How Others Inform and Transform One's Sense of Self

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Duke University

2021
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

We admire those who know themselves, are appropriately open and receptive to feedback, and appropriately ignore or reject inaccurate feedback. Thus self-knowledge is a virtue that helps us to act justly toward these sources as well as enables us to acquire other virtues through helping us come to know our strengths and weaknesses. To better conceptualize self-knowledge as a virtue, I look at the role of epistemic injustice when it comes to receiving and evaluating feedback. Epistemic injustice involves harming a person by diminishing their ability to share or gain knowledge. Acknowledging the existence of epistemic injustice is to recognize the duty to act justly toward possible sources of self-knowledge. To achieve virtuous self-knowledge, one must act appropriately towards one’s sources of feedback in terms of receptivity and evaluation.
Dedication

To my father, John Lee, and the transformative power of his love.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter Summaries

Traditionally, introspection is considered authoritative on who we are unless evidence suggests otherwise. In my dissertation, I hold self-knowing to be an epistemic virtue. Conceptualizing self-knowledge as an epistemic virtue allows us to consider the practice of self-knowing and forming one’s beliefs about the self in the right way.

Two kinds of epistemic injustices can occur in the context of receiving and evaluating feedback about the self. First, one can commit an epistemic injustice towards one’s sources by unfairly ignoring or discrediting them based on social status. A White person usually avoids negative feedback from the Black community because it likely conflicts with their beliefs about being not racist. Ignoring or misperceiving a person’s feedback because of their social status is a case of Miranda Fricker’s form of epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice. I reorient the focus to another distinct kind of harm that emerges when one commits an epistemic injustice towards one’s sources of feedback. One has an impoverished picture of the self which not only leads to false beliefs but also keeps one from being able to grow morally. In one chapter, I propose that seeking a variety of sources should help combat these biases in receiving and evaluating feedback about the self.

A second kind of epistemic injustice occurs if a source’s prejudiced feedback about oneself is transformative. Feedback can cause a person to act in ways that confirm stereotypes, particularly negative ones, thus distorting the person’s experiences of themselves. Distorted experiences transform a person so that when they draw on their
experiences for information, they will now have evidence for the misbelief about the self. When this kind of feedback is systematic, it constitutes a form of epistemic injustice towards the self-knower. I argue that, besides epistemic reasons, moral reasons such as resistance to oppressive stereotypes give one sufficient justification to believe otherwise.

Armed with a better understanding of virtuous self-knowledge, the final chapter turns to “shared transformative experiences” such as moral conversions, including of former white supremacists. A moral conversion is often described as one major event but tends to take place over time. If we can create the right conditions for exchanging information about ourselves, then we will not only have the opportunity to know but also to better ourselves. Getting better at identifying and appropriately resisting sources of feedback is also key in responding to their potential causal force.
Constructing the Self: Main Questions

We’ve all known someone who seems oblivious to what others think of them. Depending on the situation, this trait can be inspiring or annoying. Knowing oneself means knowing when that trait is inappropriate or even immoral and when it’s necessary for survival. My goal here is how best to understand and resolve tension between the ways others see you and the way you see yourself. This dissertation goes beyond the question “How does one know oneself?” to ask “How should one form self-knowledge?” It’s important then to look at what it means to have a self if we want to go beyond the basic, simple propositional beliefs and ask questions such as:

- What does it mean to have an accurate self-representation?
- What kind of authority does one have to make claims about oneself?
- How should we seek and incorporate feedback from others?
- How do others’ perspectives and cultural representations affect the way we know ourselves?
- How do we know ourselves if we constantly change depending on who’s around?
- If we are constantly changing, how can others know us? How do we know ourselves?

To this end, the dissertation draws from several different disciplines including psychology, cognitive neuroscience, critical race theory, and gender studies as well as different areas in philosophy such as social epistemology, bioethics, and virtue theory.
While I argue for the important role of feedback in self-knowledge, I also argue that its power means we need to seriously consider its role in identity formation and kinds of injustices.

I. Self-Knowledge So Far

Traditional Views

The traditional approaches in Anglo-American analytic philosophy address the question of self-knowledge by looking at one’s relationship to mental states either as a conscious observer or rational agent. They focus on the kind of state and the nature of justification. The two main self-knowledge theories, empiricist and rationalist, differ in terms of how they present the nature of our relationship to our mental states and what states they choose as fundamental to self-knowledge. These theories assume some kind of authority based on the self-knower’s mental states, which I’ll say more about in the next section. Introspected mental states serve as the primary justification for self-knowledge whether one is passively observing or actively shaping them.

First-person access assumes one has a privileged position for knowing one’s own mental states. Most traditional self-knowledge theories hold that self-knowledge is special because it’s epistemically secure, achieved through a unique epistemic method, and/or profoundly special in a non-epistemic way.1 This unique method to knowledge is

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introspection which carries different meanings depending on what philosopher or field considers its nature to be. Broadly, introspection is some kind of inward reflection on anything from one’s perceptual experiences to religious beliefs. Regardless of how epistemically strong one takes this form of justification, introspection is not open to others as a way to knowledge about oneself. People can infer your mental states from your behavior and statements but cannot know your internal workings in the same way you do.

Essentially indexical, introspection can only involve one’s own states. One cannot introspect another’s mind. The assumption is that each person stands in a special relationship to their mental states whether epistemically, rationally, and/or linguistically. For Descartes, self-knowledge doesn’t depend on any other beliefs for justification. Introspection is metaphysically and epistemically direct, thus making it more secure than indirect perception.

Empiricist theories of self-knowledge are ones in which introspection is observational and can be passive. For example, one can immediately sense when one is in pain such as a headache or has an itch. For many, “the notion of ‘unfelt pain’ is simply contradictory.” These theories tend to involve an “inner sense” and focus on phenomenal states like pain or how an experience feels. The analysis is either on the state/experience or the justification – being in the state itself serves as the justification because one’s direct relationship to the phenomenal information.

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Rationalist theories of self-knowledge stem from Kantian views and the fact that we see ourselves as rational beings. Instead of presenting self-knowledge as a form of empirical or observational knowledge, rationalism replaces observation with deliberation to define self-knowledge. Being rational means we deliberate and shape our beliefs in a special way that goes beyond having mere (or any) epistemic authority in observation.

When we consider our beliefs, we deliberate and engage in a practical reasoning specific to ourselves. We “grasp our agency through exercising it” so introspection is not a purely observational activity. ³ One cannot know the “self” (in terms of one’s beliefs and intentions) without grasping that one is a rational agent. Introspection is an active practice in which we mold our beliefs whether or not it is epistemically secure. One’s rational relationship to one’s mental states is what makes one entitled to giving self-reports.

Neither camp looks at what we tend to care about when it comes to knowing ourselves and other people. In Chapter 2, I go deeper into the ways that these self-knowledge theories still leave us with problems and lack explanatory power. “Relatively uncontroversial” states that fall outside the purview of introspection include character traits, dispositions, causal relations between thoughts and actions, and emotions. ⁴ Does that mean we should give up introspection? Some think so. Before I address the skeptics, I lay out some key elements of self-knowledge that relate to these kinds of states.

**Elements of Self-Knowledge**

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³ Gertler, 2011, 46.
⁴ Gertler, 2011, 71-77.
Accuracy

I define accuracy according to how well it reliably represents, that is, tracks something in the world. There are two kinds of accuracy -- third-person perspective and subjective perspective -- in self-knowledge that can be truth-tracking and, therefore, more or less accurate depending on the state of the world and the self. Third-person perspective accuracy concerns how well one identifies how others see the self which is important for interactions and predicting how others will react to you. This kind of accuracy involves knowing things about the world and not just one’s own subjective perspective. Subjective perspective accuracy incorporates information from a third-person perspective but also acknowledges the subjectivity of first-person perspective when forming beliefs about the self. Having self-knowledge requires having a subjective perspective which one grasps through introspection and (usually) includes a first personal authority over one’s mental life and experiences. A subjective perspective still contains a third person, “birds-eye” representation of the self through self-reflection (which tends to happen via memory and imagination).

Vision is context-dependent yet we still consider ourselves to be creating objective representations of the world. Since “person” is a social kind, the sense of objective is not one in which it exists independently of our social reality and practices that you can perhaps use with natural kinds such as water. In the same way that something can appear to be lighter or darker depending on what is next to it, so can a person be seen by others (and their different perspectives) and oneself. Only instead of being contained to shade contrasts like dark/light, we have what seem to be an almost
infinite amount of complexities, roles, and meanings associated with physical markers such as appearance and behaviors. In trying to decide which perspective is most accurate, we can use other measures to judge WHY and how one is being seen in different ways and whether one kind of perspective is most accurate (without implying there need be some kind of “essence” to the person).

Authority

If first-personal authority means that one’s mental self-ascriptions are unlikely to be doubted, then we can ask when one is authoritative and when this possible doubt would arise. Since our awareness of our mental states are often private, we usually have to express what we believe about ourselves to others. Once the self-ascription exists publicly, doubt can arise depending on whether one is believed. Philosophers who discuss first-personal authority and self-knowledge tend to assume that trust is the default response to a person’s self-ascriptions unless given good reason to think otherwise or only when observable behaviors conflict.

There are (at least) three kinds of first-personal authority associated with self-knowledge:

1. Epistemic – The idea that self-knowledge is epistemically secure stems from the Cartesian argument in which one can doubt everything except for the fact that one is a thinking thing. Introspection is special because a person has “privileged access” to their inner states. For Descartes, privileged access allows one to perceive the mind better than anything else. Most self-knowledge theories assume that first-personal authority is
intrinsic and serves as the foundational because of the immediacy, transparency, and privacy of one’s mental states.

2. Moral – Talia Mae Bettcher leaves aside the epistemic authority of self-knowledge due to introspective concerns. Instead, she claims that we have a right and responsibility to our self-avowals. This First-Person Authority is a linguistic and moral kind that cannot be coerced and should be recognized by others. The linguistic right comes from being the kind of creature that has a conscious inner life that others cannot access and who must be able to share those thoughts with others. Without such a right, not only is one’s ability to express oneself impossible but also the ability to understand other people. We must assume, given the way our language and minds work, that self-ascriptions have some authority to communicate and coordinate with each other. Morally, we are held accountable for the things we ascribe to ourselves whether our desires, intentions, or emotions. Even if we are wrong about the self-ascription, others can call us out or hold us to what we said.

3. Social – the kind that other people must grant a person (related to both epistemic and moral). Christina Borgoni argues that first-personal authority must be granted by others and cannot be assumed just because a person has self-knowledge. One of her counterexamples concerns slaves who had self-knowledge but who were denied any kind of first-personal authority over their mental states like desires or beliefs.

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5 Talie Mae Bettcher “Trans Identities and First-Person Authority” in You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity edited by Laurie Shrage (Oxford University Press, 2009) 98-120.
The extent to which one has the authority to make any self-ascriptions, mental or otherwise, tends to rest on the feedback one gets from others. You can have firm beliefs about yourself but, if no one believes you, it’s unclear the usefulness of self-knowledge. Still, in most liberal societies, first-personal authority is considered a person’s right even if the person might be inaccurate. Taking away one’s first-personal authority without warrant is considered an injustice. I say more about this in the next section.

**Autonomy/ Rational Agency**

For the rationalist, self-knowledge requires the ability to make informed and reasonable decisions about what one believes and who one trusts. True autonomy means acting in accordance with what one wills to do. We do not consider someone who acts in conflict with their avowed beliefs, attitudes, and preferences as rational. Self-deception tends to be considered oppositional to acting as a free and coherent individual. There is also a difference between wishful thinking and practical rationality. So, one’s beliefs about the self must include beliefs about one’s ability and opportunities to act to form realistic intentions. Self-knowledge allows for rational agency because a person can act towards what they know their ends to be. Rational agency requires self-knowledge that is appropriately sensitive to external constraints in order to achieve one’s ends.

**Introspection Skeptics**
Implicit biases have clear epistemic costs. On their basis, we form beliefs that are likely to be wrong about others and ourselves. For example, we tend to be bad self-knowers when it comes to gauging whether our own traits play a role in what happens to us. The fundamental attribution error refers to our tendency to attribute situational factors when something bad happens to us and hard work when something good happens (and vice versa for other people).

In response to empirical evidence regarding introspection and implicit biases, philosophers such as Eric Schwitzgebel⁶ and Jennifer Saul⁷ are skeptical of how much we should trust introspection. The problem, as Schwitzgebel sees it, is that people overestimate the reliability of introspection. Even skeptics don’t talk about the “possibility of radical mistakes about one’s current conscious experience.” His claim is that people are unable to accurately determine their experiences because introspection is “highly untrustworthy.” He defines introspection as a “species of attention” to one’s experience and the primary method by which we reach judgments about our experiences. He shares how his wife points out that he is angry as he bangs the dishes around yet he is totally unaware of his emotional state.

How do we have accurate self-knowledge if introspection is not as justified as once thought? In the example with Schwitzgebel’s wife, she seems to know his emotional state better than he does (which might also require knowing many other things about

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him). In Chapter 2, I discuss some of the psychological research on personality traits that supports others’ perceptions of you being more accurate than your own.

More than just corrupting how we evaluate testimonial evidence, implicit biases affect our perception. Perception involves attention, categorization, and (for some) higher-order states. We misjudge the evidence because we are using the wrong criteria. Some of the epistemic (and moral) consequences are that stigmatized groups are less respected and given less of an opportunity to participate fully. In terms of critical thinking, the evaluation of argument is influenced by factors completely irrelevant to the quality of the argument. Additionally, we begin to form bad epistemic habits as we cannot always recognize the influence of implicit biases as they occur below a level of conscious awareness.

Part of Saul’s skepticism is that, even through introspection, we don’t even realize nor have a way of fixing implicitly biased judgments. We assume that we will make mistakes, but mistakes due to implicit biases are those in which “something that we actively think should not affect us does.” Even though implicit biases are not themselves epistemically assessable, they give rise to beliefs that are. Beliefs based on implicit biases are very likely to be wrong. That means that in a variety of cases, the implicit biases we do have are likely to lead us astray from the truth. We are likely to be making errors in how we come to our judgments and decisions because of implicit biases.

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8 Saul, 2013, 249.
Our intuitions around self-knowledge are that you self-reflect, remember past experiences and compare to the present, then self-report. Empirical work brings into question this traditional model and our ability to self-reflect on who we are and how we appear to others. For example, most of us are biased towards having a more positive view of ourselves, including thinking we are less prone to biases than others. Here is where outside feedback steps in.

II. The Role of Feedback

So far, the emphasis on introspection assumes a sense of self that is independent from the environment and others. The self is treated as an object for one to observe and/or a rational agent. Social epistemology looks at how relationships with others, institutions, and social structures play a role in what we know, including our knowledge-forming abilities and practices. One’s position as a knower involves both epistemic and moral factors especially when we consider the larger social systems in which one inhabits. Traditional views fail to address the fact that self-knowledge is not only about the self as an independent entity but also about the life one lives, how one fits into the surrounding society and situation, what contributions and roles one is expected to fulfill.

Engaging in conversations helps reveal what the person actually believes in a way that looks different from introspection. We are social knowers. What does this mean?

1. We learn from direct interaction
2. We learn from watching others
3. We require social interaction to develop our capacities for personhood

4. We understand ourselves, our experiences, and the world partly through the social frameworks we use

The role of feedback in our ability to know ourselves is not new. I would ask (or hope) a trustworthy friend to tell me if I have been too reclusive. The reasons we have academic conferences and book reviews are because we value feedback on our ideas from our peers. If someone appears disappointed in you, you usually want to know why.

Feedback is important because it gives us new information that results in knowledge that would not be possible through self-guided efforts. As we get repeated feedback from others, we can use the information (now or stored in memory) for accurate self-knowledge. Questions arise about what we should count as feedback about the self, how often it happens, and factors that affect its effectiveness. Factors that affect whether feedback is effective include who the “other” is and whether that person meets certain criteria which include bias, credibility, and familiarity.

Current self-knowledge theories, including introspection skeptics, don’t address the role of testimony – they assume one is either in a privileged epistemic position or not. Social epistemology highlights the importance for critical self-reflection but also the influence of other people and collective groups of which one considers oneself a member (or not). Issues of testimony, identity, and power dynamics are taken as significant to any epistemological or political project. Considering the special normativity of self-knowledge, it’s surprising that not more has been said in social epistemology about the self and ways in which we come to have self-knowledge as well as what things contribute
to or constitute one’s sense of self. In this project, I use approaches in social epistemology and feminist standpoint theory to better understand how we might have self-knowledge.

**Ignorance**

I cannot see things the same way you see them not only because of our different physical locations but also because our subjective experience of the same object or event can differ. Whether one perspective is more justified or grounded in truth than another’s will be a question to which we return throughout the project.

The situated-knowledge thesis holds that “social location systematically influences our experiences, shaping and limiting what we know.” The thesis of epistemic advantage holds that some standpoints allow a person to better grasp social reality, particularly if they are marginalized or oppressed. If one is part of a marginalized group, one pays more attention to oppressive acts not only to recognize such cases but also that one may be able to overcome them. They have an “experiential understanding of their own lives as the exploited” in a way that those in the privileged group do not. While being a member of a certain social group does not guarantee this advantage, those in power are not as motivated to uncover the true nature of reality since they have no desire to change their social position. With these two theses in mind, we can see how self-

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knowledge is influenced by one’s social location as well as whether one is in power or not.

Kristen Intemann draws on the strengths of both empiricism and standpoint theory, proposing a merger of the two approaches. For example, the situated-knowledge thesis implicitly assumes that experience plays a crucial role in justification which is the heart of empiricism. Her approach suggests that an empiricist sense of self could be compatible with the “achievement thesis” of feminist standpoint theory. The achievement thesis holds that one can reach an awareness of power structures or epistemic standpoint through critical, conscious reflections that lead to new perspectives on reality. Since epistemic standpoints involve recognizing oppression, they also require normative commitments to certain ethical and moral values. Another way one might achieve this kind of epistemic standpoint is by engaging in transformative experiences which contain knowledge that one can only gain through experience and leads to changes in oneself as a person. In later chapters, I return to transformative experiences, their relationship to self-knowledge, and whether they always result in an accurate perspective of reality.

Still, Intemann identifies two major differences between empiricism and feminist standpoint theory in that the latter favors diversity of social position within epistemic communities and contains certain normative commitments like being against oppression (2010). The situated-knowledge thesis leads us to ask how our social positions lead us into ignorance, specifically self-ignorance. In Chapter 2, I go into the three main approaches in epistemologies of ignorance and apply them to self-knowledge. Since

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being in certain social positions gives us certain epistemic advantages and disadvantages, we will have certain blindspots that feedback can help us with overcoming.

**Epistemic Injustice**

“Systematic injustices produce irresponsible agents, for they tend to lack knowledge of themselves, of others, and of the world”

According to Lorraine Code, systems of oppression can lead to systematic denial of certain people (usually because of their social group) as knowers or credible sources. Such treatment diminishes that person’s abilities to gain and share knowledge, that is, their epistemic agency. Code has argued that we acquire epistemic skills through others and are dependent on being acknowledged as an epistemic agent by others to develop such skills. Her arguments take a relational view of epistemic agency which still recognizes “individuals as knowers but conceptualizes them as socially constituted and epistemically dependent on their interactions with others.”

Virtue epistemology emphasizes epistemic norms and the value of agency. Epistemic norms involve right and wrong ways of approaching knowledge and applying credit. These norms can be understood in relation to the agent’s role or intellectual

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“virtues.” A large portion of virtue epistemology considers moral features when explaining knowledge.

Weakening a person’s epistemic agency is considered an “epistemic injustice,” a term coined by Miranda Fricker. Epistemic injustice is the systemic hindering or wronging of members of certain groups in their abilities to form and share knowledge based on identity prejudice. For Fricker, our epistemic agency and moral rights are tied together.

By looking at how accurately one receives and assesses feedback, I argue that one commits an epistemic injustice when discrediting certain epistemic sources without warrant. If one lacks proper receptivity and uptake of feedback because of the source’s social status, it’s likely one is committing a testimonial injustice towards that source. Testimonial injustice occurs when one does not consider a person credible merely because of their social group. It harms people through negative group stereotypes indicating they are unworthy sources of information. Since we exclude potential sources without warrant, we make epistemically irresponsible (i.e. prejudiced) judgments. What’s interesting about these cases of epistemic injustice is how they harm not only the source of testimony but also the self-knower in terms of their ability to gain true beliefs about the self. Even if we are not blameworthy given our social positions, we are still personally responsible for this kind of epistemic injustice.

Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice concerns the lack of conceptual resources for the experiences of marginalized group members. Conceptual resources are ways to imagine, express, and see yourself, your experiences, and place in the world. Through words, meanings, images, representations, and cultural narratives, one forms beliefs about the
self. In a similar but different vein, my project looks at how feedback can constitute an epistemic injustice by contributing to discriminatory self-representations. Oppressive environments promote narrow, often stereotypical and negative concepts for marginalized group members to internalize and/or use to identify, thus making aspects of them invisible or distorted. When one is excessively receptive, especially to oppressive feedback, one is led away from true beliefs about the self.\textsuperscript{15}

### III. Sources of Feedback

Feedback involves a new piece of information that I would not have from my first-person perspective alone. I use the term “feedback” to refer to any kind of information about the self whose inputs and outputs can be cognitive and physically embodied. For example, a person can tell me that I am too close to them in words, facial expressions, body language, or by physically pushing me away. An institution or social structure can do the same by creating barriers or obstacles between me and other people. The information is the same but the way I experience and evaluate that information might change depending on how it’s expressed and felt within my body.

For example, we can think of the healthcare system as a collection or a source of feedback itself. – What I consider sources of feedback go beyond just one individual doctor to include the hospital, pharmaceutical company, insurance policy, or diagnoses. When you move through the healthcare system, you get information about your body, your mental stability, your credibility, your value, the importance of your well-being to

\textsuperscript{15} I discuss this problem in depth in Chapter 4.
the world, your entitlement to know things.

**Social Power**

To understand sources of feedback, I rely on Miranda Fricker’s use of social power as a way to conceptualize the different ways information about the self is transmitted and why it can be so influential. Social power is “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions,” which may be “exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally.” Fricker, 2007, 13. Agential power is “exercised by an agent” and involves one party (person or institution) influencing the actions of another person or group. Fricker, 2007, 10. The traffic cop is a case of agential power because you can point to the particular source exerting the influence. Whenever they give a ticket, traffic cops are actively exercising their social power or authority. The explicit feedback in the action of giving a ticket is “you have done something wrong” as well as the implicit feedback that “you are a criminal” depending on the attitude of the cop. With their role of authority, cops also passively exercise social power because their mere presence influences people’s behavior. If cops decide to patrol a certain area more than others, then feedback is given to members of that community about their status as citizens and whether they are considered dangerous.

Structural power does not necessarily involve any “particular agent exercising it.” One cannot locate the source of structural power through any one person’s agency. The
influence on people is “thoroughly dispersed through the social system.” Structural power constitutes the overall organization of the epistemic environment in which one develops and engages in belief-forming practices, including beliefs about oneself. Serving to “effect social control,” structural power controls what opportunities and things people might need or desire.

Sources of social power are both sources of information by how they construct the way people see the world and telling them what they should attend to as well as causal sources in terms of how they can influence and control people’s actions. In this way, evaluating sources of feedback raises questions of epistemic conditions of accuracy as well as practical and metaphysical concerns surrounding agency and authority.

Considering the role of feedback in constructing self-knowledge, it’s important to consider what degree one trusts others’ reactions to the self and how reliably one evaluates their testimony.

**Dominant Perspective**

Concepts and their meanings shape the way we represent ourselves and the world around us. Beyond gender identity, social concepts that we use to describe ourselves and others are likely to carry multiple meanings. What meanings we attach to concepts, even those that appear to be objective, are likely to change across time, place, and cultural perspective. Despite its fluidity, meaning(s) within a concept like gender identity can

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18 Fricker, 2007, 11.
carry similar content across societies. Far from descriptive alone, the content of social concepts are rarely, if ever, devoid of normative force.

**Background**

Taking from critical race theory and social constructionism, I want to draw attention to the concept of a “dominant perspective” and the places we see it appear. Throughout the dissertation, I often refer to “the” dominant perspective but that is slightly misleading. How we conceptualize a dominant perspective will depend on the context. I say more on understanding the context in the next section.

**Critical Race Theory**

W.E.B. DeBois uses the term “double-consciousness” to point out how a marginalized person can hold two different perspectives – one from the perspective of the oppressor and another from their own. This “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” is a consequence of the dominant perspective.

The perspective is one of ignorance, not of knowledge. The dominant perspective is not only about what is seen and known but also what is ignored or invisible. Charles Mills argues that privilege is more likely to lead to self-deception, avoidance of hard truths, and misrepresentation of the world.19 “White ignorance” is an actively maintained cognitive dysfunction that misrepresents the world in ways that support white superiority.

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Mills claims that individuals alone are not responsible for White ignorance but rather our practices and systems of knowledge-production like collective histories. Who does our history archives focus on? What groups are portrayed in positive ways and which in negative ways?

_Social Constructionism_

Simone DeBeauvoir describes how women are often viewed as the Other given that the world is set up as if men are the Subject who perceive the world. Othering is central to the dominant perspective of patriarchal systems which objectifies and shapes women according to a male-centered reality. Judith Butler (1990) uses the term “performative” to describe gender in order to capture the “audience” who views and judges one based on how well they fit gender norms. The audience does more than merely judge but set the standards as well. Her use of “audience” is broad enough that it can include a stranger on the street but also the intake form at the doctor’s office, the symbols outside of a public restroom, carry meanings and expectations and norms that stem from the dominant perspective and how it represents people. Sally Haslanger (2000) defines gender and race according to “perceptions, norms, actions” within the “social matrix” in which everyone belongs. Her approach in which perceptions of physical markers dictate whether one is to be treated as superior or inferior is one that she considers applicable across cultures and time.

Dimensions

We could take “dominant” to have three dimensions: prevalence, control, and persistence. First, “dominant” could refer to the prevalence of the meaning, concept, or view. Meaning can be dominant in the sense of being widespread, embedded implicit associations held by most people. Even if someone has an alternative meaning, they know that most other people take the prevalent meaning for granted. Here, the dominant meaning is determined by measuring the amount of people or institutions in some given set who use that meaning. The more prevalent a meaning, the more normative force the meaning carries because one will have to use it in order to be understood by others.

“Dominant” could also refer to power and control in a stronger sense. In this case, the dominance involves that which those in power create and/or enforce in order to control “reality” and other people. These powerful, dominant groups have disproportionate causal influence on what concepts and meanings are available and taken seriously in society. Such dominance does not entail accuracy but often implies oppression.

Relatedly, “dominant” can have a temporal aspect when we look at how a meaning persists. This dimension is determined by looking at how prevalent and powerful a certain concept and/or meaning has been over time. We can label it as “dominant” in this way even if it carries little weight now. Perhaps, in the present, more people use resistant meanings and those in power do not push a meaning for a concept.
To some extent, the dominant perspective is contextual in terms of the specific content of meanings and concepts. Oppression is going to look different depending on the culture and its practices but that doesn’t mean certain aspects of the dominant perspective aren’t still there. The dominant meaning of a concept still requires indexing the meaning to a particular community in space in order to grasp its particular content and function.

I will use the term “dominant perspective” to encompass all three dimensions of dominance and explain how language and practices interact to create. The dominant perspective is widespread in that it is the default perspective even if it’s not explicitly endorsed by people and they use other resistant meanings in practice. Even if many people do not agree that the concepts or meanings accurately portray reality, the dominant perspective often persists. The dominant perspective is deeply entrenched in social hierarchies and oppression. Such a perspective exists within individuals but the dominant perspective is also structural as it determines not only who is considered visible but also valuable in society. We can look at how institutions, laws, and social systems shape the content and use of a concept like woman to grasp what characteristics will be associated with a particular person’s identity.

All the facts and things in the world serve the purposes of the perceiver when relying on the dominant perspective. One’s cognitive representations of others’ perspectives are heavily influenced by concepts the dominant perspective provides. We see the world without always being able to discriminate the stereotypes and implicit biases of the dominant perspective. When we fail to recognize how the ways the

dominant perspective shapes the way we imagine others’ perspectives, we suffer from epistemic “ignorance.” If the dominant perspective tends to contaminate one’s appraisal of others with erroneous stereotypes, it’s unclear whether one should put much trust in one’s cognitive representation of another’s state of mind.

The dominant perspective looks to have the power to not only transform how one sees “reality” but also transform one’s behavior and thoughts to fit that so-called reality. It can cause you to see and interact with the world in a different way, not necessarily because the information realistically reflects who you are.

I will refer to “the” dominant perspective but there are many once we begin to flesh out the specifics of time, space, culture, and community. Medina warns against acting as if dominance is just a homogenous perspective (quote) but he himself uses the same language. While any generalization will fail to recognize some important differences, finding similarities of say, how misogyny manifests across cultures, requires an assumption of a particular ideology and “gaze” towards that group. While that gaze is metaphorical on some level, it’s also not - it’s what guides our attention to certain aspects of a person and tells us how we should categorize them. In Chapter 4, I go into more detail about how the dominant perspective works on a cognitive, personal, and cultural level to transform a person’s way of knowing themself. In Chapter 5, I discuss practices of resistance for self-knowing given the dominant perspective(s).

IV. Relational Self-Knowledge

Accuracy
What is justified feedback and whether the individual’s own beliefs about the self should ever take precedence over external sources is not always clear. When to value the observer instead the agent in what constitutes as “true” feedback depends on not only epistemic factors but also moral ones. Perspectival difference between the agent and others affects both the way one sees the self but also the world.

What happens when there’s not only a tension between the way you see yourself and others see you but also disagreement between those that know you? The hybrid view in personality studies that others’ and one’s self view are about equally accurate just on different dimensions as evidenced by how others’ ratings predict and identify certain things.22 People also have conflicting concepts about what constitutes as reflective of someone’s “true” self.23 Could we take a multi-perspectival stance on the self? Maybe in some cases but some views will conflict in ways that both cannot be true. We can compare not only the evidence but the evidential policies for determining accuracy in cases of conflict.

Even if we want to say there is a metaphysical truth about who someone is in a deep sense, we might have to recognize our epistemic limits in discovering that truth. Truths about the self could be different, special facts that require serious contextualization and weighing of various factors in establishing the evidence. How we

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23 Iris Berent & Melanie Platt, “The true “me” – Mind or body?” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 93, March 2021
reason and form belief about social facts are likely to be different than reasoning about mathematical facts.

**Autonomy**

1. Western Relational Self

Simone DeBeauvoir argues what it means to be a person is having awareness of one’s “pure internality” as a subject while being an object in the world. As human beings, we feel an “ambiguity” between our internal experiences and external object-ness. Subjectivity exists in how one recognizes that one’s experience is only given to oneself. DeBeauvoir’s approach to life choices is that your “world” is willed by you and your will expresses your “genuine” reality. According to DeBeauvior, the “me-other” relationship is as indissoluble and irreducible as the “subject-object” relationship.

The ambiguity of being a person is that, in the subjective sense, one can choose to become whatever one wants to be. However, since one is an object, one is constrained by the world. Only when one separates oneself from outside forces of society does a certain freedom exist. Those who never exercise their freedom in separating themselves from society are like children following rules. Freedom does not exist merely in the goals that one makes for oneself but in the “desire that there be being” by one’s choices.

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De Beauvoir’s account helps explain why we consider others when choosing goals for ourselves. Freedom develops through persevering against obstacles toward future possibilities. Our paths to self-realization not only depend on those around us to help us but also affects them. De Beauvoir argues that “no existence is fulfilled if it’s limited to itself.” On the path to discovering what one will become, the genuinely free person considers not only their own future but also their relationship to others’ existence. While only the individual can “justify” the world and make personal existence valid, part of that validity includes whether one helps others towards self-realization.

For De Beauvoir, one requirement of freedom is that it wills itself towards the future through “seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others.” To be ethical, one must recognize the ambiguity of life exists for others and should honor the goals of others. “To will oneself free is also to will others free,” which means freedom requires respecting others’ “sovereignty” or autonomy. When one wills the self into being, one also wills that there be people for whom the world be endowed with “human significations.” That is, the kind of person we want to be is usually the kind of person with meaningful relationships and shared commitments. Other people are necessary in order for our goals, and, therefore, the self to be significant.

In the same way, knowing ourselves requires taking others and their projects into account. Whether I am capable of achieving something will require knowing my support system, what they think, and how they will help me overcome barriers. As social beings, our life projects intertwine. For De Beauvoir, being immoral means failing to treat others as free when achieving what we want for ourselves. In Chapter 5, I discuss shared transformative experiences and the ways they can shape us into becoming better self-
knowers and moral agents. Part of how they function is by recognizing another’s sovereignty or, in other words, their humanity.

These kinds of transformative shared experiences, like eating and playing and working together, define who we are. The Person-Life View is that a person is constituted by living a certain kind of life with others.\textsuperscript{25} By “person,” Marya Schechtman means the “typical enculturated human.” Drawing from identification practices in biology, Schechtman uses a life span or trajectory to define an entity. “Person-lives” establish what it is to be a person. The person-life trajectory begins with basic cognitive capacities that mature into reflective self-consciousness, rationality, self-narrative ability, and moral agency. Development for social capacities runs parallel to the development of agential capacities as work from those such as Michael Tomasello reveals. Since cognitive and social development are not distinct processes, it is necessary to have an environment with the resources to foster both.

A person-life involves a wide variety of activities and social interactions that adhere to the norms of a community. Oppression involves the denial of certain activities that make up a person-life. So, if one is part of an oppressive environment, what does that mean for how one knows oneself? Although oppression sets out to deny people their personhood, people form resistant communities to reclaim and continue flourishing. To know oneself as a person in an oppressive environment could mean that one must find the right kinds of resistant communities.

2. Eastern Relational Self

In their work, Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne contrast the “sociocentric” concept against the Western “egocentric” view of a person. The Western concept of self is concrete, a bounded center of awareness. The self is separate from others and the environment. According to the sociocentric view, the self is seen as part of the larger whole of society. Shweder and Bourne’s own study demonstrates a significant difference between the tendencies of Americans and Oriyas (from India) when describing people. Americans are more likely to describe someone’s traits outside of any context while the Oriyas’ descriptions are situation-dependent and refer to actions.

Shweder and Bourne’s argument is that each culture lives by different metaphors for understanding social action. Metaphors are deliberately selected to guide our thinking but generalize to our perceptions of the world. They determine what we think about and how we think about it. The significance of the conceptual tendencies between cultures is not an illusory difference. Both groups of participants are competent information processors but Oriyas put less value on differentiating, generalizing, and abstracting terms for people. Instead, they subscribe to a holistic worldview that focuses on people as parts of a whole. According to their interpretation of the reports, people feel as if they lose their essential properties when isolated from the “whole” (the society or situation) of which they are a part.

The Chinese model of self also considers the individual as partly constituted by

context and one’s roles and relationships. Relationships give our lives meaning and purpose. Confucianism purports that “vulnerability and interdependency characterize human existence.” Some take this conception of self to mean a “shared consciousness” exists between the individual and others within society.

Similar to the Person-Life view, Confucianism takes human nature and development through social interaction to be central. The embodied biological organism only becomes a person by entering into relationships with others. The self develops within relationships and perhaps inseparable from the environment but such a stance does not deny a role for the individual or that autonomy exists.

Mencius’ social conception of the person involves having “inborn capacities to enter into a network of responsibilities one has toward others and others have toward oneself.” While others are necessary to help one develop those capacities, one takes some ownership as one learns how to properly “extend” them independently from context. Yet, unless one is extremely virtuous and wise, one will need “constant means of support” in making the right choices.

Moral agency depends then not only on the individual but also those around them and the surrounding environment. Confucianism adopts a conception of traits as the dispositions to perceive, feel, and act in response to a range of situations. For example,

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30 Wong, 421
31 Wong, 422.
32 Wong, 424.
kindness is a response to vulnerabilities in other persons. In that sense, there is a context-relativity built into our character traits. And insofar as our traits constitute who we are, our identities include the people in the situations that our traits are relative to.

However, the Confucian ideal of the exemplary person has a global trait that is context invariant in a special sense. What’s right is not a matter that can be captured by an inflexible rule but a matter of what is appropriate to the particular circumstance. The social conception of person does not threaten autonomy or lessen the need for individual self-reflection because a person still needs to be able to navigate the different needs of the situation, those involved, and what is right in this particular instance. Rightness is a matter of context, but the exemplary person invariably does what is right across all contexts. Autonomy is not just about valuing sole ownership of actions in this sense but “value it for the sake of reliably doing what is right.” 33 A kind of moral autonomy is the ability to judge correctly what is right and to stand for it, against social pressures to the contrary. At the same time, the individual’s abilities to judge and act independently are nurtured with a moral tradition and in being taught by and interacting with others. Nurturing moral autonomy is a social process for Confucians.

3. Worries

The relational conception of self goes beyond the few conversations I mention here. We see this conception of self in the developmental and social sciences which I

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33 Wong, 426.
return to discuss in Chapter 5. Using this conception helps solve certain problems that an individualistic sense of self cannot answer such as the influence of others’ perspectives, flexibility of our personalities, and spooky metaphysics of a separable causal agent.

Some questions that still linger and serve as the basis for this project include the appropriate role of others in developing one’s personhood and forming beliefs about the self. If global traits are a “co-authored achievement,” how others’ projects define you will make a difference to whether certain virtues like self-knowledge are achieved. Specifically, others’ expectations and feedback shape how one views one’s abilities to act across situations and whether one will be able to develop moral autonomy. The relevant dominant perspective and whether oppression exists also matters for whether one can flourish. Oppressive stereotypes and practices influence how we know ourselves which then further impacts autonomy.

Developing and expressing moral autonomy requires learning from others and forming beliefs about yourself (i.e. when one’s moral reaction is appropriate). But how do you know that you’re doing the right thing or that you’re a good person? We know that you should seek feedback and learn from others but that still leaves the question of who is the authority. How do you know what context requires you to listen to feedback and which is oppressive thus requiring another kind of reaction? We need an understanding of self-knowledge that takes personal relationships, political forces, and moral development into consideration seriously.

\[34\] Wong, 424.
V. Dynamic Self-Knowledge

While the concept of “self” is metaphysically separate from the concept of “person,” we rely on epistemic methods like introspection to determine what makes you the same person over time. David Hume argued there was no “self” or persisting person over time. Drawing from Hume, Derek Parfit argues that we should stop caring about personal identity.35 In problematic cases in which there’s not a clear answer whether someone is the same person, certain parts of a person still survive. Parfit proposes that the question of what survives about a person concerns “what matters” to us and is more important than identity. That is, I care about being the same person only insofar as certain parts of myself survive. If we give up the language of identity, we understand how “you” – the parts of you that matter like psychological characteristics - can survive without implying you are the same person. Memories fade, intentions are fulfilled, and our traits change despite having the same beginning consciousness. We can imply survival by using phrases like “one of my future selves” and “one of my past selves.”

If we apply degrees of self or survival toward life experiences, then we can ask what kind of experiences dissolve the connections we deem important for personhood. This dynamic nature of personhood is lost in traditional self-knowledge theories that reduce to particular states such as sensation or belief. People often do refer to themselves in the past and future in this Parfitian way - “I’ll let next-week-me deal with that problem” or “15-year-old me really didn’t know how good he had it.” How should we

make sense of these cases of self-knowledge? What makes a person different and disconnected from their past self can also be good or bad. Normative questions concerning whether change is something to be desired or avoided will partly depend on what self-cultivation requires. The question of self-cultivation bears on self-knowledge in that we are not always in a position to know when or how we need self-cultivation when we’re ignorant.

L.A. Paul’s concept of transformative experience also challenges how we normally think of identity, rationality, and testimonial knowledge. Experiences can be “epistemically transformative” in which one knows something that only having the experience can provide. Transformative experiences can also be “personally transformative” by changing what it’s like to be you. The experience significantly changes your beliefs as well as your “core preferences.” Core preferences are what define you as a person such as priorities like how one spends one’s leisure time, beliefs concerning the meaning of life, and values like personal commitments and moral principles. Since one does not know what the experience is like or how it will change one’s core preferences, one cannot use the standard rationality model in which one places expected value on probabilistic outcomes of well-being.

Under Paul’s definition, the prior self has no access to the later self’s personal values. One cannot project one’s current subjective perspective into the future. Since transformative experiences constantly change us, a source’s feedback could be backward-looking and reporting on a past version of you rather than an accurate reflection of your

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present self. Or, the feedback is more forward-looking than it should be because the sources won’t know how an experience will change you.

Paul’s problem with testimonial knowledge extends beyond whether that source can tell you about whether it would be rational for you to be a parent or vampire. It also concerns whether anyone can really know you to which Paul, given her Nagelian commitments, might agree. Transformative experiences are problematic for self-knowledge if we want to hold that we can have any knowledge about our future selves or that other people can give us trustworthy feedback about who we are.

A. Authority and Disformative Feedback

Feedback itself can be transformative in how it can change you. When one is developing, either as a child or in a new career, feedback about the self shapes who one becomes. As one figures out their environment, part of the discovery is recognizing where one fits. Feedback tells you where you “fit” which, even if inaccurate, makes you try to conform so that you can make sense of your place and identity. Building on Paul’s account in the last chapter, I presented ways in which feedback is itself a transformative experience, formative feedback, and its potential dangers.

Sometimes, formative feedback looks to be a good thing or even necessary. Developing virtues such as honesty, kindness, and generosity could require children being told they have these qualities even if their behavior suggests otherwise. In transformative experiences, feedback is no longer something the person can evaluate as a piece of information about a fixed object. The information itself is transformative.
because it shifts how one identifies oneself. Feedback from others can not only generate new beliefs about who you are but also change your behavior.

What happens when that feedback is negative or prejudiced? Often, it signals one is in an oppressive environment. Unfortunately, “discriminatory practices produce a kind of experience that appears to confirm the false beliefs.”

For example, a student given feedback that they are “difficult” is likely to exhibit behavior that confirms that belief. Despite whether that information was true when first presented, the student’s behavior will then provide distorted evidence for the original falsehood. Distorted experiences transform a person so that when they draw on their experiences for information, there will be evidence for the negative or prejudiced belief about the self. If one is part of a marginalized group in an oppressive environment, they’re at higher risk of formative feedback and distorted experiences that make the feedback appear to be true. I argue that this kind of disformative feedback constitutes an epistemic injustice.

However, the problems with evaluating transformative feedback apply across all cases in which the feedback itself is the catalyst for the change and not something within the agent. Feedback from others is extremely powerful because it can transform a person without the person being conscious of it. We rarely have the cognitive resources to be consciously aware of all the feedback we are receiving. In the case of the student, the feedback leads to not only thinking of themselves in a negative way but acting in a negative way.

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37 Buchanan, “Social Moral Epistemology”, 2002, 23
Given the role that formative feedback plays in creating and maintaining group identities and social hierarchies, one receives similar information about oneself and one’s group across multiple times and multiple contexts. Certain relationships, such as those between a teacher and student, require trust and responsiveness to feedback. The power of feedback in such relationships has the potential to not only epistemically harm by leading a person to false belief but also morally harm by changing the person in a significantly negative way. It's crucial that we understand how to treat relationships that inform but also transform and shape one's perspective.

VI. Reasons for Virtue Approach

A holistic and practical approach to self-knowledge should include that we are social, moral, and changing knowers. There’s something special about self-knowledge and the stakes of whether one gets things right or wrong. The normativity in self-knowledge is both epistemic and moral. First, one is expected to form true beliefs about their own mental and physical states. Since introspection carries a certain authority, it is supposed to justify one’s beliefs about the self. Second, since rational beliefs should be revisable, one is expected to critically evaluate and change one’s beliefs if necessary. Morally, we hold rational agents responsible not only for their actions but also for their beliefs. When those beliefs are immoral or harmful, we fault the agent even if they do not realize they have such beliefs. The duty to know oneself, therefore, has high stakes and requires critical self-reflection.

Virtue theory also emphasizes the right kinds of habits for becoming a virtuous
person so we can ask, what are the right kinds of practices for learning about oneself?

The features of virtue theory, in ethics and epistemology, provide a way for us to better understand the ways we should go about knowing ourselves. Being virtuous means acting and forming beliefs “in the right way.” Virtues are not merely good intentions or one-time events. They must manifest themselves into action.

In this case, one must find a balance between relying on one’s own view of oneself and others’ views of oneself. In support of introspection, there’s evidence showing it can result in less biased self-views and inconsistencies regarding motivation. However, empirical support is “mixed at best.” Unfortunately, our perceptions of how others see us are usually erroneous. Some research shows that introspection can actually impede accuracy. In terms of self-observation, it looks as though our behaviors are not as salient to us as our thoughts so the latter can mislead us.

Where can we go wrong when we seek self-knowledge? Unlike other models, epistemic virtue addresses these important aspects of self-knowledge like forming beliefs in the right kind of way, how one should respond to feedback, and how one should treat sources of feedback. Given these features, I argue that we should treat self-knowing as a virtue. Self-knowing is a practice over time that occasionally requires us to recognize when we should withhold belief about the self or when we are in a cognitive situation that is biased or unjust. Being virtuous in this sense requires knowing the self and successfully executing the proper response to feedback about the self. Treating self-knowing as a virtue itself allows us to focus on that practice (which concerns how one treats one’s sources) rather than just the end product with a particular truth value.
Exercising self-knowledge as epistemic virtue allows you to act rationally – you behave in the ways you want (or at least know when you don’t). You’re also able to accurately report about the self for others. Still, sociopaths can have self-knowledge. When one exercises self-knowledge as a moral virtue, one recognizes oneself as a moral agent and whether they are living up to that ideal. While these products of self-knowledge are important, I focus on self-knowledge as a virtue by examining the way in which it properly functions (epistemically and morally) in response to feedback.

Two different kinds of vices that stem from excessive or deficient deference to outside sources and their feedback. Each vice has a special relationship to epistemic harm and injustice. Epistemic virtue in these cases lies in appropriate exposure to the right kind of sources, treating one’s sources in the right kind of way, and acceptance of the right kind of information. Therefore, I argue virtuous self-knowing requires an excellence of evaluating one’s sources of information on the self. With such a framework, we can see the ways in which self-knowledge is tied to epistemic injustice as well as epistemologies of ignorance and resistance.

VII. Scope

What I will have to say in the project is not inconsistent with holding other conceptions of self but rather a proposal for broadening the scope of selfhood to incorporate these important features and help answer concerns raised by the introspection skeptics and personal identity deniers. For the social knower, feedback from one’s social position in the community affects one’s epistemic agency. One’s epistemic abilities are
affected by social position for better or worse. To consider the self a dynamic entity, feedback is necessary to maintain psychological continuity. When we remember, we actually reconstruct our memories according to the information we received since the time of the event. We need feedback to make sense of our experiences as embodied creatures within the world of others.

