social position,

one can acquire the epistemic resources that show that which is not obvious from where one is situated. Refusing to allow the development, or refusing to acknowledge epistemic resources for knowing the world from different situations from one's own, contribute both to maintaining one's own ignorance but also to epistemic injustice.

Kristie Dotson (2012) has identified a separate type of epistemic injustice that arise out of wilful hermeneutical ignorance. She calls this type of epistemic injustice contributory injustice. Contributory injustice is caused by an epistemic agent's wilful hermeneutical ignorance, both in maintaining structurally prejudice hermeneutical resources and in utilizing them, resulting in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of particular knowers. Contributory injustice is both structural and agential as both the structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources of the dominantly situated, and the agents own situated and wilful ignorance function as catalysts for the epistemic harm. Contributory injustice occurs because there are different hermeneutical resources that a hearer could utilize beyond the structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources of the dominantly situated, and the hearer wilfully refuses to acknowledge or acquire the necessary tools for knowing the world that the speaker utilizes, thus effectively silencing them as their testimony does not get the appropriate uptake. The hearer in cases of contributory injustice wilfully refuses to recognize or acquire the requisite alternative hermeneutical resources to understand and give appropriate uptake to the testimony of the speaker. This refusal is what Pohlhaus (2012) has called wilful hermeneutical ignorance. Wilful hermeneutical ignorance produces contributory injustice when the epistemic agent's wilful hermeneutical ignorance maintains and utilizes structurally prejudiced resources thwarts a knower's ability to contribute to the shared epistemic resources within a particular epistemic community. Thus, compromising their epistemic agency. Contrary to hermeneutical injustice, contributory injustice does not render certain experiences equally unintelligible. Rather, the victims of contributory injustice are able to articulate their experiences, but those articulations fail to gain appropriate uptake due to the wilful ignorance of the hearer. Thus, thwarting the epistemic agency of the speaker.

## **5. Hermeneutical openness and wilful hermeneutical ignorance**

So how is the virtue of hermeneutical openness relevant for thinking about wilful hermeneutical ignorance, and in extension contributory injustice? In this section I will outline two suggestions for such relevancy. The first being that

hermeneutical openness can serve as a counterfactual that makes it possible to pin down the epistemic, and ethical failure of the wilfully ignorant. The second suggestion is that the virtue of hermeneutical ignorance would serve well as a corrective to the agential dimension of cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice, and thus has a role to play in the alleviation of such epistemic injustices.

Cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance occur because a hearer actively chooses to ignore some sets of hermeneutical resources and instead chooses to solely relies on structurally prejudices sets of hermeneutical resources, thus refusing to acquire the necessary tools for knowing parts of the world. The follow-on injustice of contributory injustice occurs when a hearer's wilful hermeneutical ignorance thwarts other knower's ability to contribute to the shared hermeneutical resources within a particular epistemic community, thus compromising their epistemic agency. The speaker's epistemic agency is thwarted as even though they are able to articulate their experience, those articulations fail to gain appropriate uptake as the ignorant hearer chooses to ignore the hermeneutical resources that the speaker draw upon to remain ignorant about a part of the experienced world of the Other. As Alcoff (2003) points out, for Gadamer coming to an understanding with another person is to engage in a dialogue in which each interlocutor has agency. An attitude of genuine epistemic openness is central to such a dialogue, and for expanding one's horizons of understanding. Alcoff argues that Gadamer better captures the actual process of knowing than traditional analytic epistemology, as Gadamer (2004) centres the complex process of interpretation. What is at stake in cases of epistemic injustice is the agency of the interlocutor, and as argued in the previous section wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice are each forms of epistemic injustice in which the epistemic agency of the speaker is thwarted by the wilful ignorance of the hearer.

In a counter-factual case to that of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, where the hearer displays the appropriate openness towards Other rather than being wilfully ignorant, the wilful hermeneutical ignorance and the follow-on injustice of contributory injustice no longer takes place. Exercising appropriate hermeneutical openness towards the speaker would at its very least involve not choosing to remain actively ignorant of the testimony of the Other, and the hermeneutical resources they employ. By exercising the appropriate hermeneutical openness, one makes it possible for one's prejudices to be challenged so that they might be corrected and thus improve one's understanding. Further, hermeneutical openness constitutes an orientation towards the other that respects their alterity and their status as an interlocutor with something important and mean-

ingful to say. By taking the speaker seriously as someone with something relevant and truthful to say, respecting their alterity and acknowledging the hermeneutical resources that they draw upon, both the epistemic and the ethical wrongs are avoided as the hearer opens up the possibility for genuine dialogue, for prejudices to be challenged and for learning from the Other rather than choosing to ignore the speaker and the hermeneutical resources they draw upon. Thus, making possible the expansion of understanding, and for the revision of prejudices. Rather than thwarting the epistemic agency of the Other, a virtuous hearer would support the epistemic agency of the Other by making it possible to share their experiences and understanding without being effectively silenced, thus contributing to their ability to contribute to the shared hermeneutical resources. The counter-factual case, as well as cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, illustrates Pohlhaus' (2012) point that both wilful ignorance and critical understanding stem from the interest, or the disinterest, one takes in the experiences of the Other. The hermeneutically open hearer takes an interest in the Other as someone who has something both important, and truthful to say and thus can develop a critical understanding based in the Other's experience of the world. The wilfully ignorant dismisses the Other as a knower, and thus both morally wrongs them, and causes epistemic harm to both themselves and the Other.