The relational self emphasizes the importance of others (which includes their feedback) in constituting the self. How you interact with others is part of who you are. It’s also important to understand the difference between feedback that reflects the self and feedback that constitutes the self. In the former case, one can compare feedback to one’s own view of oneself. However, in the latter, feedback from others determines who one is and cannot be separated from one’s own conception. So, we must look at what sources, what content, what experiences should be allowed to have such constitutive power over others’ sense of self if we desire virtuous self-knowledge. My own question in this project concerns the variety and kinds of people and sources with whom we should engage, not only because of their contribution to self-knowledge but particularly because of how we can transform each other as individuals.
Chapter 2: Self-Knowing as an Epistemic Virtue

“Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance” – Confucius

“…If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.” – Audre Lorde

I. Intro

We care whether we know ourselves. We also tend to care what others think of us and whether it aligns with how we see ourselves. My goal in this chapter is understanding how best to understand and resolve tension between the ways others see you and the way you see yourself. I also want to capture why resolving this tension is so important by looking at various forms of injustice related to information exchange, i.e. epistemic injustices. Epistemic injustice is the systemic hindering or wronging of members of certain groups in their abilities to form and share knowledge.

The chapter has two main aims. First, I set out to establish the importance of assessing feedback (information about the self) and one’s sources of feedback. To do so, I present three cases concerning the role of feedback and how one should treat sources of information about oneself. Second, I argue that virtue epistemology can best explain self-knowledge and what is happening in said cases. Unlike other models, epistemic virtue includes important aspects of self-knowledge like forming beliefs in the right kind of way, how one should respond to feedback, and how one should treat sources of feedback. I also argue that the practice of self-knowledge, self-knowing, exemplifies the different

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1 Lorde, A. “Learning from the 1960s” in in The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, (Penguin: UK), 41.
criteria of an epistemic virtue. Treating self-knowing as a virtue itself allows us to focus on that practice (which concerns how one treats one’s sources) rather than some end product with a particular truth value.

There’s something special about self-knowledge and the stakes of whether one gets things right or wrong. Where can we go wrong when we seek self-knowledge? I present two different kinds of vices that stem from excessive or deficient deference to outside sources and their feedback. Each vice has a special relationship to epistemic harm and injustice. Epistemic virtue in these cases lies in appropriate exposure to the right kind of sources, treating one’s sources in the right kind of way, and acceptance of the right kind of information. Therefore, I argue virtuous self-knowing requires an excellence of evaluating one’s sources of information on the self. With such a framework, we can see the ways in which self-knowledge is tied to epistemic injustice as well as epistemologies of ignorance and resistance. At the end, I address objections to treating self-knowing as a virtue.

II. The Role of Feedback in Self-Knowledge

I would ask (or expect) a trustworthy friend to tell me if there’s something from our lunch stuck in my teeth. A mock interview serves the purpose of getting professional feedback on how one presents oneself. When a trait is highly observable or evaluative, it is more likely that close family and friends will be able to better judge and predict a
person’s behavior regarding that trait than themselves.² For example, my partner is likely
to be more accurate about whether I tend to overreact to misplacing my keys. They are
likely to know what my baseline behavior is and can compare my habitual modes of
reaction to life events. Others who don’t know me as well still judge and gauge my
reaction according to some set of relevant social norms regarding “lost keys” reactions.

I cannot fully observe myself from the “outside” and evidence suggests I’m prone
to cognitive biases of an (often) positive self-view. While having a positive self-image
could be helpful, knowing oneself in terms of how others see you as well as knowing
your own beliefs and values are important. Introspection is considered to be a form of
justification and way of learning about one’s mental states that is only available through a
first-person perspective. It serves as the basis for how we communicate with each other
about our beliefs, desires, pains, pleasures, emotions, and experiences of the world.

In terms of self-observation, we are limited by our first-person perspectives.
Additionally, research suggests that our behaviors are not as salient to us as our thoughts
(Bollich, et al, 2011). Psychologists identify two routes, intrapersonal and interpersonal,
for learning about the self. The intrapersonal route “looks inward” by using introspection
and self-observation to gain self-knowledge. The other route is interpersonal and “looks
outward” at feedback from others for information about the self. “Looking outward”
happens when one is motivated to learn about the self. We desire evidence about
ourselves and want to know what others think of us.

² Bollich K.L., et al. (2011). In search of our true selves: feedback as a path to self-
Feedback involves a new piece of information that I would not have from my first-person perspective alone. I use the term “feedback” to refer to any kind of information about the self whose inputs and outputs can be cognitive as well as physically embodied. For example, a person can tell me that I am too close to them in words, facial expressions, body language, or by physically pushing me away. An institution or social structure can do the same by creating barriers or obstacles between me and other people. The information is the same but the way I experience that information might change depending on how its expressed and felt within my body.

Simine Vazire’s Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model is a way to understand how some people know more about you than you do.\(^3\) It proposes that others know more about the self when it comes to aspects of personality that are observable (ex: dominant) and highly evaluative (ex: attractive). In the context of these traits, people close to a person are often better predictors than the person in terms of creativity, health, and career outcomes.\(^4\) The way a person rates themself and the way others rate them are similar when it comes to judgments regarding observable self-knowledge, which Vazire uses as evidence that others’ appraisals do provide feedback to the self. Observable self-knowledge refers to behaviors and general dispositions. The point of Vazire’s model is not that others’ perspectives are necessarily more accurate than one’s own perspective of oneself. Rather, the outside perspective has some knowledge about oneself that’s unavailable via the first-person perspective.

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\(^4\) Fiedler et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2008; Connelly and Ones, 2010
While the researchers separate “observable” from “highly evaluative” traits, attributing the former partly depends on how those behaviors are interpreted by those around them. Whether someone has a “dominant” personality is likely going to be influenced by factors such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and physical characteristics. For example, a Black man may have strong leadership skills but hone them in a way that appears less dominant in front of other White people. If those sources are even implicitly relying on the stereotype of a Black man and cultural U.S. norms, he has good reasons such as safety to express them differently. If he were to act in the same way as a White man, would his behavior be called “dominant” or something else? The norms of what constitutes “dominant” and who gets to count in the culture are not separate from the social roles. When determining “highly evaluative” traits, not only the person but the sources of evaluation and their social norms are particularly relevant.

What is the role of others, then, and how should we treat them as we seek self-knowledge? Making big life decisions such as career and parenthood involve knowing yourself to a certain degree. However, we think that making a wise choice means seeking advice from family and friends. Vazire and other psychologists center on those close to the person in their research on self-knowledge. Their research suggests that we should rely on feedback for self-knowledge to a certain extent. Does that mean a person should only listen to those who know them well? Who is the best authority on you – yourself, your family or friends, your doctor, your boss? Perhaps the person who knows you best is your barista or bartender. Much more needs to be said regarding who the “experts” on you are.
Despite the ways in which feedback helps us achieve self-knowledge, most self-knowledge theories do not address its role. I will argue that virtue theory gives a framework for answering these questions. For now, I will present a few cases to motivate the conversation around feedback. The first case demonstrates when we think someone should listen to others even when it conflicts with the first person perspective. Conversely, the second case is one in which the person should reject outside feedback and the supposed “experts.” In the third case, it’s unclear whether the person should listen to others or not.

A. Ignorance & Feedback

Sometimes self-knowledge requires accepting what others have to say about us. When it comes to our blindspots, we should defer to other perspectives rather than our own. I use the following case to explore the relationship to feedback and outside sources that virtuous self-knowing requires.

*The “Feminist” Mansplainer*

Mark\(^5\) considers himself a feminist. He has read several feminist texts, supports reproductive rights and closing the gender wage gap, watches female-centered movies and TV shows, and has several female friends. He believes that sexism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity are real problems. Seeing himself as a feminist, Mark feels compelled to point

\(^5\) For the purposes of this chapter, Mark is an American, upper to middle-class, cisgender, White male but one could say the case applies across other intersecting identities with being male.
out when his female friends are experiencing sexism. He chides them for participating in patriarchal norms such as wearing make-up and high heels. When female co-workers fail to get recognition, he reminds them of the “glass ceiling” for women in business. Occasionally, someone points out that Mark is being condescending by explaining women’s experiences to them. He always brushes off this information since he knows himself to be a feminist and supporter of women.

Characteristic of a mansplainer is their tone of voice, displays of confidence, and lack of awareness to others’ reactions. Many mansplainers have good intentions and genuinely believe they are being helpful. However, in many cases, the helpfulness is a form of condescension. By giving his unsolicited (often less knowledgeable) opinion, the mansplainer assumes the listener is ignorant and downgrades the listener’s status as a knower. Mansplaining is considered sexist because it conveys the impression that women are less credible knowers about a topic because they’re women. One possible reaction to Mark is calling him a sexist and, thus, not really a feminist like he thinks. In the next section, I argue that is the wrong approach.

1. “Is Mark Really a Feminist?” is the Wrong Question

Mark could have the wrong concept of feminist in mind. Perhaps Mark fails to properly apply “feminist” when he uses it to describe himself. I’m hesitant to criticize Mark in this way. Why call someone a feminist? Many people could claim Mark is a feminist. His male colleagues and friends likely have this view of Mark and may change around him because they know he would criticize sexist behavior. His employers can
trust him to be aware of diversity and sexual harassment issues. Even his female friends
could agree that Mark is a feminist, just more in theory than practice or a slightly
hypocritical one.

Debating whether Mark counts as a feminist is a form of “policing” feminism. Some upshots would be a better grasp on values and corresponding actions that seem inherent to feminism. Mark’s expressed values and other actions align with anti-sexism and promote women’s rights. These values and actions seem fundamental to feminism thus giving us some criteria for judging whether Mark is a feminist. We could claim that one is or is not a feminist depending on an issue like voting or reproductive rights.

Two major problems involving performativity and exclusivity arise if we take this approach, though. First, if we require people to prove their feminism, the “performance” aspect of feminism takes precedence. That is, people will focus more on the outward signs of feminism rather than values (or less visible activism) to “virtue-signal” they are good feminists. Too often, feminism can appear to be more about personal power and self-image than equal rights. For example, actions like wearing a pink hat or a T-shirt that says “The Future is Female” imply solidarity but they are insignificant compared to donating money or volunteering one’s time. Some actions, like voting, are also private. Requiring people to display x amount of feminist acts would lead to a more “performative” kind of feminism rather than one with actual values or real intentions of social change.

Policing feminism is also likely to exclude certain people or groups because they don’t “fit” the supposedly ideal feminist. But what would an ideal feminist even look like? Feminism in its current form is typically considered feminist if it addresses
intersectionality – that is, the diversity of identities and how they result in different forms of power or oppression. Since a woman may have multiple identities, we cannot act as if each woman has a similar experience of oppression. “White feminism” is a term coined for a feminism that lacks an intersectional awareness of the power dynamics of race. It often involves those who have privileged social status outside of gender (being white, upper class, able-bodied, heterosexual) who fail to recognize said privilege and focus only on their own experience of oppression. Emphasis on intersectionality as well as the role of those with power in dismantling oppression has allowed for men to be considered feminists. Whether one can count as a feminist could require meeting certain important standards and its worthwhile to think about those standards.

Yet exclusion and claiming a person does not “count” as a feminist feels like a slippery slope. Given the diversity of experiences, an intersectional feminism is unlikely to have a strict litmus test for measuring how feminist one is. In Bad Feminist, Roxane Gay reminds readers that “feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed.” There’s no other true “essence” to feminism - dismantling oppression is going to look different for different people. Gay resisted feminism at first because she was “worried that feminism wouldn’t allow me to be the mess of a woman I knew myself to be.” As she recognized there is no one true “Essential Feminism” to dominate all womankind, she could embrace feminist principles. An intersectional feminism allows Gay to say that, even if she strays from those principles, “it’s okay when I do not live up to my best feminist self.” While some beliefs and actions

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could clearly disqualify one as a feminist, many cases will be complicated and involve gray areas of acceptance.

The use of “white feminism” is less about policing who “counts” as a feminist and more about identifying an unsatisfactory way of being a feminist. The label is meant to call out ways that feminist movements fail to be intersectional and educate feminists on being better. The answer is not about “policing” in terms of what identity a feminist must have. Everyone makes mistakes. Being a feminist does not require perfection. Being a feminist is (and should be) an aspirational identity in which one continually aspires towards dismantling oppression within the world and oneself.

Whether the aspirational identity is really an aspiration or merely performative matters. Let’s assume that Mark is using the appropriate meaning of feminist when he refers to himself and not merely putting on a show. We still care about the reasons for the gap between aspiration and action – what prevents one from achieving one’s aim in being the kind of person one wants to be? Even if Mark has the best intentions, he still seems responsible for his mansplaining. Since sexism is contradictory to feminist values, Mark should be worried about his mansplaining. We want an account of self-knowledge that addresses the tension between what Mark aspires to be and how he falls short. Given his beliefs and values, Mark’s lack of self-knowledge means he will fall short of his aims (being a good feminist).

Feminism helped Gay, as a Black woman, “believe [her] voice matters, even in this world where there are so many voices demanding to be heard.” For Mark, feminism should mean something different. Perhaps feminism would be better described as a perspective and stance on the world rather than an aspirational group identity (I will
argue more for this position in a later chapter). But those are not the concerns I have with Mark. The problem with Mark’s lack of self-knowledge here is separable from the particular content or criteria for group identity. Asking whether Mark knows what “feminist” means or whether he counts as a feminist is the wrong approach. If there is no essential nature of feminism, how should one criticize Mark? More needs to be said to explain Mark’s ignorance since he does have some degree of self-knowledge.

2. What’s Missing in Self-Knowledge Theories

In the introduction, I look at the different frameworks for approaching the question, “How does one know oneself?” The traditional approaches in Anglo-American analytic philosophy address this question by looking at one’s relationship to mental states either as a conscious observer or rational agent. Self-knowledge theories focus on the kind of state and the nature of justification. The two main camps in self-knowledge theories, empiricist and rationalist, differ in terms of how they present the nature of our relationship to our mental states and what states they choose as fundamental to self-knowledge. But what’s missing in Mark’s case doesn’t seem reducible to his mental states. What seems more important is his relationship with other people in coming to know himself. Since each traditional camp assumes some kind of authority based on the self-knower’s mental states, neither gives us a clear way to analyze the case. We need an account of self-knowledge that is socially and politically situated. Such an account allows for a better analysis of one’s sources and kinds of information about the self, the role of relationships and one’s environment, and the interaction of epistemic injustice.
Empiricist models of self-knowledge look at mental states as the types of things that can be observed separate from the environment and one’s body. This view of self-knowledge would have to explain Mark’s case by pointing to some inability to introspect on what his experience is like. But Mark’s lack of self-awareness doesn’t necessarily imply that Mark errs regarding the phenomenal content of his experience. That is, Mark could be right about what his experience is like. Perhaps he fails to perceive reactions from his female friends but it’s unclear that Mark gets anything wrong about his own experience. Not every case of Mark’s mansplaining is likely to bring about the same reaction nor should we require women to have to give a particular reaction for Mark to know.

One might even praise Mark for being able to see sexist tropes and workplace discrimination along with having knowledge about oppression. We know that Mark is able to observe some cases of sexism. His beliefs and concepts allow him to notice the kind of advertisements marketed at women and the behavior of his male colleagues. Without these higher-order states, he could not recognize the oppression within the perceptual content.

Rationalist theories of self-knowledge focus on states for which we are responsible because we deliberate and relate to them in a special way. Rationalists have more to say when it comes to cases like Mark because they consider social and practical factors but only to a certain extent. Mark’s case would be fleshed out in terms of self-deception or irrationality. Otherwise, his reasons would be “transparent” when he thought about whether he was mansplaining (Moran). Even if he was wrong, Mark would still be entitled to saying he believes he’s not mansplaining if he’s rational. While these
approaches show potential, I want to maintain Mark is at least somewhat rational and not “self-blind” but also not necessarily entitled to self-reports about his mansplaining.

To be fair, most self-knowledge theories do not claim to be answering cases like Mark. “Relatively uncontroversial examples” of states that escape first-person privileged access include character traits, dispositions, causal relations between thoughts and actions, and emotions. Yet, we considered these to be aspects of the self and states about which we ask people to self-report. Is the claim that we only know these parts of ourselves through non-introspective methods (or perhaps not at all)? Although Gilbert Ryle (1949) and some behaviorists defend such a position, that claim seems a bit too strong even if it’s true that such methods give us necessary evidence about ourselves. Casting these important parts of the self aside is too easy. The interaction between one’s first-person perspective and other forms of reasoning, such as listening to testimony, should be addressed in a comprehensive theory of self-knowledge.

Many of the problems with the traditional self-knowledge theories are ones that plague epistemology in general. For example, the vague nature of justification pushes many to question how fundamental it is and whether it is the appropriate starting point for epistemic evaluation. As we’ve seen, the two camps disagree on which state is most fundamental and the nature of introspection, the primary (if not only) form of justification considered for self-knowledge. Since these theories only account for self-knowledge via

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introspection, the introspection skeptics won’t accept these explanations as adequate (especially since mansplaining is an outward behavior). If we are looking at only the states or the justification, we won’t be able to explain what’s wrong with Mark’s case.

Another common problem in traditional “S knows that P” epistemology is the lack of situatedness, i.e. assuming the knower’s status is interchangeable. “Epistemologists share the assumption that any person...will form the same conclusions” or beliefs if “performing epistemic operations in a responsible way” (Alcoff, 2007, 40). Even if in the same identical situation, with the same access to information, and the same perceptual data, “differing social positions generate variable constructions of reality and afford different perspectives on the world” so this approach fails for most of our complex, social beliefs (Code, 1993, 39). Treating each knower as the same ignores the individual, group, and cultural variability. In the same vein, self-knowledge theories don’t address the differences in how a subject’s social positions influence belief-formation about the self. They focus only on the individual, not social, processes and content involved in particular perceptual states and propositional beliefs. Mark’s epistemic position (which is not separate from other aspects of his identity like social privilege) is relevant for how much, if any, authority he should be granted authority in reporting about his own behavior.

Finally, most approaches in epistemology treat our beliefs as if they are discrete, specific, and often propositional when that may not be the case (Zagzebski, 1993; Kvanvig, 1992). These theories only explain particular instances of self-knowledge, which isn’t the right approach for Mark’s mansplaining or most of our traits. It’s unclear whether we could isolate each case of Mark’s mansplaining. First, it’s unlikely Mark will
get reprimanded for only one instance of mansplaining, especially if it’s out of character for him. Second, it’s not always clear when one particular instance is a case of mansplaining. Whether Mark is mansplaining could involve several, indiscernible factors beyond Mark such as the listener’s cultural background, receptivity, and needs. The co-worker might need the validation of her experience even if Mark doesn’t say it quite right. Focusing on only one case of mansplaining doesn’t let us see what most bothers us, and possibly Mark, about his case. What’s wrong here goes beyond just particular cases and involves Mark’s general disposition not only towards his own behavior but also towards other people. Going through each case would miss the point of Mark’s mistake – he is ignoring important feedback about his tendency to mansplain and likely missing feedback within situations where he is mansplaining.

Perhaps analytic philosophers do not think accounts of self-knowledge need to be applicable to one’s daily life but I disagree. Even if we allow space for more theoretical and abstract views, philosophy should also help us in our search for truth in the world and within ourselves. Explaining what goes wrong in Mark’s case should serve as a guide for others who might also suffer from certain kinds of self-ignorance. You want to have a framework that others can use to test different hypotheses and discover new truths. The framework’s value comes partly in its explanatory power as well as its functionality.

Introspected mental states are relevant to self-knowledge and rational agency plays a valuable role in knowing oneself but, as we see with important kinds of cases such as Mark’s, these are not sufficient for self-knowledge. We need a theory of self-knowledge that encompasses a person’s knowledge of themselves in a more holistic way, that captures the social elements of both the self and self-knowledge-forming practices,
that allows us to explain and improve towards a more engaged and politically aware self-knowledge. As people become more aware of their implicit biases and social privileges, they seek to know themselves in this richer way.

3. Epistemic Ignorance & Mark’s Blindspots

Instead of using traditional self-knowledge theories, I want to approach Mark’s case using epistemologies of ignorance. Rather than looking at justified true beliefs, epistemologies of ignorance seek to understand why we lack knowledge and the significance of such a lack. We are all epistemically limited in the sense that we can only see things from our own situated perspectives. While Mark can observe his own first-person experience, he can only imagine how he appears to others. This is true for all of us. But we are expected to have some level of self-knowledge about that outward appearance. When playing hide-and-seek with a young child, you can observe their lack of knowledge about their own body’s visibility to others. One gets better at the game when one can consciously imagine how one might be seen by another person.

As we learn social norms, we begin to conceptualize how others will see and judge us and our behaviors.

“Knowers are always somewhere – and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.”9 If all knowers are situated in time and space, knowledge will be contextual to some extent. Current research on social cognition suggests basic faculties such as perception, attention, and memory are specialized according to one’s

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prior concepts and culture. “Specialized” means the concepts and culture shape what one pays attention to, encodes and how (i.e. affect), and the way one actually perceives the world. For example, someone without the concept of street lights may not feel any sense of urgency when a light turns yellow.

For any individual, the way they see and form beliefs about the world will involve their various social identities and the ways those identities intersect and interact with each other. Being in a specific social position can make one epistemically advantaged or disadvantaged and defective. For Mark, being male puts him in a particular epistemic position that makes him ignorant in a few ways that affect his self-knowledge. In what follows, I look at three main frameworks for understanding Mark’s epistemic ignorance.

First, what I call the “individual” view of ignorance stems from Lorraine Code. Her general theory holds that a person’s social position epistemically limits and enables them given the specificity of their position. Mark’s (and everyone else’s) social position is somewhat unique to them and shapes their individual experiences. Taking an intersectional approach to knowledge results in this kind of view because every aspect of a person’s social position and their experience of that position is considered. If one’s social position puts one in a better or worse position for forming beliefs, then we should also consider how our social position influences our ability to have self-knowledge.

The second approach to ignorance focuses on group identity and the role that shared experiences can play in knowledge-evaluating practices. Harding’s “group” view of ignorance looks at how being in a certain group gives one an epistemic advantage and

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10 Kitayama and Park, 2011; Huebner, 2016
disadvantage depending on the features of the group. Those differences include past experiences, motivations and general interest in keeping the status quo, and starting belief sets.

While he has some knowledge of discrimination towards women, Mark will not have experienced such discrimination as a cisgender White male. He won’t be able to draw on experiences to determine whether his behavior is contributing. Perhaps Mark has face other forms of discrimination, such as sexual orientation or disability, that allows him some advantage at understanding how discrimination can feel and the power of subtle microagressions.

Where one fits in society will partly determine how much one cares about keeping the status quo. Having a social identity means one will have motivation (or not) to develop a “critical consciousness” towards conventional beliefs and values. If one is in a position of privilege, it’s less likely one will carry that motivation to change. Mark is motivated to fight oppression if we consider him a feminist but not every feminist will be motivated in the same way because of their social positions. Mark, perhaps unconsciously, lacks motivation to recognize his own mansplaining for individual reasons such as avoiding cognitive dissonance. But his (non-feminist) male identity will also not drive him to question his self-perception of how he treats women.

Forming our beliefs about the world and ourselves rely on our starting belief sets. Belief formation involves “judgment calls about relevance, plausibility, coherence, consistency, and credibility” and what one already believes will have a “privileged place

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in my judgments.”

What Mark believes about gender discrimination has a privileged place in his judgments because he’s a feminist. This starting belief set is what allows Mark to call out sexist situations in the workplace. However, Mark’s starting belief set is less likely to be as grounded in experiences that are common to most women – that is, being condescendingly treated as ignorant and/or receiving unwanted attention and advice from males. His starting belief set as a male is less likely to represent his behavior as mansplaining but rather as helpful and sincere.

One’s individual experiences and specific social position will create a unique belief set but group identity is epistemically relevant because different groups will “sometimes operate with different starting belief sets based on their social location and their group-related experiences…(which) inform their epistemic operations such as judging coherence and plausibility.” Specificity of group identity matters given the range of diverse experiences within a social group and the ways that one’s intersecting identities shape their experiences. Mark’s male identity affects his judgment calls about whether the woman is aware of the discrimination, whether his behavior is appropriate, and whether he’s being a good feminist.

For example, it’s not clear whether it’s necessary or appropriate for Mark to point out how make-up contributes to women’s oppression. He seems ignorant of the important role make-up plays because he has not yet experienced wearing it nor is he expected to wear it. For many, make-up allows them to express their individuality. Mark (and much

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13 Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance”, 44.
14 Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance”, 45.
of feminist theory) misses the value of beauty, something which bell hooks argues needs to be included in feminist revolutionary struggles.\textsuperscript{15}

Uma Narayan argues Western women see and conceptualize women who wear hijabs as being “dupes of the patriarchy” despite the latter group’s awareness of patriarchal norms and sense of autonomy.\textsuperscript{16} She compares the hijab to make-up in Western culture which feeds into patriarchal norms in a subtle but dangerous way when Western women fail to see its oppressive aspect. I don’t take Narayan’s point to be that women shouldn’t wear make-up but rather we should be cautious in assuming that women aren’t aware of patriarchal norms and treating them as if they don’t have agency. Mark’s concept of women who wear make-up falls into the same trap of assuming women are “dupes” who are unable to recognize their actions within a larger system. In both cases of make-up and the hijab, we should consider familiarity and experience with the culture and practices as important to judgments about how they function. Women are often expected to wear make-up and dress in feminine ways to appear professional. Depending on the job, these standards can be made explicit or be implicit.

The third approach of “structural” ignorance, drawing from Charles Mills, looks at how and why oppressive systems actively promote a lack of true beliefs and perpetuate false beliefs. Mills argues that “white ignorance” stems from a white supremacist history,

\textsuperscript{15} hooks, bell. “beauty laid bare: aesthetics in the ordinary” in To Be Real ed. by Rebecca Walker (New York, New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group 1995), 163

specifically in the U.S.\textsuperscript{17} Part of white supremacy’s ability to maintain power involves the participation of knowers in reinforcing ignorance, particularly seeing and believing Black people to be inferior. This “active knowing” involves lacking true beliefs and having false beliefs about the supposed superiority of white people – not only explicitly but also implicitly through how American culture centers, prioritizes, and values white identity and experience.

Having a society built upon such beliefs will also create practices and norms that seem to rationalize these beliefs. To have this kind of ignorance, society must consist in group hierarchies which happen at a structural level. For example, refusing proper education to groups of people then claiming the groups are intellectually inferior is a way of perpetuating and enforcing false beliefs about groups of people. The active practice of “unknowing” involves the constant participation of people, institutions, and other systems to maintain white superiority through the spread of misinformation and avoidance of hard truths. For Mills, the worry is not just individual cognition as much as the influence of oppressive social structures on cognitive processes. This active ignorance results in knowers of all kinds (not just white) having a “cognitive handicap” when it comes to seeing the world.

Mills notes that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged, group-based ignorance and that male ignorance goes back further in history. This epistemic ignorance seems most relevant not only because Mark is actively “unknowing” but also because Mark cares about not contributing to the oppressive patriarchal system. Mark’s

\textsuperscript{17} Mills, Charles. “White Ignorance” in \textit{Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance}. 11-38
mansplaining is particularly problematic in that he is informing women about gender discrimination. Again, just as Mark’s identity does not mean he is completely ignorant, a woman’s identity does not necessarily make her an expert. Yet, by Mark inserting himself into the role of inform/teacher, he is perpetuating the idea that men are more likely to know and therefore be superior.

One of the reasons mansplaining has the effect it does is that it’s not an isolated incident. The phenomenon consists of men, who may be lesser experts than women, constantly approaching to tell a woman how to better do something or giving her information, implying that she is either incapable and/or incompetent, throughout her daily life. For those bombarded with mansplaining on a constant basis will have epistemically significant different judgments about Mark’s behavior. These differences stem from the individual’s past experiences and starting belief set about gender discrimination, mansplaining, and men’s appropriate role in gender equality.

Perhaps we could say Mark lacks knowledge about his own participation in oppressive practices. Yet Mark can hold a general belief that his being male means he participates in oppressive practices while being blind to his own particular token acts of participation. He has the right beliefs about sexism and that sexism is playing some causal role in the reactions that his friends have. But he fails to see the causal role he plays in their experience of sexism. The belief he’s missing could be “This woman is a competent knower about sexism” but that requires more information about the person to whom Mark is mansplaining. Mark could still be a mansplainer even if one particular listener is not a competent knower about sexism.
4. The Importance of Feedback

So, where does Mark go wrong or what is he missing? I think the biggest problem is not the application of feminism or even Mark’s lack of self-awareness. Since Mark’s social position partly determines his epistemic position, Mark is therefore likely to suffer from the cognitive handicap of male ignorance which stems from living in a misogynistic environment.

Mark is aware (to a certain extent) of his causal role in sexism in the general sense. He recognizes the role of action in being a feminist hence his donations and voting. He may even call out mansplaining in others. Yet he lacks this vision when it comes to his own behavior. Part of the ways Mark is limited in knowing whether he is a mansplainer include

- first-person perspective on outward behavior
- general cognitive biases (i.e. I am going to interpret my behavior according to my intentions and think it’s less plausible that others are going to misinterpret me),
- lacking experiences of mansplaining, make-up, and other aspects of feminine identity
- lacks group motivation to challenge his position as an entitled knower
- starting belief set as a male is less likely to represent his behavior as mansplaining
- male ignorance enforced through the patriarchy/misogyny
It’s less important whether Mark knows he is a feminist or whether he is mansplaining in a particular instance. It’s more important how Mark knows he is a feminist and whether he’s mansplaining. People who occupy more privileged positions in society need to take their blindspots seriously, especially if those blindspots concern their status and potentially oppressive behavior. Oppressive systems, as Mills argues, encourage and enforce a kind of ignorance that blinds a person to the ways that they participate in oppression. Many people do not consciously want to subordinate others or treat people unjustly or gain unfair advantages due to their social status. So, a privileged group member is likely to either be unaware of their oppressive behavior or be unaware of how their behavior is oppressive and harmful.

Being aware of one’s blindspots might sound contradictory – blindspots are inherently places you can’t see. Yet, when we drive our cars, we must be aware of our blindspots and the blindspots of others or we put ourselves and others in danger. Some blindspots are bigger than others. A semi-truck driver must be more vigilant and aware of the space in which they won’t be able to see another driver. For Mark, he needs to be more aware of the gap between his perception of self and the way others see him because his social position puts in a particular position of privilege and therefore social power. That position, like the truck driver, requires being attentive and careful given the chance for harm.

Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingram carved out this “blind area” – where others can see things in ourselves of which we are unaware – as part of their model of
interpersonal awareness to help organizations with group relations.\textsuperscript{18} The framework that inspired Vazire’s model, the “Johari Window” is a technique that people can use to increase their self-awareness by having their peers use adjectives to describe them. Adjectives not selected by oneself go into this area. For Mark, it would be “mansplaining” (although not one of the originals). The model requires not only the recognition of a blind area but also the need to seek feedback so that this area becomes smaller over time. In the words of Donald Rumsfeld, Mark’s blindspot is currently an “unknown unknown” which makes it much more dangerous.\textsuperscript{19} The importance of Mark knowing his blindspots, even if he remains at an epistemic disadvantage, is significant. The chance for harm in mansplaining involves the furthering of misogyny and other kinds of injustice that Mark himself opposes.

We don’t want to just say that “mansplaining is in the eye of the beholder” and end up with a relativist stance. Certain norms, modes of justification, and structural analysis can give us conditions by which to judge whose more trustworthy in a situation. Given the nature of mansplaining, Mark is not in a good epistemic position compared to others who are more likely to be better epistemic (and moral) authorities on his behavior. Incorporating feedback does not mean accepting but rather taking it as one perspective and giving the appropriate weight to that perspective. When seeking feedback about the self, one must seek the right sources.

I trust a dentist to read my X-ray and determine whether I need a cavity but not because they have better vision. Their expert understanding of the perceptual content


\textsuperscript{19} Rumsfeld, D. Department of Defense Briefing, February 12, 2002.
allows them to see important facts. Code (1995) argues that many knowers are ignorant in certain situations in the same way a layperson is ignorant in the operating room. The layperson and the surgeon see the same things but the former lacks the conceptual resources to form beliefs and act appropriately on the basis of what they see.\textsuperscript{20}

Let’s take a step further and look at how the expert perspective transforms depending on the social position of the expert or group. For example, if a dentist has past experience with poverty, they might see the potential cavity differently than someone who does not have that background. Having a dentist who is critically aware of socioeconomic status means one’s dentist will be able to view cavity risk in the context of other important factors. In later chapters, I discuss the importance of having the right kinds of experts when seeking feedback. Generally speaking, having experts who are more aware and sensitive to social and power dynamics will result in more appropriate and accurate feedback. This point about experts matters for Mark because he will want to seek feedback from others with such awareness and sensitivity. Otherwise, he risks furthering his male ignorance.

It’s unclear how we should use “expert” in the case of Mark, either. Given the difficulties of determining who is an expert when it comes to Mark (and mansplaining), it’s likely Mark will need to seek sources with different perspectives, which in turn have their own epistemic advantages and disadvantages. Which sources are appropriate has direct relevance to the kind of epistemic ignorance involved. Getting the right kind of

\textsuperscript{20} Alcoff, “Epistemologies” 41.
feedback from the right sources allows us to revise and update our belief based on the new evidence.

Indexical or “I” beliefs about yourself and beliefs about a person who happens to be you are different. To explain the essential and problematic difference, John Perry gives an example of walking around a grocery store and forming a belief about someone spilling sugar because he sees a trail on the ground. What Perry does not realize is that his bag of flour has a hole and he is the person spilling the flour. In his example, Perry forms the correct belief that “a person is spilling flour all over the store.” But, as Perry notes, the belief takes a different form once it’s indexed to himself – “I am spilling sugar all over the store.” Two potential ways that Perry could initially find out he is spilling the flour are:

1) observe the hole himself and look to see the trail coming from his cart or

2) a person says something to Perry, directs his attention to the problem, and perhaps explains Perry’s causal role in the mess.

Perry never tells us that how he came to discover he was spilling the sugar other than it “dawned” on him. I assume this involves the first way to some degree, either observing as part of realization or confirmation. We can imagine Perry acting differently if a bystander pointed out his messy mistake instead of discovering the leak himself. This second way concerns the role of feedback in essentially indexical beliefs.

In relation to self-knowledge, feedback from others helps you to create not just any but the right kind of indexical beliefs. Mark seems to have all the right kinds of

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beliefs in terms of sexism is wrong, men should not act a certain way, women suffer from asymmetrical gendered beauty norms and workplace discrimination. But the problem is that Mark doesn’t apply those beliefs to himself in the right way. He is missing important egocentric, indexical beliefs when he engages in the mansplaining behavior he does. Perhaps he is unaware of the concept of mansplaining and lacks an important concept to help him understand the larger context of his behavior. Or perhaps he believes his colleagues and friends experience mansplaining but fails to connect held beliefs about men with beliefs about himself. What provides the proper connection between his feminist beliefs and indexical beliefs that would allow him to appropriately judge when he is mansplaining?

If we accept that Mark truly identifies with feminist values, Mark is going to be deeply upset by the realization he is failing to live up to his own standards. Cognitive biases are likely to make it even harder because of its dissonance and negative reflection. Mark should ask yet not demand help in being better at the ways he interacts with women. Seeking feedback about whether he is acting in sexist ways can occur beyond just direct interactions. Mark can also get information about himself by reading more about how men can be ignorant of their own sexism and women’s experiences of mansplaining (even if they don’t explicitly use that term).

What is most important to this case is that Mark fails to appropriately respond to others and have a proper relationship to feedback about himself. This failure is not only an epistemic but also moral one given the context and the content of Mark’s behavior and values. Being an ally to marginalized groups, especially when one is in a position of privilege, requires constant learning and checking oneself for behaviors that could
contribute to others’ oppression. If one truly aspires to be a feminist, one will seek feedback and learn how to better exemplify that identity.

With the availability and access to information in most places in the U.S., it is easy (perhaps required) for one to believe that sexism and racism exists. One may even admit that one is likely to commit sexist and racist actions but still not be able to form the “I” belief when situations arise. That is, one might not be able to see one’s own actions in a sexist or racist way due to cognitive biases, lack of background beliefs or prior experience, or other epistemic barriers. It’s important to seek out the right kind of help and sources of information when addressing one’s blindspots.

However, we should seek different perspectives without the same blindspots in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Mark’s close friends are likely to have a different perspective on his behavior than Mark’s work carpool because they will have different blindspots. Not only might the kind of relationships create a certain bias (such as partiality), the situations and roles in which the relationships exist will make certain aspects of Mark more salient and normatively significant than others. So, a source’s blindspots could concern their own cognitive biases, the limitations of the relationship, and/or ignorance concerning the subject which could be the person, i.e. Mark, or the trait itself, i.e. mansplaining. In the next chapter, I’ll build on these issues and argue that seeking a variety of sources is an important (possibly necessary) part of virtuous self-knowing.

B. Self-Knowledge & Rejecting Feedback
Now that I’ve argued for the importance of accepting feedback, the next question is when one is justified in rejecting feedback? The obvious answer is when the feedback is false. If you tell me that my birthday is Tuesday, and I know it’s Wednesday, I can easily dismiss and potentially correct your statement. Yet, as we saw with Mark, self-knowledge and feedback involve social knowers whose experiences and environments matter. The following case is from Rebecca Walker’s autobiography which explores how intersecting identities influence one’s sense of self.22

*Black, White, and Jewish*

Rebecca was born to a Black mother and Jewish father. The nurse came to ask, “Correct?” regarding the birth certificate and the different races. As a young girl, Rebecca takes ballet classes from a woman who tells Rebecca that she “will never be a great ballerina because black women’s bodies aren’t suited for ballet…You will never get this hundred percent right, she says out loud….There have never been any black ballerinas.”23 When Rebecca goes to middle school, other girls bully her for “acting like a white girl” and ostracize her. One night at college, a drunk boy comes into Rebecca’s room and asks “Are you really Black and Jewish…How can that be possible?” Although this remark leads Rebecca to question her own existence, she knows that she is “not a bastard, the product of rape, the

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22 Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White, and Jewish.* (2001)

23 Walker, 93.
child of some white devil.” With this statement, she refers to the ways that people tended to see interracial children and rejects the labels as ways to see herself.

I want to look at conditions within the environment that give Rebecca (and others) reasons to reject feedback she is getting about her identity. In the last section, I discussed Mark’s lack of self-knowledge in terms of his social position and how situated being within an oppressive system makes him more vulnerable to certain kinds of ignorance. Due to being in this position, Mark needs to be more receptive to and appropriately seek out feedback. Now, I want to consider how one’s social position can justify rejecting feedback about the self. I argue that some cases of self-knowledge involve actively resisting feedback, particularly when the feedback is oppressive. In these cases, the person can be vulnerable to ignorance in the same ways that Mark is. However, the oppressive environment is giving them feedback about their inferiority rather than superiority due to their social identity. This kind of internalization is much more detrimental to the person and their self-respect, autonomy, and, therefore, self-knowledge.

Looking at the conditions of an oppressive environment, I consider how feedback in particular plays an important role in oppressive environments. I argue that feedback is a tool for oppression and works in at least two major ways, ignorance and internalization, to control a person’s self-knowledge. While both of these tools are used to shape dominant as well as subordinated groups, I will be focusing primarily on the latter group.

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in this explanation. To this end, I draw from several different examples – context, type of feedback, and intersecting group identities – to capture the expansive and vast nature of oppression. Recognizing and rejecting oppressive feedback can be extremely difficult but crucial given its power to negatively transform people’s lives and bodies and minds.

1. Oppressive Environments

First, I should explain how I am using the concept of oppression. The different conceptual frameworks of philosophers, feminists, Black radicals, queer theorists, and sociologists tend to focus on different audiences and arguments for different purposes. Accounts of oppression are often complementary so I don’t focus on comparisons. Instead, through this interdisciplinary approach, I hope to shine light on what an oppressive environment looks like and what it means for self-knowledge.

At its core, “being oppressed means the absence of choices” due to an unwarranted and harmful social hierarchy.\(^{25}\) Oppression involves systemic injustice towards certain groups of people in different ways such as powerlessness and marginalization,\(^ {26}\) epistemic injustice\(^ {27}\), and no good options.\(^ {28}\) Oppression works by forcing a certain kind of social reality in which some groups of people are superior to other groups. Various factors, such as body shape or skin color, mark a person for a


\(^{26}\) Young, Iris Marion “Five Faces of Oppression” In *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism* edited by Lisa Heldke and Peg O’Conor (McGraw-Hill, 2004)


particular kind of degrading treatment due to one’s supposed membership in an inferior social group. The treatment is unjust because of the systematic subordination of certain groups based on unwarranted factors as well as the kind of treatment the groups receive.

While I draw from several sources, I rely heavily on Marilyn Frye’s work to understand the nature of oppression. She identifies key features of oppression such as how it functions on a macrolevel to “mold, immobilize, reduce” certain groups of people. Interwoven barriers and forces, seen and unseen, work together to create a “cage” of oppression for these groups. Frye uses an analogy of a wired bird cage to show the importance of a macrolevel perspective. Just how one cannot look at one “wire” of the cage to understand why it’s inescapable, one must look at how oppression works as a whole. Oppression involves constraining a person’s abilities to move through the world either by systems that limit a person’s ability to move through the world and what resources they can access, including how they form beliefs.

“The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in…”

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30 Frye, 1983, 4
Each person’s “cage” will be a bit different depending on their social position – it is not a very strong cage if one can easily move in and out of its constraints. For people who experience multiple kinds of oppression, their cages will have reinforcements that people who only experience one or a few kinds of oppression have. Different factors exist in “complex tension with every other” such as economic necessity, pressures of competing judgements about the “right” way to be, the demands of self-respect.

One’s social position is unique in the sense that, as an individual, one has certain experiences, beliefs, and intersecting identities specific to oneself. We can still look at the conditions that oppressive environments tend to generally have. These conditions are those that extend across time, geography, and cultures. Identifying these conditions does not mean that we always have the power to recognize and point out specific cases of oppression, especially when we are not a part of that environment and its community. Most accounts of oppression describe the following:

1. attempted or actual control over members of a certain group in a way that disadvantages or harms them
2. coercing and/or molding the group members’ behavior and perceptions of the world to benefit another group
3. unwarranted denying of certain rights and personhood for subordinated groups
4. manipulating the environment by creating barriers and limiting available options for subordinated groups
5. constructing the world according to the dominant groups’ interests
Oppressive systems also shape and disfigure our knowledge-forming practices. In a similar vein as Mills, social epistemologists criticize unjust systems and environments in their accounts of epistemic injustice\textsuperscript{31}. Testimonial injustice is the discrediting of a person’s testimony without warrant based on their social status. Justice refers to having certain rights recognized, in this case, as a knower free from unfair discrimination. The use of social status here is based in identity prejudice. I’m justified in not trusting the layperson’s testimony in the operating room because they lack the proper expertise.

However, being a member of a certain groups often prevents a person, without warrant, from participating fully as a knower. The lack of credibility is not specific to a certain subject or person but irrelevant factors such as gender and race. Having a certain amount of social power is what grants credibility to a person or group more than expertise.

Social power is “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions,” which may be “exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally.\textsuperscript{32}” One cannot locate the source of structural power through any one person’s agency because its influence on people is “thoroughly dispersed through the social system.”\textsuperscript{33} Fricker’s example is certain social groups who are informally excluded from the democratic process in that they do not vote. No particular agent or agency is actively excluding them. In such cases, “no social agent…is excluding” people but the exclusion is rather a mark of how social power operates to disenfranchise certain groups. Serving to “effect social control,” structural

\textsuperscript{31} Fricker, Dotson, Medina
\textsuperscript{32} Fricker, 2007, 13
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 11.
power controls what opportunities and things people might need or desire, such as the chance to vote. If you belong to a certain social group, structural power could influence whether you think you are the kind of person that votes (i.e. “My vote doesn’t matter”). Structural power constitutes the overall organization of the epistemic environment in which one develops and engages in belief-forming practices, including beliefs about oneself. Our relations with each other rest on this organization and “the context of the functioning social world” referring to our “shared institutions, shared meaning, shared expectations,” and, to some extent, a shared perspective of reality. When structural power is hierarchical and oppressive, marginalized groups’ credibility diminishes as part of ensuring only certain “shared” perspectives are taken seriously and remain in power. This denying or prevention of certain group members’ knowledge-forming and sharing practices is embedded in our environment. While a person can experience epistemic injustice in one-on-one conversation, such as mansplaining, the concept is necessarily systemic and structural.

Oppression also constrains how a person is able to see themselves by only providing certain representations of group identities, particularly negative ones. Consider the terms that Rebecca knows for interracial children and, therefore, herself. Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice concerns the lack of conceptual resources for the experiences of marginalized group members. In the case of Rebecca, not only experience but also her actual existence lacks representation. The fact that the college boy is unable to fully recognize Rebecca’s identity as real because he lacks the conceptual resources such as words and images.
If a person is seen as or feels different from the prescribed role for their group identity, they are considered abnormal and/or punished. By placing value on certain bodies, groups, and lifestyles, oppression is able to “mold, immobilize, reduce” a person to either strive towards maintaining that value if they are closer to the ideal and/or feeling shame or helpless if they do not or cannot meet those ideals. To illustrate this immobility, Frye gives the example of the double-bind that most women face in the U.S. where “neither sexual activity nor sexual inactivity is all right.” No matter which way a woman acts or “moves” in the world, she will face harsh judgment. Frye demonstrates the consequences of the bind by using the slurs that a sexually active woman faces (“whore”) and slurs that a non-sexually active woman faces (“cocktease”). The double-bind goes beyond just particular actions to how one represents oneself, one’s abilities, and one’s available outcomes. A girl is likely to hear these words before she is at the age for sexual activity but she knows they will eventually apply to her. When she starts to consider engaging in sexual activity, or when she does, these representations are what she will have for understanding herself and how she should react to her own actions. What information is available for the scaffolding and details of your self-representation? For Walker, she was told she did not properly “fit” in that she was either too Black or too white depending on the context. Whatever race that she tried to exemplify, she was bound to fail.

2. Oppressive Feedback

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34 Frye, 1983, 3
In her essay, “I Was Once Miss America”, Roxanne Gay describes how the crowning of Vanessa Williams was transformative for young Black girls as well as herself. Having the first Black Miss America “made us believe that we too could be beautiful” as Williams gave Black girls “a new image of who the All-American Girl could be.” At the time, Gay is the only Black female student in her school and constantly teased for her hair. The other children call her “Don King” until one day Gay snaps and shouts, “One day, just you wait and see. I’m going to become Miss America.” Of course, they tease her relentlessly for years about being Miss America but Gay herself didn’t help:

“Those kids made it clear I didn’t have a shot in hell at the crown, but I’m stubborn and Vanessa Williams had won Miss America so I began to sincerely believe I was going to become Miss America. I remind my classmates of my belief regularly, which only fueled their petty torments. I have no idea where I was going with that strategy.”

In this example, Gay is stuck in a particular double-bind; be confident and be teased as Miss America or think little of yourself (and still be teased). I think Gay did have a strategy whether or not she was conscious of it. The strategy that Gay takes involves rejecting one representation by replacing it with another. While Gay did not end up becoming Miss America nor did Walker become a ballerina, they’re both justified in rejecting feedback that is based in discrimination.

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35 Gay, 2014, 61
36 Ibid, 64
Feedback provides conceptual resources for understanding your experience. You learn how to identify and express your emotions by watching other adults react, listening to what they say and how they say it, and interacting with others who tell you how they are interpreting your emotional expressions. We also make sense of our actions, emotions, and experiences according to the social scripts we follow. Social scripts are common narratives, tropes, and practices that we use to organize our behavior and interactions with each other. We can’t just look at one piece of feedback: It will not be one particular piece of feedback that is oppressive (which is why microaggressions are often excused) but rather the way in which the feedback intersects and interweaves through and works to uphold the oppressive “cage.” This cage is not always one of physical barriers (such as segregation) but rather the cage forms as we think about what options we have and what we should and ways we can act/be in the world safely (let alone, flourish). When environments are oppressive, I argue that the information that one receives about one’s identity is likely to be false (working to mold a person into something controllable and inferior), immobilizing (limiting actions or no good options at all), and reducing (limiting resources including opportunities for self-respect).

Feedback also plays a very special role in oppression by helping build a (mis)representation of the self and the world. Oppressive feedback allows for the creation, maintenance, and internalization of social hierarchy in which some groups of people are superior and others are inferior. It furthers oppressive power and control over certain groups of people by having them internalize their supposed inferiority. This kind of constant, pervasive discriminatory information forces a marginalized group member to fit a certain stereotype or social script that maintains the oppression. When oppressive
feedback works, it helps to create the kind of “cage” that Frye uses to describe how oppression immobilizes people. It manipulates the available options for self-representation by only providing stereotypes, maintaining general invisibility, and participating in hermeneutical injustice through practices such as silencing or exclusion. By giving a person false information about themselves and manipulating the available options, oppressive environments make knowing oneself outside of that cage almost impossible.

Oppressive environments force everyone into these places to a certain degree. Frye argues that while oppression involves barriers for both the oppressed and dominant group, restricting access and potential knowledge, the barriers only serve one side’s benefit while harming the other. When a person is figuring out who they want to be in the world, oppressive environments make it impossible to choose any positive representation (or perhaps don’t provide one at all in an attempt to reduce a person down to invisibility). Being part of a marginalized group also puts one at higher risk for internalizing oppressive feedback than others because of the limited available options. Later chapters look more closely at what oppressive feedback is and what resistance might look like.

The interwoven barriers and forces create a tapestry of oppressive feedback from various sources on different aspects of one's identity. The feedback itself is not necessarily unique as its often meant for every member of that group. Yet, as each person tends to have a unique social position intersecting planes of oppression and privilege, the feedback hits each individual in a slightly different way. The point is not to compare whose cage is the most oppressive but rather how can we free people from oppressive cages in general.
Mills frames ignorance in oppressive systems as the absence of true beliefs and holding false beliefs. Remember that active knowing requires participation and not just from those in privileged positions. Oppressive systems create active unknowing that also targets marginalized groups by keeping them from being able to form and share their beliefs and forcing them to act in ways that reinforce the structural ignorance. The ability to hold false beliefs about the inferiority of your group without internalizing them seems almost impossible. But being part of a marginalized group puts one at a certain epistemic advantage to recognize oppression because those who are privileged will not have the same motivation or reasons (perhaps the opposite) to notice it (Mills, Harding).

Internalized inferiority is one of the main weapons of oppression as it perpetuates the subordination without any external force. The oppressive environment pushes feedback that will maintain the hierarchy but focus is more often on inferiority. Our cognitive biases naturally lead us to have more positive perspectives of ourselves and the groups to which we belong. There’s a greater need for believed inferiority in those being excluded more than a need for believed feelings of superiority enhanced in the privileged. W.E.B. DuBois refers to this phenomenon as “double-consciousness,” which Chike Jeffers defines as “the oppressive experience of seeing one’s self from another perspective where that perspective is demeaning and where one sees one’s self from this demeaning perspective so often that it dominates and to some extent overpowers any healthy self-consciousness.”\(^{37}\) Oppression “reduces” certain groups of people and thus makes their worlds smaller in an attempt to make those people feel smaller and less

\(^{37}\) Jeffers, unpublished, 22
worthy of space, opportunity, options, freedom. When one feels small and unworthy, one is less likely to push back, to question authority, to seek independence from what is given to them for something better.

If one is socially positioned within an oppressive environment, one must recognize and reject oppressive feedback in order to have self-knowledge. First, it’s likely to be wrong. Walker’s ballet teacher must have been unaware of Janet Collins and Raven Wilkinson, internationally famous Black ballerinas starting in the 1950s. Collins would have been famous earlier in life but she refused to paint her face white in order to perform. Second, and perhaps more importantly, oppressive feedback is dangerous. If one internalizes the misinformation one receives about oneself, one is likely to act according to those oppressive expectations. With such high stakes, a person must do more than merely reject the feedback. They must resist it.

3. Resisting Oppressive Feedback

As epistemically responsible agents, held accountable for our beliefs, we all have some duty to reject false feedback. We may even deserve praise for standing up for ourselves against someone who spreads lies. Sometimes, the origins of feedback are based in oppression. A person is not only justified in rejecting but also should actively resist this kind of feedback. Oppressive feedback requires more than mere rejection. It is not merely false but manipulative, misleading, and attempts to systemically damage certain group members. Resisting oppressive feedback will look different for different people, groups, situations, and stakes. Even with this diversity, we can identify a few
conditions in such cases of resistance such as its value and praiseworthiness as well as the creativity and sense of community required.

First, resisting oppression is valuable and praiseworthy for moral reasons. We also have epistemic reasons to value resistance. Oppression is often, if not always, perpetuated through lies about certain groups’ inferiority and furthers mass ignorance. Resisting oppressive feedback is valuable for these reasons as well as personal, practical ones. Oppressive feedback is designed to threaten the self-respect, autonomy, and well-being of marginalized group members. Internalizing oppressive feedback is dangerous and detrimental to the person.³⁸

Depending on its pervasiveness and power, oppressive feedback can be extremely hard to recognize and reject let alone resist. The person must understand the situational factors, such as the history of discrimination, and be able to identify the “hidden” meanings. For example, microaggressions and “dog whistling” are linguistic strategies that signal negative stereotypes about people in subtle but strong ways. These subtle terms and ways of speaking are less obviously oppressive than a slur directed towards a person but they still exist to perpetuate oppression. In the introduction chapter, I discussed the different forms of feedback – feedback that is implicit and indirect is most difficult to address. Often oppressive feedback comes in this form. Someone did not explicitly and directly tell W.E.B. DuBois that he was different when he had his realization of double-consciousness but rather it “dawned” on him when a white girl would not play a game with him. The status of an act such a microaggression can be

³⁸ The power of feedback and this danger creates epistemic, moral, and practical dilemmas that I discuss in Chapter 5, Formative Feedback.
ambiguous enough so that its recipient can be sitting and wondering: Was that meant as a subtle cut? Was it more lack of sensitivity? Is it just me? The net effect can be undermining but with no definite agent to blame. This example demonstrates why we still find resisting oppressive feedback to be praiseworthy – it’s often quite hard.

Taking from Mills, one could argue that those who are being oppressed are more likely to recognize the feedback. Those in marginalized groups will likely have motivation to change the status quo and less likely to suffer from the cognitive handicap of different kinds of structural ignorances. Recognizing intersectional identity means each advantage and handicap is slightly unique to one’s social position and group identities as well as one’s own individual qualities and experiences.

Resisting oppressive feedback often comes with significant consequences for rejecting. Element of bravery if one is resisting oppressive feedback as a marginalized person. Even for Mark, resisting feedback about his superiority and fighting male ignorance could come at a cost. Even if one is able to reject the feedback, one might still need to live in a world where one cannot outwardly reject the feedback. The issue of survival, in a literal sense, is often at stake for those being oppressed in responding. We should praise someone for resisting oppressive feedback when the person does so in a conscious, intentional, and active way.

Whether resistance is praiseworthy will vary more or less depending on the situation and the stakes. The more privilege one has, the safer one can show resistance although the cost might still be very great. Resisting feedback from an oppressive environment looks different for those occupying privileged positions. Although giving up power and taking responsibility can be hard, Mark should resist male/white ignorant
stereotypes about his superiority. I’m not sure whether Mark would deserve praise for resistance or just blame for failing to resist but that’s not my focus. When those who are oppressed fight against power, even in cases of feedback, they face worse punishment. But, while the stakes are higher concerning the backlash, the stakes are also high because this feedback can destroy a person in a psychological, rational, and even physical sense.

The person requires the right kinds of tools and sources to recognize, reject, and resist oppressive feedback. They cannot do it alone. For Gay, the representation of a Black Miss America allowed her to resist oppressive feedback because it gave her another replacement that challenged other stereotypes. For Rebecca, it might mean finding a Black Jewish community that shares similar experiences. Social media, for all its faults, has allowed for the exchange of information and creation of such communities (ex: disability, LGBTQ+)

When we think about resistance to oppression, we tend to think about political and social movements. Since oppressive feedback gives the most pervasive and powerful representations, rejecting it requires resistant cultures and communities that either change or introduce conceptual resources to challenge and resist the oppressive feedback. Since we have some degree of power over our social practices (or should), we have the power to choose what meanings and concepts work best for our world. But social power and language are closely tied.

A society in which white supremacy, patriarchy, and other forms of ideological “reality enforcement” exist is an oppressive environment. Being a member means one will have to be vigilant and resist active ignorance. Being marginalized and oppressed in such a society means also having to avoid internalizing these beliefs about inferiority.
This false information about the self can be considered oppressive feedback because it’s intended to oppress a person in terms of their identity and self-respect, at the very least.

Those who are able to and do recognize and resist oppressive feedback are brave, daring, and imaginative. They also know themselves in a special way which I seek to understand. While I do not claim to fully comprehend this ability, I attempt to show some characteristics of this admirable resistance to feedback. Yet these characteristics create a potential tension with the last section in which I argued Mark should listen to others’ feedback over his own self-perception. The easiest way to solve this tension would be pointing to social position as justification for the different stances on feedback. However, as earlier stated, one’s group identity alone does not guarantee knowledge. More importantly, our social positions involve particular interwoven barriers that may or may not be due to oppression. Being in an oppressive environment alone does not guarantee each piece of negative feedback one receives is false or misleading. In the next section, I focus on this kind of tension between one’s potential blindspots and potential oppressive feedback.

C. Oppressive Environments & Ambiguous Feedback

The first case concerns the importance of accepting feedback, the second case involves resisting feedback, and the third case demonstrates the potential tension that can arise between one’s view of the self and others’ view of the self. This tension shows the need for a framework that’s sensitive to factors about environment and agent. The following case raises questions of how one goes about assessing feedback when one lacks relevant knowledge and tools of assessment.
Audre, The Wavering Graduate Student

Audre is a graduate student in Philosophy in a highly ranked program at a prestigious University. She is the only female and ethnic minority in her own and the last prior cohort. Although Audre considers herself a strong writer and critical thinker, her professors disparaged her work and approach as lacking philosophical rigor. They say her comments in class fail to be substantive or sufficiently argumentative. She is constantly asked, “Are you sure you want to be in Philosophy?” Audre’s program director suggests that Philosophy is not a good career choice for Audre because of her niche interests, writing style, and personality-type. Even the one female faculty member suggests that Audre’s value system might not align with Philosophy. Audre is unsure whether she should consider herself a good philosopher (or one at all) and continue pursuing her degree.

It’s not clear who is in the best epistemic position regarding Audre’s status as a philosopher so we don’t know how to properly grant epistemic authority. Due to the nature of mansplaining and Mark’s epistemic position, he needed to grant more epistemic authority to others regarding their view of him. Yet being situated in an oppressive environment explained why Rebecca should reject certain feedback and others’ views of her. Many cases of self-knowledge involve the kind of uncertainty Audre faces of whether to listen to certain feedback and who to trust, especially when there’s a tension between perspectives.
1. What are Audre’s Blindspots?

To begin understanding Audre’s case, let’s first consider whether Audre has any blindspots. Is Audre self-ignorant? The answer is…not exactly. In what follows, I look at the three different ways of conceptualizing ignorance (which can work together) as we did with Mark and how Audre might be ignorant according to these views. In general, Audre potentially lacks awareness of her own skills and how she fits into the world of academic philosophy. By looking at the specific ways in which Audre might be ignorant, we might believe that Audre needs to listen (and potentially defer to) feedback about her status.

First, Code’s “individual” view of ignorance looks at how a person’s social position epistemically limits and enables them given the specificity of their position. So, how does Audre’s social position matter for her self-knowledge here? It seems fairly obvious that Audre’s social position as an non-expert in the subject matter limits her ability to assess her own skills. Typically, we consider expertise in both title and experience which Audre lacks. Her novice position as a graduate student means she is (at least somewhat) of a non-expert regarding the academic landscape. She has not yet been part of a job search committee, endured extensive paper rejections, or served as a journal editor. To this extent, she is a non-expert regarding the quality of her own writing.

Harding’s “group” view of ignorance concerns the different experiences, motivations, and starting belief sets of social groups. The female professor might be in a similar social position regarding gender but carries different individual experiences and inhabits a different sort of social group than Audre. Without needing to add any other
potential differences, the obvious two are that they come from different generations and the professor is (most likely) in a different position of power and status than Audre.

Audre, as a graduate student, is less motivated to keep the status quo than the professor because Audre does not benefit from the system in the same way (not to say that the female professor necessarily benefits). Even if the professor wants to change the system to a certain extent, she has more investment within that system than Audre. Their different experiences and motivations also means that the professors and Audre will have different starting belief sets when making a judgement about Audre’s potential. Older professors could be drawing on prior experiences of watching minority graduate students fail to succeed and suffer in the profession. Their motivation could be sparing Audre from that suffering.

2. A Case of Oppressive Feedback?

Yet, when we take the third approach of “structural” ignorance, we might question whether Audre receives oppressive feedback. One of the first questions we can ask is academic philosophy an oppressive environment for certain group members? If so, then Audre should possibly resist the feedback she gets from her professors.

Part of the professors’ perspective involves a particular norm of what it means to be a philosopher. Too often, the assumption is that a particular approach, style, or area of analysis is more valuable, important, and philosophically rigorous than others. Given the history of certain groups’ oppression and the field itself, that “one” way is likely to reflect some kind of active structural ignorance. In many departments, the introductory philosophy courses consist of reading white, male, cisgender, upper class, Anglo-
American, analytic philosophers. If we take epistemologies of ignorance seriously, this narrow perspective should concern philosophers in every area.

“Philosophy is not for black women. That is a white man’s game.” is what Dotson’s sister was told from her undergraduate guidance counselor. Dotson uses this quote to start her critique of academic philosophy and whether it’s capable of sustaining diverse voices. Anita L. Allen (1998) expresses the same concern in her skepticism when she asks what philosophy can offer Black women and calls for a closer look at whether the conditions foster or hinder their success in the field. Robert Solomon argues that philosophy today has become “constricted, oppressive, and ethnocentric.”

Looking at exceptionalism and exclusion in philosophy, Dotson argues that the environment in professional philosophy is built on a culture of justification that creates a difficult working environment for diverse practitioners. This culture of justification includes valuing certain “legitimation narratives” which involve what are assumed to be the commonly held justifying processes and norms that are univocally relevant. Diverse practitioners, such as those working in Africana philosophy, are often asked to justify “the adequacy and significance” of their position as well as the position’s “right to exist as an appropriate philosophical position.”

So, we might think Audre’s case is parallel to Rebecca’s situation with the ballet instructor. Setting aside a causal explanation, philosophy as a field does not appear welcoming to minorities. The most recent official data support a significant gender

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39 Dotson, 2012, 3
40 Solomon, 2001, 101
disparity in professional Anglophone philosophy, particularly outside of ethics. Leslie et. al found a high correlation between beliefs about “genius” status and absence of minority representation in discipline, including philosophy. Del Pinal and Spaulding’s work on concepts shows people tend to assumes “male” when given the concept “professor” and that people’s judgments of “female professor” implies “hard-working.” While hard-working can be a positive trait, the conceptual centrality of the feature relates to Dotson’s point about legitimation narratives. The stereotypical narratives for successful female philosophers require “hard work” whereas the male philosophers do not.

It’s unclear whether we can or should say that the role of academic philosopher is one that is up for grabs. Graham Priest argues philosophy should be a resistance culture itself in his concept of “philosophy as critique” in which philosophy is “subversive” and “unsettling.” Perhaps one can always be a philosopher in the sense of seeking truth but having a profession means meeting certain external requirements. Still, those requirements could be based in oppression (such as gendered or narrowly culturally specific evaluations). Additionally, Audre does not necessarily have a cognitive handicap when it comes to oppressive practices even if she is limited in knowing how those practices will play out in the profession. So, perhaps Audre should reject all the feedback she receives about being in the field of philosophy? That answer seems unsatisfactory.

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45 Priest, 2006, 200-203
3. Ambiguous Feedback

Often, people experience two kinds of tension when it comes to self-knowledge. First, they can experience a tension between the view they have of themselves and the view that others have of them. However, we often experience a tension between our sources of feedback and their different views of who we are. For example, the way your family sees you is often different from the way your co-workers see you. A person’s mother might not be the most trustworthy source of feedback depending on how much her own insecurities, expectations, and projections shape her maternal perspective. Let’s assume that, at least in some cases, people can know certain things about themselves and others such as whether a certain marriage is a good fit, motherhood would be reasonable, or a career choice makes sense.46

Even if we accept that others can see things in us that we cannot, we are still left wondering who has an accurate perspective. The expert perspective(s) could depend on several factors including those about Audre, Audre’s blindspots, and Audre’s abilities in the face of oppressive feedback. Audre has to assume her professors know more about her status because of their expertise. However, she’s justified in being unsure if that comes objectively without certain biases that affect their negativity of their judgments or feedback.

46 One could argue that there is no way of knowing whether Audre would be a good academic philosopher because the nature of career choices is transformative – that is, one cannot know what an experience will be like or how it will change oneself until one has it. Others cannot testify to what a transformative experience will be like for another person so they wouldn’t know, either. In later chapters, I address transformative experiences and how Audre’s choice to be a philosopher is aspirational which could impact whether she resists it.
Suppose that Audre’s blindspots include that she’s disadvantaged in terms of her past experiences and access to what academic philosophy is like and what it requires. Yet her social position also enables her to better understand the discrimination that she might face. She may not know the specific forms of discrimination that she will face within the profession. However, she could have knowledge of her own abilities such as resilience and whether she has the right kind of support systems to help her resist internalizing discrimination.

It’s also relevant what the general environment might be – that is, Audre might feel that she has the wherewithal to endure such obstacles in her career if things seem to be progressing towards less discrimination and better working conditions and society is supporting more representation. Unfortunately, the obstacles that a marginalized person faces in regards to their identity are rarely limited to career but stretch across various systems and roles including education, housing, and healthcare.

What Audre knows about her potential in the profession will be partly determined by factors such as her motivations, interests, and starting belief set. While those giving her feedback might consider her overall well-being as primary interest or motivation, Audre could have different motivations such as resistance to oppressive stereotypes. Yet, this difference doesn’t tell us which one is more authoritative. Additionally, if Audre is located within an oppressive environment, the feedback she receives is likely to be impacted by implicit biases surrounding gender, race, academia, and professional philosophy. She will have to consider the potential cognitive handicap of those giving feedback.
The answer to Audre’s self-knowledge seems to involve more than purely epistemic considerations given her social position and the oppressive environment. Moral encroachment is the view that the epistemic status one should give to a proposition can depend importantly on its moral features. Audre may not be suited for philosophy but moral factors concerning oppression and diverse representation are relevant. Her particularly vulnerable position could justify a more resistant strategy to feedback.

Whether or not the epistemic reasons are good, the moral features provide possible justification for Audre to reject or not even consider the feedback. Ignoring feedback, however, has its dangers and is similar to “flying blind.” Audre has reasons (epistemic, moral, and practical) having to do with her long-term self-interest to assess whether her department has a point. Instead, perhaps Audre should take a stage-dependent strategy. That is, when information is coming from unreliable or not sufficiently knowable sources, then it might be good to ignore the feedback. As time goes on, the situation may change as one gathers more information (perhaps from more sources) and one may have more or less reason to consider the feedback one has ignored. Again, we see support for a theory of self-knowledge taking place over time rather than looking at individual states.

III. Self-Knowledge as an Epistemic Virtue

A. Revisiting Self-Knowledge Theories

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47 Gendler, 2011; Moss, 2018; Bolinger, 2018; Basu, 2019
First, a theory of self-knowledge should include the appropriate role of feedback and relationship to outside sources. Current self-knowledge theories, including introspection skeptics, don’t address the role of testimony – they assume one is either in a privileged epistemic position or not. In Mark’s case, we need to explain why his lack of self-knowledge is problematic in terms of not only self-ignorance but also the harm he is perpetuating by ignoring feedback.

We can grant him feminist status and some self-knowledge when he is mansplaining. What he lacks doesn’t seem specific to one particular case of mansplaining but requires generally being receptive to feedback from others. His relatively privileged social position gives him more reasons to listen to feedback unlike Rebecca and Audre whose vulnerable positions suggest the opposite. Yet, for cases like Rebecca, a self-knowledge theory needs to explain why Rebecca can and should reject feedback even if aspects of the environment make it seem true. A comprehensive self-knowledge theory should also explain Gay’s achievement when she claims that she will be Miss America and her appropriate resistance to feedback.

Often, we run into cases that are unclear regarding our blindspots and authority in an oppressive environment. Unlike the other cases in which the person’s social position helps warrant the answer, it’s unclear what sources have expertise on Audre’s status as a philosopher. In Audre’s case, self-knowledge theorists who emphasize rational agency might argue that Audre is the expert whereas introspection skeptics might say others are. Vazire argues that self-ratings and other-ratings are equally as accurate just in different
The complexities of Audre’s and many cases of feedback suggest that a theory of self-knowledge alone doesn’t provide a way to explain which perspective, one’s own or others’, is the most accurate regarding the self. Audre may be the expert on certain things about herself such as her resourcefulness or determination. The professors may be the expert in judging her aptitude for doing a certain kind of philosophy, but not necessarily her aptitude for doing philosophy in ways that are respected by other parts of the philosophical community.

Second, a theory of self-knowledge should address the balancing of different perspectives on the self as well as the epistemic, moral, and practical features. It’s unlikely that all the sources’ evidence will lead them to have the same epistemic attitude about Mark’s mansplaining, Rebecca’s bodily abilities, and Audre’s philosophical rigor. Mark’s male friends could call Mark a feminist and might not see anything problematic with his being “helpful.” Mark needs to make sure he’s listening and giving credibility to the right sources and seeking feedback from the right communities. Similarly, Rebecca needs a resistant subculture and communities to give her a voice and recognized identity as a Black Jewish woman in the face of oppressive feedback. Yet resisting oppression requires some acknowledgement of its real power and influence over one’s identity.

Recognizing oppression is one of the first steps to resisting it. Audre is faced with this challenge as she must determine how societal and academic discrimination affects her being a philosopher. Weighing the evidence alone doesn’t explain what source or community to whom Audre should defer. Again, it’s unclear who the expert is. How

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Vazire, 2010
Audre defers might depend on other values, priorities, and emotional resources that Audre has. The transformative nature of a career path often begins with the decision itself.49

Finally, a theory of self-knowledge should account for its moral aspect. This is different from having an account that explains self-knowledge of moral beliefs or even the moral responsibility one has regarding beliefs about oneself (in contrast to other things). What these cases of self-knowledge show us is that it matters how one does and should form beliefs about the self. Mark’s ignorance is a significant and important cognitive handicap for him to overcome for moral as well as epistemic reasons. His treatment of women as knowers and lack of receptivity to feedback is a particular kind of wrong directly related to his self-ignorance.

While Mark wrongs his sources of feedback by dismissing or ignoring them, Rebecca should resist oppressive feedback which serves to control and harm her. Understanding what constitutes oppressive feedback will partly depend on moral judgments about the environment and whether it’s oppressive. While Audre has blindspots, she also has grounds for rejecting ambiguous feedback given the uncertainty and nature of the environment.

**B. Locating Self-Knowledge in Virtue Theory**

Despite the natural connection between virtue and self-knowledge, significant gaps exist in the virtue theory literature. Virtue ethics traditionally values self-knowledge but no theory primarily focuses on the right way to gaining self-knowledge. In virtue epistemology, no attention is given to self-knowledge in particular and how to categorize it in relation to being a good knower. The closest contenders are worries surrounding implicit biases and our inability to introspectively detect and reject them. These worries include epistemic injustice, testimonial smothering, and other ways we wrong others by ignoring or discrediting them.

The role of self-knowledge is discussed very little in the epistemic injustice literature.\textsuperscript{50} The focus tends to be mainly on testimony and the speaker who experiences harm from discrimination. But testimonial injustice and smothering is a vice of (who should be) the audience. In the case of Mark, his vice leads him to commit harm towards others \textit{as well as} harms himself as a knower – in a particularly special way because that knowledge concerns him. Mark needs to avoid testimonial injustice in his mansplaining but also in how receptive he is to feedback, particularly from women. Even when he is not receiving direct feedback, Mark should be aware of how he contributes to testimonial smothering - women might not mention his mansplaining because they don’t want to discourage him from noticing and calling out discrimination.

Yet self-knowledge is an integral part of virtue theory. First, looking at defining characteristics of virtues and the virtuous person, we see an important connections with

\textsuperscript{50} The only two instances are Jose Medina’s \textit{Epistemologies of Resistance} in which he argues that active ignorance results in a lack of self-knowledge and Borgoni’s distinction of social first person authority (the credibility one is granted about their own mental states by others) and self-knowledge.
self-knowledge. Doing or believing something for the right reasons tends to imply that the person could report on those reasons if asked even if it is habitual. A man of practical wisdom will be able to “deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself.”\textsuperscript{51} It’s incoherent or at least unintuitive to attribute wisdom to someone who is self-ignorant or delusional. Wisdom seems to presuppose the person has gained self-knowledge alongside experience and expertise.

First, a virtuous person must act from a “knowing state.”\textsuperscript{52} While virtue theorists debate the concept of “knowing state” in various ways, some degree of awareness of one’s process and/or reasons is necessary. In order to act virtuously, to be in a knowing state, means the agent must have some minimal degree of self-knowledge. The necessary self-knowledge includes knowing their beliefs, their intentions, and their reasons for acting but also know how others perceive them and how their actions affect others.

One might hesitate to call these features of self-knowledge. They seem to put too high a demand on the knowing state. However, self-knowledge is not isolated and separate from knowledge about the world. The virtuous person must consider their social position and the situation when they form beliefs about themselves. As we saw with Mark, it’s important for those who are in positions of privilege to recognize the ways they participate in oppression. I can have knowledge about an oppressive practice but it’s a different question to know that I am participating. Wisdom also involves knowing what you don’t know, as I noted above, which influences the confidence you should put in your own assessments as well as prompts you to seek help in knowing the relevant and

\textsuperscript{51} Darwall, Stephen, \textit{Virtue Ethics}, 2003, 39. Italics added for emphasis
\textsuperscript{52} Aristotle, Zagzebski, Hursthouse
important unknowns. It also means knowing when to not care what others think and when it’s appropriate to not pay attention to their feedback.

Still, members of marginalized groups are forced to have to think about the ways that those in power are going to perceive them and must often conform for safety. The option to avoid thinking about others’ perceptions of you is rarely available. For Audre, she cannot step outside of her marginalized identity so she must also figure out what appropriate weight to put on those factors when making a decision.

Being virtuous means acting and forming beliefs “in the right way.” What constitutes the right way will involve knowing whether one is appropriately responding to the environment and other people. Whether I should get bifocal glasses concerns my ability to recognize that my vision is blurry or my need to seek regular help from an outside source (perhaps near-sightedness runs in my family). Not only is Mark ignorant of his mansplaining behavior but also he’s ignorant of his blindspots and fails to rely on others in the right way to help him know.

One must know how one fits in the world such as acknowledging how one’s social privilege or subordination affects their epistemic position. Some people should lean towards being more open-minded given their epistemic position while others should be more steadfast given theirs, such as Wynn. For Audre, self-knowledge plays an important role in knowing how she should respond to feedback from the different sources. In order to evaluate their feedback, she must have some degree of self-knowledge regarding her epistemic position as well as the situation.

A virtuous person must act the right way from an “unchanging state” which is often considered a disposition. In order to be a disposition, the virtue’s “unchanging
state” must be a reliable practice of the virtuous person across time & space. Virtues are not merely good intentions or one-time events. They must manifest themselves into action. Mark’s self-ignorance partly stems from his inconsistency in forming beliefs about himself. He may realize that he’s likely to perpetuate misogyny in some ways but his repeatedly mansplaining suggests his belief-forming practices are selective. His constant mansplaining implies a persistent ignorance of others’ feedback. Conversely, Rebecca’s rejection of oppressive feedback requires constant vigilance and must take place in various contexts from school to dating scene to public streets. As the sources and the situations change, Rebecca must have some kind of grasp on who she is. Otherwise, she is likely to internalize the oppressive feedback even if she rejects it on some level. Whatever the unchanging state, it must adapt to not only the changes in the situation but the changes within the self.

Virtues are “excellences” in that they are connected to success, achievement, and flourishing as a knower and person. Excellence means the virtue makes “something an excellent instance of its kind.”53 Since virtue theory is agent-centered, this success will be tailored (to an extent) to the particular agent. Certain goods like intellectual pleasure and friendship take shape according to the needs and abilities of the person. Thus, a person must know what will suit them best in terms of their success and flourishing. Knowing whether one is being virtuous therefore requires also knowing whether one is successful in their aim.

53 Darwall, 2003, 2
For Mark to be virtuous, as a knower or moral person, his good intentions are insufficient – he must also understand the ways in which his social position limits him, including what might be considered appropriate behavior. Failing to understand how you appear to others is not always blameworthy but Mark’s ignorance contributes to gender discrimination. When the stakes are high, a person’s self-ignorance appears to be a significant failure. Excelling as a person tends to entail knowing oneself. Despite a lack of analysis, self-knowledge is at the heart of virtue theory and what it requires.

C. Looking at Self-Knowledge through Virtue Epistemology

To address the concerns laid out above, I propose we turn to virtue theory, in particular, virtue epistemology. We value knowledge over mere opinion or lucky guesses so we are making a normative judgment when saying someone knows something. Epistemic norms involve proper (right) and improper (wrong) ways of approaching knowledge. These norms can be understood in relation to the agent’s role or intellectual “virtues.” Taking agents rather than beliefs to be the primary source of epistemic evaluation, virtue epistemology considers the reasons why we grant credit to an agent. Setting aside the general characteristics and differences for now, I will look at how virtue epistemology provides an explanatory and prescriptive framework for cases like Mark, Wynn, and Audre. Virtue epistemology (a) factors in the environment and others involved, (b) aims for truth/accuracy but can take moral considerations into account and

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54 (Battaly, 640)
(c) explains finding the balance between different perspectives (a) as well as the epistemic and moral considerations (b).

First, an agent-centered approach is better suited to explain the epistemic position of Mark, Rebecca, and Audre when evaluating their self-knowledge. For Mark, his position of male privilege gives him a certain cognitive handicap and requires that he overcome the vices of male ignorance. For Rebecca, being a Black Jewish girl in the US during the 1980s put her in a difficult and vulnerable epistemic position given the power behind oppressive feedback. Oppression shapes people through feedback in ways that they can internalize that feedback. For Audre, her epistemic position puts her at a crossroads. Looking at evidence alone will be insufficient as Audre’s values, abilities, and character will influence whether Audre should accept the feedback. Looking at particular instances of feedback is insufficient.

Second, a large portion of virtue epistemology considers moral features when explaining knowledge. For Zagzebski, intellectual virtues carry moral weight because we praise them in similar ways and may not be able to distinguish the moral and intellectual counterparts of virtues like open-mindedness or honesty. For Fricker, our epistemic agency and moral rights are tied together in her concept of epistemic injustice. Both consider epistemic virtues and vices inherently moral if they involve a person’s identity and rights as a knower.

Finally, the concept of virtue involves finding an appropriate balance of receptivity to feedback and appropriately responding depending on the situation. A cornerstone of virtue theory, the doctrine of the mean states that virtue lies in the middle between vices of excess or deficiency. The “mean” is not some literal midpoint but rather
a concept of getting it right with respect to the qualities that could be excessive or deficient. It’s not that Mark should always defer to others’ feedback or that Rebecca shouldn’t ever seek feedback. Virtue epistemology lets us look at the epistemic norms surrounding feedback and sources of feedback. Certain norms related to one’s epistemic position can explain why Mark should be receptive, Rebecca should be resistant, and why Audre is justified in being uncertain. Epistemic norms or virtues are successful and lead to the flourishing of the individual. Balancing perspectives to gain self-knowledge successfully involves taking a doctrine of the mean approach in which one evaluates not only the content of the feedback but the situation and how to respond appropriately.

D. Self-Knowing & Virtue Epistemology: A Pluralist Approach

Virtue epistemology informs us about knowledge that is best understood as virtue or skills. All intellectual virtues aim at or attain epistemic goods such as truth or understanding. The question of what constitutes a virtue or skill remains. There are two main camps in virtue epistemology, virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism, that differ on what they consider virtues and when to grant credit to the agent. Both camps tend to agree that virtue is a reliable excellence, valuable, and praiseworthy. However, how they understand those qualities diverge based on each camp’s conceptions of the nature of virtue.

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55 Battaly, 2013, 186
Reliabilists like Ernest Sosa\textsuperscript{56} and John Greco\textsuperscript{57} argue that an epistemic virtue is that which leads one to reliably form true beliefs under normal conditions and includes vision and memory as virtues. The reliable truth-producing faculty or skill can be either natural or acquired. Natural faculties don’t necessarily require active training or motive - we form beliefs on our visual experiences regardless of whether we are trying or care. Children and animals can then exhibit intellectual virtues in this passive and automatic sense. An epistemic virtue need not have any intrinsic value besides leading one towards the truth and is often morally neutral. A problem for reliabilists is that they must avoid circularity and not define epistemic virtue in terms of knowledge. To merely say an epistemic virtue is that which leads you to knowledge won’t get us very far. I use John Greco’s virtue reliabilist account because it puts the agent’s abilities in a causally explanatory relationship to knowledge. This approach allows the focus to be on the agent’s role such as past training in forming beliefs in the right way.

Responsibilists take a more traditional Aristotelian approach that parallels the way we view moral virtues.\textsuperscript{58} A few key aspects of Aristotelian theory is that virtues are learned through habituation, reflective of a person’s character, and praiseworthy in a way that implies responsibility. These aspects of virtue are connected: a person puts time and work into developing virtues (or vices). We hold a person responsible for their habits in the sense they are voluntary (or began that way). As habits become virtuous (or vicious)

\textsuperscript{56} Sosa, 1991, 2007)
\textsuperscript{57} (2010)
\textsuperscript{58} (Zagzebski, 1993; Wallace, 1978; Meilaender, 1984; Broadie, 1994)
ones, they become “entrenched” in that person’s identity. Praising someone as virtuous is to say that person is at least somewhat causally responsible for being that way.

Being responsible in the virtuous sense also implies responsibility for what kind of person you are. It’s key that the person “could have gone either way” when it comes to having virtues or vices.\textsuperscript{59} Responsibilists argue that intellectual virtues are character traits that require acquired intellectual motivations to perform intellectually virtuous actions.\textsuperscript{60} Being actively acquired and having the right kind of motivation is what makes a virtue praiseworthy unlike natural faculties which are automatic. Zagzebski argues that you don’t hold a person responsible or blameworthy for not having natural abilities or failing to perform a skill. The skills of virtue-reliabilists are important for achieving virtues but lack the necessary features to count as ones.

While they differ on their analyses, the two camps can be complementary. Some virtue epistemologists, like Fricker, do not bother with either camp and focus on a virtue instead of a theory. Similarly, my focus is self-knowledge as an epistemic virtue regardless of which camp. My hope is that, by addressing the characteristics of both, I do not exclude either camp and those who want to take a particular approach still have the option available. Taking after Battaly, I argue that we can understand self-knowing in both ways if we think of it involving low-grade and high-grade knowledge. That is, I use self-knowing as a term that encompasses the perceptual and other sensory mechanisms that relay information about our experiences along with metacognitive traits such as open-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, and motivation towards truth. I will say more

\textsuperscript{59} Zagzebski, 1993, 105
\textsuperscript{60} Battaly, 2008, 645
about this hybrid approach after I introduce the two camps and lay out the virtuous features of self-knowledge.

1. Virtue-Reliabilist Approach

To grasp how self-knowing is an epistemic virtue from a reliabilist approach, I rely on how John Greco uses “ability” in *Achieving Knowledge.*\(^{61}\) He defines ability under a few principles: relative to both stable and shifting circumstances, reliable in a range of success, and has a good track record. This means that the ability is maintained across different kinds of conditions, often successful in different ways, and considered accurate.

In typical virtue epistemological fashion, Greco alludes to Aristotelian principles to build his account. Thus, doing the right thing, for the right reasons, in the right way explains knowledge. The “doing” refers to the agent’s action playing a causal role in the outcome, the “reasons” should be under the agent’s own autonomy, and the “way” must be due to ability. The action here is the successful application of one’s ability in achieving knowledge.

Greco’s account is not only an account of knowledge but also an account of epistemic normativity.\(^{62}\) The goal of Greco’s (and what he believes should be the proper task of epistemology) is to explain *how* we come to have knowledge. Evaluation of individuals involves explaining actions, in this case knowledge, as occurring because of some sort of property, in this case, ability. If one has a virtue or, for Greco’s sake, ability,

\[^{61}\text{Greco 2010}\]
\[^{62}\text{Ibid, 3}\]
whether it is moral, physical, or intellectual, then they can demonstrate said ability through reliably successful application. Just like a professional baseball player hitting a homerun, I must discern facts about the world to achieve true, justified belief. The explanatory power of ability or “explanatory salience” provides the reasoning to ascribe credit in cases of true knowledge. For Greco, an agent’s ability has explanatory salience if it plays a causal role for the resulting knowledge. This ability should be the causal reason for the belief being true and justified. In other words, “one’s own efforts and abilities are appropriately involved.” Without such involvement, we have cases in which we don’t ascribe credit to the agent because we feel they just got lucky in coming to have a true belief. Intuitively, we want to make sure an agent has reasons for his action to grant credit. While these reasons need not be accessible to the agent, ascribing credit requires a reason for why the agent deserves it. For Greco, that reason must be that the agent’s ability played a salient role.

In the case of self-knowing, the agent’s ability to accurately gather and assess information helps determine whether we grant them credit for knowing something about the self. When Mark fails to incorporate feedback about his mansplaining, we find him more blameworthy than if no one ever said anything. However, we still find him blameworthy for not being aware of his mansplaining in the moment as well. His inability to recognize others’ reactions or the needs of the situation are part of his self-ignorance.

Greco distinguishes between giving credit to an agent for just having an ability and for correctly applying an ability. A virtuous action depends on that for which the situation calls, so then an intellectual action depends on the circumstances. To grant
credit to the agent requires a successful application of ability on the agent’s part within that situation. If I am taking a test in a warzone, my ability may be unable to successfully function. The agent can have intellectual ability but lack the opportunity to use it.

Similarly, we may have the ability to self-know but the environment could prevent us from exercising our ability properly. Oppressive environments can be like a warzone in which one is being attacked, especially if the target of oppressive feedback. Here is where we might distinguish blame for ignorance from responsibility for knowing. Even if we have a responsibility to self-know as rational and moral agents, the blame (and much responsibility) concerns that which is allowing the environment to be that way. I return to this issue at the end of the chapter

Virtue epistemology rests on crediting the agent. The agent must exercise their ability in such a way that grants credit. Whether knowledge gained through another’s testimony involves the agent’s ability is difficult to demonstrate. Greco attempts to defend how we can grant credit to the agent using a sports example he claims is analogous to testimonial knowledge. If a soccer player scores a goal with an assist from another player in the right way, then we grant him credit. If only due to luck, we don’t. If receiving testimony, an agent must employ their ability in the right way to achieve justified true belief. Just having testimony is not enough nor is sufficient to grant credit.

Testimonial knowledge is based on information gleaned from a credible source. Ideally, all agents could discriminate their sources in the right way. Unfortunately, most situations don’t lend themselves to the agent in this way. Jennifer Lackey’s example of a tourist in Chicago asking strangers for directions reveals the impossibility of such a standard. Since the tourist has no prior connection with the strangers on the street, how
do they know who to ask? Greco credits the tourist with knowledge based on their ability to receive and evaluate sources.

This credibility issue with testimonial knowledge is extremely relevant because we must rely on feedback to some extent for self-knowing. In the above example, we assume that the scoring soccer player and the other player have a history together – they practiced over time, built up trust, communicated in different ways, shared the same purpose. It would be less likely that the assist would have been successful without those conditions in place.

Similarly, we often trust the feedback of those close to us. Unless they give us reason to think otherwise, we assume that they want what’s best for us and will be honest about how they feel. However, we (potentially) get information about ourselves from many sources that don’t meet conditions of familiarity or partiality. Yet it still seems that we should be receptive to feedback from those that do not know us well at times, especially since those that care about us could be biased towards a positive view. Being a virtuous self-knower means making sure one’s abilities to receive and evaluate feedback are properly attuned to the environment and who can assist towards success.

Successfully exercising one’s ability to have self-knowledge will involve the right kind of assists from appropriate, trustworthy sources of information. Conversely, it will also involve defending oneself against those who would lead one towards false beliefs. In the case of oppressive feedback, one must recognize and resist the content from sources of discrimination. Successful resistance requires not only the right kind of ability but also the right environment that allows for one to exercise this ability. While diversity is still a problem in ballet, organizations like MoBBallet bring attention to the history of
Black ballet dancers and companies like the American Ballet Theatre featuring dancers of color help change the environment. When looking at abilities, we may grant individuals credit for their skills but part of the credit goes to the community that helps train the ability thus allowing it to be successful.

2. Virtue Responsibilist Approach

While not every virtue responsibilist view holds the reliability component of knowledge, Zagzebski maintains this aspect of virtue since Aristotelian virtue involves a certain level of success. The main points of divergence for Zagzebski is not that virtue-reliabilists aren’t pointing to important aspects of virtue but that which they call virtues are really just skills that are often necessary for being virtuous. For her, virtues have essential characteristics that their accounts, being focused on skills, does not cover. Some of these characteristics include responsibility as well as moral relevance and being tied to one’s identity.

It seems fair to say that being virtuous or having a virtue is part of who we are (or aim to be). A “state of the soul,” responsibilist virtue is a “property that we attribute to the person in a deep and important sense...closely associated with her very identity.”

While virtue is “a deep quality of a person, closely identified with her selfhood,” faculties like memory and perception are “only the raw materials for the self.” The quality of “deep” means that the virtue is “entrenched” into the person’s character and who they are. It’s the kind of trait you’d mention at the person’s funeral. It’s that which connects

63 Zagzebski, 1993, 85
64 Ibid, 104.
one being considered responsible for it – whether vice or virtue – and carries a special personal meaning because of the way it motivates your life and your ends.

While the person’s ability plays the causal explanatory role in Greco’s account, motivation plays the same role for Zagzebski. For Zagzebski, an intellectual virtue must be deeply connected with one’s identity and must have a good motivation. Zagzebski argues for these elements of virtue by pointing to the role of responsibility in virtue – this is how she conceives of praise and blame in a meaningful sense. Motivations are action-initiating and guiding emotions or feelings particular to the virtue (Zagzebski). Acquiring the right kind of motivations and dispositions to act is key for having an intellectual virtue. We all have different natural tendencies towards being fair, the virtue of fairness will require acquiring a motivation to be fair such as avoiding biases in one’s judgments.

Often, responsibilist arguments attend to morally relevant features of our knowledge-forming practices. First, many virtues are not distinctly moral or intellectual. Zagzebski argues that the difference between two moral virtues is just as wide as that between a moral virtue and its intellectual counterpart. For some virtue-responsibilists, intellectual virtues are a subset of moral virtues (if there is a distinction at all). For example, being morally fair and being intellectually fair might involve different subject matters but the acquired motivation of fairness seems similar in both cases. Second, Zagzebski argues that having a moral virtue means one is also motivated to identify and master the necessary intellectual skills and know nonmoral facts about the world in order to act in a virtuous way that’s appropriate for the person and the circumstances.

Below are various features of epistemic virtue that appear in self-knowledge that converge across both camps. I note that forming beliefs about the self seems to involve
not only having the right kind of abilities playing a causal but also the right kind of traits related to self-knowing and responding to feedback.

3. Virtuous Features of Self-Knowledge

Agent-centered

First, self-knowledge is inherently agent-centered because of its context. Self-knowledge is reflexive knowledge of an object, the self, so the agent is directly relevant. This kind of knowledge requires some indexical “I” to attach itself or it becomes incoherent. Since beliefs about the self are essentially indexical, it seems intuitive to focus on the person along with their role and epistemic position. Essentially indexical beliefs directly affect our perspective and actions. Given the moral and practical significance of self-knowledge, virtue-responsibilists should find it particularly important. No other kind of knowledge is more often attributed to a person in a “deep and important sense” in the way that Zagzebski notes virtues are.

Right Response: To the Right Person, to the Right Extent

Second, as I have argued, self-knowledge (or lack thereof) involves an appropriate relationship with the outside environment, including other people. Having self-knowledge requires knowing how one fits within the world as it matters not only for how one forms beliefs about the self but also whether one defers to others’ perspectives and feedback. Where one is situated in an oppressive environment is relevant for one’s
own and others’ epistemic position on oneself. A special kind of responsiveness to one’s surroundings and situation is required for self-knowledge despite the traditional Cartesian method of attempting to extract oneself from the external world.