I propose conceiving of the hearer in cases of wilful hermeneutical and contributory injustice, as failing to exercise the appropriate hermeneutical openness. That is, the hearer has failed to demonstrate their willingness to take seriously what the Other has to say, and to regard their claims as potential correctives to one's own prejudices and understanding. As the hearer does not exercise the appropriate openness towards the speaker, and the hermeneutical resources they draw upon the hearer perpetuates both epistemic harm, an ethical wrongs. Similar to Nielsen & Utsler (2022) analysis that the epistemic injustice of testimonial injustice forecloses the possibility for genuine dialogue, so does wilful hermeneutical ignorance. As Pohlhaus (2012) has argued, refusing to acknowledge epistemic resources for knowing the world from different situations from one's own, contribute both to maintaining one's ignorance, but also to the perpetuation of epistemic injustice. The epistemic harm consists of the hearer losing out on understanding about certain parts of the world around them as they refuse to listen and learn from the Other. The ethical wrong consists of the hearer wronging the speaker by effectively silencing them, and preventing them from contributing to collective understanding, thus unfairly thwarting their epistemic agency due to their refusal to acknowledge other hermeneutical resources that the structurally prejudiced one they draw upon. As Pohlhaus suggests, by identifying the epistemic and ethical failing of the hearer they can be held responsible

for their ignorance. By positing that the hearer in cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice acts in a hermeneutically vicious manner, contrary to meeting the Other with appropriate hermeneutical openness, their epistemic and ethical failings become clear.

There are grounds for thinking that the virtue of hermeneutical openness could serve well as a corrective to wilful hermeneutical ignorance and the follow-on injustice of contributory injustice. As suggested earlier, by taking the speaker seriously as someone with something relevant and truthful to say, respecting their alterity and the hermeneutical resources that they draw upon, both the epistemic and the ethical wrongs are avoided as the hermeneutically open hearer makes possible genuine dialogue, for prejudices to be challenged and for learning from the Other. In contrast to the wilfully ignorant hearer who forecloses the possibility for genuine dialogue and learning from the Other. However, remember that both Pohlhaus (2012), and Dotson (2012) stressed that wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice each includes both an agential dimension and a structural dimension. The individual virtue of hermeneutical openness would do little to address epistemic inequalities and injustice at a structural level. As discussed earlier in this paper, Nielsen & Utsler (2022) notes that both Fricker and Gadamer while focusing on the virtues of individual hearers, recognize that changing the structural dimensions of epistemic injustice would require more radical structural changes. Following this insight, I put forth hermeneutical openness as a virtue that can function as a corrective to the agential dimension of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. To tackle both dimensions of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice, individual virtues would have to be combined with more radical structural change.

## **6. Conclusion**

Scholarship at the intersection of Gadamer's hermeneutics and epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression is limited, and there is plenty left to explore. In some ways, Gadamer's thought goes beyond the existing scholarship on epistemic injustice in interesting ways that deserve to be further explored. Warnke (2015) has already argued that Gadamer goes beyond Fricker's work both ethically and epistemically, and one could likewise argue that Gadamer's (2004) emphasis on historical situatedness adds another relevant dimension to the projects of feminist such as Fricker (2007), Pohlhaus (2012) and Dotson (2012) who are primarily concerned with social situatedness and its relation to the ethics of knowing. In this article I contribute to this nascent project by arguing that Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004, 1976) hermeneutics offers relevant insights

for contemporary scholarship on epistemic injustice and oppression. Specifically, I have argued for the Gadamerian notion of *hermeneutical openness* as a hermeneutical virtue that can play a role in remedying the agential wrongs in epistemic injustices such as testimonial injustice, wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. In doing so, I expand Nielsen & Utsler's (2022) analysis of testimonial injustice by considering further forms of epistemic injustice. I argue that we can understand cases of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice as cases where the hearer fails to exercise appropriate hermeneutical openness, and in doing so does something epistemically and ethically wrong. Further, I have argued for hermeneutical openness as a hermeneutical virtue that can function as a corrective to the agential dimension of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. However, tackling both the agential and the structural dimensions of wilful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice would require individual virtues such as hermeneutical openness to be combined with more radical structural change. In doing so I aspire to have illustrated not only the relevance of Gadamer's philosophy for scholars of epistemic injustice, but also its potency in both offering diagnostic tools for identifying the wrongs in specific forms of epistemic injustice and offering potential remedies to existing epistemic injustices.

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