Being aware of our limitations when it comes to perceiving ourselves is key to self-knowing. Here I am building on the call from social and virtue epistemologists to recognize the embeddedness of knowing in a community and how one’s knowing is supported (or undermined) by a community and its structures. Mark should be more receptive to feedback from others about his mansplaining given his epistemic position. Part of the blame with Mark is that he fails to understand what his social position means for his epistemic position in terms of having certain blindspots and likelihood of engaging in epistemic injustice. He has natural blindspots to his outward behavior and self-serving biases along with a male ignorance that comes from being situated in a patriarchal, misogynistic environment. Due to where he is situated, he is also more likely to (unconsciously) engage in epistemic injustice – that is, not treat women as credible knowers – especially if they disagree with him.

The solution involves more than Mark just accepting direct feedback as described in the case. Mark will need to actively seek out feedback about whether he is mansplaining from various sources – not just friends. But that does not mean that Mark should accost his feminist friends and require they do the emotional labor of giving him feedback. Sources such as books, blogposts, and internet communities provide feedback both directly and indirectly. A similar phenomenon regarding white people and the Black community occurred in 2020 as more white people began to confront their own racism. They often went to their Black friends to recommend how they should deal with the
problem. However, these requests were not often wanted in the face of the other emotional labor the Black community faces. “Asking black people in the United States to discuss race is asking them to relive every moment of pain, fear and outrage they have experienced” says B.L. Wilson when imploring white people to stop doing so.65

For people in positions of social privilege, they must take active steps to overcoming ignorance that maintains the hierarchy of power. For those in subordinated positions, the appropriate relationship to feedback is resistance. Without resistance, marginalized group members are not only likely to miss out on self-knowledge but also to internalize oppressive feedback which could be life-threatening.66 However, knowing how to resist means finding the right kinds of communities, concepts, and strategies to succeed.

One reason I am focusing on self-knowing as a virtue, instead of its product, is that self-knowing occasionally requires us to recognize when we should withhold belief about the self or that we are in a cognitive situation that is biased or unjust. For example, Audre’s case suggests that we might not get a clear rule or conditions for when to accept or reject feedback. Instead, Audre’s self-knowing will involve whatever is the appropriate response for that particular situation and source given Audre’s other beliefs, values, and intentions. Even in cases like Mark, one might choose to suspend belief about whether one is right or wrong in a situation and concede to the other person’s perspective. The other person’s perspective is not infallible but conceding is more virtuous because it’s

66 Over half of transgender male teens attempt suicide due to lack of acceptance (https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/4/e20174218)
reliably getting to the truth and motivated by the historically disproportionate epistemic credibility that one must overcome even in a place of privilege.

*Right Way*

Self-knowing is something at which one practices. Some candidates for practicing becoming a better self-knower involve meditation, journaling, and going to therapy. This latter practice involves a balance of appropriately interacting with the right authority and self-reflecting. Noticing when one is stressed, uncovering the source of one’s anger, and recognizing ways one is being self-ignorant can happen at particular instances but often take developing the right tools through practice. Aristotle holds that “experience and time” are necessary for epistemic virtue – the “birth and growth” of epistemic virtue requires teaching.67

Recognizing your social position is an important step in self-knowing as is constant self-evaluation, conversations with others, and an understanding of the historical context of the subject. Mark is unlikely to recognize or stop his mansplaining overnight even if he does have an epiphany and accept the feedback. Over time, he would pay more attention to others’ reactions or catch himself as he begins. He would develop ways to notice whether he was trying to center himself in the conversation and whether the situation called for another kind of reaction.

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67 Darwall, 2003, 12
Success

Even when we do something out of habit, a certain level of self-monitoring is required in order to perform tasks successfully. One must be able to perceive one’s actions and their effects on the environment. When the effects are undesired or different than expectations, one adjusts accordingly. We do this unconsciously for most things, even if we must start noticing and adjusting consciously at first.

What does it mean to have success or excel at forming beliefs about the self? First, self-knowledge involves an excellence at knowing how you see yourself and how others see you. Second, it involves an excellence in knowing when to reject or accept how others see you. This kind of excellence also involves knowing how to properly modify one’s own perspective and beliefs about the self in the face of feedback. Self-knowing, not just one belief, is an epistemic virtue because it is an epistemic achievement that requires the agent to be at the primary focus (self) and involves the right kind of interaction with the environment (feedback).

4. A Pluralist Approach to Self-Knowing

In the last section, I describe the features of self-knowing that most virtue epistemologists would agree make it virtuous. I’ll now present three main reasons to take a pluralist approach to self-knowing. First, the different views of virtue are potentially compatible. Second, self-knowing as a virtue is not reducible to other virtues. Third, a pluralist approach would be more comprehensive and carry more explanatory power.
What do I mean by a pluralist approach? Pluralist refers to a few things. The main plurality is seeing self-knowing as a hybrid of both kinds of virtues. Many skills and character traits are necessary parts of being a virtuous self-knower.

Another plurality I’ve already employed is taking an interdisciplinary lens to self-knowing in which we consider the empirical, practical, and social factors (such as epistemologies of ignorance and oppression). Better to have an account that captures both given what we know empirically about self-knowledge. For example, cognitive penetration is the heavily researched concept that refers to the way our higher order states (such as beliefs, expectations, or emotions) influence our lower order processes such as attention, visual perception, and memory. In the next chapter, I discuss how this concept appears in social cognition and the way we process others’ faces and, therefore, their feedback. Such evidence suggests that trait-like epistemic virtues like intellectual caution, open-mindedness, and introspective awareness make a difference for how well certain faculties perform. Conversely, even Zagzebski recognizes the important role of faculties and skills in achieving epistemic virtue. The conceptual distinction is useful for some purposes but many of Zagzebski’s own examples are ambiguous and further evidence suggests that our brains often engage in parallel processing. Top-down processing, in which our higher order states (like traits) influence what we experience, and bottom-up processing, in which our lower order faculties (like vision) convey information about what we experience, are happening simultaneously.

A plurality that appears in a later chapter is the use of both Western and Eastern views of virtue for approaching self-knowing. Zagzebski’s view is Aristotelian but we can also consider self-knowing in terms of Confucian virtue. The latter Eastern view
could be said to include skills as part of virtue. Confucianism also tells us more about the role of rituals (social practices), communities, and culture in forming the self.\textsuperscript{68}

Recall that one important distinction between the kinds of virtues is the moral aspect in which skills are typically considered passive and morally neutral while traits are not. We have reason to question this distinction. First, we shape and can therefore train our skills in ways that imply agency over skills and faculties. Zagzebski acknowledges this essential step in her own account. Second, since we have agency over skills, we are also somewhat morally responsible for how they function. Zagzebski argues that being “deeply personal” separates traits from skills but many people identify with their skills such as musicians and athletes. Using a pluralist approach means both epistemic and moral features appear in the concept of self-knowing without committing to this distinction.

Battaly argues that “both sorts of virtues succeed in making us excellent thinkers, albeit in different ways” because excellent thinkers tend to reliably produce true beliefs (if not for themselves than for the epistemic community, like a scientist who tries a new experimental method and ends up with more false beliefs before achieving the important, revolutionary true belief). Having good intellectual motivations is not inconsistent with virtue-reliabilism while intellectual skills are considered necessary for being virtuous in virtue-responsibilism. So, we don’t have to choose. We can instead take a pluralist approach to virtue as each camp is partly right.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{68} Slingerland, Wong
\textsuperscript{69} Battaly, 2007, 2013
Looking at implicit bias research and moral encroachment literature suggests that the realm of moral might be larger than philosophers have been granting. Research on prestige bias shows us that peer-reviewed journals are more likely to publish and not find fault with papers from more famous, elite Universities. Despite the belief that science is an objective pursuit of truth, social status along with race and gender can often affect not only the evaluation but the application of data. For example, even beliefs that might seem rational given statistics could be harmful. Rima Basu presents the case of a rational racist belief about the tipping practices of Black people to motivate the claim that we should refrain from forming certain beliefs because holding them is a form of harm towards the group or person. Activist groups fighting against racism, body shame, fatphobia, transphobia, and ableism seek to change people’s visual perceptions of certain bodies or bodily features. Seeing a fat body as beautiful is not unnatural but could require rewiring one’s perceptual processing. Battaly argues that, while “hardwired reliabilist virtues” are likely nonmoral, it’s much harder to distinguish responsibilist intellectual virtues from moral ones.\textsuperscript{70} Whether the intellectual virtue counts as a moral one will partly depend on what we take the realm of the moral to be.

Self-knowing as an epistemic virtue should be taken as having several moving parts – skills and traits – that constitute its being a special kind of virtue. One of those moving parts is appropriately responding to feedback and one’s sources. Being appropriately receptive to feedback from marginalized groups could be considered a skill in terms of attention or a trait in connection with fighting epistemic injustice.

\textsuperscript{70} Battaly, 2013, 186.
Since self-knowing is likely to be a hybrid of both kinds of virtues, skills and traits, there’s value in both approaches. Virtue-reliabilism gives us insight to the virtuous processes of self-knowing while virtue-responsibilism sheds light on praise and accountability involved. Each is going to affect the other’s success, especially since we receive feedback about ourselves in different ways. Assessing someone’s body language could be quite different than evaluating their statement. If we treat self-knowing only in terms of one or the other, we lose valuable insights on this complex virtue. Similar to parallel processing in the brain, you have both lower-order and higher-order communicating and working together to achieve the outcome. Taking a pluralist approach, we can use both virtue approaches to self-knowledge allowing us to look at those abilities and traits without reducing them to one particular set.

Self-knowing cannot be reduced to other skills (perception, memory are relevant but employed in terms of self-knowing/feedback) or traits (conscientious, attentive, just). Zagzebski mentions potential candidates in passing such as “introspective awareness” but such a virtue does not capture the relationship to outside sources and feedback. In the sense that some skills are required for virtues, some virtues may be required for other virtues. Most, if not all, the virtues are required for wisdom (phronesis for Aristotelians or de for Confucians). Self-knowing is required for wisdom although wisdom is much more. Just as we wouldn’t want to reduce wisdom to a particular virtue, we cannot reduce self-knowing to a particular skill or virtue without losing some of its nature. Given this irreducibility, I argue that self-knowing is a sui generis epistemic virtue that requires special attention beyond the other abilities and traits it could help constitute it.
The most appealing reason to use a pluralist approach is that it is more comprehensive. Both skills and traits as well as truth and justice are important in self-knowledge. Narrowing the focus, whether empirically or philosophically, is possible and can carry some benefits. However, self-knowing in this virtuous sense cannot be reduced to one kind of virtue or kind of reason without missing something. Having a pluralist approach means we can better understand self-knowing and therefore explain its connection to other issues like epistemic injustice.

**IV. Finding the Balance**

We can apply the doctrine of the mean to self-knowledge in different ways. First, we could look at the extremes of having too much or too little knowledge. Too little self-knowledge is clearly a vice as we usually try to avoid self-deception or ignorance. Of course, given the power of oppressive feedback, resistance might require ignoring or even forgetting others’ perceptions of self (which I count as self-knowledge). But such ignorance only works to a certain extent because a marginalized person could put themselves in unknown danger if unaware of these perceptions.

Too much self-knowledge is a little trickier to understand as a vice. Is it possible to never have too much self-knowledge? Here we can rely on the virtue approach and look at situations in which self-deception is valuable. Again, being a marginalized member of society could mean deceiving oneself on how likely they will succeed or be
taken seriously. We could praise Gay for her belief even if it’s very certain that she will never be Miss America.\textsuperscript{71}

A virtue approach acknowledges situations in which extremes on either side are problematic. While the character trait “reliably knows themselves” should appear across situations, there will be situations where this virtue matters less than others. In cases where it does not matter or the stakes are low, failure to practice self-knowing does not necessarily mean a failure of being virtuous. Remember, being virtuous means acting from a knowing state but should be effortless and easy once achieved.

I am not particularly interested in this kind of application. Instead, I want to focus on how the doctrine of the mean can help us understand the appropriate relationship to feedback. In this case, one must find a balance between relying on one’s own view of oneself and others’ views of oneself. At times, one should defer to outside sources and failing to do so is wrong. Other times, one must resist these outside sources. If one arrives too far towards one end of the spectrum, one fails to achieve self-knowledge or, at least, in the right way. In general, these epistemic positions can be categorized as epistemic vices because forming beliefs in these ways distort the right way of coming to self-knowledge. Heather Battaly distinguishes between two different kinds of vice, effects and responsibilist, which are both relevant for self-knowing.\textsuperscript{72} An effects-vice is a cognitive disposition that has bad epistemic effects such as false beliefs or prevents one from achieving good epistemic effects while a responsibilist-vice has to do with one’s character. However, white ignorance is a case of both kinds of vices in which one ends up

\textsuperscript{71} Not everyone would agree with this conclusion - it depends on how one conceptualizes rationality. I say more on this kind of resistance in Chapter 5 in my discussion on grit and aspiration.

\textsuperscript{72} Battaly, 2014
with false beliefs and bad character. What determines the virtuous self-knowing will involve epistemic as well as moral considerations since many sources of feedback are people and the exchange of feedback rests on power dynamics. The doctrine of the mean is key for evaluating cases such as Audre’s because the appropriate response is less clear. Finding this balance involves moral considerations regarding epistemic injustice, discrimination, and self-determination.

When seeking self-knowledge and feedback, the vice of deficiency is lacking the appropriate receptiveness to feedback by ignoring or discrediting certain sources while the vice of excess is the unwarranted deference to others and their feedback. Vices are bad for the person themselves as well as others. Conceptualizing these vices gives us a better understanding of how epistemic injustice occurs within self-knowledge and gathering information about the self. Epistemic injustice is the systematic harming of members from marginalized groups in terms of their knowledge practices – whether forming or sharing beliefs. Gaining and sharing knowledge is integral to who we are, attached to our sense of autonomy and rationality, which is why harming a person in their knowledge capacities is more than just an epistemic worry but an injustice.

The vice of deficiency in cases of feedback is related to Fricker’s concept of testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person’s testimony is discredited or ignored without warrant due to identity prejudice. If one lacks proper receptivity and uptake of feedback because of the source’s social status, it’s likely one is committing a testimonial injustice towards that source. Testimonial injustice in such cases not only harm the source but also harm the potential self-knower as they lack important information about the self. The epistemic effects of the vice are that one
furthers one’s self-ignorance but the damage one perpetuates through epistemic injustice creates what we would consider a character vice (i.e. Mark).

The vice of excess receptiveness concerns those who receive and internalize harmful feedback from sources they shouldn’t. Here, the epistemic injustice harms a person in terms of how they understand and trust their own experiences. Hermeneutical injustice involves the lack of conceptual resources for marginalized groups to express and share their experiences and knowledge. But those in power do give marginalized group members concepts for understanding themselves and their experiences, many times in order to keep them oppressed or invisible. While excess receptiveness can be an effects-vice because it leads one away from truth, it is not necessarily a responsibilist-vice. That is, the conditions under which one might need to be receptive could involve survival - accepting feedback could mean avoiding intense suffering or even death. Although an epistemic vice, excess receptivity is rarely the fault of the self-knower in the same way as the vice of deficiency. Recognizing the role of epistemic injustice allows us to understand how outside sources force individuals into these positions. While the vice harms the person, the causal forces for the vice are systematic and potentially unavoidable.\textsuperscript{73}

Achieving self-knowledge is a constant pursuit of seeking the truth about oneself, how others see oneself, and finding the appropriate balance between the two when forming beliefs about the self. The question goes beyond confirming evidence and credibility of sources. More needs to be said about what one should do in evaluating feedback in a situation, particularly in an oppressive environment, with multiple

\textsuperscript{73} In later chapters, I go into detail about the different forms of epistemic injustice that appear when one veers towards an extreme of either too much or too little deferring to outside sources.
uncertainties and lack of information. One must find a balance between trusting one’s own perspective of oneself and deferring to others’ perspectives of oneself. Finding that balance, in the right kind of way, not only contributes to self-knowledge but also paves the way for self-improvement and a better life.

V. Objections

Next I will address potential objections to my account. First, the situational objection concerns whether self-knowing can be a dispositional state. The specificity required for self-knowing means it will look drastically different for not only each person but across situations for any given person. Second, the deception objection concerns whether self-knowing is necessarily something valuable. Sometimes, it can be better to not have self-knowledge. I consider the claim that self-deception has value that the virtue account excludes. Third, similar to certain virtues like open-mindedness and empathy, self-knowing can look more like a vice under the wrong conditions. The vice objection concerns how self-knowing itself could be a vice or the dispositions involved in self-knowing can lead to certain vices such as virtue-signaling. Fifth, the exclusivity objection concerns how my account seems to justify or even argue that people should close themselves into echo chambers. Finally, the unfairness objection concerns how my account seems to expose marginalized communities and require too much of them.

A. Situational Objection

One might reject the possibility of self-knowing as a disposition to be self-aware and appropriately receptive. I take this rejection to be the similar skeptic position held by
those who argue against the existence of virtues or global traits. The general position of
the situational critiques is that we have no reliable “global” dispositions to act in a certain
way across a wide range of situations.\textsuperscript{74} Virtuous traits are often considered “global” in
the sense that they should appear in most, if not all, appropriate circumstances. The
critiques stem from the lack of behavior reliability when it comes to one’s personality
traits. Empirical work in social psychology demonstrates the power of situational factors
on a person’s decision-making. The crux of the criticism is that seemingly irrelevant
aspects of the environment can affect how people display what are typically virtuous
actions. Specific to self-knowing, the critiques would point to situations in which a
person seems to be displaying ignorance and/or lack of proper receptivity. For example,
in the Good Samaritan study, seminary students would ignore someone in need if they
were in a hurry despite the task to which they were late was giving a talk on the Good
Samaritan (which is about helping strangers). You would assume that the person sees
themselves as the kind of person who would help if asked to self-report.

It’s relevant that several virtue theorists reject the situational critiques as
strawman arguments because they ignore important aspects such as room for error and
individuality,\textsuperscript{75} degrees of virtue,\textsuperscript{76} and the experiments’ structures.\textsuperscript{77} In terms of self-
knowing, this kind of data brings into question our ideas about personhood, agency, and,
thus, self-knowledge in general. These questions are central to understanding self-
knowing as a virtue such as how deeply is the self relational and how contextual are the

\textsuperscript{74} Doris, 1998, 2002; Harman, 1999,2000
\textsuperscript{75} Kupperman, 2001
\textsuperscript{76} Miller, 2003
\textsuperscript{77} Sreenivasan, 2002
traits that constitute who we are. To say a trait is contextual means it will be specific to a situation, which is different than a trait ordinarily conceived, but still a trait because it can be reliably tracked across those situations. Context can include not only salient environment features but also roles, expectations, cognitive load, and other features of the person and those involved. As long as there are some contextual traits to investigate, some questions will be a matter of further empirical evidence. For self-knowing to a trait, we may still need some possibility of coherence between the different ways the trait manifests. If some coherence, we can see what kinds of traits emerge from empirical investigation and relational traits could have more specificity. What seems more important than the actions themselves is whether one’s behavior lacks ethical consistency such as the case with Mark.

The larger questions, however, are metaphysical - is there a self at all or does it all dissolve into context? How can one be said to be the same person since we so often use psychological dispositions to determine sameness? What about the effects of the situation on the person’s decision-making and intentions? How can one know oneself if the “self” is constantly shifting and changing shape? This objection calls into question if there’s a self to know at all not just dispositions. If you reject the concept of a self, you might have to reject more than virtue theory.

Or, we may value the kind of virtue that has situational flexibility as that seems closer to the sense of “appropriateness” that Aristotle uses and supports the Confucian reasoning around virtues like de and yi. For example, Slingerland argues that
Confucianism allows for a variety of situational forces in virtue. Confucianism still takes these forces seriously by trying to address the kind of situational variability that causes people to do what is not right. Through ritual and other regular environmental reminders, Confucianism trains up greater ethical consistency while also allowing for flexibility.

Wong distinguishes two kinds of situational flexibility, one you don’t want and one you do, in giving the Confucian stance on this critique. This critique concerns the kind of situational flexibility that causes us to be ethically inconsistent. Mencius was aware of such inconsistencies which is why he encouraged working on extending one’s moral reactions so that they would follow what’s right and not be haphazard. Confucianism seeks to combat the inconsistencies through various cultivational methods such as ritual and imagination. The kind of situational flexibility that consists in accurate judgment as to what is appropriate to the circumstance is the kind you want to incorporate. People and situations are unique so one’s moral judgements and actions will also be. Similarly, one’s self-knowing will be unique to the situation. We want a kind of autonomy and self-knowing that does not separate selves from others but “makes them worthy of others’ trust.” Such flexibility does not exclude global traits but rather is necessary in having a global trait “that adjusts with the finest sensitivity to the type of context in order to produce a consistent result—rightness.” We want self-knowing and other virtues to be sensitive and flexible if they are to be accurate and appropriate.

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78 2011
79 Wong, 427
80 Wong, 425.
The situational aspect of virtue theory is then a strength, not a weakness, under my account. For example, perhaps a person focusing on what they’re doing and not seeking feedback from others which results in a person feeling ignored. My response is that you have to look at the whole situation to determine whether that person is warranted in ignoring, what are the stakes, what is the relationship between the two people, etc. If a surgeon is performing a difficult procedure, they may or may not be receptive to feedback at the moment and whether they should be could depend on other aspects such as the severity of any error or whether the other person has expertise. I argue for virtue theory as an approach to self-knowledge because it accounts for the situational aspect in the doctrine of the mean.

Doris and other anti-virtue theorists tend to rely on empirical work to make their arguments so I will appeal to the same literature: social psychology. Darley and Batson attribute the lack of helping the stranger in the Good Samaritan study to two possibilities.81 First, they suggest that the need to hurry changes subjects’ perception of the situation by “narrowing of the cognitive map.”82 Second, they note the results do not indicate a lack of ethical behavior if you consider the conflict between helping the stranger and meeting the needs of the experimenter. Finally, they argue that the “time and scope” of the situation partly determines whether personality characteristics even get to play a role.83

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81 Darley and Batson, 107
82 Tolman, 1948
83 Darley and Batson, 108
The power dynamics of a situation and the desire to be the kind of person who meets one’s obligations undoubtedly can have an influence on what we do. Yet, in the famous Milgram study in which people deliver electric shocks under orders, a few people who resisted reported conflict with their moral codes. Recent work involving a similar set-up shows that “resistance developed in response to the Experimenter’s attempt to deny participants’ sense of free will and an associated violation of norms associated with shared identity.”84 They also found that obedience was mediated more so by appeals to science rather than authority.85

What is most salient in a situation, and what should be, are not always clear. Yet, once we parse these out, we might still end up with virtues – such ones that are specific to the situation. For example, the conflicts in the studies are still relevant to virtue theory which focuses on the appropriateness of action. With the virtue lens, we can ask whether being late morally appropriately outweighs helping another who looks in serious need or whether the pursuit of scientific truth is really more valuable than causing another person significant harm. One’s culture also influences one’s helping behavior which is why Confucianism focuses so heavily on its role in virtue formation. For example, many people in the US are likely to see themselves as independent individuals and not necessarily as part of a community. This stance could be why many people experience wearing a mask as infringing on their bodily autonomy rather than an obligation of communal safety.

84 Reicher, Haslam, and Millard, 2015, 8
85 Reicher, Haslam, and Birney, 2014
Perhaps it seems contradictory to hold something to be a disposition but also unique to the particularities of a situation. But we so often change according to our social role and corresponding expectations, who is around us, what the environment is like, and other situational factors. A strength of virtue theory is its compatibility with a relational view of the self and transformative experience.\textsuperscript{86}

Virtue theory coincides with a relational view of the self because both emphasize the particular situation and others involved. While less clear in Aristotelian theory, Confucianism virtue theory is built upon this view. The data on situational factors’ influence on individuals supports a relational view of the self. Studies that involve experimenters giving people tasks create a kind of relationship and role for the person in which they are seeing themselves as part of the study and their attention is there. The importance of relationships in determining self-knowledge should be clear from the cases of Mark, Rebecca, and Audre. In general, my account need not take a position on the metaphysics of the self and can leave that to be determined by others.

\textbf{B. Deception Objection}

The second way to interpret this objection is that self-knowing is not always valuable or something that contributes to the virtuous life. Sometimes, it’s better not to know yourself. For example, being overly optimistic one will make a deadline could help one get closer to finishing it more than being realistic. Biologist Robert Trivers argues

\textsuperscript{86} I discuss these in more detail in Chapter 1.
that self-deception is an evolutionary adaptation that functions like a psychological immune system.\textsuperscript{87} It allows us to unconsciously deceive others which makes it easier and detection less likely but Tivers also looks at benefits, especially in old age, of a bias towards positive memories and suppressing other memories.

My reply is that the difference between self-deception about aspects of the self and other topics matters as well as the reasoning and agency behind it. False memories as a way to overcome trauma have potential value but the knowledge concerns particular events and not necessarily one’s traits. Even so, erasing or manipulating an important event from someone’s past could also change who a person is and whether that always constitutes a harm is beyond the scope of this chapter. In a later chapter, I argue that false memories are one example of oppressive feedback and are more likely than not to harm a person. Trivers himself is concerned with oppressive feedback or, as he calls it, “imposed self-deception” in which others manipulate you so that you value yourself less than others. He argues that we should be concerned about how this functions to impart a negative self-image onto historically degraded social groups. While Trivers may be right that “honesty is not evolutionarily stable,” we don’t have to accept that lying to oneself is a virtue or part of a flourishing life. If it turned out that it was \textit{all things considered} to be systematically overly optimistic about one’s situation or capabilities, this objection would carry more weight. That’s not to deny it might be useful in some situations. Taking the situation and one’s reasons into account makes a difference to whether we consider the lack of self-knowing or level of self-deception appropriate or a vice. We should still

\textsuperscript{87} Trivers, 2010, 2011
value accuracy for epistemic and moral reasons but this objection is more of a practical concern.

C. Vice Objection

We should also consider whether self-knowing could be a vice. Self-knowing would qualify as an effects-vice if it narrowed one’s focus to only thinking and forming beliefs about the self. One becomes self-absorbed and ignorant about other important matters. Yet, self-absorption is more commonly thought to be a character vice. Indeed, one could say that virtue theory is not just agent-centered but self-centered because you are seeking your own well-being and betterment, not necessarily society’s.

Excessive self-knowing would no longer be a virtue under my account. This vice could be less significant depending on the stakes but it’s likely to still affect one’s well-being. For example, people who experience social anxiety because they’re self-conscious or those who remember an abnormally large amount of their life experiences in vivid detail. Hyperthymesia or “highly superior autobiographical memory” is a condition that is often described as a “curse.”

The vice of excessive self-knowing also appears as a form of narcissism or even psychopathy. While the person might practice relevant self-knowing constantly, and even come to reliably form justified true beliefs, they are (likely to be) harming their sources of feedback because they are using others’ perceptions of themselves as a way to

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manipulate and deceive those people. It’s not the same kind of harm that Mark commits
towards ignoring his sources and considerably more blameworthy.

We like to make things about us. Sometimes, the situation is not about you and
assuming you’re receiving feedback is wrong. In introductory psychology courses, it’s a
common practice to give students personality assessments then hand out “feedback” that
says similar, vague things and ask students whether it reflects them accurately. Often, the
point is a jab at practices such as astrology in which the language is general enough that it
could fit anyone.

As mentioned, Mark does have some self-knowledge which could come into play
when he mansplains. For example, Mark knows his feminist values and his ability to
speak freely about oppression. Yet he appears to virtue-signal his values rather than live
them. If Mark was practicing virtuous self-knowing, he would not mansplain because he
would realize his proper role in the conversation. The virtuous, self-knowing person will
know their role which could be as an active listener. Being an active listener can often
require developing habits through practice and training (consider counseling education)
to ask the right open-ended questions, visibly respond such as shaking the head, and keep
eye contact. Mark makes his hearer’s experience about him as a feminist when he
mansplains.

Recognizing feedback and your role still fits into self-knowing even if your
attention is not on the self in the situation. It requires wisdom and self-knowing to know
the proper context in which self is one of the things you should be monitoring in the
situation. There might be ways you can redirect yourself to focus on others or the object
of inquiry if starting to ruminate or become self-absorbed. It’s not always an unbalanced,
asymmetrical mode of attention when one is self-knowing. If we take there to be diachronic aspects to the self, then knowing yourself in the long term means getting into activities where you “lose” yourself as a form of self-discovery.89

It might be easy to assume that some roles require a lack of self-knowing. For example, a teacher’s focus should be the students and the information they are teaching. But a self-knowing teacher will also realize that their students are watching and learning from the teacher’s expressions, behavior, and speech as well. Certain cases in which it is better not to have certain aspects of self-knowledge or ways in which self-knowing could be inappropriate does not mean that self-knowing is not a virtue. More certainly needs to be said about the virtue of self-knowing to understand its proper context and functioning.

**D. Exclusivity Objection**

The exclusivity objection about self-knowing rests on how virtues develop through practice and interaction with the world. One way to teach and model self-knowing involves careful monitoring of what information a child receives about themselves and people with whom they identify (such as parents or media representations). Excellence requires the right environment because one needs to be able to learn the virtues and put them into practice. The virtue of self-knowing requires learning what feedback to accept or reject and sources to trust. Exposing oneself to oppressive feedback and bad sources could lead to more than a lack of self-knowledge

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89 I say more about this in Chapter 5.
and put one in danger of further oppression. The risk of internalizing oppressive feedback is high if it comes from several sources, especially those with power. But one implication of this approach to self-knowing is that one seems to be justified being inside an “echo chamber” to keep away from oppressive feedback. Echo chambers typically have a negative connotation as they’re likely to lead to ignorance or false beliefs about reality, particularly what others believe.

If oppression and discrimination exists towards groups of which we are members, we should be aware of it to a certain extent when it’s appropriate. When appropriate and to what extent will depend on a number of factors including the individual’s particular abilities and situation and other intersecting identities. We don’t necessarily blame a caregiver for “sheltering” their child from dark subject matters. Yet this objection suggests that such a sheltering would be possible for those who face the worst kinds of oppression – which isn’t true. For example, Black families describe having to give “the Talk” to their young children in which they warn and try to prepare them for police harassment (or worse). The ability to exclude oneself (or one’s kin or community) comes from social privilege that allows one the power to determine such parameters.

Returning to the concept of resistance, it’s important to know how others see the groups to which one (is presumed to) belong in order to combat oppression even if forms of privilege shield you. While I argued that Mark should seek a variety of sources for feedback, those who are marginalized should do the same. Having a variety of sources makes us aware of the ways that oppressive feedback shapes us in different ways depending on where we are situated. Oppressive feedback is not a single, separable piece of information from the rest of the information one gets about the self. It strikes a person
in a special way according to the various axes of identity and culture. Rebecca and Audre should also seek a variety of sources to help identify oppressive feedback as well as find resistant cultures and concepts. Finding these environments will be difficult if the emphasis is always security. A role for boundaries and justified exclusion is important but depends on the person and the stakes (subject matter, situation, and safety of individuals).

**E. Unfairness Objection**

Opposite of the exclusivity objection, the unfairness objection concerns how my stance leads to unfair burdens and blame on marginalized communities. In terms of the burdens, the virtuous self-knowing framework implies that, first, a marginalized person must expose themselves to oppressive feedback and bad sources to gain virtuous self-knowing. Another burden my account seems to suggest is that marginalized community members must give feedback to those who are privileged to help them out of their bad epistemic positions. Finally, treating self-knowing as a virtue seems to imply that we should blame those who receive and are unable to resist oppressive feedback.

The first burden of exposure to oppressive feedback as part of virtuous self-knowing is a weakness of my view only if one does not accommodate for the particularities of the agent, the environment, and the stakes involved. The virtue of self-knowing is one that needs to be weighed according to other considerations and other virtues such as discernment, resilience, and bravery. Similar to bravery, self-knowing is not reckless or cowardly but proceeds with appropriate caution and awareness to danger.
Even if one is a firefighter, one must receive the proper training, equipment, and team in order to safely enter a burning building. Having these conditions does not make the firefighter any less brave but situates the bravery according to the situation and the person’s abilities. Similarly, if one is part of a group vulnerable to oppressive feedback, one should seek the right resources to resist that feedback. One rarely has to search for oppressive feedback but one might need to learn how to recognize it. I’ll return to the importance of resources such as communities and practices in a later chapter (Chp 5).

One could also argue that my account burdens marginalized community members as sources of feedback for those in positions of social privilege, like Mark. If we want privileged people to overcome their ignorance, those who are marginalized feedback should help them out of their bad epistemic positions by informing them of their erroneous perspective.

This second burden is not one I want to accept nor advocate for its necessity. Under my account, the burden is separate from the virtue of self-knowing because it’s about giving feedback and not assessing it. We can praise a person for their abilities to do the former well but the latter is my focus. My answer rests on the agent’s responsibility to seek appropriate information and sources then doing the self-reflective work necessary. I made a similar point about the appropriateness of Mark’s seeking feedback with the example of white anti-racists. Seeking feedback in the right way is part of self-knowing on behalf of the self-knower and their responsibility. Feedback, especially from someone in a more vulnerable position, is not something to which they are entitled. Members of a

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90 Versions of this objection appear in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5)
marginalized group do not have a duty to help members of an oppressing group if it puts them at risk of further oppression.

Treating self-knowing as a virtue could result in blaming those who receive oppressive feedback and are unable to resist it. Self-knowing is a virtue that requires rejecting oppressive feedback for which a person deserves praise. Therefore, if a person internalizes oppressive feedback, the virtue framework implies that we can blame that person.

Cases exist when the marginalized individual could be culpable for participating in furthering oppression. For example, Phyllis Schafly’s pivotal campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1970s lead to its failure to pass as even the Republican party was originally in favor of it. Even though the legislation would have helped their own gender, mostly women were and are part of the Eagle Forum (her political group) that continues today. Other aspects of their identities are likely relevant such as religion, race, and socio-economic status. Schafly galvanized women by arguing that the ERA would threaten their supposedly privileged positions as mothers and wives. That Schafly deserves blame for her role is clear for many feminists and historians. But I don’t think she deserves this blame because she was self-ignorant or even unconsciously manipulated. Schafly wanted power in the Republican Party and was unable to secure it as a woman. She saw an opportunity to seize power for herself despite the costs it would have to women in general. I’m inclined to believe that Schafly knew herself and others’ perceptions of her quite well and would use the latter for self-gain. It does raise the question for less extreme cases whether a marginalized member is blameworthy for conforming to oppressive standards, especially if it does not seem necessary for survival.
or well-being. The harm one can potentially inflict on others could be one important factor.

The real burden or blame involved with being in an oppressive environment is not with those who are on the receiving end of that feedback. Blaming a person for their own oppression is not a position I want to take. To take this position assumes an unrealistic view about the ability of individuals to resist feedback from dominant groups and severely underestimates the power of oppressive structures. What is explanatorily salient in their current lack of self-knowing is not their own ability but rather the oppressive environment. When looking at responsibility to self, not resisting feedback may be failing oneself (to the extent that you can resist) but that’s different than being responsible to others for doing so.

When I say one “must” resist oppressive feedback, it’s not necessarily a duty or responsibility to others but something one owes to oneself. Therefore, others are not necessarily in a position to judge whether you’ve met that responsibility, especially since resistance can be internal. However, those within marginalized communities do often hold each other to varying degrees of responsibility when it comes to resistance whether political or personal. If one is in a better position than others in the oppressed group, one may have a duty to others in that group to fight for their liberation and advancement. Again, the stakes such as survival should influence our judgments. We all carry the burden of oppressive feedback to the extent we can resist and create change for ourselves and those marginalized in society. As members of different communities, we share responsibilities for the social environments we help create and perpetuate.
VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that our social positions affect our ability to gain self-knowledge. Understanding one’s appropriate relationship to feedback is key for overcoming obstacles in self-knowledge. It’s also important for making sure one is not contributing to or suffering from epistemic injustice. To understand this relationship, I argue we should take a virtue epistemology approach to self-knowledge. With this approach, we can not only understand the appropriate relationship to feedback but also how self-knowing is an epistemic virtue of its own. To have virtuous self-knowing, choosing the right kind of epistemic environments and communities in which to receive feedback is key to not only accuracy but protecting oneself from harmful transformations. The question remains how should we be developing virtuous self-knowing in the face of potential injustices.
Chapter 3: Variety of Epistemic Sources

I. Introduction

“He could no longer quiet another alarm that had begun to go off with increasing frequency inside his head: What if so many of his classmates on the forum were valid in their criticism and righteous in their anger?”1

Derek Black knew to keep his famous white nationalist identity a secret when he enrolled at his liberal arts college. Once his peers realized who he was, most of the student body was outraged and ostracized Derek. Yet Matthew Stevenson, one of the few Orthodox Jews on campus, invited Derek to a weekly Shabbat dinner he’d been hosting. Through socializing with those different than him, Derek had another route to begin questioning his belief system. Over time, he became receptive to their counter-evidence and their feedback regarding his values. As an outcome of these interactions with different kinds of sources involving people as well as research, Derek came to recognize the contradictions between his ideology and relationships. In other words, he came to change his view of himself and his role in the world.

Derek Black was a famous white nationalist when he went to college. Once his peers realized who he was, some attempted to help Derek through personal interactions. Matthew Stevenson, one of the few Orthodox Jews on campus, invited Derek to a weekly Shabbat dinner he’d been hosting. Through socializing with those different than him,

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Derek began questioning his belief system. Over time, he became receptive to their counter-evidence and their feedback regarding his values. As an outcome of these interactions with different kinds of sources involving people as well as research, Derek came to recognize the contradictions between his ideology and relationships. In other words, he came to change his view of himself and his role in the world.

Even if one is not part of a hate group, one is still vulnerable to having inaccurate beliefs about oneself. It’s rare that we question our belief system and whether we are accurate about what we know about ourselves. Often one ignores or disregards important feedback about oneself, especially if it’s negative. The source’s social status can also influence how much attention or trust one gives to that source. In this chapter, I focus on the problem of self-knowledge when it comes to evaluating one’s sources. By looking at how accurately one receives and assesses feedback, I argue that one commits an epistemic injustice when discrediting epistemic sources without warrant. Epistemic injustice involves harming a person by denying them their status as credible sources thereby diminishing their ability to share or gain knowledge. What’s interesting about these cases of epistemic injustice is how they harm not only the source of testimony but also the self-knower in terms of their ability to gain true beliefs about the self. I propose that seeking a variety of sources might allow us to recognize and combat biases involved receiving and evaluating feedback. I then defend this proposal against the objection that it places an unfair burden on marginalized group members and that it argues for the inclusion of bad epistemic sources.

II. Epistemic Injustice and Feedback

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Our ability to receive and assess feedback can limit or distort our ability to achieve self-knowledge as well as potentially harm others. Rarely considered in debates about self-knowledge is one’s responsibility towards others in seeking testimony, especially about oneself. In terms of the latter, social epistemologists such as Lorraine Code, Miranda Fricker, and Kristie Dotson consider ways in which one can harm another’s ability as a knower. These philosophers argue that oppression can involve systematic denial of certain people (usually because of their social group) as knowers or credible sources. Such treatment diminishes that person’s abilities to gain and share knowledge, that is, their epistemic agency. Epistemic injustice affects who we seek and treat as credible sources (or not). We tend to engage with those most similar to us, thus limiting our scope of credible sources Even if one is not a member of a source’s group, though, one can be biased in trusting their feedback because they have a high social status. In this section, I discuss how groupthink limits who an agent trusts, chooses, and perceives as sources of feedback and the potential corresponding harms.

A. Favored Sources

We like people who are similar to us. Consider assortative mating. Assortative mating is the pattern that emerges as people are more likely to seek partners that are like them (particularly those of the same race, socioeconomic status, or political ideology). Why do we do this? One reason is that we just interact more smoothly with people who

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are similar to us. Sometimes, seeking feedback from those similar to you can be useful. When you want to know whether to see a film, it is usually best to ask someone similar whether they think you would enjoy it. We both intentionally and unintentionally create spaces in society that keep our epistemic environment limited to certain sources.

Epistemic environments have varying degrees of breadth and diversity. Places like country clubs, private schools, gated communities, elite universities limit the types of people with whom we come into contact and whose beliefs we must consider.

Since we prefer to surround ourselves with those who are similar, we tend to create an “ingroup.” Ingroup biases appear in both receiving and giving feedback. Research supports the presence of “ingroup positivity” in which a person views fellow group members more positively than outsiders. The ingroup sources are biased because group members are partial towards agents like them. Having a positive bias makes group members’ feedback skewed towards ignoring negative characteristics of members. They are highly vulnerable to emphasizing shared characteristics as positive traits and make salient those characteristics. Since the agent has a positive view of the ingroup, the agent is more likely to trust ingroup sources than other people.

Although ingroup biases will have varying degrees of influence in society, I claim that these biases affects an individual’s ability to properly receive and assess feedback. If one is biased towards meeting group norms, the desire for conformity outweighs good epistemic practices. It’s unlikely to look for evidence that will conflict or challenge one’s

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5 It’s important to make a distinction here between using similarity without warrant as a reason to grant credibility to a source and seeking solidarity between members of stigmatized groups. The latter is more likely to justify seeking members of one’s group over outsiders as epistemic sources.

group membership. Since they are vulnerable to the epistemically irrational practices, ingroup members are likely to provide biased or inaccurate feedback. Regardless of credibility, trusting the source is based on similarity and ingroup status.

Along with seeking sources based on similarity, I argue that we are biased towards accepting expert feedback even if its unwarranted. Epistemic deference is the disposition to regard person or institution as an especially reliable source of truth. An excessive amount of epistemic deference means that there is too much or a wrongly placed amount of trust in certain authorities. Social hierarchies tend to involve excessive epistemic deference or surplus status trust to people who are high on the social hierarchy based on stereotypes of group identities. “Surplus status trust” occurs when certain individuals, particularly those in power, are given a status of trustworthiness that is unwarranted. The surplus could be due to the wrong people being given social power or due to the social hierarchy that puts the excessive amounts of trust in place.

Due to excessive epistemic deference, we end up with expertise imperialism. “Expertise imperialism” occurs in a society when people (including the experts themselves) overestimate the skills and knowledge of experts. Because of experts’ high social status, we have a bias to regard them as more trustworthy than they might actually be. One example of excessive epistemic deference occurs in the case of pregnant women and new mothers. While we get direct feedback about ourselves from experts, we also get indirect feedback from the accepted theories, practices, and expertise opinion of various fields like psychology, biology, and medicine. Yet experts are continually changing the

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norms for what and how women should eat, drink, nurse, and react to pregnancy in what Quill R. Kukla calls the “signal moments” of mothering.⁸ Kukla gives numerous examples of how medical experts and institutions create cultural norms that unfairly assess women without regard to socioeconomic status and ethnicity. When women do not live up to the cultural norms, they are given feedback about themselves (i.e. they are not “good” mothers). Since we must defer to experts and are discouraged from questioning them, our abilities to assess experts as sources of feedback are extremely limited.

In cases of diagnosing a patient, medical experts give little credibility to self-reports (particularly when the patient is a member of a stigmatized group). They consider themselves to be more knowledgeable as part of their training and social status despite whether they actually are. Many times, we must defer to experts regarding ourselves. Whether one is considered competent to make medical decisions, like taking hormonal replacement therapy, is determined by outside experts. When we are discouraged from questioning them, our abilities to assess experts as sources of feedback are extremely limited. If we live in societies with expertise imperialism, the social power of experts forces one to accept certain sources as trustworthy without proper evaluation.

Similarly, certain experts are considered more credible because of their background rather than actual expertise. Prestige bias occurs when experts are favored because of their association with famous institutions. Occurring when we use the identity of the expert to affect the way we reason about the evidence, prestige bias leads to “errors based on social category membership” even though we believe our judgments are based

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on “scientific or argumentative merit.” Accepting arguments from those with more prestige also stigmatizes those who do not come from certain institutions, thus limiting one’s available (potentially more warranted) sources of feedback.

Prestige and unwarranted authority is not exclusive to experts. We tend to be biased towards sources with high social status in general. For example, the person of low social status who admires the rich celebrity will take their feedback about what counts as a healthy body even if that information about the self is unwarranted. A consequence of living in a hierarchical society is the tendency to excessively defer or give too much credibility to those with a high social status whether or not it is warranted. Social status determines the level of trustworthiness a source is granted. The status of trustworthiness can be unwarranted if that those at the top have less accountability for their epistemic practices. In cases of surplus status trust, we commit excessive epistemic deference by using social ranking to justify one’s epistemic authority. People begin to accept information from those with high social status without rational evaluation.

Many cultures treat celebrities as authorities on matters despite their expertise having nothing to do with the subject matter. Which people become celebrities depends almost entirely on social factors such as class, race, sexual orientation, body shape, and other physical markers. These factors have nothing to do with whether a celebrity is a trustworthy source of information. In terms of feedback, celebrities are sources of information regarding whether one’s identity is desirable or appropriate. Their epistemic (and possibly moral) authority is unwarranted because it’s not necessarily based on actual credibility.

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Certain groups stay at the top of the hierarchy by fitting a certain stereotype. Stereotypes perpetuated by media representations give feedback about what is required to be part of the “ingroup” or have high social status and its corresponding value. The information conveyed by those representations is pervasive in such a way that they not only affect our perception but also lead to stigmatization of others. One propagated value of the celebrity and white, upper class is “healthism,” the view that one’s bodily functionality corresponds to one’s overall worth. Taste, food variation, and diet are historically known to play a defining role for social ranking and identity. Healthist norms give feedback about one’s success based on whether their body type is strong and skinny. A class stereotype emerged between the thin, active, thoughtful consumer and the fat, lazy, poor eater. Those who fit the “healthy” stereotype are seen as overachieving, having more self-control, and being more responsible members of society. One might choose a white, thin, male psychiatrist for feedback instead of a black, larger, female one because of the stereotypes surrounding “successful.” Additionally, if you do not fit the stereotype, you get negative feedback about not only your body but who you are as a person. These stereotypes affect more than just who you consider a source of feedback in that they also give you feedback about yourself.

When Western television came to Fiji in the 1990s, the women experienced a significant change in how they saw themselves. Before the introduction of Western images of thin and successful characters, Fijian women were not given negative feedback about their weight so they weren’t “motivated” to care about body shape. It is not only

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that the skinny actors are visually modeling certain social norms and values. Discourse within Western media gives constant feedback about how to interpret one’s weight as “healthy” or “unhealthy.” The ways weight is discussed are associated with individual responsibility, blame, work ethic, and whether a group is considered an asset or a problem for society. The women begin to identify “lazy” with obesity as well as “smart” with attractive.\textsuperscript{12} The images and feedback led to a significant increase in eating disorders within a few years. The way that media operates as an authority in general affects the acceptance of feedback without question.

In this section, I explored the ways in which we are biased to favor certain sources without warrant. This favoritism can stem from the source sharing group membership or having a high social status. One is less likely to be critical of those with high social status, such as experts or celebrities, when they convey information about the self. In the next section, I explore the ways in which one is likely to discredit or ignore epistemic sources.

\textbf{B. Stigmatized Sources}

I now look at biases that we tend to have towards others who are different than us or have a low social status. Testimonial injustice works in (at least) two ways when it comes to evaluating our sources of feedback - one more passive than the other. By

\textsuperscript{12} Sometimes, the feedback is accurate and not prejudiced. Some women reported watching the show \textit{Xena: Warrior Princess} and coming to realize that they are equal with and just as strong as men. The term “warrior” with a woman, who talks in a commanding, low voice, implies that “woman” has qualities of strength and leadership. Since the women identify with the character, they are given feedback about what it means to be a woman.
excluding someone from my in-group, my brain tells me I don’t need to pay attention to them as much because they aren’t as valuable to me. As mentioned, high social status and authority of certain groups can create and enforce negative stereotypes about groups of lower status. We tend to ignore or discredit sources based on whether they are outgroup members or have a low social status. If we are biased against certain sources because of their group membership or social status, we are likely committing an epistemic injustice.

When we receive feedback, multiple brain systems are involved “between bottom-up cues (e.g., skin color or hair length) and top-down cues (e.g., attention or motivations) that interact in cycles until the evaluative system settles on a representation of a target.” 13 When receiving feedback, a person perceives information in ways that include verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. One way we get feedback is perceiving the face. “Cognitive penetration” involves one’s higher order cognitive states influencing one’s perceptual experience while the state of the object is constant and one’s sensory organs are otherwise normally functioning. 14 One form of cognitive penetration is the phenomenon of seeing the faces differently based on higher-order beliefs, particularly related to group membership.

“Holistic processing” is a specialized mechanism we have for perceiving faces as a whole instead of individual parts that begins in childhood. 15 When perceiving your anger, I process the relevant cues on your face such as your furrowed eyebrows and

15 Studies show that children begin to recognize and remember parts of the face better when they see the whole face than when they only the individual parts. See Pellicano, E. & G. Rhodes. “Holistic processing of faces in preschool children.” Psychological Science 14 no. 6 (2003): 618-22.
clenched jaw as a whole. By holistically processing your face, I am able to come the judgment that you are angry (perhaps with me).\textsuperscript{16} This kind of processing is considered to be crucial in recognizing and remembering faces.\textsuperscript{17} However, once a face is categorized as an outgroup member, the observer processes it less holistically.\textsuperscript{18} The outgroup members are not “accorded the specialized processing mechanisms applied by default” to ingroup members. Since holistic processing is more finely tuned to members of one’s own race or social group, we are less likely to assess feedback from outgroup members as well. These unconscious psychological mechanisms involved in feedback can seriously hinders one’s epistemic abilities and dangerously influences one’s perspective on the world.

One’s beliefs, attitudes, and positive bias towards ingroup members has the potential to keep one from correctly perceiving feedback from outsiders. We are likely to ignore or misperceive potential sources of feedback when they are not part of our ingroup. However, biases regarding group membership are not limited to those who are similar to us. We tend to be more attentive and receptive to those who we consider to be valuable sources of information based merely on the source’s group membership, even if

\textsuperscript{16} While many hypothesize that holistic representations are meant to extract second-order information concerning variation between different people, some research supports the hypothesis that we also receive first-order information from holistic processing as well. See Taubert, J., D. Apthorp, D. Aagten-Murphy & D. Alais. “The role of holistic processing in face perception: Evidence from face-inversion effect.” \textit{Vision Research} 15 no. 11 (2011): 1273-1278.

\textsuperscript{17} The necessity of holistic processing is well-established through a large body of research although there are questions of whether it is sufficient for these processes (Watson, 2013).

that receptivity is unwarranted. Attentional biases arise through a process of cultural evolution and cultural attunement. That is, the cultural history of one’s community affects who and what grabs one’s attention and therefore what information one encodes.

The more active form of testimonial exclusion involves stereotypes, representations, beliefs, expectations, and emotions tied up with the group identities (which can be fairly complex). Hierarchies of authority and social power also influence who a person perceives as a competent source of feedback. The social hierarchy is based on stereotypes regarding group identity so that certain groups are marginalized through identity categories. To achieve a feeling of superiority, in-group members are likely to create immoral or evil attributes of the out-group. Negative stereotypes of out-group members are common. Recent neurological studies suggest that a person’s expectations about someone’s social identity guides their attention and how much information is necessary to confirm their beliefs.

Associating physical markers with negative qualities creates cognitive representations of people as lacking or less deserving of social status. Within social hierarchies, group membership through physical markers such as the color of one’s skin or shape of one’s hips determines their testimonial worth. Oppression occurs through the

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creation and maintenance of associations of certain physical markers with the groups in order to give power to some and marginalize others.\textsuperscript{22} Excessively deferring to people who are high on the social hierarchy grants them even more social power, thus contributing to oppressive practices such as epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice occurs when one does not consider a person credible merely because of their social group. It harms people through negative group stereotypes indicating they are unworthy sources of information. Since we exclude potential sources without warrant, we make epistemically irresponsible (i.e. prejudiced) judgments. Fricker argues that the social group to which a person belongs will often have a dramatic effect on our willingness to treat them as a credible source of knowledge. We will be less likely to accept the testimony of those from stigmatized groups. If you do not perceive sources as worthy of giving feedback, you pay less attention and fail to accurately process their feedback.

One is epistemically irresponsible if deferring to people on the basis of their social status alone. Dotson refers to this kind of epistemic injustice as “testimonial quieting” which is a systematic undervaluing of someone as a knower. In cases where one’s ignorance stems from oppressive practices, Dotson takes from Charles Mills\textsuperscript{23} to argue that one is not merely passive but has an active practice of “unknowing.” The “unknowing” extends beyond knowledge of others to self-knowledge. To resist “unknowing” oneself, one must be vigilant in resisting the ways in which ingroup biases encourage ignorance of feedback.

What sources the agent deems trustworthy determines the way the agent perceives feedback instead of processing all available evidence. In one sense, the brain isn’t doing enough work and, in the other, it’s doing too much. If we are biased against certain sources because of

their group membership or social status, we are likely committing an epistemic injustice. In these cases, one’s epistemic evaluation is significantly influenced by the social status of the person giving the feedback. If we also exclude potential sources without warrant, our judgments of feedback are biased in that we fail to consider all the relevant information. Not only are we likely to favor certain sources while excluding others without warrant but we could be committing epistemic injustices in how we receive and evaluate feedback. This kind of epistemic injustice harms both the source of feedback and the potential self-knower. In the next section, I offer a proposal to help combat the biases we have in seeking feedback in order to resist “unknowing” the self.

I. Variety of Epistemic Sources

Here I will argue that seeking a variety of epistemic sources allows one to combat biases towards and against certain sources. In order to have better self-knowledge, one should seek feedback from a variety of sources because one will then have independent reasons for believing information about the self. A variety of sources means they are different than you (and each other) in terms of their beliefs, values, and experiences. Through engagement with a variety of sources, such as talking to people from different cultures, one is able to be more aware of and open to different kinds of feedback. One limits themselves to biased feedback if only seeking or listening to certain sources. Interacting with those different than you and putting oneself in new environments presents opportunities for changing stereotypes of group identity. By consciously recognizing and reassessing one’s stereotypes through interaction, one is more likely to
have a more accurate and just uptake and assessment of others’ feedback. Seeking a
diversity of sources allows one to consider more perspectives and hopefully combat
epistemic injustice.

Diversity of sources should lend itself to overlapping perspectives which
converge on reports regarding oneself. Being receptive to a variety of sources gives you a
larger field of information about yourself from which to evaluate. Exposure to different
kinds of feedback should increase the accuracy of one’s self-knowledge. Each source
places different values on your behavior and traits concerning what is considered to be
positive and what they emphasize about you. If we are exposed to different points of
view, we can become aware of previous feedback as merely one point of view about us.

Distinguishing feedback as coming from different viewpoints allows one to assess
which kind of viewpoints increase self-knowledge and which viewpoints are inaccurate
or harmful. If we receive different viewpoints, we become aware of them as viewpoints
so we can then further address feedback that we have accepted as “fact.” Before Derek
got to college, he would receive positive feedback about being a white supremacist. Part
of the negative backlash from peers in college motivated Derek to rethink his role in the
world.

Getting feedback from stigmatized groups is a key part of this proposal because
their feedback is given less attention and less social power. Ideally, exposure to a variety
of sources leads to less epistemic injustice because one will pay more attention to
stigmatized sources one might otherwise ignore. Their information regarding how you are
and how you fit into the world is going to have a better grasp on the (social) reality then
you might have if you are in a position of privilege. I draw this conclusion from
arguments in feminist standpoint epistemology which hold knowledge is local in that it is always situated. In these cases, the member of a stigmatized group has a kind of epistemic privilege due to where they are socially situated as both an insider and outsider of their community.24

Merely having a diversity is not going to remove the burden of evaluating which ones are more accurate than others. You’ve got to have some ability and motivation to weigh different kinds of feedback. Being part of the vulnerable, marginalized group is an important factor to consider when exposing oneself to other perspectives. When they receive prejudiced information about themselves, those from stigmatized groups become more vulnerable to not only erroneous but also negative and damaging feedback. The “school to prison pipeline” phenomenon concerns the growing pattern of educators and institutions disproportionally and harshly punishing the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color despite comparable rates of infractions with other students.25 Instead of being a disciplinary issue, a student’s behavior becomes a crime and gives them feedback that they are (at least) perceived as a threat or dangerous. If vulnerable to this kind of feedback, one can and perhaps should restrict what sources to which one exposes oneself. I directly address these concerns in the next section.

My proposal builds on the contact theory which holds that when people are put in intimate settings with group members about whom they hold biased views, the influence of the stereotypes lessens. Different than exposure, which is merely encounters between members of different groups in daily life, contact is defined in terms of face-to-face

interactions. Contact between people of different groups can yield positive attitudes towards the non-group member. For example, friendly contact between U.S. natives and immigrants increased welcoming towards and feeling welcomed by each other. A large body of evidence from independent studies supports the contact theory although there is some evidence that shows these experiences can backfire. For example, people from different political parties can end up more polarized after deliberating with the other side.

Psychologists are still trying to determine what positive factors contribute to prejudice reduction from contact between different kinds of people. Along with “friendly,” we could also consider the effects of how safe the participants feel, how voluntary the contact is, how open-minded and receptive the participants are. For Derek, the last factor manifested only after he became friends with those different than him. While he was receptive to their friendship, he begin to question his beliefs only after feedback from those on campus who were angry with, fearful of, and outright rejecting him. As the people who he considered friends grew in diversity, Derek was forced to face the feedback of how his worldview was not only prejudiced in general but also harmful to those to whom he was partial. Organizations like Life After Hate build their programs around face-to-face contact in order seek to reform white supremacists. By creating programs that facilitate interactions, like breakdancing competitions, these organizations

29 Lifeafterhate.org/about-us-page
humanize those that the white supremacists say they hate.\textsuperscript{30} The success of such programs is evidence in favor of the contact hypothesis.

Having a variety of sources combats ingroup biases that come from just seeking feedback from those like you. Since they are different, these sources will view your behavior in novel ways. If one’s sources tend to be similar, they are likely to have the same perspective, knowledge structures, and blindspots as you do. In the case of Derek, feedback helped him recognize the tension between his hateful stereotypes and the love he had for his diverse group of friends.

Seeking a variety of sources means paying further attention to those outside of one’s group identity, which will help combat some of perceptual biases. Paying more attention to those outside one’s group helps one accurately assess the feedback from the other person. Along with paying attention, a person should communicate with the source about the feedback, such as asking questions. As mentioned, cognitive penetration can lead to misperceptions of feedback because of higher order beliefs about the source. Engaging with a variety of sources allows one to adjust higher order beliefs by recognizing blindspots and perhaps change one’s perspective by gaining new beliefs. For example, getting feedback about how one’s behavior appears sexist can allow a person to “see” their behavior in a new way. Perhaps even a feeling of disgust or repulsion occurs. While the person may not occupy the same social position as their source of feedback, they are able to grasp the situated knowledge.

By doing so, the person is able to assess when they are getting the feedback wrong like misreading or ignoring a person’s reaction based on the source’s social status. The #metoo movement suggests that women are beginning to have more credibility and attention regarding their experiences of harassment and assault. Men seem to be acknowledging and perceiving their own actions differently in light of these experiences. There is a distinction between these cases of feedback and getting the wrong kind of feedback. Before college, Derek received feedback from several white supremacists that he was doing the right thing and speaking out for others. It’s important to form judgments about the reliability of feedback from other different sources.

When Derek brought a friend to a white nationalist event, she pointed out the inconsistencies of the group’s principles regarding unity yet hating other races. This challenged the way Derek saw the event and those involved which then lead him to re-evaluate his ideology. It allowed him to re-evaluate the prior feedback and whether it was accurate. It was no longer just a comparison of what he thought of himself with what others thought of him but a comparison of the sources themselves.

Different kinds of contact foster a cooperative process that allows for correcting misperceptions. In order to correct his misperceptions of himself and his sources, Derek had to engage in various cooperative processes like potlucks, game nights, and conversations. Derek demonstrated some level of vulnerability when he openly shared parts of himself of which he knew his friends would disapprove, which could be another important factor in positive outcomes of contact. But the friends put themselves at risk by association with Derek in the first place. Part of the cooperative process was the openness to debate as peers. Referring to theoretical principles and empirical data as well as
Derek’s own diverse friendships, his friends were able to help Derek correct his misperceptions about the epistemic weight he was giving to his former sources. Still, the anger of his classmates played a necessary role in Derek’s transformation. In the next chapter, I argue the reason their anger made a difference to his self-reflective practices is due to this sense of shared identity as students.

The more corrections one is able to receive regarding misperceptions, the more one can adjust higher-order states. In terms of perceptual shortcomings, there’s evidence that training can help with biases. In the same way experts are trained to holistically process novel objects, we can learn how to become aware and attentive to information. Trainings that are successful in reducing biases acknowledge and emphasize group differences and multicultural perspectives.31 It’s not that Derek came to see his friends as having the same perspective as himself. However, he did engage with them in perspective-taking as part of the cooperative process of friendship.

Seeking a variety of sources does not mean that one should not listen to expert feedback. Instead of arguing that one should not listen to experts, I hold that we should seek different kinds of experts as a way to combat expertise imperialism. Even Derek relied on “experts” when arguing for white nationalism. A less extreme example than white nationalist “experts” are the ones we encounter in our own discipline. Academic philosophy is severely lacking in women and minorities. One reason, I believe, is that women and minorities are given feedback that they don’t belong in philosophy. The

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feedback is not always explicit but can come in forms such as harsher evaluation, asking questions like “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”, and the “genius” complex. Due to a lack of diversity, we lack a variety of expert feedback about ourselves as philosophers. Feedback about whether one should take a certain career cannot always come from experts within the field. One requires outside sources like therapists, fellow academics, mentors from other professions, and personal friends that can point out the ways in which that treatment is based in one’s social identity more than one’s skills, work ethic, or actual potential.

With prestige bias and the possibility of unwarranted expert consensus, one should be critical of feedback from any one certain discipline or field. A variety of sources such as empirical evidence, case studies, and ethical arguments give different reasons for believing things about yourself. Seeking a variety of expertise means one receives feedback from diverse sources like professional assessments (direct feedback) to theoretical texts (indirect feedback). Different experts will emphasize different things which requires more evaluation when experts conflict with each other. It’s important that we not rely purely on what’s mainstream expertise. For example, a less prominent journal could have papers that help one understand oneself better than a prestigious journal’s papers.

A clear example of mainstream expertise that fails to provide proper feedback the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM is an

33 Women participate in misogynistic practices, too. One need only look at the cover-ups of sexual harassment across universities in which female mentors reacted as if the treatment was normal.
operational measure of psychological disorders which often changes according to social norms. Despite being relatively new and changing every few years, the DSM serves as the standard by which both experts and ordinary people justify knowledge about a person. One well-known change to the DSM is the classification of sexual orientation. It wasn’t until 1974 that homosexuality was no longer included as a “disease.” However, it was replaced with "sexual orientation disturbance" for people "in conflict with" their sexuality until 1987. Despite homosexuality no longer categorized as a disease, medical experts and non-profit organizations still give feedback that perpetuates the association. Many countries, including the US, currently exclude men who have had sex with another man in the past year from donating blood. Excluding these men from donating blood gives them feedback that they are unworthy to be contributing members of society. Trans patients face similar issues in having to “prove” their gender dysphoria in order to receive treatment. Despite the first person authority that one has regarding one’s sexual and gender identity, the mainstream expertise determines how one is perceived.

The hope is that having a variety of experts will give you feedback that is also critical of other expertise feedback. Observing such debates allows one to develop a better ability to evaluate expertise feedback about the self. For example, you have philosophers critical of psychologists, bioethicists critical of psychiatrists, neuroscientists critical of spiritual leaders. Derek relinquished his racist beliefs once he understood how the supposed “experts” were misusing statistics. Looking at criticisms allows one to translate the feedback through possible biases the experts and fields have. Instead of always disregarding our bias toward experts, we leverage our bias toward experts in order to ensure that we get better feedback and reduce testimonial injustice. We achieve such
leverage by diversifying expert sources. When the elite are held accountable, they are less likely to spread false information. The point is not variety alone rather the greater differentiation between the kinds of variety of sources could be crucial. More importantly is how certain communities might be better than other kinds to provide such complementary functions to others depending on their own members and values

Seeking a variety of sources challenges the testimonial injustice within social hierarchies. One could interpret my proposal as stating that there should be a variety of sources with high social status. Since they represent sources of feedback for self-identification, celebrities with visibly different ethnicities, body shapes, cultures, and gender expressions would provide models of positive feedback for more people. The diversity changes the social elite stereotype and helps reduce testimonial injustice for certain groups. Unfortunately, we cannot assume such a quick solution. Even with visibly diverse celebrities, there are still problems of social power determining trustworthiness based on status. Testimonial injustice is still possible if the prejudice merely shifts to a different group identity by creating another outgroup (such as the poor). The outgroup has a lower social status that prevents their feedback as significant.

To truly have a variety of sources means giving epistemic weight to those at different levels of the hierarchy. That doesn’t mean that they all equally deserve epistemic weight or that the weight should be equal. However, at the outset, you can try to give more weight to lower levels than you would normally to counteract possible biases. If one has a variety of sources, then one should be receiving feedback from people

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at different levels and refrain from discounting feedback merely because the source has a lower social status.

Many of us do not think of ourselves as racist or sexist or homophobic or transphobic or ableist. By interacting with others from stigmatized groups (and their intersections), one can recognize how one might be contributing or perpetuating to oppression. For example, interactions help people recognizing how one participates in ableism when using the slang word “lame” or how using gendered pronouns discounts the identity of those who are non-binary. Having a variety of sources from different levels of social status allow us to see when we are participating as agents and ways that we contribute to not only epistemic but also other kinds of injustice.

II. Objections

Now I consider a few major issues with my general proposal. First, those following my proposal run the risk of harming members of stigmatized groups. Second, my proposal suggests that people should expose themselves to bad or harmful epistemic sources. Finally, one could question the plausibility of my proposal.

A. Tokenism Objection

The first objection concerns the way in which my proposal could unfairly burden or even harm members of stigmatized groups. Many times historically stigmatized groups lack the proper respect, attention, and opportunities to express their beliefs and identities. Those groups deserve to seek out certain epistemic environments separate from those in power who seek to harm them. If one only seeks out a source based on diversity, one has to avoid tokenizing the source or placing an unfair burden on them to give feedback.
Applying my proposal to combat epistemic injustice requires setting parameters around how we exchange feedback about each other. For example, exchange should be voluntary and (ideally) safe for all parties.

My proposal also runs the risk of tokenizing which involves treating a person as representing a whole group of diverse individuals. It’s insufficient justification to accept feedback from one person simply because they are a minority group member or reject feedback by saying “I have a black friend.” You cannot assume that, if that friend has a positive view of you, that you are not a racist. Feedback from a variety of sources also means a variety of sources from certain groups like not only experts but also marginalized communities which involve not only personal perspectives but a shared experience of oppression in a society. One cannot assume that one is not complicit or perpetuating oppressive norms and practices by merely talking to one person from the group.

Seeking a variety of sources does not mean that one should tokenize and use people for feedback. If one seeks a variety of sources only to use people as a means to the end of receiving feedback, then one is unlikely to accurately assess the feedback. A person must see the source as intrinsically valuable and listen to the source on their own terms. Otherwise one risks using the other person as a means to self-knowledge. Ortega argues that one must be careful to avoid projecting one’s own perspective or objectifying the source when listening to others.\(^{35}\) Otherwise, one is likely to construct the other’s perspective in a way that fits whatever end or purpose one desires rather than what is

accurate. I assume most of my readers are not white supremacists but rather open-minded, well-intentioned individuals who recognize that we each have blindspots regarding ourselves.

Certain factors should be taken into account when a stigmatized person seeks to give and receive feedback from a member of a privileged group. As a member of a stigmatized group, one may be doing a service to the privileged member but could be best off by protecting oneself from their harmful feedback. Group solidarity, not segregation, is one justified reason that people create communities with those similar to themselves. One should be more receptive to, not demanding of, direct sources from stigmatized groups. If one is a group member of a historically or currently privileged community, one must also take responsibility in seeking out sources such as literature, speeches, data, and other kinds of information that provide feedback in terms of one’s group identity and role in society. Certain figures from communities, like W.E.B Du Bois and Rebecca Walker, have acquired “translational” abilities to advocate for their communities to the wider society. Then one is not forcing the source to give feedback as the sources have voluntarily shared their perspectives. The distinction between safety and discomfort can be useful here. Perhaps one can have uncomfortable conversations and interactions with people, even if one is stigmatized, but only when one is safe.

Matthew saw his vulnerability as a stigmatized source as an opportunity to help Derek. One major factor that might have created a safe environment for Matthew is the common ground they did share. Matthew reports “shaming” and feeling marginalized due to being one of the few conservative students and an Orthodox Jew on the liberal,
secularist campus. Matthew might also have felt safe because of the campus environment, the acceptance from his peers, and/or the fact they were both male and already friends. Even though just similarity with a source is not warrant for trust, one might need some degree of similarity with the source to engage. The balance of power also shifted between Derek and Matthew because Derek was ostracized whereas Matthew was accepted. Based on his reports, Matthew also did not seem to receive feedback directly from Derek because Derek did not talk about his views with Matthew for years. Here the context was personal and not political. While the two are inseparable for many people, one context can be more salient depending on the situation.

Still, many people stopped going to the Shabbat dinners because Matthew invited Derek. It’s interesting to note that Matthew allowed others to feel unsafe in hopes that Derek would change (which took over two years). While most of his friends would return to the Shabbat dinner, the sense of community was not the same as his roommate refused to talk to Derek out of protest. Daryl Davis has received similar criticism from those in the Black Lives Matter movement regarding his interactions with the KKK even though he has helped many disavow the group. Exclusivity can be justified. Qualifications surrounding contact between members of different groups are important so that those with privilege respect those who are oppressed and stigmatized. If a member of a stigmatized group does not want to engage with you, that rejection is itself a form of

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36 Saslow, 80.
37 Saslow, 94.
feedback. That rejection does not mean you have the right to ask them or another member of that group to explain themselves but it does signal that you need to reflect on your beliefs and actions. Sometimes, the rejection is not personal to you but rather a justified stance towards your privileged social status.

One factor in whether one is justified depends on the kind of harmful feedback one can receive. Sometimes, feedback is harmful but accurate. However, even if statistically accurate, the information received about oneself could be prejudiced or given because the source intends to harm the person. Feedback is harmful when it is either deliberatively misleading, intended to cause pain or suffering, based in prejudice, and/or distorts the person’s sense of self and thus their well-being. Each person will be different according to what kind of psychological harm they are willing to endure or be potentially exposed. We might still need to define what sufficient level justifies or even encourages one to exclude certain sources. However, there is a difference between significant harm and discomfort. Many times those who are privileged claim to feel “unsafe” or “attacked” during exchanges with those stigmatized when really they are merely uncomfortable receiving the feedback. Discomfort alone is insufficient justification for rejecting feedback. Drawing from Dotson, we should turn to the “socio-epistemic circumstances of the silencing” of certain sources. The systematic and personal burdens rest on those who are privileged to create environments and practices in which those marginalized or oppressed can speak up without getting overly defensive when uncomfortable.40

39 Although a source can give feedback through physical acts of harm, I am going reject those cases as justified for the sake of this paper. However, it’s very possible and plausible that one is justified in giving violent forms of feedback through protest or punching Nazis.
40 The kind of parameters I have in mind should help combat testimonial silencing, which occurs when sources silent their own testimony because they view the content as unsafe or the listener incompetent.
Even if a person is part of one stigmatized group, we usually belong to many
different types of groups some of which are privileged and others that are not. We cannot
always judge whether a source belongs to certain stigmatized groups. The different ways
in which identities intersect means that so many interactions involve each person being in
some position of privilege. Playing “oppression Olympics” is not the answer. Those in
the lesbian and gay communities don’t always realize how they are privileged compared
to bisexuals. Bisexuals are commonly assumed as socially privileged if they “pass” for
(i.e. are perceived as) heterosexual. However, this invisibility of their sexual identities
tends to make bisexuals feel isolated and alone even if they don’t experience the fear that
a same-sex couple has walking down the street. A similar issue arise when radical
feminists claim that trans women have male privilege and discount their feedback about
being transphobic. These examples remind us to be cautious in assuming one is more
oppressed than another person.

Context matters. Another example of how one could mistake the stigmatized
source as oppressive is demonstrated by cases of Islamophobia by Western liberals. The
general idea is that a source, even a Muslim American woman, is perpetuating oppression
by encouraging modesty. While religious oppression exists, such reactions overlook the
marginalization of Muslims in a secularist community. Such ignorance is apparent in
Susan Okin’s argument against multiculturalism when she claims a fundamental conflict
between gender equality and certain minority group rights. In her response, Uma
Narayan points out the ways in which Okin downgrades other women’s status as knowers

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41 Susan Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” in Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Ed. by
by portraying them as “dupes of the patriarchy” instead of having their own agency when doing things like wearing a hijab.\textsuperscript{42} Narayan points out how women in the West participate in the patriarchy by emphasizing their physical appeal to men through clothes and make-up. Contact with a variety of sources is understanding another person’s worldview as well as grasping how you are ignorant of participating in systems of oppression yourself.

We tend to downgrade the source’s credibility based on stereotypes we might have about them. If one is new to a community, it can be important to know how you are perceived by others even if you don’t think that their perception of you is accurate or moral. For example, being a white queer woman in a Middle Eastern country, I need to be aware of gender norms even if I don’t agree with them. How I incorporate that feedback is key to the kind of influence it has on who I am. When one lives in a culture over time, it can be hard to separate one’s own sense of self from the cultural self that one’s environment imposes on one. Being vulnerable to stereotypes means we should be more cautious in assuming a person is not a credible source of some kind of feedback.

B. Dilution Objection

A second objection is that a variety of wrong views can get you even further off the track than you were with a more limited set of biasing influences. One could assert that my proposal fails to address evaluating sources and their feedback by saying, “If you

had 75% crazy views of you and 25% accurate, it wouldn’t do to somehow take the mean between them, would it?”

First, it’s important to know what others think of you even if you choose to reject the accuracy of their beliefs. If 75% of your sources significantly converge on their perspectives of you, it doesn’t mean that you must accept that perspective. However, you are justified in believing that others hold that perspective of you. Part of self-knowledge is knowing what others think of you even if they are wrong. Second, it’s unclear how to know what makes a view of you “crazy.” Drawing from my last point, one should acknowledge that the source is merely giving their perspective of oneself (even if they claim to be stating what they think one thinks of oneself). You still have to make a judgment based on more information about their perspectives and the context of the feedback. While you’re not just taking the mean between the two, I’d argue that taking a pluralist approach is most appropriate.

The real problem, that I address in more depth in the next chapter, is that feedback from oppressive sources can be damaging and potentially overwhelm one’s capacity to resist their influence. In the face of oppressive feedback, one is justified in seeking other kinds and actively avoiding the harmful feedback since it is often so pervasive. At the same time, one might also be on guard for the tendency to believe in more positive feedback purely for defensive purposes.

Exposing oneself to bad epistemic sources can still result in better self-knowledge. First, engaging freely with others sharpens one’s cognitive abilities. As John Stuart Mill argued, one is able to better grasp the truth through discourse with even those
who are wrong. My proposal builds on his view that engaging with others is important to cultivate our capacities of reason, specifically when it comes to virtuous self-knowledge. Dogmas, even if true, tend to stifle people’s ability to think and understand others’ perspectives. When someone is wrong, is it better to leave them in the dark or try to show them the error of their ways? Can you do that without engaging with them?

Free debate is not just a way to get you to true beliefs but also serves to help you develop your critical reasoning skills. Mill has been criticized precisely for overgeneralizing about the effects of free debate but we can address this concern when it comes to self-knowledge by referring to the harm principle. If engaging with a source harms a person, then they are not required and perhaps should not engage with that source. The chance of harm goes up exponentially when one is exposing oneself to feedback and not just giving it. If we use the harm principle as a way to exclude sources, then we can still take Mill’s approach to seeking sources.

Second, being open to bad epistemic sources can (but doesn’t always) strengthen empathy and compassion towards others. Seeing another “justly or lovingly” could be a necessary part of moral development similar to how those who help convert white supremacists are able to actually see and treat them as friends first. As mentioned above, I do not think that everyone should befriend white supremacists. Derek reports the backlash from his fellow students as necessary for his transformation. Other reformed white supremacists report similar negative events that elicit motivation for rethinking their ideology and world views. Such events lead them to engage with those different

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than themselves. Empathy or compassion might not be appropriate or even possible. I cannot assert what will happen in every case. However, there are circumstances where empathy or compassion is both possible and desirable. In part, it depends on exactly what you are empathizing about.

C.P Ellis and Ann Atwater become unlikely allies after joining a committee to help with the desegregation of schools in Durham, North Carolina. Ellis was a Ku Klux Klan leader whereas Atwater was part of a black militant civil rights group. By working together on a school board together, Ellis and Atwater were able to share perspectives as parents. Although he was white, Ellis suffered because of his working-class status. A working-class single mother, Atwater was tired of those in power or with authority stigmatizing her and her children. Personal contact, including sharing meals, slowly lead Ellis and Atwater to rethink their initial hatred of each other. They were both able to see how the South's power structure had oppressed and exploited them both as working-class citizens. For Ellis, realizing that Atwater experienced the world in similar ways humanized her to him. Ellis received feedback about his beliefs, behaviors, and the role he played in their community. Through his relationship with Atwater, Ellis could perceive his own beliefs as distorted and racist. Ellis finally renounced the KKK and the two stayed life-long friends. Here is one example of when empathy is appropriate. When the groups share some level of oppression, even if their experiences are different, there is a common ground from which to build. Similar experiences of suffering could also foster appropriate empathy. The way that Ann and C.P. empathized about their common feelings regarding how their children were treated at school was what allowed them to

recognize ways that black and white families, especially of the working class, share some oppression. Since “divide and conquer” is a common tactic of oppressive systems, cases of radical empathy are a potential tool for not only personal but also political transformation.

Dylan Marron grasps the value of these goods in his podcast, “Conversations with People Who Hate Me,” in which he engages with those who have left hateful comments on his website. The guests tend to be extremely conservative and religious while Marron is a homosexual liberal. While Dylan rarely changes his guests’ minds or even share common ground, he does connect with them on a personal level. The podcast shows us how civil conversation, which includes listening to the person as a knower, between polarized group members is possible. That doesn’t mean that Dylan takes all the feedback from his guests as truth, even though many express regret at their original comments. Instead, he is able to articulate and justify his views to a listener with whom he normally doesn’t engage. As he considers how to present information, Marron also comes to realize the humanity of his guest in a way that he did not prior to the conversation. Note that Dylan decides to engage with his trolls voluntarily and considers himself strong enough that he can reject the harmful feedback from those sources.

C. Plausibility Objection

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Finally, one could question how plausible my proposal is. Unfortunately, this is an empirical question and not one that I can answer. Research in empathy, solidarity, and group polarization are key to understanding when, where, and how certain kinds of people should interact in order to facilitate understanding. What communities and practices with which one engages will matter. We might also need to look outside of our normal epistemic environment for a variety of sources. Not every environment has variety nor should every space be required to be completely inclusive. By looking at extreme cases like Derek Black and C.P. Elis, I hope we can develop the right parameters in which engaging with a variety of sources will be beneficial to all those involved.

Conclusion

It’s important to know who you are and how others see you. That requires receiving and evaluating feedback you receive from outside sources. In this paper, I explore the biases we have in receiving and evaluating feedback from sources. We tend to seek certain sources based on their similarity to us or their high social status. Conversely, we ignore or discredit certain sources if they are different or have lower social status. I argue that failing to treat sources as knowers based on their social status is not only poor epistemic practice but constitutes an epistemic injustice. To combat this epistemic injustice, I proposed seeking a variety of sources. However, I acknowledged that important parameters surrounding the safety and voluntariness of the sources is key for the proposal to be successful and beneficial.
Chapter 4: Disformative Feedback

I. Introduction

In a *This American Life* story called “The Old Man on My Shoulder,” Elna Baker talks about her own experience growing up Mormon and interviews others about their experiences, particularly as adolescents. Although it’s been disavowed by some, Mormonism requires people to come and confess to the Bishop (without anonymity). From the age of 12-18, adolescents are required to do “worthiness interviews” with their Bishops where they have to share if they are having any sexual thoughts or engaging in any sexual behavior. The Bishop was not ordained and usually had another job to which he would return once another church volunteer was chosen to be Bishop for 2-5 years. The (always male) Bishops asks questions about sexual acts that, for most adolescents, is their first exposure to sexuality. Note that most people interviewed about their experiences report not realizing anything was questionable, let alone wrong, at the time. Baker reports it feeling like “going to the dentist.”

Regan, one of the interviewees, describes her experiences as follows:

“...he said, ‘are you obeying the law of chastity?’ And I didn't know what that word meant. And so I asked him to explain it more, and he said, ‘are you engaging in sexual things like petting and necking?’...I was about as innocent as a 12-year-old can be...so I didn't know

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what necking or petting was. And so I think I said, like, I don't think so. And I remember
the feeling of my heart beating in my ears. You know, I felt my whole body was so hot.

And even though I didn't know what it was, and I didn't think I had done it, I felt like I had
done it. You know, I felt like I was really guilty. And it seemed like every question up until
that point was really not important, and then this was the big question. This was like, the
whole-- you know, climax of the interview.

And then I also became bad after that. I became completely obsessed with necking, and
petting, and finding out what it meant. Anytime anything would happen in a movie,
anything sexual at all, I'd be like, I think that's petting. The interviews kick-started
something with me. I made my Barbies do everything that you can possibly imagine. It
was like a bloodbath. My Barbies went from just playing house to like, doing angel dust,
and having like, orgies within a matter of weeks.”

These interviews, the Bishops, and the values placed on the interview all gave
Regan information about herself as a sexual person. It not only leads her to feel shame
and guilt but also affected her actions from there forward thus making her seem more
sexual than she would have otherwise. Later in the podcast, she describes seeking out
sexual experiences, enjoying them, and then suffering afterwards as she remembers her
experiences. The feedback creates new behavior (“kickstarted something”) as well as
changes how Regan relates to herself (“I felt like I had done it”). Others also report a
difference in how they represented and trusted their experiences and memories. For
example, another interviewee shares how, when a Bishop pushed her on whether she was lying about chastity as an 11-year old, “I thought, does the bishop know something about me that I don't know?”

The purpose of this chapter is both descriptive and normative. I want to better understand how feedback transforms people and how that impacts their self-knowledge. While the role of feedback is typically understood as a source of information, I explore how feedback can also be a casual source in that it shapes one’s actions, preferences, and experiences as well as how one knows those things about themself. In this way, feedback does more than just inform but transforms who a person is. In particular, I look at cases of feedback that result in significant self-doubt as well as changes to one’s identity (in terms of preferences, values, and commitments). I argue that cases of feedback which change a person in this way create problems for how we approach self-knowledge. A special dilemma arises when feedback is no longer something the person can evaluate as a piece of fixed information because of its causal influence on the person. Such cases are difficult to evaluate because we cannot always establish a clear causal relationship between the feedback and the effects. When that information is false and meant to manipulate or control a person, I consider it an instance of disformative feedback. In these cases, the false input from feedback content produces outputs (actions and/or distorted experiences) to confirm the false input so that the original content appears accurate.

I will argue that this kind of feedback is problematic not only for self-knowledge but also oppressive when systematically targeted at certain groups. When disformative feedback is based on a person’s social status, it constitutes an epistemic injustice.
Accounts of epistemic injustice focus on cases of harming someone by unfairly excluding, discrediting, or diminishing their abilities as a knower based on their membership in a group. I look at how disformative feedback manifests in two social structures\(^2\), education and medicine, and particular cases of epistemic injustice and oppression.

Disformative feedback suggests that self-knowledge cannot consist in merely having accurate beliefs about the self. Seemingly rational beliefs can be grounded in epistemic injustice and oppression. I argue that, besides epistemic reasons, moral reasons such as resistance to oppressive stereotypes give one sufficient justification to believe otherwise. To have epistemically just self-knowledge, one must recognize and reject feedback that can distort one’s agency and experiences of the self.

I. How Feedback Informs Self-Knowledge

We tend to believe that we each know ourselves fairly well and that, if we have blind spots, we can seek feedback from others to help guide us towards better self-knowledge. Feedback involves a new piece of information that I would not have from my first-person perspective alone. I could make an algorithm that creates a profile on “H. Bondurant” based on input from various sources of information (medical files, academic reviews, friends’ comments on my social media, pages I visit online, phrases I use often in my emails and texts) and use that algorithm as a way to form beliefs about myself. Some psychologists say we do this in how we create our own “self-schemata” to which

\(^2\) I use the term “structures” in order to encompass not only particular agents and institutions but the opportunities and costs within those systems.
we attach any piece of information about ourselves. The problem is that, unlike the
computer algorithm in which we can clearly point to and extract the bits of information,
feedback is not always so direct and explicit.

The generally accepted idea is that we use introspection, memory, and feedback
about the self to determine what our characteristics, dispositions, and traits are. We know
that we change across time but the ability to attach past actions to oneself and project
oneself into the future is what makes one the same person.³ One seems to be acting in the
epistemically right way by not only listening to feedback but introspectively looking back
at one’s experiences and assessing their coherence with one’s self-ascriptions.
Epistemically, if things are going right, this evidence should lead us to truth about the
world and ourselves. While we don’t always react to feedback this way, this model is
intuitively what we expect from a rational approach to feedback.

We could say the feedback process involves receiving new inputs from outside
sources, comparing the information to the outputs of those other processes (introspection,
reasoning with background beliefs, memory), and then an output involves a reaction to
that feedback such as accepting or rejecting it. Being rational implies that you can self-
reflect on the feedback and decide whether it accurately reflects you. If it doesn’t and you
think the feedback has merit, you might revise your beliefs about yourself and/or change
your behavior.

One might assume that the same epistemic (or at least somewhat stable)
conditions exist before and after receiving feedback. Similarly, rational choice theory
assumes a certain amount of stability across time regarding the agent’s preferences and

³ John Locke, Essay of Human Understanding
their knowledge of the situation. The models “tend to presuppose that our choices are typically appraised and selected against a background characterised by agential autonomy, informed understanding, and situational stability.” In models of feedback and rational choice, the self can appear to be a static entity because changes to the self are not inherently part of the process. When mentioned, the relationship to feedback is treated as merely evidential and doesn’t account for how the information itself can change the person. The way it changes a person is the same way any new piece of information would in which one updates their evidential basis and potentially belief. They don’t account for when the way one reasons about the self and one’s evidence changes due to the new information.

We do make choices about our actions, commitments, habits, and ways of responding to the world (evidential policies) which bear on our beliefs about ourselves. Debates about whether non-epistemic reasons should come into play (and, if so, where) appear in the next chapter. In both cases of beliefs and choice, though, voluntariness can be unclear. The need for attention to influence from outside sources matters for both rationality and self-knowledge. In particular, I want to identify what kinds of influences from outside sources are permissible, potentially useful, and which threaten or oppress a person’s agency and ability to form beliefs about themself. For the purposes of this chapter, we will be focusing on the latter.

II. How Feedback Transforms Self-Knowledge

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A key aspect of transformative experience (TE) is that one learns the what-it's-like-ness of something. Experience involves some kind of conscious, special quality that can be hard, if not impossible, to capture in words. The information within experience is phenomenal, embodied, sensory, physically felt in some way. Frank Jackson’s Case of Mary is the classic example of an epistemic transformation in which fictional Mary, the color expert, learns something new about the world when she steps outside her black and white room and sees color for the first time. Her knowledge is unavailable through study or testimony. David Lewis argues that our experiences of the world, like seeing color, give us the ability to imagine, remember, and plan ahead on that subject matter. From this kind of experience, one “gains new abilities to cognitively entertain certain contents” and assess the world in a new way. For example, if I know what lemon tastes like, I am in much better position to decide whether lemonade will go well with my lunch.

Experiences can be “epistemically transformative” in which one knows something that only having the experience can provide like in the Case of Mary. They can also be “personally transformative” by changing what it’s like to be you. A minimal account of TE merely requires that some new information is acquired and personal change undergone. This personal transformation is related to one’s “core” preferences, which are the preferences (and their configuration) with which one identifies oneself by. For example, a Christian will identify with their religious beliefs and corresponding preferences when making decisions. Transformative experiences (usually) change your

beliefs as well as your core preferences. In this section, I lay out the taxonomy of transformative feedback (feedback that epistemically and personally changes you) and the challenges it raises for self-knowledge.

L.A. Paul’s TE account is broad enough to include many kinds of life-changing moments from mundane like trying a new fruit to fantastical like becoming a vampire. Becoming a vampire is not a decision we normally face but Paul asks us to imagine how radical such a personal transformation can be. Additionally, once we imagine all our friends and family becoming vampires and recommending it, our personal decision to refrain seems less rational. How should we assess our loved ones’ testimony in situations where they’ve made a radical transformation, say parenthood or religious conversion, and advise us to do the same?

A particular kind of transformative feedback constitutes an epistemic and moral harm when it distorts one’s relationship to knowing oneself. To begin, let’s compare two situations. In both, Sam is getting ready to declare their college major. Sam gets very good grades across all subjects and enjoys learning in general without any particular preference.

Situation 1

Everyone in Sam’s family goes into medicine and encourages Sam to do so. Growing up, Sam primarily watches TV shows and movies related to healthcare. Sam’s parents have told Sam that they will only pay for school if Sam majors in pre-med.

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Situation 2

People in Sam’s family have a variety of successful professions. Sam grew up exposed to different kinds of careers through documentaries and reality shows. Sam’s parents have told Sam that they will pay for school because they trust Sam to get good grades and make a wise career choice.

In some ways, Situation 2 could be more stressful for Sam because now Sam has the burden of having to learn more about what they want to do. In Situation 1, Sam could pay for their own schooling if they came to prefer another career choice but it would be irrational if all preferences and probabilities of success are equal. Yet, we might think Sam should get a chance to form their preferences which go beyond just the major. If Sam is going to go to medical school, which is fairly competitive, then they will need to structure their activities around that goal which means doing certain things in college (interning, biology class) and not other things (partying, dance class).

There is no example of “normal” development without feedback because feedback plays a necessary role. Feedback transforms us as it opens up and closes off ways of being and knowing oneself. It provides the conceptual resources for understanding our experience through language, images, and affect. It reveals our options and potential paths along with our probable successes at following them. I’m not arguing that Situation 2 is better than Situation 1 but rather than Situation 1 could create a dilemma for future Sam that Situation 2 may not. When future Sam reflects on their career choice, whether they felt like they had a choice matters. I will also raise a problem that Sam may or may not face - whether Sam recognizes the feedback about career choice.
as transformative or not. I’ve purposefully left out details about Sam because Sam’s social position and other relevant factors could change how we view the situations and Sam’s parents.

The set up involves feedback influencing rational choice since that’s the starting point for the transformative experience literature. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Paul’s argument concerns the problem TE creates for rational choice theory. Rational choice theory assumes that an agent has certain preferences that they’d like to satisfy based on their reasons (which include beliefs and values). Ideally, a rational agent also has different options for satisfying those preferences and access to reasons about different options like their corresponding costs or likelihood of success.

Rationality allows for change in terms of flexibility when planning ahead and recognizes unknowns. Being rational means updating one’s preferences and beliefs based on new evidence (not changing at all would be irrational). However, in the case of becoming a vampire, one does not know what it is like nor how it will shape one’s preferences. Perhaps the cost of drinking blood which seems high as a mere human being will no longer seem that bad when compared to the benefits. While Paul focuses on how such unknowns challenge the decision-model of rationality, I want to build on her point about the role of testimony. Part of what motivates the vampire example is that others are encouraging you to do it and living vampire lives themselves. As I explore more fine distinctions in TE, I’ll continue to draw attention to the role of feedback from others.

My focus will be the role of feedback in forming beliefs about the self that one uses when making a choice such as a long-term pursuit or reflecting on whether one should continue a pursuit. These beliefs concern the following:
- one’s abilities,
- one’s values and commitments,
- one’s past experience,
- one’s current situation,
- one’s reasons for acting,
- one’s possible options and their corresponding probabilities of successful outcomes

In what follows, I focus on different kinds of transformations so we can get a better idea of what changes, the role of feedback, and how they influence self-knowledge.

A. Transformative Feedback

1. Revelations and Activities

When we get feedback from others, it can transform us quickly or over time. In terms of learning something new, Paul focuses on moments that one can distinctly reference such as eating a new food, being bitten by a vampire, and seeing color for the first time. To show how TE raises a problem for rational decision-making, Paul relies on “radical changes” and clear disruptions to one’s worldview. Agnes Callard refers to Paul’s examples of TEs as transformative revelations because the new knowledge
happens at once. A transformative revelation occurs “when an agent elects to undergo some process” that promises to provide “new phenomenal knowledge” and maybe new preferences. Deciding to become a vampire and deciding to try a new fruit are similar to the extent that you can mark when they happened. The transformative event or “decision to become a new kind of person constitutes a dividing line between the person you were (cognitively or conatively) and the person you will be.” Edna Ullman-Margalit characterizes this transition from an “old person” to a “new person” as involving a “point of sharp discontinuity.” The “old person” enters the transformative revelation and the “new person” emerges from it. The temporal profile of a revelation, for Callard, is fairly short as it signals a distinct point of change designating clear before/after stages in one’s life.

Callard distinguishes revelations from transformative activities in which one changes by actively learning and engaging in a practice over time. Imagine the difference between trying a new fruit and becoming a wine connoisseur. The transformative experience of coming to know what it is like for wine to have notes of cherry takes time, practice, and learning from others. Being able to appreciate the value of a challenging activity and/or being a certain kind of person is rarely a sudden change. Transformative activities lack the kind of radical “disruption” that Paul uses in her examples. Instead, “the agent actively works to become a new kind of person without undergoing a break in

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9 Callard, 2020, 148
In transformative activities, one’s transformation is temporally extended in such a way that one cannot point to a particular moment designating the before/after stages. One changes through doing and actively learning, not just knowing. This change could be large over time but the changes happen incrementally as one learns from experience and actually doing, not just knowing. Often temporally extended, our personal transformations also happen in degrees that we tend to notice after time passes. For instance, learning ways of speaking to others in our communities happens through different interactions. We might feel a transformative revelation when consciously learning a foreign language but, as children or hobby amateurs or newcomers, we pick up on the community’s meanings and sayings over time.

For Paul, making a rational decision means being able to (a) identify the possible outcomes, then (b) assign values to the outcomes, and finally (c) make a rational decision on that basis. Choices in which we drastically change call into question this decision model of rationality. Since Paul’s argument concerns the decision model, only the radical TEs are of interest. Part of Callard’s larger project on aspiration, which depends on transformative activities, is a call to action for a new model of rationality. Callard claims that “facts about where you are headed are not expressible as facts about where you currently are” so we can’t treat the preferences that one seeks to acquire as being categorically the same as ones that one currently has.

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11 Callard, 2020, 149
12 Formulation taken from Carel and Kidd, 2018, 203.
13 I say more on her aspiration model in Chapter 5.
14 Callard, 2018, 66.
Yet when we attribute psychological traits to others (and ourselves), we are not just making claims about their current status. We’re also making claims about what they’ve done in the past and predicting what they’ll do in the future. Even in the case of the vampire, we could imagine the transformation downstream from the bite happening any amount of time from an hour to twenty years. The point is that the bite itself would still be the key to the transformation even if it happened later. For Ruth Chang, the bite is merely the event that leads to the transformation. What is missing in explaining how the transformation could be rational is whether you choose the transformation. Chang’s choice-based transformative choices are those in which “the making of the choice itself transforms you.”

Perhaps you are deciding whether you want to go to the beach or the mountains for vacation. When you “commit to some feature of the beach vacation,” you thereby make it true that “you have most reason to go on the beach vacation. You change “who you are” in this small way by creating for yourself a new reason you didn’t have before. You are now, to that small extent, a beach person rather than a mountain person.”

So, while you don’t become a vampire by choosing to be, you create a reason for yourself to get bitten if you’ve chosen to be the kind of person who is a vampire. This choice-based change is more distinctive because one can usually mark when making a choice about what kind of person one identifies as. The clear break from being one kind of person to another is more of a disruption even if other TEs must occur for the transformation to be complete.

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16 Chang, 280.
Callard does not deny but is less convinced by the power of choice. For Callard, choice is not enough. Rather, one must DO things in order to transform one into a particular kind of person. One could claim one is a beach person over a mountain person by making that choice but whether others find that to be true could depend on whether one ever goes to the beach. A person engaged in a transformative activity is “at work throughout” their transformation and will stop changing if they stop the activity. Unlike changing from a revelation or choice, changing from transformative activities do not allow for one to pinpoint a certain time of transformation and allow for breaks without a loss of identity (even if it pauses the transformation). Learning from revelation is like a “a-ha!” moment whereas learning from an activity is a gradual development.

Many of the beliefs we form about ourselves we do through transformative activities. Yet we allow for long pauses between the activities. One can still count as being that kind of person depending on their overall commitments. I know I’m a yogi because I regularly do yoga, attend classes, and challenge myself with new poses. I might question this belief if I stopped doing yoga but it’s partly determined by the proportion of yoga over my lifetime, the value I still associate with the activity, and how others identify me. Of course, we expect people to do lots of different meaningful activities in their lives and they are not always doing them in the present. However, being a student or friend or caretaker are identities that can involve constant monitoring of one’s role even if one is not presently engaged in the activity.

17 Callard, 2018, 64; 2020, 152.
Our transformative experiences tend to involve other people. Since they involve learning and inquiry, transformative activities necessarily require a mentor and/or engaging with others. Callard also notes that “we undergo extensive education on the value of these activities at the hands of our family, friends, teachers, books, and acquaintances.”\(^{18}\) One reason transformative activities are key to being (and knowing oneself as) a certain kind of person is the feedback that one gets while participating in the activity. Whether becoming a yogi or medical doctor, the feedback that one gets while participating in transformative activities is crucial to success. Feedback tells you not only whether you’re doing the activity correctly in the moment but also how to interpret your experience, how to reason about your evidence, and how to respond to the situation. A student knows they are a student when they get grades back, a friend knows they are one by the friendship shown in return, a caretaker might receive feedback from the care recipient or others involved such as family members or the state.

Regarding self-knowledge, these experiences reveal information about oneself that one would not know either through introspection, memory, or critical reasoning. The experience causes you to see yourself in a way that changes how you imagine, remember, and make plans for yourself. “Seeing” yourself means getting a feel for how others experience you, what it's like to be around you, how they see you. Social experiences allow you to be more successful in the future because you know how you will appear in similar situations and what kind of responses to expect. Experiences of feedback transmit or generate reasons to believe and act in response. Feedback can be evidence in the form

\(^{18}\) Callard, 2018, 64.
of information such as a particular grade or official title or journal rejection yet we still
experience it. As a reason in favor of believing a particular fact, feedback is typically
thought of as revelation. Feedback as revelation or choice involves a clear piece of
information along with the ability to reference it and one's acceptance of it.

Feedback within transformative activities will be spread out or diffused across the
activities and those from whom one learns. While you are likely to have revelations
within transformative activities, the feedback as part of one's transformation is
accumulative and cannot be reduced to a single moment. With this in mind, I want to
explore the differences between feedback that changes as a revelation compared to
feedback that changes across time and not just as one experience.

One way we notice we have changed is when we get feedback from those close to
us about the differences. While negative feedback or a rejection supposedly reflects one’s
current status, often it serves to generate behavior in response. Even if one does not agree
with the feedback, one can point to moments of revelation or choice of responding to
feedback by changing.

But not always. That is, we cannot always tell when a particular piece of feedback
caused us to change. First, we cannot always tell if the feedback is providing reflective
reasons (based on accuracy) or generative reasons (based on what one should do to
achieve a certain goal). In transformative activities, feedback often contains generative
reasons to which we often respond without reflection. Second, we often evaluate
feedback downstream of the event when judging its accuracy. Once we have temporally
extended experiences, it begins to get murky on whether feedback is reflective or
generative unless we can point to the first moment of feedback. Either way, feedback
adds reasons to one’s evidential basis about what one should believe about oneself and one’s actions.

We also tend to learn our evidential policies through transformative activities. Evidential policies are our standards of reasoning about evidence. For example, through transformative activities with others, we learn

- how to interpret obstacles and difficulties as evidence (often part of any aspiration),
- whether something is a reason in favor of believing or acting,
- how to incorporate the stakes of the situation into one’s standards,
- when it’s better to be more intellectual cautious or skeptical in a particular situation, and
- when to keep searching for more evidence

The point of this section is showing the murkiness of evaluating transformative feedback. If feedback is a revelation, one should be able to identify the reference point and causal source of change. However, we accumulate feedback over time (and across sources) so the revelation could be downstream of the event. Evaluating feedback through one’s activities is even more difficult as the feedback is necessarily temporally extended. Yet feedback plays a fundamental role in transformative activities because one is learning from others. When one is reliant on others’ perceptions to achieve self-knowledge, it’s important to look at who are the others, what are their standards, and what kind of environment it is.
2. Voluntariness of Transformation

Just like how we can experience agential control in different ways for choice, our sense of control and ways we identify with our experiences can change. It makes a difference whether someone consents to transformation. Voluntary transformative experiences include Callard’s transformative activities and Chang’s choice-based transformative choices mentioned above. Both use the distinction between *active* (something you do) and *passive* (something happens to you) to help situate agency within TE. This broad distinction misses some of the complexities of what Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd call “coerced choice” which refers to the ways we still act and choose under non-ideal conditions. Carel and Kidd find the decision model problematic but for reasons related to voluntariness which the active/passive distinction fails to address.

First, many people cannot identify the possible outcomes not only because they are aspiring towards an unknown future but also, due to instability in their environment and their position in it, “radical uncertainty” exists. For example, crossing the border to seek asylum has multiple outcomes that cannot be predicted. Carel and Kidd argues that conditions of radical uncertainty cause an inability to deliberate that itself is a harm.

Second, being forced to make certain decisions or assign values subject a person to certain material and psychological pressures that “force rethinking of core commitments” or require one to act in ways that one would prefer not to, if that was an

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20 Carel and Kidd, 2020, 203
option. Third, being subjected to oppression and violence leaves people overwhelmed, traumatized, and/or “cognitively and epistemically compromised” so they cannot be expected to engage in this kind of rational deliberation. Citing Sartre, they argue that “freedom without a capacity to reflect on it is insufficient, because this severs the relation of freedom to responsibility for the outcomes of one's decisions.”

I want to draw attention to some key aspects of self-knowledge here. The capacity to reflect on one’s own “freedom” is necessary to take responsibility for one’s actions (similar to Locke’s view on personal identity). Taking this capacity away “severs” one’s relationship to oneself and one’s ability to form one’s own identity. If one feels that something outside of oneself is completely controlling one’s every action, one will feel a loss of self. Callard requires agency through one’s active participation in learning: You are actively “working to change preferences and tastes in the direction of those befitting” whatever type of person you want to be - wine connoisseur, classical music lover, yogi, or parent. Callard deals with problematic environments in terms of who will have opportunities to aspire/engage in transformative activities in the last chapter of her book. However, these environments are not considered to be the norm in the rest of her discussion.

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21 In the Christian Bible, King Solomon forces two women both claiming to be the mother of a child to decide whether to split the child in half or let the other woman get the child. He decides the mother must be the one who lets the other woman take the child. Here we see the mother could not give up her “core commitment” to her child because she would rather the child live above all else yet she is still (to her knowledge) forced to surrender her child, something she would not do otherwise.

22 Carel and Kidd, 2020, 203

23 Callard, 2020, 150
The power dynamics within a situation matter. These dynamics can range from asymmetry in knowledge between participants to physical limitations on one’s actions. For our purposes, the power dynamics within transformative activities seem particularly relevant if one is considered to be a fully active, consenting participant. To call certain transformative experiences “passive” also takes away the agency and kinds of choices a person has to make when there’s no good options. For example, people have different experiences of slavery and concentration camps and sexual abuse. They also still make choices in those situations which can impact their transformation. In this sense, one is still active but the transformation is not a voluntary one. Carel and Kidd are careful to pull this apart and want to incorporate the constraints more so in the model rather than it be something about the environment in which it’s situated.

Instead of active and passive, Carel and Kidd argue for a distinction between voluntary TEs and involuntary or nonvoluntary TEs. Involuntary TEs are those that you choose or participate that carry unintended results. It’s not “necessarily due to any error or deficiency on the deliberator’ part, but simply as an unavoidable consequence of the complexity and contingency of the world.”\textsuperscript{24} Nonvoluntary TEs are epistemically and personally transformative, like being sent to a concentration camp, but no one would freely choose that experience. “Some aspects of some lives are shaped by choice, but contingency plays a powerful role in the shaping of lives” so we should include these elements in our account.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} Carel and Kidd, 2020, 204
\textsuperscript{25} Carel and Kidd, 2020, 204
Callard recognizes the role of environmental support and thus some sense of involuntariness: “Aspiration begins before the aspirant is in a position to exercise agential control over her relation to the value: it gets started, but the aspirant herself isn’t the one who starts it.”\textsuperscript{26} Involuntariness appears in aspiration to the extent that one does not know what it will be like to be the kind of person. Callard acknowledges this which is why she introduces a new kind of rationality that involves one’s not fully rational reasons for acting.\textsuperscript{27} Yet, again, we should question the role of others’ and their feedback provides reasons to believe and act if one is engaging involuntarily.

Whether we accept feedback is typically seen as a choice. One can give a student a bad course grade but they don’t have to really accept it as feedback. The academic system merely requires they accept the grade in terms of how it impacts their institutional standing. A student may contest and complain about their grade but that does not entail they care about the actual feedback. However, Carel and Kidd call this approach to feedback into question. “Far less of life is the outcome of careful deliberation and decision than is appreciated, not least because reflection on such pervasive contingency can induce a disturbing sense of vulnerability.”\textsuperscript{28}

We tend to assume that everyone has the privilege to consciously self-reflect on one’s experiences, including feedback. This practice takes time as well as a sense of security in remembering past experiences and questioning one’s choices. If this practice is not available, then evaluating feedback looks difficult (if not impossible).

\textsuperscript{26} Callard, 2018, 64.
\textsuperscript{27} I discuss Callard’s account of proleptic rationality, which involves acting on underdeveloped reasons about future you, in Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Carel and Kidd, 2020, 203.
3. Temporal Profile: Disruption or Downstream?

It’s unclear when revelations “disrupt” and create personal transformations even if we claim we can mark them in our autobiographies. When you have a personally transformative experience, it’s not always as instant as a vampire bite nor drawn out across one’s entire life. For Callard, transformative activities mean no “disruption” in one’s autobiography. Yet Callard notes that many transformations are a mix of revelations and activities. The revelation that your partner wants to marry you should not appear from out of thin air. With an aspirational model, revelations “are best understood as climactic moments embedded in a longer transformative journey, marking neither its beginning nor its end.” (2018, 63). Most cases of learning (whether in a classroom, a relationship, or a career) are a mix of revelations and activities in ways that aren’t clearly separable.

Feedback can be transformative in the sense that one now knows something about the self about which one was ignorant and can significantly change who one becomes in response. This kind of feedback is considered an accurate evaluation of the current person that, once realized by the self-knower, motivates them to change according to that evaluation. This kind of transformative feedback is morally neutral and perhaps necessary for personal development. It’s hard to imagine how one could become a person without any of this kind of feedback. The way a person is transformed in a transformative activity is “guided by and responsive to her activity” so it depends on what a person actually does. But it also depends on what others teach and do with the person in the activity.
A major problem still arises given how transformative feedback leads to the creation of new behaviors and changes in one’s representations of the world. Transformative feedback presents reasons to believe or act that can cause change in the moment or downstream. However, a person may be unaware that the feedback is the reason, especially in the case of activities. Since the feedback is diffused in a transformative activity, one is unable to reference a particular point of feedback as a causal source (even if it is).

Another issue is that, even if a case of feedback appears to be a revelation, the feedback is part of the “longer transformative journey” in which one is not always forming beliefs or making choices voluntarily. Feedback is reflective when the source is giving an accurate assessment of the self-knowers. To be successful, that assessment must be integrated into the self-knowers’ own assessments as accurate.

What might appear as accurate feedback (reflective reasons) that one should believe something about oneself could actually be based on previous pressures to act (generative reasons). These pressures could force one to undergo non-voluntary or involuntary experiences but, due to the way the feedback is presented, give the impression one is actively (and therefore voluntarily) choosing to be that way. For example, let’s say that someone is being ignored so they start speaking louder in order to be heard. When someone then tells them, “You’re being so loud!”, the conditions leading up to the behavior analysis make a difference in how we want to attribute the trait to the person. Yet situations are complex and we cannot always tell what are the relevant situational factors.
Now we can identify a special dilemma for evaluating transformative feedback in general. Feedback impacts not just evidential basis not only by adding reasons but also impacting and potentially changing how one represents and relates to other evidence. For example, a transformative activity like being in a marriage changes how one remembers the past as well as experiences and encodes the present. Part of being in the transformative activity involves social interaction but particularly the kind in which one is actively learning from another (or each other). A certain amount of trust is necessary but that could depend on how voluntary the transformative activity is.

Feedback also changes one’s evidential policies in ways that one may not always realize. For example, getting feedback in a marriage or in a classroom involves learning how one should react to the world, how much self-doubt or self-trust one should place in one’s own experiences, how to weigh conflicting evidence, and the appropriate amount of reliance on authority and testimony. Whether we have the ability to tease those influences apart in how we reason about ourselves remains to be seen.

Feedback from others is extremely powerful because it can transform a person without the person being conscious of its effects. Since the causal power of the feedback is not always clear, accepting it is not necessarily a “choice” yet it can still create change. Feedback is often epistemically transformative because the person would not have access to that evidence otherwise except through experience(s) of that information about themselves. Receiving feedback can itself be an experience, not just a piece of information on which to later reflect. The content of transformative feedback epistemically transforms the person’s cognitive self-representation which then informs how a person plans, acts, behaves (consciously or unconsciously). With transformative
feedback, the content is no longer something the person can evaluate as a piece of fixed information. The presentation of the informational content itself is transformative.

Engaging in these transformative activities along with nonvoluntary and involuntary choices can lead to the creation of new behaviors. It won’t always be clear the causal source as it's not often clear when people are performing voluntary actions or making voluntary choices. However, what one believes about the causal sources of one’s actions impacts what one comes to believe about oneself. If feedback creates behavior that one would not have done otherwise, we can assume some relationship of counterfactual causality. Similarly, if feedback causes a person to represent their experience in a particular way (say, with an attitude of self-doubt), it transforms their relationship of self-knowing. That is, the person would not have formed beliefs about themself and their experiences in the same way (whether as reasons/evidence or evidential policy) otherwise. From this, we can look at two ways that transformative feedback works and how this creates a dilemma:

**Creation:** The content of transformative feedback introduces a new epistemic perspective and causes a new configuration of core preferences that significantly increases the likelihood the person’s experiences will confirm the epistemic perspective.

**Representation:** The content of the feedback changes one’s epistemic perspective on past actions and one’s experience of one’s past core preferences.

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29 By “epistemic perspective,” I’m referring to one’s appraisal of evidence as well as one’s evidential policies.
The idea is that the person would not have that epistemic perspective of themselves and the personal transformation if not given the feedback they were given. Since the feedback has changed them, the self-knower lacks the ability to properly assess the original content outside of the feedback’s influence. If the feedback was originally inaccurate, the new epistemic perspective is not one that a person should use when self-reflecting. In terms of being a transformative experience, this kind of feedback could constitute an epistemic harm if it distorts a person’s relationship to self-knowing. It could depend on whether we see the normal process of forming beliefs about oneself through feedback as disrupted by the transformative experience(s).

One might ask whether this dilemma is really a problem since this kind of social interaction and transformative feedback seems necessary for cognitive and moral development. My point is that it’s important to be able to identify and differentiate the influences on one’s preferences. Knowing these influences and understanding their power matters for self-knowledge and personal identity. It also allows us to ask more questions about what’s acceptable and desirable in terms of feedback and outside influence. In the next section, I present a kind of feedback that should concern us.

### B. Disformative Feedback

Transformative feedback raises questions to how we evaluate testimony from others about the self and supports a more relational view of the self. However, I am more interested in cases of transformative feedback that go wrong. That is, what happens when...
transformative feedback is full of misleading information or becomes a tool of subordination, especially in oppressive environments? In the following, I present a special kind of transformative feedback that is both epistemically and morally problematic. First, let’s look at how transformations can have different valence.

1. Affect: Positive, Negative, and Ambivalent

Carel and Kidd argue that the decision model used by those in the TE literature “tends to downplay contextual, emotional, situational, and nonrational aspects of choice making.” They call for a broad focus because “human life is much more constrained by vulnerability, affliction, and dependency” than these conversations address. Most of the decisions those such as Paul, Chang, and Callard discuss are positively valenced in that one’s epistemic and personal transformations leave one better off. An example of a positive epistemic and personal transformation is being in a loving marriage in which one learns what it’s like to communicate and live with another person while also becoming more considerate and self-aware.

However, life is full of many kinds of transformations and these (valence, epistemic, and personal) dimensions can come apart. A negative epistemic transformation involves changing or reversing one’s epistemic status such as giving up one’s intellectual pursuits or shifting one’s stance to one of less “robust cognitive activity.” One can

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30 Carel and Kidd, 2020, 204.
31 Carel and Kidd, 2020, 205.
experience this shift in a positive personal transformation such as choosing to use faith rather than reason as part of one’s moral conversion. In cases like dementia, one experiences this negative epistemic transformation alongside the negative personal one.

Personal transformations can also vary. A negative personal transformation could involve the trauma from wartime combat but still be a positive epistemic transformation because one knows what war is really like. Often, our transformations will be complex and unclear about whether they are purely positive or negative (in the epistemic or personal sense). It’s important to also recognize that one might be ambivalent about one’s transformations if one does not feel as if they were voluntary and under one’s control. If we are going to have an account of transformative feedback, we need to address these complexities.

2. Learning about Oneself

In defining transformative activities, Callard distinguishes learning which is active from merely “being informed” which is passive. Transformative activities are what one does when aspiring to be a certain kind of person. For Callard, learning is factive so it must involve a positive epistemic transformation. She also holds aspirations to be necessarily good so they involve a positive personal transformation. While perhaps not fully voluntary because one does not yet know what one is getting into, one is still responsible (or has some agency) in transformative activities. Part of Callard’s aspiration model is that one is acting for one’s future self when one aspires to be a certain kind of person. At a minimum, transformative activities have an agency criterion and learning
criterion: “the person chooses or enacts or sustains or engages in the transformation” while they acquire (an active relationship) knowledge through doing. The learning and the doing are not distinct.

Being informed, on the other hand, is considered neutral and passive. Several problems arise with this distinction. First, we might want to have a broader class of transformative activities if we want to include complexities about valence and the different kinds of transformations possible. Second, since Callard is using the active/passive distinction, it’s unclear how someone can engage in transformative activities against their will. Yet, we can still choose to learn even if we don’t choose the activity.

As an example of a transformative activity, Callard refers to John Hull, a disability activist who goes blind over his forties, and his transformative journey. Not only was developing blindness temporally extended but also Hull’s relationship with his blindness was one of engagement. “Hull’s experience of coping with blindness is that of working his way into what he called ‘deep blindness’—abandoning mental images and even spatial concepts such as ‘here’ and ‘there’ so as to learn to think in a new way.”

While Hull’s experience is clearly transformative, we might not interpret it in the same light as Callard. Hull learning what deep blindness is like is a positive epistemic transformation but someone might claim that Hull has still had a corresponding negative epistemic transformation by losing access to his former epistemic stance and ways of reasoning about the world. While “Hull did not arrive at deep blindness by decision,”

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33 Callard, 2020, 150.
Callard argues he is still taking agency “over the years of reflecting, conversing, and writing about what he was experiencing.” Hull’s sense of agency here is unclear. Not everyone may have the sense of agency that Callard connects with transformative activities. While Hull had a positive personal transformation, it’s also unclear whether we want to appeal to valence of the transformative journey.

Not all transformative activities will be aspirational in Callard’s sense if we want to include ones that involve negative and nonvoluntary transformations. As noted earlier, the active/passive distinction doesn’t seem to apply well to transformative experiences. Carel and Kidd claim that “the sense of ownership, indeed authorship, and authority over one’s life is a requirement Paul takes for granted.” Callard does not take aspiration for granted which is why she argues for the importance of environmental support for the aspirant. However, her model seems to treat the environmental support as a situational factor rather than fundamental to life choices which Carel and Kidd argue it is. Since she categorizes aspiration according to positive transformations, Callard also has a harder time explaining how one aspires in oppressive environments despite lack of support. In other words, how does one develop virtues such as aspiration in less than perfect environments?

The active/passive distinction doesn’t seem to apply well to situations in which one is forced to learn and be engaged in transformative activities for one’s survival. In

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34 Callard, 2020, 152.
36 I make this claim based on the topic being fairly unaddressed until the end of Aspiration but Callard may have a more fundamental role for environmental support in future work.
37 This issue is explored in depth in Linda Tessman’s Burdened virtues: Virtue ethics for liberatory struggles. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2005.
particular, an oppressed person is often forced to learn more about what their oppressors’ believe for their own safety. In oppressive environments, learning about yourself is a valuable activity partly because it allows you to survive. Aspiring to learn about oneself as a marginalized person is important for overcoming obstacles but also just avoiding costs. If one is in a bad, nonvoluntary situation, we could ask whether learning too much about one’s obstacles could be counterproductive. Perhaps a negative epistemic transformation like delusional thinking could support a positive personal transformation.

We typically think of “learning about oneself” as a transformative journey in any new stage of life, but especially for adolescents. Yet being able to evaluate feedback and learn about oneself is not necessarily positively valenced nor something one feels as part of their own agency. Learning what your teacher thinks of you is important for your well-being even if you don’t plan to succeed in the classroom.

For example, conversations can be transformative activities to varying degrees because not everyone is engaged in a conversation in the same way. Callard’s “being informed” stance assumes that, if one receives the feedback in a conversation, the information is somewhat reflective. Even if the feedback is not reflective of you, you accept that it’s at least reflective of the world in some way by acknowledging it. If one responds to the question, “Are you sure you’re smart enough for that class?” with a reason, one gives that question a certain kind of status. The question conveys information about the person to whom it’s asked, i.e. that requiring justification of their intelligence is an appropriate inquiry. Is feedback transformative only when it becomes true through acceptance from the person? In the next section, I look at particular harms that come from transformative feedback such as this question which does not seem to require conscious
acceptance like a revelation or choice to transform the person. Without a way to point to the change, the person’s relationship to their own states and forming beliefs about them is disformed.

3. Ways that Feedback Disforms

“...In any decision-making procedure made in the thick of life, the decision could be thwarted, twisted, or otherwise frustrated by a variety of factors and forces, many of them beyond our knowledge, understanding, and control.” (C&K, 204) Just as our decisions go awry, so can our beliefs. Evidence can seem to support certain claims so that we would look irrational to believe otherwise. In this section, I look at how transformative feedback can be an epistemic and moral harm when we consider how it changes one’s relationship to one’s states and ability to know oneself.

What I call “disformative feedback” starts with a false or distortive evaluation of the person that then transforms the person in a way that confirms the false feedback. There are two elements of disformative feedback: it’s transformative and disrupts the appropriate process of self-knowing. By appropriate, I am referring not only to epistemic norms of rational reflection, intellectual autonomy, and self-trust but also moral norms of agency, self-determination, and freedom. Often unconscious, disformative feedback can encompass different kinds of cases of self-knowledge from social interaction. What’s interesting (and also dangerous) about disformative feedback is that, like other kinds of transformative feedback, disformative feedback can disrupt one’s normal trajectory without one realizing that anything has changed. This inability to see the difference could
be due to the diffused nature of the feedback across transformative activities. Yet one could have a revelation within a transformative journey but lack a way to understand or use it as evidence.

Some cases of disformative feedback will be unclear but most cases involve:

- Manipulation/coercion,
- False information as feedback,
- Interferes with normal development,
- Severed self-knowing relationship,
- Impacts sense of agency

The inability to recognize disruptions from transformative feedback can also be due to changes in one’s evidential policies. The way others (particularly those with authority) shape the transformative activity itself may cause one to doubt what would be a revelation otherwise. This inability raises a special dilemma for self-knowledge but it’s also a vulnerability and leaves one open to harm. Disformative feedback can do more than merely transmit misbeliefs but can distort the person’s experiences of self (such as remembering one’s past or self-trust of one’s current experience). These distorted experiences transform a person so that when they draw on their experiences for information, there will be evidence for the original feedback.

1. Gaslighting

Gaslighting, if successful, results in distorted memories and self-doubt of one’s perceptions, experiences, and abilities as a knower. In the “worthiness” interviews, one could argue that a Bishop is gaslighting an adolescent when asking about whether they
are thinking sexually inappropriate thoughts then refusing to believe them when they say no. In some sense, the Bishop might phrase the question in such a way that makes it almost impossible for the interviewee not to have a sexual thought. For example, asking about “necking and petting” requires knowing and thinking about what those concepts mean. Asking how your date touched you invites you to remember the intimate setting. Now that the person is thinking about “petting” or their date, they can no longer defend themselves and claim non-sexual thoughts. When the adolescent comes to their next interview, they’ve been reflecting on these new concepts. Now, when the Bishop asks about their thoughts, they have their curiosity (brought about by the Bishop) to use as evidence confirming the Bishop’s impression.

Setting aside Mormonism, cases of gaslighting are most rampant (and dangerous) in cases of abuse and oppressive environments. It’s important to note that gaslighting is a fairly common occurrence for marginalized group members who call out instances of discrimination. I return to how gaslighting occurs in healthcare later in the chapter but, just as sources of feedback vary, so do cases of gaslighting. Gaslighting for particular group members is pervasive “over a long time, often from multiple voices” which is “important to understanding how and why gaslighting works, and what kinds of interactions qualify as gaslighting.” However, gaslighting covers a number of cases from particular incidents of malicious manipulation to more innocent microaggressions. Although some hold the aim of the gaslighter to be crucial, what constitutes gaslighting for our purposes is anything that falls into the “particular family of dismissive

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38 Kate Abramson, “Turning up the lights on gaslighting” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2014, Vol 28, 1, 1-30, 5
interactions” that are characterized as a family insofar as the parties to them “fail to treat disagreements as seriously as they ought to be treated” for reasons having to do with psychological difficulties.39

In gaslighting, one gets feedback about one’s experiences and whether one can trust oneself. “The central desire or aim of the gaslighter, to put it sharply, is to destroy even the possibility of disagreement” so the goal of gaslighting is eliminating not only evidence but also the epistemic standing one might have to disagree. Gaslighting, as disformative feedback, “radically” undermines “another person so that they have “nowhere left to stand from which to disagree, no standpoint” from which their words might constitute genuine disagreement.40 If anything in one’s experience, whether past or present, suggests disagreement with the gaslighter’s perspective, it gets shut down as “crazy” or something that suggests one is suffering from a kind of cognitive or emotional dysfunction. One begins to question and rethink one’s representation of one’s past and/or present experiences, including of oneself and one’s mental capacities.

Using our conditions for disformative feedback, we can see how gaslighting applies. In terms of creation, the gaslighting instills a kind of self-doubt and corresponding instability. The gaslighting could also lead one to behave in ways that confirm the suspicions. For example, the newfound sexually curiosity and exploration of the adolescents only began after the suspicious questioning from the Bishop. Experiencing self-doubt also seems to provide reason for reliance on others. Others’ reactions can confirm the gaslighting even if they themselves did not originate its

39 Abramson, 10.
40 Abramson, 10.
message. If someone keeps going to different doctors and being dismissed, they begin to look like a complainer. The self-knower could seemingly support the gaslighting claims in an effort to stake out a place of genuine disagreement. In terms of representation, the self-knower could fail to properly represent their own experience because the gaslighter’s feedback disforms their relationship to their own states. Experiences that one would normally trust, like pain, are called into doubt.

2. Negative Expectations and Stereotypes

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a “false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception true.”\footnote{Robert K. Merton, “The self-fulfilling prophecy” The Antioch Review, Vol 8, no. 2 (1948), 193-210, 195.} We will set aside any practical or moral reasons to engage in this kind of feedback for positive personal transformations. When referring to disformative feedback, the transformation is negative or (at best) ambivalent. We are likely to confirm expectations even when they are negative. It is costly to act in ways that resist the expectations of others. Many times, expectations of a person are grounded in social norms whether it’s due to the environment, the group to which one belongs, or both. When a person acts against social norms, they will receive punishment such as reprimanding or exclusion. We can consider those social costs of denying or resisting expectations. When a person is given disformative feedback in the form of negative expectations, the following occurs.
First, the feedback presents a distorted *representation* of one’s future self and transforms the way one plans and thinks about what kind of person one currently is and will be. If powerful enough, the representation becomes what the person uses when imagining their possible options for actions and what is most appropriate for them as an individual. This power could come in the form of an authority figure or as social costs or part of the role they are given in the transformative activity. When a person is put into a certain role based on expectations, they will act accordingly. In this way, negative expectations lead to a *creation* of new behaviors. The person who receives this disformative feedback is likely to act in ways to confirm the representation they have. Then, once they have acted according to the expectations, they will have evidence to support the earlier feedback.

3. Misbeliefs

Misbeliefs interfere with practical rationality by “severing the proper connection between one’s willing and doing” with misleading or deceptive content.\(^{42}\) They interfere with one’s freedom by disrupting or derailing the process by which one comes to act. “Misbeliefs” are false or unjustified beliefs that interfere with one’s being able to do what one wills to do.

A few ways that misbeliefs can make one unfree are relevant for transformative feedback. First, misbeliefs can produce a fundamental misunderstanding about what one

\(^{42}\) Allen Buchanan, “Prisoners of Belief: Why the friends and theorists of freedom should pay more attention to its epistemic conditions,” unpublished manuscript
is doing when one acts so success is impossible. Second, misbeliefs can mislead one about the circumstances in which one acts and the effective means to secure one’s ends so that one acts in a way one would not have acted otherwise. Third, misbeliefs can limit one’s awareness of available options regarding what one wants to do or avoid doing.

Whether a misbelief renders a person unfree depends on the “normative seriousness” of the disruption that the belief causes between what one wills to do and what one does. The stakes of the situation and how significant the disruption make a difference for whether we want to count the product of a misbelief rendering a person unfree. For example, the misbelief that one cannot whistle is unlikely to be a significant interference with one’s freedom. The stakes are relatively low and failing to whistle because a misbelief about one’s capabilities doesn’t seem particularly important to one’s identity. However, a misbelief in one’s capabilities that keeps one from considering all the feasible options in situations with high stakes or important to one’s identity makes one unfree.

One’s rational agency involves knowing what one is capable of doing, being able to weigh all the different options according to one’s strengths and weaknesses. Buchanan gives an example of pessimistic parents who instill the misbelief in their child that she is not “college material” who then ends up not going. When one is misled about one’s capabilities from feedback, the misbeliefs produce actions like failing to apply to college which do not reflect what one wills (assuming that rationality entails wanting the best education for oneself). The content of the misbelief and feedback inform the child’s decision-making about college in a way that follows practical rationality. So that, as Buchanan points out, we become not only the prisoners of our misbeliefs but our own
jailers. At some point, the evidence and justification for the misbelief reach a threshold where the self-knower is quite rational in the sense of taking the content into account. Yet, due to the way misbeliefs have severed the connection, the acts remain unfree.

A similar belief formation process exists for self-knowledge. If the consequential actions support the original feedback, one is unlikely to recognize the feedback as the transformative, causal source of their actions. In transformative feedback involving misbeliefs, the experience of feedback can significantly disrupt the way in which a person normally and should evaluate feedback because of the radical change to the person’s epistemic perspective and identity. Misbeliefs threaten the epistemic conditions for self-knowledge in a way that contributes to a person being unfree because they are “significant disruptions of the processes by which motivation, implicit background beliefs, judgment, and intention coordinate” to form beliefs about the self. The transformative, misleading content disrupts how a person would normally assess feedback and makes a person unfree when they take into account something they should not (or overlook something they should).

Depending on normative significance and the extent to which the misbeliefs disrupt the connection between willing and doing, disformative feedback results in a moral harm by making one unfree. That is, one does not seem to be acting voluntarily because the evidence one is using is a result of false or misleading information. The results lead to behavior or mental states that become evidence which seems rational to use in one’s forming a belief about oneself.

When feedback contains disruptive misbeliefs carrying this transformative power, I consider it to be disformative feedback. In the case of self-knowledge, “willing”
involves being able to rationally identify and revise one’s beliefs, preferences, and desires where “rationally” includes properly assessing feedback. The “doing” of self-knowledge is the actual formation of beliefs about oneself which misbeliefs distort through transformative feedback. In terms of meeting the conditions for disformative feedback, misbeliefs disform one’s *representation of one’s agency* by misrepresenting one’s (or one’s group’s) abilities. This misrepresentation impacts what one believes about oneself and how one acts (or fails to act). The *creation* of one’s behavior stems from the misbeliefs and not an accurate assessment of one’s agency.

4. Pessimism Traps

Morton draws out the limits of resilience by situating it alongside what she calls pessimism traps, situations in which one’s pessimistic view can make things worse.\(^{43}\) A person gets stuck in a pessimism trap when their lack of confidence that they will succeed leads them to then pursue a less risky option. However, acting this way reinforces the evidential basis that led to their pessimistic assessment in the first place. This reinforcement is not only true for the person but for others who are similarly positioned so the overall evidence for that kind of person not being capable of something increases.\(^{44}\) However, Morton argues, believing against the evidence is “dangerous and potentially very costly” for those in vulnerable positions. Epistemic resilience, the license to be optimistic in the face of disparaging evidence, only works in these cases “within the threshold of reasonable disagreement” which Morton takes to be fairly narrow. On

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\(^{44}\) I consider pessimism traps to be a type of disformative feedback in Chapter 4.
Morton’s account, one should be very sensitive to statistical and anecdotal evidence if a marginalized group member. She claims that “our beliefs about what we are able to achieve depends on what others around us in similar positions also achieve” so a pessimism trap is not a subversion of rationality but an understandable result.

Pessimism traps are relevant for how one represents oneself not just in terms of one’s abilities but one’s chances of success. Such traps are devastating in the sense that one can feel a sense of hopelessness - it’s not always about you but your environment. Still, disformative feedback can impact this representation making one’s prospect seem even more hopeless than they really are. Since pessimism traps lead one to no longer persist towards a long-term pursuit, the creation of certain actions (or non-actions) appear. One makes decisions and act in ways that support evidence for the representation. Unfortunately, the trap could be impacting others who resemble you which is why one’s actions in a pessimism trap carry more weight if connected to one’s social position.

In cases of disformative feedback, one lacks a full grasp of one’s actions, the circumstances, and effective means under which one is coming to have self-knowledge which we should take to be an epistemic and moral harm. Since disformative feedback changes the self-knower to reflect the original belief, the self-knower looks to be properly assessing feedback on the surface. The child who gets disformative feedback that they don’t belong in higher education is less likely to act in ways that will lead them to have that aim.

A consequence of disformative feedback, distorted experiences are unwarranted causal sources of one’s identity or, at least, “core preferences” by significantly increasing the likelihood of future events such as one’s desires, plans, and actions. The epistemic
distortion means they also shape interpretation of one’s experience of the self and world to be false or discriminatory, thereby perpetuating the false information and strengthening its evidential basis.

When one has a distorted epistemic perspective and core preferences and acts unfreely because of disformative feedback, distorted experiences of the self can occur. How one experiences one’s own states and actions will be distorted by the disformative feedback. These distorted experiences can happen by causing one to act in ways that confirm the misbeliefs. Most importantly, the way one encodes and remembers all of one’s experiences, even the ones in which one does acts freely, will be distorted by the epistemic transformation.

The distorted experiences of self include warped representations, memories, plans, and values that one uses to make up an evidential basis about the self. What one does and what others do contribute to one’s evidential basis about world/social reality and where one fits. In one sense, these are not separate since one’s actions and reasons in one’s evidential basis influence the other so they create a kind of shared evidential basis.

In another sense, the tension between how interprets one’s own experiences (which I call experiences of self here) and experiences of one’s social reality (which I call social experiences) are part of this project. A person can experience themselves in the world but not part of the world. Moving between different “worlds” is sometimes referred to as “code-switching” which involves changing one’s “style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in

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45 Many religions, such as Christianity, argue one should take this position.
exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.”

A person might identify with the way they are in one “world” or environment as being more reflective of who they experience themself as (or not - this is partly why I suggest we lean towards a relational view). In the next section, I explore why certain groups have to code-switch more than others and why that constitutes an epistemic injustice.

III. Disformative Feedback as an Epistemic Injustice

The purpose of this section is demonstrating how disformative feedback, which I define as an epistemic and moral harm, targets certain groups of people in order to keep them oppressed, thus constituting an epistemic injustice. Disformative feedback as an epistemic injustice is a concept that I hope allows us to understand how oppression directly affects the practice of self-knowing. In its basic form, the argument follows these premises:

1. Assessing feedback and forming beliefs about oneself is an epistemic practice.
2. Disformative feedback distorts the epistemic practice of self-knowing and harms the person’s epistemic ability to properly assess feedback.
3. Certain groups of people systematically receive more disformative feedback than others in order to make group members (at least feel) inferior.

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4. Epistemic injustice is a systematic harm based on identity prejudice (unwarranted negative stereotypes about a social group and its members) towards certain groups of people in terms of their epistemic practices and abilities.

5. Epistemic injustice is a form of oppression.

6. An epistemic injustice occurs when certain groups of people are systematically receiving more disformative feedback than other based on identity prejudice. (2,3,4)

7. Disformative feedback can be a form of oppression. (5,6)

I argue for the first two premises in the prior section. In this section, I look at epistemic injustice in depth and give examples to support the third premise.

A. Epistemic Injustice & Being a Self-Knower

Epistemic injustice occurs when a person is “harmed in her capacity as a knower” owing to identity prejudice.\(^{47}\) These forms of injustices can affect a broad range of abilities, not just testimonial, but must be distinctively epistemic (self-knowledge in this case) and not merely an injustice.\(^{48}\) There are a few key characteristics of epistemic injustice. First, it must be a general, systematic treatment of a member of a certain group based on identity prejudice. Second, the wrong must be intrinsically epistemic. For something to be intrinsically epistemic means it concerns the knowledge-seeking capacities and practices themselves and not merely the information. A person can be

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\(^{47}\) Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 2007, 18

wronged in other ways that prevent them from gaining knowledge without that wrong being intrinsically epistemic. For example, a female researcher who lacks research funds because of sexist boards would be wronged in terms of equal access to opportunity. While that opportunity happens to involve learning, the wrong itself could be separated out from the instrumental epistemic value. Third, the wrong must constitute an injustice because it unfairly wrongs certain groups of people in terms of what we take to be a fundamental right.

Coming to know oneself as an epistemic practice is not yet discussed in the conversations surrounding epistemic injustice. The majority of contributions tends to focus on how others treat you in terms of sharing or participating in collective knowledge and belief-forming practices without any direct reference to self-knowledge. Interestingly, the role of outside sources in forming beliefs about the self is rarely addressed in the traditional Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy literature. Yet we consider forming beliefs about the self to be a very important epistemic practice that requires receiving and evaluating feedback. Disformative feedback interferes with this practice by disrupting the relationship between assessing feedback and forming beliefs about the self.

Feedback can wrong in several ways. The clear harm in the feedback that a female researcher receives when lacking the same funds of her male colleagues is that she is not as worthy or does not belong in the field. While Hookway claims this wrong is not intrinsically epistemic, I argue that such feedback can be when it is disformative and changes her knowledge-seeking capacities.

Disformative feedback causes significant harm depending on the extent of the misbeliefs transmitted and following distorted experiences. When those epistemic harms
happen on a systematic level based on identity prejudice, the person on the receiving end of disformative feedback experiences an epistemic injustice. While disformative feedback can (and most likely does) happen to everyone, epistemic injustice is characteristic of the ways in which those from stigmatized and oppressed groups are affected by others’ perspectives and treatment. We could rephrase what happens in disformative feedback as oppressive without referring to epistemic injustice but my point is that it is also an interesting problem for self-knowledge.

The reason why disformative feedback is an epistemic harm is how it affects the epistemic practice of self-knowing. Coming to form beliefs about the self and how one encodes information from one’s experiences of self is intrinsically epistemic. The effects of disformative feedback can be harmful in more than just epistemic ways. For example, gender and racial discrimination are forms of oppression in terms of how it forms people and how they can move in the world. Disformative feedback constitutes an epistemic injustice when it systematically distorts the epistemic capacities and experiences of certain social group members based on identity prejudice. Specifically, properly assessing feedback for self-knowledge is an important epistemic activity that disformative feedback corrupts by distorting a person’s experiences of the self. When disformative feedback is based on unjust stereotypes about group membership, those who are part of that group are likely to suffer from distorted experiences of self merely because they are a member of that group.

Stemming from identity prejudice, epistemic injustice relies on several kinds of cognitive biases. Social power, structural and agential, works alongside cognitive biases to create and control the ways people see the world. Sources of social power help
propagate and perpetuate the internalization of identity prejudice. Disformative feedback, which also relies on cognitive biases, is then part of the process of internalizing identity prejudice towards oneself. Let’s look at the five main cognitive biases of disformative feedback in relation to identity prejudice.

First, the discriminatory content of the disformative feedback is widely available. Identity prejudice is systemic so a person from a marginalized group will be given feedback about that group and their relation to that group across several areas of their life. The frequency of this kind of feedback means one will be more likely to apply the stereotype to themselves because of availability bias. Second, one’s self-representation will involve associative stereotypes based on the pervasive identity prejudice in one’s communities. Representation bias will then make one believe it’s very likely that one has said stereotype. Third, if one begins to internalize identity prejudice, one will begin to look for past behaviors and mental states that confirm the stereotype. Within one’s present experiences, one becomes alert to the evidence (such as more feedback) that supports the stereotype and less likely to notice ways that conflict with identity prejudice. Fourth, the power of conformity bias is crucial to internalization of identity prejudice. Since identity prejudice is systemic, the views dominate the culture. Dominant group beliefs and behaviors can cause one to revise one’s own to conform without good evidence. Finally, the misinformation effect allows identity prejudice to distort one’s past experiences as the stereotypical information seeps into one’s memory.

B. Distorted Social Experiences
When arguing for the epistemic value of societies that substantially recognize human rights, Buchanan uses the term “distorted social experiences” to explain how societies with discriminatory practices create bad epistemic conditions. Buchanan and Powell’s evolutionary account of moral progress holds that recognizing human rights is a reflexive practice that requires the right kind of epistemic conditions. The term is most closely associated with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra in which he argues that our postmodern reality is actually a “hyperreality” in which the distinction between “the real” and “the simulated” no longer exists. So, the way that we represent the world in terms of images will contain not only things that reflect reality but also the supposedly fictional worlds and stories. This “staged authenticity” occurs not just in our minds but in our practices thus it “overwhelms, infects, and/or distorts realities.” For example, having Confederate monuments can contribute to a distorted social experience of Southern pride because they misrepresent history and many of the Southern population.

Disformative feedback can perpetuate discrimination by distorting not only the experiences of self but also causing what Buchanan calls “distorted social experiences” within the community. Buchanan uses the concept to explain the dominant views of a society regarding the differences between identity categories such as race or sexual orientation. When Buchanan focuses on misbeliefs and distorted experiences, he is concerned with not only individuals’ views of their own capabilities but also social

49 Buchanan, “Prisoners of Belief”, unpublished
52 Alexandra Watkins, Problematic Identities in Women’s Fiction of the Sri Lankan Diaspora (Boston: Brill Rodopi), 2015, 135.
groups, institutions, and large systematic practices and norms. Sources of social power distort social experiences on a large-scale through misbeliefs, cognitive biases, and epistemically defective practices and institutions. If women are banned from higher education, there will be evidence for their lacking abilities in certain academic areas. The Just World Hypothesis, the belief that everyone gets what they deserve, is a cognitive bias that can function as a way to keep those who are oppressed from uprising. If everyone gets what they deserve, any failures of the system are presented as failures of one’s own.

Distorted social experiences shape individual perspectives but also perpetuate and reinforce misbeliefs because they are shared by and prevalent within the community. These kinds of distorted experiences happen at a systematic level for particular groups of people because they are targeted for oppression and discrimination. Oppressive practices distort the social experiences of members of a community so that the oppressive beliefs can be not only upheld but supported by each member.

Sources of social power can have a “trickle-down” effect on people’s beliefs, known as an “availability cascade.” An availability cascade is “a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in the public discourse.”53 While the original belief might have been based on some kind of evidence, the beliefs are taken to be true merely because other people believe it. The more people that express a perception of the world, the more the perception is believed regardless of

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its original justification. This “self-reinforcing process” contributes to distorted social experiences by it perpetuating discriminatory misbeliefs about groups of people through exaggerated representativeness.

Media plays a large role in starting availability cascades, which need not begin with justified true beliefs, through repetition of perceptual and discursive content related to social norms and identities. As a source providing representations of identity categories, media provides a form of feedback to those who belong to those categories. When looking at other instances of feedback in areas such as education and healthcare, it’s important to remember how different systems in society work together to reinforce availability cascades. When transformative feedback happens at a systematic level, the content of that feedback is part of an availability cascade that it affects the individual as well as the collective. As mentioned above, the member of that identity category is affected by the content and perhaps more likely to believe the content because of confirmation bias. Yet the outsiders of the identity category feel justified in their beliefs.

When disformative feedback meets the following conditions, it constitutes an epistemic injustice of self-knowledge:

1. systemic (occurs across multiple kinds of structural and agential sources)
2. oppressive (based on discrimination and identity prejudice)
3. creates or represents distorted social experiences (specifically related to one’s group membership)

The third condition is an extension of the creation or representation condition within basic disformative feedback. Disformative feedback can distort one’s experiences of self (such as memories or one’s current emotions) without changing one’s perspective
of one’s social status and corresponding abilities. When systemic identity prejudice is the force behind disformative feedback, the distortion expands beyond one’s personal interactions and daily experiences. Instead, the awareness of how one fits in the world when compared with others in one’s society is much more salient.

V. Cases of Disformative Feedback as Epistemic Injustice

In this section, I situate transformative feedback by looking at how it works when systematically applied to social groups on structural level. Social power rests on the actions of agents and institutions but also manifests through the opportunities and costs of navigating the web-like social structure of certain systems. While seemingly accurate, disformative feedback changes a person in ways that limit the autonomy of the receiver and damage the appropriate confidence they should have in their self-knowledge. Disformative feedback extends beyond the systems I use to exemplify its effects but it’s important to note how the specific structural power of the systems, not just the institutions or the agents, give feedback. To explain when disformative feedback constitutes an epistemic injustice, I present its systemic occurrences towards certain groups in the areas of education and medicine. How easy or difficult it can be for one to navigate these structures gives a person information about where they belong, what actions are available to them, and how they seen by others such as their value, potential, and social power (or lack thereof).

A. Negative Expectations in Education
In this section, I look at how disformative feedback constrains the autonomy of the receiver through inculcating false beliefs about their abilities. The disformative feedback transforms the person, prompting them to act in ways that confirm those misbeliefs and creates evidence for those misbeliefs. The supposed accuracy of the feedback when reflecting on such evidence prevents a person from acting with full autonomy. Here I argue that negative expectations in education are a form of disformative feedback that target certain groups based on identity prejudice. To be clear, an expectation is considered to be a norm for that particular person (including when that norm is itself deviancy from a larger social norm) but can be elicited merely because of one’s social group. Identity prejudice involves an unwarranted expectation of deviancy from the dominant or proper norms because of one’s being a member of a social group.

Empirical evidence shows that negative expectations can create behavior even if those expectations are implicit. Below are three cases of this kind of epistemic injustice within education in the United States (although similar phenomena and treatment can be found globally for these groups): the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, the gender discrepancy in certain professions, and the statistically significant effect of instructor’s identity on student evaluations. Negative expectations are disproportionately aimed at those who already experience systemic identity prejudice outside of education and thus reinforce the content of those expectations. Disformative feedback appears across all parts of the education system from daily interactions with teachers to the general opportunities and resources one is given or denied. I use these cases to illustrate when disformative feedback meets the creation condition and furthers the systemic epistemic injustice certain groups face.
The Pygmalion effect and Golem effect are self-fulfilling prophecies of the positive and negative expectations of others on a person’s behavior, respectively. Originally studied in educational settings, each demonstrates the power of expectations on the actions of both teachers and students alike. The original study had a group of teachers believing that some of their students were gifted when, in reality, the selection was random. The “gifted” or higher expectancy students would score higher on IQ tests at the end of each year. While the original study is controversial regarding robustness and replication regarding IQ, other studies have demonstrated significant effects of teachers’ expectations.\(^{54}\) Self-fulfilling prophecies have a greater impact in classrooms where students perceive a large amount of differential treatment from the teacher.\(^{55}\) Several reviews found that “teachers are typically emotionally warmer and more supportive to their high expectancy students, provide them clearer and more positive feedback, teach them more and more difficult material, and give them more opportunities to demonstrate mastery.”\(^{56}\)

One study showed that students improved more and were more satisfied in the experimental group which was told low scores did not matter for the evaluation (thus “restraining” a natural Golem effect).\(^{57}\) In another compelling study on the Golem effect, students at a business school were put in random groups which were then assigned to


support instructors. Each instructor had (false) information about how their group had scored on a previous test so that the expectations were explicit. Instructors who thought theirs was a “loser” group verbally expressed negative expectations about how a student would perform on future tests. The subjects were given a series of different tests and feedback from “support instructors” (who were unaware that they had been given random students) regarding their (supposed) performance. Conducted over 4 different academic years with new students and support instructors, the results showed that the expectations (which were made explicit to the students) of the support instructors regarding their students’ performances. With only a single exposure to the support instructor’s comments, students would perform significantly worse on two post-tasks. The first post-task is a posttest similar to the pretest and demonstrated how the students’ scores were lower after the negative feedback. The second post-task involved the students folding as many origami cups as possible under the pretense that only the good quality ones would be used for an event later that day. A striking and relevant outcome is that the negative expectations affected how individuals performed on the unrelated task of “non-cognitive skills” when compared to the control group who did not receive any feedback. The first study to use negative expectations as a variable, this study demonstrates how truly powerful the Golem effect can be.

Discipline is a form of feedback that conveys one is deviant and should not be trusted. If a student is labeled as deviant, there is an assumption of inability to be a proper

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58 Reynolds, Dennis. “Restraining Golem and Harnessing Pygmalion in the Classroom: A Laboratory Study of Managerial Expectations and Task Design” *Academy of Management Learning & Education* Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec 2007), 475-483.

59 Interestingly, the Golem group performed better on this task than the Pygmalion group. Reynolds’ intuitive hypothesis is that the Golem group was overcompensating for their earlier performance.
student. Instead, the information conveyed is that the student does not belong and/or is a danger to the classroom. Higher instances of suspension and incarceration will further support expectations of deviant behavior as cognitive biases create the illusion of accuracy. If education systems have beliefs about certain groups of students, they will be more attentive to evidence that confirms those beliefs. Additionally, we have a strong bias towards generalizing people into categories which can lead to false beliefs and a higher number of memory errors. Attribution bias can also play a role here. If the student is considered to be an “out-group” member, which in these cases has to do with the marginalized status of the group within society, their negative behavior will be attributed to their dispositions rather than situational factors.

Identity prejudice involves seeing members of a certain group as deviant from what is normal or best. Students of color and/or with a disability are more likely to be punished than their counterpart peers. Black students in PreK-12 schools are far more likely to be disciplined — whether through suspension or referral to law enforcement — than their counterparts of other races. According to the GEO report, While black students account for 15.5 percent of student population, they account for almost a quarter of the suspensions. Another interesting analysis is that students with disabilities (11.7 percent) account for 13.2 percent. These are the two smallest population sizes in school yet the suspension rate is disproportionately high.

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61 GAO-18-258, “K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black students, Boys, and students with disabilities”
The well-documented “school to prison pipeline” phenomenon concerns the way teachers punish certain students at a higher rate than others, thus contributing to higher instances of incarceration of those students. The main cause of the phenomenon is unlikely to be related to the actual behavior but more so systemic racism and unjust treatment of Black people.\textsuperscript{62} However, those such as Heather MacDonald argue that the disproportionate incarceration rates are not due to racism but data-driven and justified.\textsuperscript{63} Even if one grants that the criminality rates are higher based on actual behavior, an explanation for why and how such behavior occurs could help assess claims of those such as MacDonald who defend the severe punishments.

Expectations of deviance appear in the disproportionate punishment or policies that target certain social groups. In some ways, deviance is almost unavoidable because of the nature of the disciplinary policy. Rules banning certain hairstyles to suspension from school conveys the message that Black natural hair is deviant. The feedback to Black students is that they have something not only abnormal but wrong about their bodies which deserves. The idea that their natural hair is “distracting” is confirmed by the unnecessary attention it receives from the legal discrimination and social marginalization of Black hair.

The idea of responsibility also plays a role here. Civil rights activists argue that these disparities are problematic and largely based on racial discrimination. In response, the former Obama administration created over 600 pieces of “guidance” and regulations

\textsuperscript{62} Disproportionate punishment of those with a disability or lower socio-economic status also occurs but to a lesser degree. However, when marginalized identities intersect, the effects will be exacerbated.


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in order to directly address and fight discrimination towards students of color. The redacting of those guidelines during the Trump administration conveyed the message that those students are solely responsible because of their own actions and should be held accountable.64 Yet children are often not seen as responsible for their actions because they might not fully understand the consequences. However, evidence shows that black children are perceived as older and less innocent than white children.65 What follows is that the standards for appropriate behavior is raised above other children whose standards are lower and more forgiving.

The expectation of deviancy is not limited to such extreme examples of criminality. Identity prejudice affects not only students but educators as well.66 Negative expectations manifest in barriers for certain spheres of education as seen in disciplines such as STEM, philosophy, and law. Student evaluations, hiring and promotion decisions, peer-review are all considered to be forms of career feedback. Disformative feedback includes the kind of attention, encouragement, and opportunities (or lack thereof) one receives. Lack of representation, inappropriate questions, and discouraging comments are all forms of feedback that signals information about one being deviant, that is, unfit for a profession.

One might respond by noting the recent emphasis on diversity and recruitment in such fields. However, such emphasis can backfire. Institutions rely on women and people

of color to signal these virtues of diversity. In the process, they often objectify the individuals and overburden them with service. The “invisible labor” or “minority tax” refers to the extra work laid on minority faculty to promote diversity.\textsuperscript{67} Having more service duties, the individuals then have less time for publications and less chance of tenure.\textsuperscript{68} The minority tax also refers to the extra burdens of isolation, discrimination, lack of mentorship, and other disparities that are not equally shared by the group.\textsuperscript{69} Such burdens are likely to lead to less energy and motivation, if not depression and anxiety. When a minority group member self-reflects, they have evidence from low student evaluations (outside feedback), their own feelings of fatigue (physical states) and imposter syndrome (mental states of doubt) to support the content that they should not be in the profession.

One of the reasons diverse representation is low in fields such as STEM concerns student evaluations. A large amount of evidence is surfacing that shows student evaluations are biased against women and people of color.\textsuperscript{70} Students show a positive bias towards male identified instructors around the world. Longitudinal studies comparing scores with effectiveness to randomized, controlled online experiments demonstrate the bias.\textsuperscript{71} Women of color experience the most significant negative bias in

\textsuperscript{68} Guarino, C.M., Borden, V.M.H. Faculty Service Loads and Gender: Are Women Taking Care of the Academic Family?. \textit{Res High Educ} 58, 672–694 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9454-2
\textsuperscript{70} Mitchell, Kristina & Martin, Jonathan. Gender Bias in Student Evaluations. \textit{PS: Political Science & Politics}. 51. 2018: 1-5. 10.1017/S104909651800001X.
\textsuperscript{71} MacNell, L., Driscoll, A. & Hunt, A.N. What’s in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching. \textit{Innov High Educ} 40, 291–303 (2015); Boring, A., Ottoboni,K., Stark, P.B., Student evaluations
student evaluations. These ratings, a form of feedback, are suggestive of a negative expectation about the instructors’ performance because they are deviant from the norm in terms of conceptual representation of a person in that profession.

Sarah Jane Leslie et al. give data supporting a brilliance-gender bias in certain fields which explains the gender disparity according to the emphasis the field places on raw talent. The less a field is associated with hard work and the more it emphasizes “natural” brilliance, the less the diversity within the field. Del Pinal & Spaulding’s research supports this hypothesis by looking at how the central features of concepts such as “professor” can be skewed according to gender. Their work demonstrates the significant likelihood of associating “hard-working” with “female professor” more so than just “professor” whether or not male is specified (also suggesting that male is also implicitly associated). The centrality of “hard-working” to one’s identity can prevent a person from participating in needed self-care. Instead of seeing oneself as being justified in taking a break from work, one experiences any other activity as a sign of laziness and deviancy because the standard is skewed. The expectation that one must be hard-working could be considered pragmatically effective but distorts the way one encodes one’s experiences of the self. This problem is not necessarily unique to women but the research suggests it is most significant for them in academic fields.


Evaluations are used for hiring, firing, and giving tenure to faculty. Since women and persons of color will have substantially worse evaluations, more white men get hired & tenured. If productivity is affected due to factors related to underrepresentation, it creates support for the lack of tenure. Even when productivity levels are the same, the women and persons of color get direct feedback conveying they are unfit for their profession. The effect becomes more significant in the aforementioned fields where the instructor is different than the stereotypical identity for that field. In fields whether there is underrepresentation, the worse the student evaluations will be for a member of one of those groups. The paradigmatic examples of who should educate and who should be educated are maintained by such practices.

So why should we think of these cases as disformative feedback? And why should we say they are epistemic injustices and not just plain injustice? First, experiences as a student or an academic are distorted by the feedback that one is deviant from the normal student or member of that field. These experiences of feedback either lead to further behavior confirming the expectation or distort one’s experience of past behavior. For a student, the feedback could lead to more opportunistic behavior such as cheating as a reaction to the distrust of the teacher and peers. As an academic, it can lead to less productivity due to burnout (trying too hard to overcome expectations) or due to a lack of motivation (adhering to low expectations). Second, the everyday experiences within education may seem small but they are extremely significant in one’s life. Obviously, childhood education is transformative as they are developing their social, intellectual, and emotional capacities. We also consider the choices one makes about career choice to be significant to one’s life and who one is. Third, the feedback is systematically given based
on group membership. All the above cases are considered forms of discriminations because the causal explanation for the outcomes is identity prejudice. Finally, what makes these cases a kind of epistemic injustice is the lack of autonomy when forming beliefs about oneself and one’s abilities. Autonomy is not constrained to merely the choices one makes but involves the epistemic process one undertakes when deciding what to do. Disformative feedback corrupts the role of autonomy in this epistemic process by playing unwarranted causal role in who that person becomes and distorts a person’s experiences of their behavior.

B. Medical Gaslighting

We tend to grant first-personal authority to a person regarding their inner experiences like sensations, beliefs, and feelings. Medical gaslighting is the discounting, distrust, or distortion of one’s first personal experiences within medical systems. In this section, I look at how medical gaslighting is a form of disformative feedback that distorts a person’s experiences of their own pain, mental states, and body. I examine systemic medical gaslighting by examining treatment of women, people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, fat people, and people who are disabled. Beyond just discrediting the person’s testimony, medical gaslighting constitutes a kind of epistemic injustice intrinsically related to self-knowledge. It harms the epistemic practices of forming beliefs about and expressing one’s states and experiences.

When medical gaslighting is internalized, one’s experiences will no longer serve as the basis for forming beliefs about oneself. I argue that medical gaslighting further perpetuates identity prejudice by confirming stereotypes thus distorting stigmatized group
members’ ability to gain self-knowledge. This kind of disformative feedback prevents epistemically just self-knowledge because misbeliefs wrongly severe the proper relationship between authority and accuracy. To have self-knowledge, one must trust one’s experiences and that one is rational. Being considered an authority on one’s own experiences, even to oneself, requires external validation. Whether one is rational or “accurate” about how one does (or should) understand one’s experience is partly determined by one’s social environment. Getting feedback such as “It’s all in your head” denies a person their first personal authority. Medical gaslighting distorts the epistemic practice of self-knowing by causing a person to distrust their own experiences and rationality.

Feedback within medical systems comes in the form of agential and structural power. People receive feedback directly from sources such as doctors and indirectly from how easily or costly interacting with medical systems is. Some ways in which people are given medical feedback include: diagnoses and treatments, conversations and rapport with medical professionals, concepts of health and well-being, medical “expertise” of professionals and academics, and access to treatments. The what-its-like-ness of navigating healthcare and medical concepts for understanding one’s experiences transform one’s epistemic perspective. How to believe one’s inner experience is accurate when medical feedback denies or distorts the experience is unclear.

Epistemic deference to medical feedback is necessary in many cases because patients rarely have the same expertise. However, medical systems go beyond any warranted epistemic authority when determining not only the content of others’ experiences but also placing a value judgment on those experiences. Anna Alexandrova
labels scientific statements with implicit morally normative evaluations as “mixed claims” (which may or may not be objectionable). Using mixed claims in diagnostic language makes it difficult, if not impossible, to interpret one’s experiences without the value-laden judgment. Medical gaslighting also categorizes one’s experience with distorting conceptual resources such as “hysteria” and the Body Mass Index. Allen Buchanan argues that the high social status attached to medical experts leads to “excessive epistemic deference” that goes beyond medical expertise. Mixed claims, distorting conceptual resources, and excessive deference to medical feedback corrupt the introspective process of self-knowing.

Pain

Philosophers who work on self-knowledge like to use the experience of pain in their examples. Pain is considered immediate, subjective, and “private” in the sense that it can exist without any clear physical effects. To distrust or discount one’s experiences of pain significantly affects whether one has self-knowledge. The experience of pain is present but the person no longer believes their own experience. For example, being denied proper treatment informs a person that their experience of pain is either wrong or insignificant.

Healthcare gaslighting, a term coined by Black activist Sasha Ottey, is the discounting and distrust of the first personal experiences of certain groups of people and

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75 Anna Alexandrova, A Philosophy of Science of Well-Being. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2017
their burden of self-advocacy within medical systems.\textsuperscript{77} (Fetters, 2018). Ottey started a non-profit organization for those with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), which affects about 6-12 percent of women in the US. Yet PCOS is rarely diagnosed. Accurate diagnoses can take sufferers decades and multiple dismissive doctors’ visits. Women with pelvic pain, a symptom of PCOS, face several obstacles when seeking to understand or communicate their experiences. First, they struggle to have their pain taken seriously. Second, their pain is related to women’s sexual and reproductive health of which medicine has notoriously poor knowledge as well as negative bias. Third, depending on the cause, other effects (such as weight gain) can interact with other biases so that the pelvic pain is dismissed as a symptom of poor health.

Gender-biased diagnosing and treatment of pain illuminates the unjust discrepancies of patient care. In general, women’s reports of pain are often discredited as psychological. Empirical evidence of disproportionate treatment for pain medication suggests the lack of credibility is related to identity prejudice and emotional bias. Women are less likely to receive pain medication and, when they do, receive less aggressive treatment for their pain than men. Often prescribed sedatives more than men who undergo the same procedure, women are perceived as having anxiety rather than pain. According to Hoffman and Tarzian,\textsuperscript{78} women may have their pain discounted in the following ways:


(1) have their pain complaints erroneously dismissed as being emotionally-based and therefore "not real";

(2) have the likely psychological components that accompany chronic pain be misidentified by health-care providers as the cause, rather than the result of their unrelieved pain; or

(3) have the psychological problem that is the source of their pain be discounted

The failure to receive proper care leads to further distress and seems to confirm the feedback about their intense emotions such as anxiety. For those suffering from identity prejudice, the feedback is that one lacks authority within self-knowing. These experiences can cause emotional distress and significant trauma of “not being seen” – sometimes literally. For example, wait times are longer for women and they receive pain medication later than men. They are shown to complain more than men but, given the data, women have to advocate more for their treatment than men do. They have to be louder and more aggressive yet calm enough to not be seen as emotional. Any psychological distress can then be attributed as being a cause of the pain. The consequential distress creates a sense of accuracy regarding the medical feedback to the patient.

Physical causes (without which the pain isn’t “real”) are privileged as the proper explanatory conceptual resource in healthcare. The medical emphasis on a narrow set of physical causes helps explain the feedback migrant works receive about their experiences of pain. Anthropologist and physician Seth Holmes catalogs narratives and conditions of
(predominantly Mexican) migrant farm workers. He documents how they suffer from more than their working and living conditions alone. Racial stereotypes and oppressive structural factors (such as a lack of stable funding at the non-profit clinics that serve migrants) prevent workers from proper healthcare. Workers are perceived by their employers, healthcare professionals, and sometimes even themselves to have natural differences that make them more fit for the grueling and backbreaking work they do. Triqui people pride themselves on their strength, endurance, and being unaffected by pesticides.\textsuperscript{79} Medical reports provide explicit information that suggest the healthcare professionals tend to hold the patient blameworthy whether it’s due to natural differences (their “bone structure” is harder to work with; their bodies are lower to the ground); cultural differences (poor diet, “dirty”, lazy); or moral decrepitude (making unwarranted judgments of domestic violence). Such medical treatment is a form of feedback that affects how the migrant workers behave and see themselves as “belonging in ordained social locations.”\textsuperscript{80}

The lack of Spanish-speaking services is also a structural factor that conveys to migrant workers their value. Along with lack of access to anything that requires health insurance, the information is they do not deserve the same medical attention as another English-speaking patient (despite the majority of their patients being native Spanish speakers). Part of the medical process is the feedback regarding the diagnosis, whether the patient and professional have fully understood each other, and agreeing on a

\textsuperscript{79} Seth Holmes, \textit{Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States}, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2013, 173
\textsuperscript{80} Holmes, 172
treatment. Healthcare professionals complain that Mexican migrants “don’t think they need medicines” and attribute any vagueness in self-reports due to their being Mexican. Since doctors often fail to provide adequate care or a proper medical process, any Mexican believing Western medicine is wrong for them seems to be accurate. By failing to provide Spanish-speaking services, professionals almost guarantee problems with self-reports and medical feedback.

Gender, race, and citizenship look to play a role in the perception, categorization, and treatment of a person’s pain. Whether a person’s experience of pain is granted first personal authority is dependent on their social status. Additionally, group members internalize the medical systems’ feedback concerning their pain. This internalization can lead to doubt or, even worse, distortion of one’s pain experiences. The former role of first personal authority is dismissed or displaced. Instead of acknowledging their pain, a person questions its real presence or wrongly conceptualizes the pain.

Mental States

Knowledge of one’s mental states is another exemplary case of self-knowledge. Having self-knowledge in these cases involves recognizing first personal authority, rationality, and autonomy. “It’s all in your head” is one of the most explicit and common forms of feedback women receive when seeking treatment. Amy Medley, author of Healing PCOS, was referred to a psychologist as a teen when she began showing

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81 Holmes, 137
symptoms. The lack of proper diagnosis leads to distress and depression so that the person exhibits, and thus confirms, the originally false symptoms. In these cases, the feedback distorts whether one understands their mental state as rational and whether their judgment is truly sound.

Here I look at how medical systems distort beliefs and decision-making through psychiatric diagnoses. These diagnoses involve concepts that wrongly pathologize mental states, such as sexual desire. Since these diagnoses are disproportionately targeted towards certain groups, such as women and homosexuals, they constitute an epistemic injustice.

In order to get mental health treatment covered by insurance, a person must be diagnosed using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Yet the DSM is consistently changing diagnoses - rarely because of further scientific knowledge but rather shifting cultural norms upon which it rests. The medical gatekeeping of gender-affirming treatment for trans individuals requires said individuals to prove themselves under extreme distress and depression. Yet many times, the navigating of the healthcare system itself causes a large amount of the stress.

Consider the effects of categorizing homosexual orientation as a “disease” with its informational as well as normative content. Conversion therapy began as a way to help relieve homosexuals from the distress they felt being gay. Originating in aversion therapy, some of the tactics included applying electric shocks or eliciting nausea with injections alongside sexual images of the same gender. Disturbed with intentionally inflicting physical pain, Dr. Gerry Davidson started conversion therapy as a way to encourage opposite-sex attraction. He gave his male patients Playboy magazines and
encouraged them to masturbate in such a way that would transfer positive gay thoughts onto a female body. He sought to help patients who came to his office distressed and desiring to change their attraction until he interacted with those in the gay community protesting the psychiatric classification. Davidson now cites the conditions of homosexuality in the 1960s which involved “being told that you’re an evil person and you’re disgusting” along with general discrimination as the actual underlying issue for distress. Continuing to exclude homosexual men from donating blood is a current kind of medical feedback that they are likely “diseased” and dangerous. Any sexual activity with another man, even if that man is one’s partner, excludes one as a homosexual man from giving blood.

What is considered normal or deviant sexual behavior is mostly determined by one’s social environment. Sexual norms change alongside culture norms. Medical systems tend to treat the sexual awakenings of women and homosexuals as deviant and dangerous (hysteria and sexual disorder, respectively). Bi-polar disorder is associated with hypersexuality or “sexual indiscretions” or, currently, “excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences.” Hypersexuality was also classified as a sexual disorder until experts felt there was a lack of evidence to include it in DSM-5.

Hypersexuality is a concept that depends on what sexual norms seem appropriate for the person. When determining whether bipolar men engage in more “sexual risky behavior” when compared with other men, researchers will include the likelihood to engage in homosexual behavior as one of the criteria. A possible response is that psychiatrists are using the sexual norms for that particular person instead of culturally-
based one. That is, determining whether someone is experiencing hypersexuality requires looking at what their typical sexual behavior is and whether current behaviors are drastically different. It’s unclear why typical sexual behavior would not also be constrained by cultural norms. If a person is sexually repressed prior to their “hypersexual” behavior, medical systems will be more likely to categorize the new behavior as deviant.

Adolescents are currently diagnosed with bipolar disorder at almost the same rates as adults. First, defining hypersexuality according to typical behavior will be unavailable. Teenagers explore their bodies and sexuality in adolescence. If using prior sexual behavior as the norm, almost every teenager is hypersexual. Similar symptoms of mood swings, irritability, and extreme fear of rejection are also characteristic of teenage behavior yet part of bipolar diagnoses. Second, parents are part of the process of diagnosing their child so descriptions of the child’s behavior will also be normative. For many parents, their child’s sexual and social exploration causes alarm. Third, exploration of one’s sexuality and identity usually involves risk but adults are likely to be more conservative and risk-averse. Part of the sexual awakenings of repressed individuals, particularly women and the LGBTQ community, requires risk. Resisting the cultural constraints on their “typical” sexual desires is one step in sexual freedom but such resistance can be met with painful consequences. For many, avoiding painful consequences is not the healthy alternative despite the hypersexuality criteria.

Bodies
In this section, I look at groups whose bodily experiences are dismissed or distorted through conceptual resources. First, morally loaded medical norms surround motherhood and Black mothers are in critical danger of death because their self-reports are ignored. Second, arbitrary measures and concepts categorize certain bodies as overweight and therefore unhealthy despite how fat people may actually feel or what they do. Finally, the trans community and people with disabilities not only suffer from stigma but also experience medical gatekeeping that often forces them to conform to the diagnostic norms surrounding their bodies. These cases of disformative feedback severe the proper connection of first-personal authority and knowledge of one’s body.

First, the way a person relates to their body during pregnancy is not only medicalized but also normatively defined. Quill Rebecca Kukla notes “signal moments” in which a pregnant woman is given feedback about her mothering abilities based on her behavior in medical settings. Their examples include properly responding to ultrasound images and giving vaginal birth without pain medication. Medical systems partly constitute these moments, such as ultrasound testing and diet restrictions, which are interpreted as “displays and tests of women’s maternal adequacy.” As they navigate particular spaces like doctors’ offices and emergency rooms, mothers get information about themselves through their “complicated relationships to medical authority” concerning their own behavior and bodies as well as their children’s.

One example is the pressure to make a very elaborate birth plan. In the best light, the plan signals value for the person’s rationality. However, the pressure and the negative judgment if one does not make a plan signals that the person should have more of an authoritative role than the labor process really allows. Kukla notes these unrealistic
expectations generated by such plans leads to feelings of failure and disappointment when things different than planned despite healthy outcomes for parent and baby. The focus is no longer the patients’ well-being but meeting the norm of “good” mother. Guised as something they made autonomously, the elaborate birth plan distorts the natural bodily experience that could exist otherwise. “The distaste for mothers who do not behave properly during their births is strong and explicit” yet women have very little control over how their births will actually go. This mindset distorts the experience of the pregnant person’s body during labor. The feedback of birth plans signals an unfair burden of control on the pregnant person. Instead of embracing the complexity of labor, the person now has a normative lens against which to judge their body.

Black women in the US experience some of the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in the world (even when controlling for factors such as socio-economic status). Even celebrity tennis star Serena Williams’ testimony failed to receive uptake from health professionals. When she experienced a familiar pain during pregnancy, she asked for a specific treatment. At first, the nurse thought she was confused from medication. When a doctor finally intervened, it was not the test and treatment needed for which she had explicitly asked. She persisted in her understanding of her pain but also her beliefs regarding the proper test and treatment. They finally did as she had said but only after trying other procedures. It helped that Williams knew exactly what kind of physical issue it was and the medical procedure that needed to be done.

83 Haskell, 2018; Williams, 2018
instead. Despite being a world-renowned athlete, Williams was a victim of epistemic injustice as a Black woman in regards to her bodily experience. Someone who is famously known for her physical abilities still gets feedback that she doesn’t understand her body. Fortunately, Williams resisted medical gaslighting – the dismissal of her first personal authority - because she is a confident self-knower and continued to believe her own understanding of her body.

Second, the supposed obesity “epidemic” distorts the way people relate to their bodies. Medical systems dispel feedback that one’s body must be a certain weight and have certain physical abilities in order to be healthy. While the way medical systems categorize bodies affects every person’s experiences of their body, I focus on those that are categorized as overweight or obese. I use the term “fat” as descriptive, value-neutral, and separate from the medical terminology.

The Body Mass Index carries authoritative weight within medical systems including public health and clinical research. Yet, merely a height-weight ratio, the BMI is an unreliable measure of factors such as ratio of fat tissue to muscle or risk of heart disease. One of the most used indicators of underlying health issues, the BMI can lead to serious diagnostic problems and can misled people to reduce their fatty tissue in ways that could worsen the problem. The BMI continues to be used to define the “obesity epidemic” despite its unreliability and potential danger.

Weight bias in medical systems significantly distorts how fat people gain self-knowledge. It distorts a fat person’s first personal authority by misrepresenting their body

84 Guthman 2011, 29
and behaviors. Who qualifies as overweight or obese is largely dependent on arbitrary factors. Several million Americans became overweight overnight when the NIH reduced the BMI levels for that categorization of bodies from 27 to 25.\(^{85}\) Additionally, referring to certain body types as an “epidemic” gives the feedback that one’s body is diseased, contagious in some way, and dangerously out of control if it falls in those categories. “Explanations of increased size…cannot assume that one kind of embodiment is more natural or more probable than another.”\(^{86}\)

PCOS can cause obesity which is one reason doctors fail to diagnosis it. Often, medical systems overlook the actual symptoms of a disease by focusing on body weight. Women suffering from PCOS are often told they should eat better and exercise instead of being properly diagnosed. Ironically, also those in the “lean” category are often overlooked for PCOS because doctors assume obesity is a necessary symptom.\(^{87}\)

Since obesity is closely associated with the disease, fat people are more likely to be diagnosed with binge eating disorders (which are defined by BMI and feelings of shame). Feelings of shame are likely to be associated with eating for a fat person because of the social norms, particularly healthism. Healthism involves the valuing of certain bodies (thin), activities (exercise), and eating habits (organic and low-carb) while creating a culture of blame and distaste for fat bodies with the assumption they are responsible for failing to fit the healthism norms. When the person’s eating habits are misdiagnosed, the feedback represents the person’s experience of eating as “wrong” and

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\(^{85}\) Kuczmarski and Flegal, 2000  
\(^{86}\) Guthman, 2011, 43  
something that must be controlled. The framework for fat people’s eating habits is negatively skewed towards this value of “wrongness” even if the eating habits are the same as someone who is not fat. The feedback is the way you eat food is the cause of your “disease” regardless of whether your eating habits are considered normal otherwise. Yet eating is a natural, necessary life-sustaining activity. The fat person will have plenty of evidence to support feedback that, yes, they do eat. The experiences of eating are likely to be more salient than for those who do not receive such negatively skewed feedback when self-reflecting.

Kukla argues that, regardless of who you are, there is no way to eat food in our culture completely free from criticism and Alison Reihald argues that many fat micro-aggressions are aimed at bodies of all sizes. Research shows that information about the self, even if false, can change how one relates to food. The “false memory diet” manipulates people into “healthier” eating by giving false feedback about a person’s past experiences with certain foods. These false food-related memories can change not only a person’s preferences but also their behavior regarding what they eat. Elizabeth Lotus herself works on these projects and notes that, “as far as we know, people cannot determine when they’ve had a false memory implanted.” Since they receive so much disformative feedback about their eating habits, fat people are at risk for false memories of their relationship with food. Medical gaslighting surrounding the obesity “epidemic” and BMI distort the act of eating so one’s bodily experience of ingesting food becomes embedded with either feelings of guilt or extreme depravation.

Third, the medical gatekeeping surrounding the treatment of the trans/non-binary community and people with disabilities (PWD) contributes to the diagnostic (and
oppressive) stereotypes surrounding these group members’ bodily experiences. Here, medical systems dispel feedback that one’s body have certain physical characteristics and abilities in order to be “normal” and healthy. The pressure from medical systems regarding what’s best - binary gender or not reproducing if a PWD – forces patients to conform to diagnostic norms surrounding their bodies. Medical gatekeeping makes any other kinds of feedback costly, if not impossible.

For the trans community, the medical norms surrounding bodies concern binary gender, genitalia, and heterosexuality. The focus and sensationalizing of sex-change transformations puts undue pressure on trans individuals to conform their bodies to binary gender expressions. Two forms of medical gatekeeping of trans bodies exist. The well-documented kind concerns the hoops related to therapy and gender presentation as necessary to receiving medical interventions. The second kind of medical gatekeeping involves the assumption and corresponding pressure for undertaking medical interventions that fit binary gender and genitalia. Likely an empathetic and political response to the first kind of medical gatekeeping, this kind stems from good intentions. But the excessive push through the medical “gate” for certain treatments can reinforce the values around what a make a body “normal” and healthy.

The need to demonstrate one’s gender dysphoria in order to receive treatment means a trans person must reflect the cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. Although standards are changing, a trans person must meet certain criteria in order to receive gender reaffirming treatment. First, one must present oneself to have gender dysphoria. Here the feedback is that being trans means not only is your mental state abnormal, not societal standards, but also you must relate negatively towards your body.
Second, one must present one’s body as different from assigned sex. This standard rests explicitly on cultural norms and the feedback concerns what is the “correct” way to be a gender. In *Whipping Girl*, Julie Serano details the ways science and medicine have forced trans women to contour their bodies in order to receive treatment. She outlines the various ways in which trans women must “overcompensate” in presenting themselves as feminine in order to receive treatment.

To be clear, many trans individuals need medical transitions in order to fully be themselves physically. Without that access, trans individuals can suffer immensely even if social norms around gender expression change. However, the trans community is much more diverse than the way they are treated within medical systems. Non-binary and genderqueer identities are finally being recognized as legitimate and being trans no longer carries the necessity of medical interventions. “Gender-reaffirming” is taking the place of “sex-change” in how the medical community conceptualizes treatment of trans patient. Part of the vocabulary evolution concerns the rejection of the binary spectrum and the desire of many trans individuals not to seek medical interventions.

But the prevalence of this kind of medical gatekeeping remains from the binary genders on medical forms to terms like “women’s rights” referring to issues related to ovaries and uterus.

A consequence of this gatekeeping is the gaslighting of one’s bodily experiences as “abnormal” and requiring medical interventions. A distrust of one’s relationship with one’s own body can build if one is not presenting oneself according to the cultural gender

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norms. One is not really a gender unless one’s body appears a certain way and can do certain things (like having similar secondary sex characteristics and being able to engage in heterosexual intercourse). Forcing such changes can lead to further gender dysphoria if a person is non-binary or genderqueer. A trans man might choose to have top-surgery, in which the breasts are moved, but opt against removing their ovaries and uterus or surgically reconstructing a penis.

Self-proclaimed “gender-critical feminists” often include trans men under the category of women if they have taken such a route, providing fodder for the medical categorization of bodies to consist around one’s genitalia. Using terms like “women’s rights” when discussing the treatment of body parts and processes like the vulva or pregnancy makes those who are non-binary or male-identified invisible. The feedback is that their bodies should not have the same rights because they do not identify with the gender typically associated with things that their bodies still have or can do.

For a person with disabilities (PWD), their physical embodiment could be less disabling if the medical norms surrounding disabilities wasn’t immensely negative. They experience medical gatekeeping in terms of access to treatment and equipment as well as discouragement to reproduce or perform other activities. Ableism is the idea that only bodies with certain features and abilities are worthwhile or “normal” and can be found throughout medical systems.

While PWD feel pain or have negative feelings about their bodies, so do many people without disabilities. The “deep sense” feelings of shame and inadequacy associated with disability are due to the ideas that disabled lives are less worth living (Barnes, 2018). Barnes’ doctor gives her feedback when he remarks that it’s probably
best that she can’t have children because they might have inherited her condition. The “natural conclusion” is the implicit message about the “comparative value of disabled lives” including her own. Not only does this leave Barnes feeling inadequate but also prevents Barnes from experiencing her body as one capable of reproduction. The feedback that disabled bodies are unfit for parenthood is prevalent and upheld by the encouragement and medical gatekeeping from doctors to avoid it. Being “unfit” for parenting is confirmed by the inability to receive the kind of medical care and attention that a person without disabilities would receive.[12]

Another way ableism manifests is the medical gatekeeping or access to proper equipment. Giving those with physical disabilities the proper equipment, such as prosthetic legs, shows us how medical gatekeeping gives disformative feedback. The feedback is, explicitly, one’s body can’t do the same things as a normal body and, implicitly, your body is less valuable and a burden on society. Yet we can look to people such as Stephen Hawkins, whose contributions to society still required some assistance. Similarly, most people use computers instead of handwriting their research. The standards for relying on technology change if one is able-bodied or not. For a PWD, the connection between technology and their bodily experience becomes one of dependence and weaknesses despite the fact that able-bodied people are also reliant on technology.

I use several cases to exemplify how medical gaslighting is a kind of disformative feedback that constitutes an epistemic injustice. First, medical systems give a person information about themselves. Second, certain feedback is systematic and unjust because it is based in identity prejudice and prevents certain groups of people from fair treatment. Third, the feedback is epistemically unjust when the unfair treatment is intrinsically
epistemic regarding belief-forming and knowledge-sharing practices. Within medical
gaslighting, the distorted belief forming practices include using one’s introspective
capacities to the best of their abilities; being able to recall accurate, not false, memories;
having truth-tracking concepts for understanding and communicating experiences of
one’s pain, mental states, and body; and having a lack of, or potentially worse, distorting
conceptual resources for understanding and expressing oneself/experiences.

Fourth, the disformative feedback distorts those epistemic practices in a way that
is specific to self-knowledge, i.e. forming beliefs about and expressing one’s states and
experiences. The feedback distorts one’s introspective experiences of the self by
dismissing them as credible and/or categorizes them in an inaccurate and/or harmful way.
The normal practice of self-knowledge is distorted because, now, the person distrusts
their first personal authority regarding their mental and physical states while lacking
autonomy in discovering and deciding what their own “well-being” means. At the same
time, the medical systems creates seemingly accurate representations through their
feedback and treatment.

**VI. Objections**

In this section, I address three potential objections to my concept of disformative
feedback. The first concerns the role of accuracy, the second concerns positive
transformative feedback, and the final objection questions the whole point.

**A. Accuracy Objection**
Objection: If the content of the feedback accurately reflects the individual, shouldn’t a person believe it? Aren’t there epistemic reasons to accept it? Knowledge seems to require that a person believe the content of the feedback if it accurately reflects them in the present.

Sometimes, the truth hurts. Whether harm is warranted partly depends on the context of the feedback and the person to whom the feedback is directed. Each person will also be different according to what kind of psychological harm they are willing to endure or be potentially exposed. Constructive criticism is a kind of feedback that can be painful. Theoretically, constructive criticism is directed towards a person’s present work or action and not that person’s identity or their worth. The overall benefit of this kind of feedback outweighs the small cost of hurt feelings when it is accurate and helpful. Unfortunately, disformative feedback can mask itself as constructive criticism. Both kinds of feedback will involve a source of social power whose influence can distort a person’s sense of self. What sufficient level of harm justifies or possibly obligates a person to exclude certain sources. The accuracy of the feedback is insufficient for acceptance.

To defend that last claim, I turn to the proponents of moral encroachment. Moral encroachment holds that the knowledge is sensitive to and constrained by moral factors. Rima Basu gives an account of the “rational racist” who has a justified true belief that black diners are bad tippers based on statistical evidence. Since that belief is considered racist, Basu argues the wrongness of the belief should keep one from forming it despite its supposed accuracy. As she notes, “we live in an unjust world” so there will be
accuracy regarding marginalized identities. Oppression perpetuates the evidence justifying marginalization. Similarly, the wrongness of disformative feedback need not lie in how accurately the information reflects the person if the information. When disformative feedback constitutes an epistemic injustice, then the wrong lies in the identity prejudice inherent in the feedback.

B. Positivity Objection

*Objection:* What if the feedback positively transforms the person? Disformative feedback can be good for the person even if it distorts their experiences of the self. If it makes them become a better person, disformative feedback can be justified. Take a student who has poor performance. Giving them positive disformative feedback regarding their abilities could lead them to excel.

If a misbelief is the causal source, there is always an epistemic harm. Even if disformative feedback is positive, it still constitutes harm. Inaccuracy can be dangerous. For example, school systems began to prioritize self-esteem regardless of the students’ achievements starting in the 1980s. Roy Baumeister et al.\(^\text{89}\) reviewed the long-term effects of high self-esteem and found that it tended to be correlated with bad, not better, behavior. Those with high self-esteem were more likely to commit crimes, cheat, etc. When those with high self-esteem are successful, their achievements play the causal role that leads to high self-esteem. Undeserved praise can lead to being more confident and

assertive but it’s unclear whether such traits are always desirable.\textsuperscript{90} Whether a potential benefit outweighs the epistemic harm depends on the empirical evidence as well as practical and moral matters.

It’s important to remember that disformative feedback can cause moral harm even if it seems to improve a particular person. The pain and suffering disformative feedback causes is not always towards the individual to whom its directed. Oppressive social hierarchies, in general, cause disformative feedback to occur as part of maintain the hierarchical order.

Those who are already privileged are more likely to receive positive disformative feedback which can lead to further oppression. A surplus of credibility and sympathy flow upstream towards those at the top of the social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{91} Kate Manne’s concept of “himpathy” refers to the “positive and exonerating attitudes and practices” that society bestows on misogynists.\textsuperscript{92} Such treatment upholds and protects men’s position of dominance by highlighting their upright moral standing and capacity for self-improvement. Manne uses several examples in which a man commits sexual assault and his actions are categorized as mistakes, uncharacteristic, and excusable. Rapists are “pictured as unlovable, invulnerable, and… (have) no valuable future” which fails to reflect the ways these men are viewed by those close to them.\textsuperscript{93}

Without context, giving a person feedback that they have the ability to make themselves into a better, more moral person seems good if it makes it more likely they

\textsuperscript{90} Salerno, 2006; Twenge, 2014
\textsuperscript{91} Medina, 2011; Manne, Kate, \textit{Down Girl}, 2017
\textsuperscript{92} Manne, 2017, 193
\textsuperscript{93} Kate Manne, \textit{Down Girl}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2018, 211
will be. Yet empathy is a kind of disformative feedback that informs men that their
moral high ground must be protected at all costs. Moral transformation is a possible
outcome but more likely is victims are downgraded as their morality and rationality are
called into question. These instances do not happen singularly but contribute to the
distorted social experiences of men and women.

“I don’t see race” is a common thing for white people to say. Yet physical
markers like skin color are used to signal people in positions of power or subordination. People get disformative feedback about their physical markers to reaffirm their status
within the hierarchy. It can be easy for white people to ignore the disformative feedback
they receive regarding their entitlement, superiority, and dominance. Being a racist is
undesirable to many white people so they will be more likely to seek feedback that they
are the “good ones” and not contributing to oppression. The content of the disformative
feedback does not necessarily harm the white person but contributes to oppression and
identity prejudice.

Derek Black, a reformed white nationalist, attributes his moral transformation to
the people who were encouraging and patient in helping him renounce his racist beliefs.
These people gave him positive feedback concerning his ability to befriend and care
about those of different ethnicities (which was accurate). However, he also attributes the
aggressive negative feedback he got as important to his transformation. The case is
potential support for giving racists feedback that they are actually much kinder and
tolerant than their racists beliefs would suggest. However, feedback that leads a racist to

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see the wrongness of their beliefs is transformative, not disformative, because the change is based on moral vision not misbeliefs. I discuss this kind of feedback in my next chapter.

C. Triviality Objection

*Objection:* So what? Of course, social environments determine how people develop into who they are. The phenomenon of disformative feedback is nothing new. In fact, it’s all there is. Everything you do is caused by others and their feedback.

I take this objection to stem from the metaphysical commitments of social constructivism, behaviorism, and determinism. Judith Butler (1990) famously argued that the way in which one’s behavior is interpreted by society is what determines one’s gender. The school of behaviorism is built on the refusal to acknowledge one’s mental states as influential. Determinism holds that autonomy is a façade since free will is controlled by prior conditions within one’s environment. While vastly different, each group prioritizes the causal role of outside forces on one’s autonomy and sense of self to the extent that one’s own intentions or choices make no difference. I have one brief response and one much longer.

First, the claim that one’s environment and relationships determine who one becomes is still controversial. Many argue against the above views in reference to the self, autonomy, and first person authority. When taking a hard stance, these views fail to account for people who are transgender that claim they feel different than the way their

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bodies are interpreted by society. They also fail to account for anyone who is resilient, aspires beyond the options they are given, and/or resists the expectations of others. There are softer versions of these views that can allow for my concept of disformative feedback.

Eddy Nahmias (2016) argues that free will is a psychological achievement thus making it compatible with determinism. In his account, free will is the ability to properly exercise one’s psychological capacities for making decisions. Disformative feedback interferes with this kind of free will by preventing or distorting the proper functions of psychological capacities of not only decision-making but also self-knowledge.

Second, even if I grant that everyone receives disformative feedback, there are important differences between the social groups that receive information about who they are. One difference is that between serious and trivial infringements on rights. David Sobel (2012) argues that self-ownership views justify much too “broad protections from coercion when we are engaged in self-regarding actions” because they conflate serious and trivial infringements. The Conflation Problem, as he calls it, fails to recognize important differences between, say, personal assault and pollution fines. His proposal is that the strength of the protection of certain rights should depend on the seriousness of the harm of the infringement. The same can be said regarding the harm of disformative feedback. In cases of disformative feedback, these rights concern self-determination. Disformative feedback infringes on the rights of a person to aspire and become the person they want to be. However, disformative feedback can cause different levels of harm and need not always involve moral harm. We may not be worried about every case of disformative feedback, especially if the epistemic harm could be justified, such as the case mentioned in the positivity objection.
When we should worry about disformative feedback is when it constitutes a moral harm either to the person and/or contributes to identity prejudice. Here lies another important difference. As I have argued, some groups receive disformative feedback more than others. Even if we hold that everyone receives the same amount of disformative feedback, the content and effects of disformative feedback change significantly based on one’s social group. It’s important to recognize the ways in which disformative feedback creates epistemologies of ignorance as well as ones of resistance (Mills, Medina). The first kind furthers oppression whereas the second kind weakens its power.

Societal expectations of white people are positive so their behavior will be interpreted differently than people of color. Even if a white person recognizes racism and their privilege, they still seek feedback that they are “one of the good ones” and praise for treating people of color with respect (DiAngelo). What a white person considers respectful tends to still be based in their epistemologies of ignorance and the desire for superiority. Hence the self-serving “white savior” complex in which a white person uses people of color to further their own image as a “good” white person. The disformative feedback involves the content that the white person can fix the world with some enthusiasm.96

The reminder of one’s privilege can backfire as seen in cases of “himpathy” that result in men feeling entitled to forgiveness and further perpetuating inequality. One might say that white people also get disformative feedback regarding their roles as oppressors from stigmatized groups. I reject these cases as disformative feedback. When

white people get negative feedback about their privileged social position, the feedback is not caused by misbeliefs or identity prejudice. The negative feedback is based on historical and current evidence of white people’s power and the oppression they have caused. Expectations that a white person will act racist are not based on stereotypes alone but the interactions and experiences of not just personal but social experiences. While white people want to break free of negative perceptions of themselves, the feedback is warranted in reference to their social group. If a social group has oppressed and marginalized another, they have already distorted the autonomy and authority of that group.

In general, feedback from marginalized communities is rarely given the social power to influence the actions and self-knowledge of white people. A tension exists between someone who is a member of a privileged social group and their perception of themselves and the perception of that person that those from the subordinated group have. In these cases, since the chance for an epistemology of ignorance is high, one should defer to members of the marginalized group. Bianca Crewe and Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa⁹⁷ make a similar argument regarding cases of sexual assault. In their view, since knowledge ascriptions are contextual, they also carry social power. Choosing to “employ some standards rather than others is a political one” that includes cases of self-knowledge.

Many cases of disformative feedback will be unclear because of the pervasive and unconscious effects of the content on a person. Disformative feedback is not just one agent giving direct, explicit information about the person. Rather, it transmits from a social matrix of information exchanges that influence how one sees oneself and one’s available courses of action.

D. Victim-Blaming Objection

It sounds like part of the blame falls on those who fail to reject disformative feedback. Especially in cases of new behavior, they seem partly responsible for the effects the feedback has on them. In the work I reference, Buchanan takes a similar stance to Susan Okin in that their arguments seem to imply that those who choose to remain in certain discriminatory environments are just unaware of their subordinate positions because of these distorted social experiences. Buchanan says, in such cases, one is not only a “prisoner of beliefs, but one’s own jailer, too” because one is contributing to one’s own oppression. One could easily interpret that, and the uses of women who veil themselves as examples, as victim-blaming or as Uma Narayan puts it, treating them as “dupes of the patriarchy.” Narayan argues that liberalist models often fail to recognize the non-Western women’s subjective experiences, their practical and emotional stakes, and legitimate reasons for their behaviors.\footnote{Narayan, Uma. “Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women.” In A Mind of One’s Own, 418-432. Edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002.}
The rationality of adapting preferences is relevant in understanding disformative feedback. We can identify disformative feedback according to its purpose and function but it need not be successful. If the relationship to one’s states is maintained, then isn’t a successful case of disformative feedback. We don’t always know people’s reasons for acting. This account is not meant to be prescriptive in the sense of telling people what to do. I’ll bring up potential paths of resistance in Chapter 5.

If anyone does have a duty to resist disformative feedback, it would be those in whom the disformative feedback pushes them towards perpetuating oppression towards others. For example, one could argue that toxic masculinity is a form of disformative feedback - it would not be an epistemic injustice in the typical sense because one could say their excess credibility doesn’t harm them. First, it may harm them but not be an injustice (as I state above). Second, under my account, it could qualify as an epistemic injustice only in the context of self-knowledge in that it is hard to know oneself as a male-identified person in an oppressive environment given the dominant conceptual resources (words, images, narratives).

This is my most devastating objection because I agree with Narayan. Othering people’s experiences not only objectifies them but it also blinds you to how you might be a part of oppressive systems. My concept of disformative feedback is not about others being able to determine the ways in which a particular person have been harmed by feedback, whether you are able to consciously recognize feedback, and evaluating other evidence for the feedback. Every person is unique and different. That is part of the worry when using statistical generalizations, no-tolerance policies, or certain diagnostic tools.
VII. Conclusion

The main problem with transformative feedback is that you cannot always tell that it played the role it did in making you who you are. First, it’s hard to always identify formative feedback and its effects. Second, it’s hard (sometimes impossible) to know when you first received certain kinds of formative feedback. Third, since transformative feedback changes you but you don’t know how or when, you won’t be able to know what caused you to act certain ways - the feedback or your own agency. In describing phenomena as disformative feedback, I had two goals. First, explain the epistemic problems so that people can better identify potential cases of disformative feedback in terms of how they receive but also give feedback to others.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, a call to action for better practices of self-knowing that include recognizing the powerful influence of feedback and the value of resiliency against supposedly accurate but discriminatory feedback. Moral reasons such as resistance to oppressive stereotypes may give one sufficient justification to believe otherwise.
Chapter 5: Practices of Self-Knowing

I. Introduction: Best of Enemies

As leader of the local Ku Klux Klan, C.P. Ellis had a pretty good idea of how Ann Atwater, the local Black militant civil rights activist, saw him. Similarly, Atwater knew how Ellis saw her. They openly hated each other. Yet, the two would change their perspectives of each other, develop a lifelong friendship, and Ellis would disown the KKK. The true story of how Ellis and Atwater became unlikely allies as co-chairs of a charrette in Durham, North Carolina now exists as a book, play, and movie. In this chapter, I seek to understand what conditions allowed for Ellis’ transformation. Specifically, I want to look at the role of feedback and interactions with others in knowing oneself and becoming a better person.

A charrette is “an experimental technique...to bring a diverse group of people together to work out differences” by producing an “intense reaction” through successive nights of hours-long face to face meetings. Despite the two figures having both been at numerous City Councils, being co-chairs was scandalous because it implied they were working together. Although they did not share the goal of desegregation or share a perspective on race, Atwater and Ellis shared concern as parents and members of a deeply divided community. The ten days would produce several transformative reactions in the charrette. Co-chairing the charrette, Ellis and Atwater were able to share a transformative experience with each other as protective parents dealing with poverty. This experience, among others such as sharing a meal, caused Ellis to see not only Atwater but also

1 Davidson, Osha Gray, Best of Enemies, (University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 2007), 249
himself in a new way thus leading to his moral conversion. What are the habits, practices, and experiences that lead one to develop the right kind of skills, traits, and communities for self-knowing? If self-knowing is an epistemic virtue, then a virtue account should include the ways in which someone develops the right ways to seek and respond to feedback.

I’ll argue that, by having shared goals and experiences as parents, Ellis was able to share Atwater’s perspective to a certain extent. Having a shared perspective allowed Ellis to receive feedback about his beliefs, behaviors, and the role he played in Atwater’s life. Seeing through a shared perspective, Ellis could perceive his own beliefs as distorted and false. However, individual and cultural perspectives can transform others in oppressive environments as we saw in the last chapter. I’ll look at how resistance should play a role in our self-knowing practices given how these transformative experiences can go wrong.

II. Problems with Evaluating Feedback

In this section, I’ll cover a few major barriers for evaluating direct feedback from others. The first concerns cognitive biases when we self-reflect, the second concerns Kristie Dotson’s concept of testimonial smothering, the third concerns how L.A. Paul’s original decision-making problem of transformative experience applies to exchanges of feedback, and the fourth concerns the transformative nature of feedback.

A. Self-Reflection

In Chapter 3, I argued that seeking a variety of sources would help combat certain cognitive biases when it comes to evaluating others and their feedback. We have biases in how we evaluate our sources of feedback but we also have biases in terms of how we
evaluate ourselves. The ways we self-reflect are biased so even if we are open to others’ accurate feedback, we could fail to incorporate it properly. In this section, I focus on how self-reflection fails as a tool for assessing feedback and overcoming one’s blindspots. Jennifer Saul argues we should be worried about our epistemic practices and rationality if we are unable to notice and correct implicit biases.\footnote{Saul, J. “Scepticism and Implicit Bias.” \textit{Disputatio} 5 no. 37 (2013): 243-263.} Being epistemically responsible requires knowing and fairly assessing one’s reasons for forming a belief. Unlike beliefs, implicit biases are considered to be inaccessible, automatic, and out of our control. Therefore, they are unavailable for revision even when we have conscious beliefs denying them. Epistemic mistakes due to implicit biases are those in which “something that we actively think \textit{should not} affect us does.”\footnote{Saul, 249} Yet we rely on implicit biases despite our desire not to rely on them in our epistemic practices.

It’s important to note Saul is making two claims, one descriptive and one normative. The descriptive claim is that our abilities to reflect on and revise our implicit biases fall short of epistemic norms. Self-reflection and self-criticism do not seem sufficient for changing one’s implicit biases if the implicit biases are inaccessible. If the processes by which we acquire implicitly biased judgments are inaccessible and not under our control, more reflectiveness on our beliefs and behavior does not seem as if it would achieve anything. Since we cannot use self-criticism to change our implicit biases, and therefore our poor epistemic practices, Saul makes the normative claim that we should be seriously concerned with how we are forming our beliefs.
To support Saul’s claims, let’s look at three biases that bear on how we practice self-reflection and criticism. One implicit bias is the disposition to have an overly positive view of oneself, resulting in epistemically poor practices. Since the positivity bias is self-serving, one is less critical of positive feedback and more critical of negative feedback.\(^4\)

Evaluation of behaviors and attitudes is then likely to be epistemically irresponsible because one fails to properly evaluate evidence. Even if one does not have a positivity bias, it’s most likely one suffers from a confirmation bias.

A confirmation bias occurs when one searches for and attends to evidence that supports one’s preexisting beliefs. We tend to be drawn towards details that confirm our own existing beliefs. The ease and availability of a thought or belief tends to increase its perceived validity. How one integrates beliefs is biased toward perceiving and accepting feedback that confirms what one already believes. Since one has a confirmation bias, one is less likely to notice the ways one’s beliefs might be wrong and likely to assume one’s beliefs are more justified than they really are.

Finally, most people tend to have a “bias blindspot,” which is the tendency to see oneself as less biased than other people. Another term used for the bias is “naïve realism,” which is the belief that one sees reality as it really is – objectively and without bias; that the facts are plain for all to see; that rational people will agree with me; and that those who don't are either uninformed, lazy, irrational, or biased. This bias leads one to ignore signs of prejudice. We are quick to rationalize away biased judgments since we assume that we are less vulnerable to epistemic error than others. The assumption that one is less likely to be vulnerable to epistemic vices is dangerous because it leads one to ignore evidence of

\(^4\) Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Holt, 1985; Wyer and Frey, 1983
bias and become less critical of their epistemic practices. Since one is biased about how often one relies on implicit biases, one is unaware of when one has bad epistemic practices.

It seems we should not assume self-criticism is enough when we are evaluating feedback from others. Without a way to consciously access whether these implicit biases are influencing our appraisal of the source and the feedback, we are unable to recognize our errors. Despite one’s attempts to adjust for one’s implicit biases, evaluating feedback through self-reflection is severely limited.

B. Testimonial Smothering

We often receive feedback through our conversations with others. When we consciously reflect on feedback, we think about what was said and how it was said. However, discourse alone is insufficient. Certain sources of feedback will not always feel comfortable expressing their perspective of you, especially if one is unfamiliar or ignorant in important and relevant ways.

Kristie Dotson defines testimonial smothering as “the truncating of one’s own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence.”5 Testimonial competence is the speaker’s “positive assessment of an audience's ability to find potential testimony accurately intelligible.”6 Such ability implies a certain baseline understanding of the issues and their

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5 Dotson, K. “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing.” Hypatia 26 no. 2, 236-257, 244.
6 Ibid, 245.
complexities. Testimonial smothering depends on what the speaker assumes about their environment, specifically their audience and their background beliefs. If an audience shows reliable incompetence, the “speaker perceives the audience as unwilling or unable” to properly respond to what the speaker says and will remain silent. Dotson calls this “coercive silencing” because the speaker might want to share their testimony but they stay silent for the sake of the audience’s interests and the potential harm the speaker might experience if they do speak up. This coercive silencing is an instance of “epistemic violence” which Dotson takes to be a form of oppression.

Oppressive systems perpetuate a reliable ignorance that “insures that an epistemic agent will consistently fail to track certain truths” which Dotson considers a form of epistemic violence “if this failure to track the truth also happens to cause harm.” Under her account, this ignorance “constitutes epistemic violence….not simply because of the harm one suffers as a result” but because epistemic violence institutes practices such as silencing. Being in oppressive environments raises the likelihood of oneself being actively ignorant about certain truths as well as one’s sources from certain groups being silenced.

One example is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s discussion of how Black women avoid talking about domestic abuse in fear of contributing to negative stereotypes of Black men. In the case of Mark the feminist mansplainer (from Chapter 2), he would chide his female friends on wearing make-up. It’s unlikely they would want to open up to Mark about how they actually experience make-up, though. They would be justifiably concerned he might treat them as insecure (a form of weakness) instead of recognizing some of the valid

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7 Ibid, 244.
reasons women might want or need to wear make-up. In the case of feedback, a person might withhold information if they think you will misinterpret it or use it against them. For example, if the stereotype for a certain group is aggression, the group member might not be as vocal and adamant in their criticisms of you if they are worried about how you will perceive them. If one’s blindspots concern oppression of certain groups, sources from those groups are more disincentivized to give you feedback about those issues because it will not be intelligible.

C. Transformative Experiences

The concept of transformative experience creates problems for how we assess testimony from others. Transformative experiences can be “epistemically transformative” in which one knows something that only having the experience can provide and “personally transformative” by changing what it’s like to be you. Under Paul’s definition, the prior self has no access to the later self’s epistemic perspective or priorities. Since transformative experiences constantly change us, a source’s feedback could be backward-looking and reporting on a past version of you rather than an accurate reflection of your present self. Or, the feedback is more forward-looking than it should be because the sources won’t know how an experience will change you. Such problems occur with the case of Audre, the wavering graduate student (Chapter 2), who must assess the feedback of her professors on whether she should go into academic philosophy as a career. If Audre talks to someone from her Masters’ program about her work, they might not realize how Audre’s philosophical approach has changed in her PhD program. Those
giving Audre negative feedback about her career potential lack access to how such a career will transform Audre and thus cannot accurately report on what it would be like for her. A problem arises for Audre and us regarding how other people can give us trustworthy feedback about who we are. Assessing others’ feedback about part of ourselves involving transformative experience looks difficult, especially since other people tend to shape our transformations.

D. Disformative Feedback

Feedback itself can be transformative in how it can change you. When one is developing, either as a child or in a new career, feedback about the self shapes who one becomes. As one figures out their environment, part of the discovery is recognizing where one fits. Feedback tells you where you “fit” which, even if inaccurate, makes you try to conform so that you can make sense of your place and identity. In the last chapter, I looked at how feedback is transformative and its potential dangers. Sometimes, transformative feedback looks to be a good thing or even necessary. Developing virtues such as honesty, kindness, and generosity could require children being told they have these qualities even if their behavior suggests otherwise. In transformative experiences, feedback is no longer something the person can evaluate as a piece of information about a fixed object. The information itself is transformative because it shifts how one identifies oneself. Feedback from others can not only generate new beliefs about who you are but also change your behavior.

What happens when that feedback is negative or prejudiced? Often, it signals one is in an oppressive environment. Unfortunately, “discriminatory practices produce a kind of
experience that appears to confirm the false beliefs.”

For example, a student given feedback that they are “difficult” is likely to exhibit behavior that confirms that belief. Despite whether that information was true when first presented, the student’s behavior will then provide distorted evidence for the original falsehood. Distorted experiences transform a person so that when they draw on their experiences for information, there will be evidence for the negative or prejudiced belief about the self. If one is part of a marginalized group in an oppressive environment, they’re at higher risk of formative feedback and distorted experiences that make the feedback appear to be true. I argue how this kind of disformative feedback constitutes an epistemic violence in the last chapter. However, the problems with evaluating transformative feedback apply across all cases in which the feedback itself is the catalyst for the change and not something within the agent. Feedback from others is extremely powerful because it can transform a person without the person being conscious of it. We rarely have the cognitive resources to be consciously aware of all the feedback we are receiving. In the case of the student, the feedback leads to not only thinking of themselves in a negative way but acting in a negative way.

Transformative feedback plays a large role in creating and maintaining group identities and social hierarchies through repetition and different relationships. One receives information about oneself and one’s group across multiple times and multiple contexts to reinforce identity categories. Yet certain relationships, such as those between a teacher and student, require trust and responsiveness to feedback. The power of feedback in such relationships has the potential to not only epistemically harm by leading a person to false

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9 Buchanan, 2002, 23
belief but also morally harm by changing the person in a significantly negative way. It's crucial that we understand how to treat relationships that inform but also transform and shape one's perspective.

III. Transformative Shared Experiences

While transformative experiences raise problems for testimony and self-knowledge, they are part of our daily lives and who we are. My goal is looking at how they also contribute to self-knowledge and social change and what the right conditions are for the right kind of transformations. Since self-criticism is not an entirely reliable or trustworthy epistemic practice, I examine the potential of transformative shared experiences for receiving and incorporating feedback. Instead of just engaging in discourse, I argue that transformative shared experiences with those different from you provide a new approach to receiving feedback. In this section, I cover some key concepts to show how our interactions with others shape the way we experience, understand, and act in the world. I look at how these general concepts take place on three levels (cognitive, personal, and cultural) by drawing from developmental neuroscience, feminist and critical race theory, and Confucianism.

A. The Basics

1. Defining “Transformative”

   a) Epistemic
An epistemic transformation gives one the ability to “cognitively entertain certain contents” and assess oneself in a new way. The information within the experience is phenomenal, embodied, sensory, physically felt in some way. Being able to accurately imagine and model certain future scenarios cannot be gleaned from other sources in the same way besides the experience itself. In Chapter 4, I discussed the differences between a transformative revelation (disruptive moment) and transformative activity (active learning across time).

Part of why we should be receptive to others is that they see and know things about us that we do not. Information gleaned through someone’s facial expressions and bodily language can fall into this category. Experiencing another person’s extreme disdain or disgust is hard to ignore because one can physically sense how that person feels. One can experience this feedback as a revelation in the same way that W.E.B. Du Bois describes realizing that his skin color was why his white classmate did not want to play with him. One can also experience feedback across time through transformative activities such as the way a child learns moral behaviors through playing during recess.

Regarding self-knowledge, these experiences reveal information about oneself that one would not know either through introspection, memory, or critical reasoning. The experience causes you to see yourself in a way that changes how you imagine, remember, and make plans for yourself. “Seeing” yourself means getting a feel for how others experience you, what it's like to be around you, how they see you. Whether it’s accurate is another question (for later), but it’s still at least some kind of knowledge about how others see you. Social experiences allow you to be more successful in the future because you know how you will appear in similar situations and what kind of responses to expect.
b) Personal

Personal transformation changes how you experience being the person you are and what you consider to be valuable. Your personal identity radically alters in virtue of having the experience. What it’s like to be you changes. Paul’s famous example of becoming a vampire showcases how even seemingly small differences like diet choice and being a night person can be part of a more significant transformation. The things that constitute you - not just beliefs but priorities, values, desires, motivations - shift in ways you cannot imagine.

Feedback plays a few different roles in personal transformation such as bringing your attention to a change, being the catalyst for later change, and/or being transformative itself.\(^{10}\)

Being a catalyst for change could involve the feedback being epistemically transformative separate from and prior to the personally transformative experience. Sometimes, the experience of feedback, whether or not it’s true, can cause you to react in significant, radical life-altering ways. When experience of feedback itself changes what it’s like to be you, then it’s transformative. When truth-tracking, feedback is personally transformative because it illuminates parts of you that might not have been salient or seen. It can change what it’s like to be you at least temporarily so those parts of yourself can be better known.

\(^{10}\) It’s not clear to me that we can reliably tell the difference between these roles of feedback given the issues I address earlier in this chapter and previous chapters.
c) Moral

We can’t ignore the ways that transformative experiences interact with self-knowledge, including important and necessary ways. Some transformations make us (to some degree) better people by helping us realize we’ve committed a moral error or have a character flaw. A transformative experience can go either way in terms of whether it is good or bad, for you or for others. Moral transformation is a unique form of personal transformation because we judge moral traits to be most connected with who a person is.\(^{11}\)

The more radical transformations are often called moral conversions. A moral conversion is a “significant change for the better in an adult’s moral commitments and actions” which involve the person’s moral record going from “unremarkable or poor” to “admirable.”\(^{12}\) When someone has a moral conversion, a “dramatic transformation” takes place. The way the person “construes the meaning” of life radically changes. The emotional, visceral aspect of conversions suggests that rational deliberation alone is rarely (if ever) the catalyst for change. Transformative experiences involve physical and perceptual changes that impact how one conceives of one’s own personal identity. Many of these changes involve emotions. Experiencing things from your own first-person

\(^{11}\) This core commitment appears in virtue theory (see Chapter 2) and transformative experience literature (see Chapter 4). For empirical support, see Stromhinger, N., and Nichols, S., “The essential moral self,” Cognition 131 (2014), 159-171.

perspective allows you to grasp new information as feelings do not come from “deliberation” but are often elicited automatically from the experience.

Wong emphasizes emotions in conversions by using the “two-track” model to explain how emotional experiences elicit moral change. One track is “fast” in assessing the situation by signaling to and preparing responses for the body. The other is “slow” in discerning whether the initial reaction is appropriate. “The complex process” of emotional experiences involves both tracks working together. Wong treats these tracks as “useful abstractions of processes” similar to Daniel Kahneman’s use of System 1 and 2 in *Thinking Fast and Slow*. These metaphors help us understand the different levels of processing, especially when conflicts arise, but do not exist separately. Wong warns against treating these systems as literally distinct as it can mislead us into thinking of the slower System 2 as affectively neutral. Our emotional reactions are and should be part of our conscious moral judgments as our reflective and automatic processes interweave with each other. Wong argues that the process of Confucian moral cultivation includes some reflective “self-consciousness and the use of practices such as ritual” so the integration of the two systems is “conducive to moral excellence.”

Mary experiences the reality of color once she sees it and feels what it’s like for her. Similarly, one experiences moral reality and feels a certain “struggle” when undergoing a conversion. When experiencing a moral conversion, the agent acquires new abilities in mental representation, imagination, and comprehension of other experiences. A moral conversion has an emotional impact on a person, eliciting a visceral response and a

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14 Ibid, 583.
mental “grasp” of a situation. The experience “grips the body” to prepare for seeing and responding to the environment. The visceral response is necessary to motivate the agent to act. The morally converted person experiences the world in a different way.

A moral conversion changes the agent’s perspective on the world. The experience “reveals” something to the agent that was previously unseen or unfelt. Wong borrows a metaphor from Iris Murdoch in which “clouds” are lifted from one’s “vision.” Clearing one’s perspective requires one to have a certain experience that “disperses” the clouds of selfishness (for Murdoch). Besides selfishness, we might also consider the ways that active ignorance or oppressive feedback can cloud our perspective.

Having an accurate moral perspective is not always easy or comfortable. We constantly rationalize selfish actions to make ourselves feel better about not meeting certain moral standards. Moral rationalization is the cognitive process that individuals use to convince themselves that their behavior does not violate their moral standards and significant contributor to future unethical behavior. While the fast system is usually faulted for being prey to cognitive biases, the slow system can be just as guilty. One thing that might happen in moral conversions is that the (fast) emotional response overrides one’s (slow) cognitive rationalization. Arousal regarding the experience motivates changes within the agent. The agent can then consciously reflect upon and integrate those experiences into future judgments.

In terms of helping one gain self-knowledge, emotional experiences can also break down one’s defense mechanisms and the ways one maintains active ignorance. Active

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15 Tsang, 2002, 25
16 Mulder, 2019, 2020
ignorance prevents one from acknowledging moral truths, including about oneself. Audre Lorde (1981) argues that one of the important uses of anger is to learn, including when one is on the receiving end of the anger. Lorde is speaking specifically to White women who feel guilty or defensive about their racist attitudes. Feedback from a Black woman’s anger conveys that something about one’s worldview, including how one fits in the world, is wrong in a significant, existential way. Since we better relate and remember information connected to ourselves, feedback can play an important role in helping people realize important truths beyond themselves (even if that’s the starting point). For Lorde, that feedback from the anger is not so much about the person on the receiving end but rather racism itself which is why it’s so important to listen.

When I refer to transformative shared experiences (TSEs), ideally all three parts are involved. Although to differing degrees of significance and affect, the following examples create conditions for TSEs. When do these qualify as “transformative” is another question which I attempt to address but will likely remain unanswered. Paul allows for a minimal, thin sense of transformative experience but recognizes that we are mostly interested in the significant, paradigmatic cases of transformation. In showing how TSEs work, I include moments that are more seemingly mundane since they are often key for the more radical changes.

2. Defining “Shared Experiences”

Now that I’ve laid out the different senses of “transformative,” I will now cover the way I will use “shared experiences” since the phrase itself is vague. First, I’ll discuss
differences in how an experience can be “shared” from a minimal to rich sense. Then, I’ll
draw attention to a separate but often important aspect of certain shared experiences,
what I call shared perspective. Finally, I’ll look at empirical work on shared intentionality
which concerns the way we think when we engage in cooperative activities together as
individuals or as a society.

a) Degrees and Kinds of “Shared”

“The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge
between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared
between them, and lessens the threat of difference.” - Audre Lorde

A minimal, thin sense of “shared” exists in which everyone who meets a certain threshold
of being in a certain place, in a certain time, witnessing certain events together has a
shared experience. For example, if you’re reading this, we all share the experience of
being alive during a global pandemic. However, given the vast array of experiences and
important differences, we might think there’s little explanatory power in using the
concept in this broad sense. Yet, the event is transformative enough for such a great
number of people and in similar ways (isolation, fear, vulnerability), that we tend to think
of it as shared even if a celebrity quarantining on their orange grove seems very unlike
the majority of others’ experiences.

17 “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Penguin Modern: UK, 1978, 2017), 10
On the other end of the spectrum, a thick, rich sense of “shared” exists in which those who partake feel an intense connection and shared identity with each other. Religious ceremonies, weddings (for the bride and groom but often others), hospice deaths, military duty, and fraternities center around establishing bonds through shared experiences. These experiences are considered part of who we are, where we belong, and reflect our values.

Sometimes the sense of identity can come without having shared the experiences all together. For Ellis and Atwater, they bonded not only through the experiences they shared on the school board but also by recognizing that they had similar past shared experiences dealing with poverty. What does “shared” mean here? The extent to which an event is shared could be influenced by two other factors that can be separated out from shared experience: shared perspective and shared intentionality.

b) Shared Perspective

To understand how shared perspectives work, I rely on Michael Tomasello’s extensive research on young children and the nature of what he calls “cultural cognition.” Unique to humans, cultural cognition is a natural capacity that leads to the creation of social practices and norms. Cultural cognition is part of small-scale shared experiences such as playing a game to large-scale shared experiences such as political revolutions. Infants and young children not only predict others’ behavior and learn social norms but also create their own culture. By looking how infants possess a unique motivation to work and create with others, we can start to conceptualize what it means to share a perspective.
Two chimpanzees could sit next to each other, look and attend to the same thing, and know the other one is too. But, Tomasello argues, they would not be seeing the thing together as a ‘we’ like humans can do when motivated to do so. When humans create a “we” perspective in shared intentionality, they create between them “a kind of shared world” that involves each of their perspectives and the potential for that perspective to clash with an “objective (perspectiveless) view of it.” This not-actual-view is what Tomasello labels our “human reality.”

Joint attention whether to visual content like a banana or mental content like someone’s false belief is possible in primates. However, the complex “coordinated perspective” is lacking. Young children show the ability to coordinate or share a perspective when working towards a common goal, that is, joint intentions. Activities such as building a tower together require one person to hold the tower and another to place the blocks. Toddlers are able to imitate both roles even if they have only acted in one and attempt to help or motivate the other person to share in the activity. Infants move through stages of sharing behavior, emotions, goals, and perspectives to finally enjoy collaborative activities with others. They are not merely learning but actually participating in creating culture. At a young age, children are able to create a “shared fictional reality” with others through innovative games. That “reality” consists in rules, norms, representations, and narratives about what the world is and what it should be like. This construction of social reality is actually quite real and ongoing as this natural tendency is what leads us to create institutions, policies, and other structures to maintain our cultural traditions and values.

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18 Tomasello, M. *Becoming Human*, 2019, 82
Feedback about oneself, such as how one should identify as a person, is found within this shared reality. A make-believe game like “house” could reinforce or challenge gender norms depending on who (or whether) children designate as the mother and the father. Cultural cognition involves the ability to create new roles and identities. Yet we develop in societies with previous cultures. The cultural norms in place inform a person what kind of agency and abilities they have.

The kind of shared perspective Tomasello implies in his model goes hand in hand with shared intentionality, which I discuss in the next section. The shared perspective involves one’s own subjective “I” perspective, imagined others’ perspectives, and a “birds-eye view” that is meant to be objective. This three-part “we” perspective involves everyone considered part of the activity along with the values, norms, and culture shaping what is seen, attended to, and its affect. Being able to maintain our cultural norms requires having a cognitive representation of our social “shared reality” to coordinate our actions in which certain concepts, rules, and meanings apply.

How far our individual perspectives can be shared is controversial. Part of where you fall might depend on how individualistic you take the “self” to be. Dan Zahavi’s experiential self account bridges the self as socially constructed and subjectively experienced. Zahavi holds that our own self-experience is mediated through social interaction. Instead of projecting my own self-experience onto others, I internalize others’ perspectives onto

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myself. The way other people see me will affect how I connect to my own mental states. The “self” is not extraneous but intrinsically part of one’s experiences. Instead of creating a self from one’s experiences, one’s experience is “self-given.” Contained in self-consciousness, the experiential self does not exist independently nor does it reduce to specific experiences. The “for-me-ness” of my experience individuates me from others. Applying his experiential approach to social processes, like empathy and shame, Zahavi argues that one is directly acquainted with certain aspects of others’ mental lives. We are directly acquainted because we experience “perspectival ownership” over shared states, particularly empathy. “Perspectival ownership” involves experiencing the conscious state as mine but is not individualized by person. Zahavi’s account holds that we experience many emotions because we share perspectival ownership with each other.

What I have in mind is a kind of epistemic standing that involves this kind of merging of perspectival ownership in such a way that one gains a new kind of knowledge from one’s experience. This new knowledge involves not only the external world but also bears on one’s subjective experience and how one views oneself. The shared perspective allows one to “see” in a new way and gives feedback that allows for one to both recognize and adjust one’s beliefs about the world and the self. Two sides of the shared perspective emerge in my discussion: a subjective first-person experience and an “objective” representation of the external world. The former is necessary for the shared perspective to be considered one’s own and the latter is necessary for receiving accurate feedback about oneself even if there is no “view from nowhere” (Nagel).

I use the term “see” when referring to perspective and mean it in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Iris Murdoch uses the language of “moral vision” to describe the
ability to recognize ethical truths in the world. Moral vision includes being able to see the person in need by the side of the road instead of focusing on how slow the traffic light is taking to turn green. This requires certain cognitive processes (attention, motivation), personal traits and values (kind, conscientious) and cultural knowledge (what does needing help look like). Other sense modalities are involved besides just sight and emotions play an important role so “seeing” is perhaps better conceptualized as “understanding” or “comprehending.” Still, having a very minimal sense of moral perspective can be good. A child can often see things in the world that are wrong even though they lack understanding, sometimes in ways that adults cannot.

The shared perspective could still conflict with other cognitive representations and expose erroneous stereotypes that one has about the source and the world. To be the kind of shared perspective that helps one overcome harmful biases, it must be transformative to some degree. In the case of Ellis, sharing a perspective with Atwater dampened the power of the historically salient, stereotypical way of representing the world.

c) Shared Intentionality

Any activity that requires coordination with others is considered a form of shared intentionality under Tomasello’s model of cultural cognition. Given that most of our experiences involve cultural and social norms and rules, institutions, or some kind of goal, they still count as instances of shared intentionality. Shared intentionality are “we” plans of action.
Committing to the same goals and mutually coordinating actions is how we come to understand each other’s behaviors, emotions, and desires. When people share a common goal, they share intentionality. By itself, an intention is an action plan one chooses and commits oneself in pursuit of a goal. The basic organization of an intentional action consists of three components (Tomasello):

(i) a reference value or goal towards which one’s cognitive system acts,

(ii) the ability to act in order to change the environment,

(iii) the ability to perceive the environment so one can recognize when the state of things matches the reference goal.

The circular organization of all three components means that one must constantly check whether one’s actions are having any effect on the environment as well whether that effect is changing things in the right way. Additionally, one needs feedback regarding one’s abilities to act and to perceive the environment in order to accurately aim and meet the goal. Intentional action requires monitoring reality, including whether one executed the intended action and whether that action produced the correct result.

Shared intentionality or agency involves two or more individuals not just sharing goals but also cognitive representations of multiple actions, roles, and perspectives. It can occur in simple or complex tasks between individuals or groups. Tomasello et. al calls such tasks “joint cooperative activities” involving mutual responsiveness, shared intentions and attention, and coordination of action plans and roles. Each participant has a cognition representation of the goal itself and of achieving it with the other participant(s) that Tomasello calls the “we” perspective. The representation contains both the self and the other (and sometimes an object). Coordination requires that each participant shares a
similar cognitive representation so that one can help the other achieve part of the goal if necessary. What does it mean to have successful coordination? It partly depends on how shared the joint activity representation (including reality) is. To have a successful joint cooperative activity or what I will call “shared experience,” the participants must reach some threshold of sufficient agreement in how they are representing the world.

The desired goals and values of joint activities always include, to some degree, doing it together. Through shared agency, we perceive and create cultural ideas of what are common or desirable goals and roles. Shared agency is then necessary for “cultural cognition,” which is the way we come to think about and create social norms. Tomasello claims that sharing a culture is what makes our intentionality a special kind of motivation unique to humans.

The special way we collaborate sets us apart from other species because we desire working with others for its own sake, not just because it gets us to some goal.\textsuperscript{21} Humans are naturally motivated to construct shared goals and establish mutually supportive roles with others. It’s this motivation that we deny when we treat self-knowledge as if it’s an individualistic, purely introspective pursuit. We become who we are among others so it follows that we should also come to know ourselves through others.

We also share these goals and roles against a backdrop of shared values. For Tomasello, the desire to collaborate as well as the normative dimension of those collaborations (especially large ones like culture) sets us apart as humans. Other primates like chimpanzees may have several aspects of shared intentionality but his data shows these

\textsuperscript{21} Imitation in other species is never for purely social reasons, according to Tomasello’s interpretation of the research.
two characteristics are lacking. Regarding how things should go, different kinds of norms are relevant - prescriptive (what people should do) and descriptive (what people typically do). The norms could be agreed upon and/or given by an authority but they are part of the shared values within shared intentionality and necessary for cultural cognition. Being part of a community means collaborating in different ways with each other so some threshold of shared values must exist to live in harmony.

Possible to have shared experiences without shared perspective and vice versa.

Successful shared intentionality has both - the joint cooperative activity and the similar representation of how things are going and should go. In Chapter 3, I presented the story of Derek Black, a young famous white nationalist who came to publicly disown his former identity through friendships made at a small liberal arts college. The friendship aspect is the more well-known part of the story but, as Derek tells it, the overwhelming amount of anger and hatred from his fellow classmates also played a large role in his conversion. Derek had been on campus for a year before his white nationalist identity was discovered so he had already connected with some of his classmates and the school. Being part of a student body living on campus is an example of large-scale shared intentionality. The joint cooperative activity goes beyond just intellectual learning.

Students must agree to an explicit code of conduct, figure out the social norms around partying and studying, and share the goals of making friends, establishing one’s adulthood, and figuring out a career path together. The shared values of a student body will be diverse and often reflect the mission of the school. For a small liberal arts college, the community will be close-knit which increases their sense of “togetherness” and being anti-racist is a shared value and norm. The anger at Derek was not only due to his racist
ideology but also his secrecy. By hiding his beliefs, Derek was not cooperating in the student body in the way he should. Because he lacked the shared perspective and values, the students felt he was deceitful by living among them. Derek and his classmates had the shared experience(s) of being a college student but not a shared perspective on white supremacy.

Those that befriended Derek had the same shared perspective as the angry students (which Derek came to eventually have) regarding Derek’s behavior/belief system but not of Derek as a person. Whether their perspective of Derek was accurate at the time is unclear but that could depend on what one believes about human nature and our potential for growth. In the next section, I’ll look at how Confucianism and *wu-wei* allows us to understand how transformative shared experiences (TSEs) work for self-cultivation.

**B. How TSEs Work**

1. The Importance of *wu-wei*

It would be inappropriate (and likely ineffective) to say, “Let’s hang out so I can get to know myself through you.” To be genuinely engaged, one must be absorbed in the experience and not in self-reflection. It doesn’t make sense to say you’re doing something *together* if you’ll only be thinking about yourself and paying attention to the person merely for feedback. To want to be around a person in order that they can help you be a better person is admirable in that one is taking steps to learn. But, as I noted, our self-evaluation and rationalizations can often get in the way of our intake assessment of feedback. Also, as Wong noted, the role of emotions and our “fast” track play crucial
roles in moral transformation. So, we want to strike the right balance between consciously seeking and reflecting on feedback while letting ourselves feel and be in the experience.

Confucianism captures this balance in the concept of *wu-wei* although it has slightly different flavors depending on your Chinese philosopher. Broadly speaking, *wu-wei* is the “dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective” (Slingerland, 2014, 7). Confucianism might seem counter to *wu-wei* given its commitments to tradition and ritual but it’s “ultimately aimed at producing a cultivated, but nonetheless genuine, form of spontaneity” (24). While acting spontaneously, one has a “relaxed concentration” yet is “profoundly attuned to the environment” (23). Being in *wu-wei* feels “enjoyable” (8) as one goes with the flow and achieves one’s goals.

For our purposes, Mencius’ view is most applicable because he holds that “morality is about emotion-driven, *wu-wei* behavior” (118). Mencius takes a middle ground between a strict Confucian cultivation and a more primitivist view of *wu-wei* that relies on human nature. His position focuses on moral cultivation through “embodied emotions” which motivate and guide our behavior (115). Education is not about forcing moral behavior which could kill the “sprouts” or positive, innate tendencies for *de*. Instead, the goal is nurturing these tendencies of compassion, moral correctness, ritual propriety, and wisdom which Mencius calls the “four sprouts.” Naturalness is important in a cultivated sense. Although we are born with the “beginnings of morally proper *wu-wei* within us,” we must tend to these seeds so that they develop into virtues. To grow into a morally
developed person, you need the right environment and care just like a plant. Part of that care involves guidance of a wise teacher like a wu-wei farmer.

Self-knowing plays an important role in Mencius’ cultivation process. For example, Mencius tells the story of a child about to fall into a well to elicit feelings of empathy and compassion. He asks us to imagine the scene and then analyze our emotional reaction. The wu-wei farmer helps us identify the sprouts of goodness and separate them from weeds such as inappropriate emotions. While we take feedback from others in helping us identify these sprouts, self-knowing requires taking on the farmer role in noticing, evaluating, and isolating the sprout to grow. Once we have grasped “the stirrings of wu-wei” inside ourselves, “we need to focus on it, strengthen it, and extend it.” (122). We strengthen these feelings by “reflecting on them and putting them into practice” (125). In another example, Mencius points out the stirrings of compassion to the brutal tyrant King Xuan of Qi by drawing his attention to his own kindness towards an ox. This kindness shows the king has the emotional capacity to be a good ruler but he must still “reflect on the way he felt...ruminate on it, roll it over on his moral tongue” to fully grasp the empathy (125). Then, he must do the work of applying the feeling to the other situations such as his common people. This cognitive, imaginative aspect is key in Mencius’ holistic cultivation process which involves “your embodied experience, your emotions and perceptions” and employs “imagistic reflection and extension as its main tools” (128).

Wu-wei is a “complex and holistic” state of harmony involving “the integration of the body, emotions, and the mind” (7). Wong’s two-track model applies here as well. Often, when describing how to get into wu-wei, the “mind” is the “slow” track (whether
something is appropriate) and the “body” is the fast track (sizing up the situation and reacting). “For a person in wu-wei, the mind is embodied and the body is mindful; the two systems...integrated” (Slingerland, 29). Eventually, Slingerland argues, you want the slow mind to take a backseat and let yourself get lost in the experience to achieve wu-wei. However, Wong holds the reflective process to still play a large role in self-cultivation. We can and should come to reflectively appreciate what practices set us up for better automatic learning and responding to others.\textsuperscript{22}

For our purposes, wu-wei can provide particular insights into self-knowledge, feedback, and transformative shared experiences (TSEs). First, it can help us understand how we get feedback from others and our activities in an unconscious, less self-reflective way. “Overthinking” is not necessarily effective in TSEs as they often require getting completely absorbed in the activity to be successful. Wu-wei still allows for the individual to self-reflect but it’s done with “a kind of effortlessness” that “springs directly from embodied thinking” (227). A paradox is involved with wu-wei in that you should not try to not try or else you’re thinking about it and no longer in wu-wei. Getting pleasure and achieving one’s goals are important outcomes when engaging with people close to you like family, partners, and friends. You don’t seek these relationships just for those reasons, though. If those reasons become the sole purpose of the relationship, it would change and perhaps no longer be genuine. If concentrating too hard or treating transactional or approaching with self-interest, one cannot be successful.

\textsuperscript{22} Wong, 2017, 584.
Second, *wu-wei* helps us look at the role of TSEs in how we form beliefs about ourselves and the groups to which we belong. Part of why you lose yourself in *wu-wei* with others could be that you’re engaging with and absorbed in the “we” perspective. Being in this state means you’re exhibiting a certain level of social competence and others find you attractive (11). Not in a social vacuum, *wu-wei* depends on social interaction and shared values (37). Considering TSEs as *wu-wei* puts emphasis on experiential, social, shared values rather than just rational, individualist aims. This allows us to re-center the role of practices and communities, which is necessary for a virtue approach, in self-knowledge and self-cultivation. This chapter builds on ways “to produce change through constructive interaction with others” and how “we must be open and receptive to who they are and to what they are thinking and feeling in the moment.”

Finally, *wu-wei* helps us situate TSEs within a moral framework. The presence of *wu-wei* distinguishes TSEs involving moral virtue from the kind of experiences involving just goal-oriented success or coordination. Being in *wu-wei* gives one a sense of being absorbed or “at home” in some larger, value “whole” or framework of values - which differentiates it from the psychologist concept of “flow” (15).

In what follows, I introduce the three lenses from which to view TSEs. One achieves *wu-wei* by performing the right kind of TSEs (which could include anything from intense memorizing to getting drunk) by being in the right embodied and perceptive state (cognitive), having the right kind of interactions with others (personal), and engaging in the right kind of cultural practices (cultural). Despite distinguishing them in my analysis,

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23 Wong, 2017, 584.
it’s clear that the aspects exist simultaneously in our social interactions with each other. So, you cannot have one without the other two also working in some way.

Looking with each lens (cognitive, personal, and cultural), I explore the ways that we eat, play, and work together. Eating together includes how we share and coordinate meals, potlucks, our shared eating spaces, the kinds of foods we eat and how we eat them. We play together when we engage in games, sports, strategic teamwork activities as well as the arts such as music, dance, and humor and intimate acts like flirting, dating, and sex. Often, these activities involve a mutual gaze and seeing another’s personhood. Working together often involves an external goal but sharing those goals can lead to other transformations as seen in professional sports and military service. For Ellis and Atwater, it was being co-chairs of the ten-day charrette for people to voice their concerns about the school system and desegregation.

2. Cognitive: Seeing Together

Eating: Meals

Eating a meal involves seeing the table from your own view as well as imagining from others’ perspectives at the table and a kind of “bird’s eye” view. All of these are involved in the “we” perspective which includes the accepted and expected mannerisms. If you need to ask someone to pass the salt, you need to know who to ask, whether they will respond, and where to direct their attention. If you’re eating by yourself, you don’t represent the meal in the same way.
Part of whether an experience is truly shared depends on whether the perspective is shared. For a meal to be somewhat successful (for everyone), the participants must be perceiving and sharing a similar cognitive representation of the environment, common goal, and the accepted ways of working together to reach that goal. The environment includes the space at which one eats but also the organization and norms of the setting in which the meal takes place. We tend to think about the other diners in the restaurant in terms of how they help or hinder our own table from our desired goals whether that be eating, celebrating, grieving, fighting, or parenting. At some level, we are coordinating our actions to eat together but our cognitive representation looks different depending on whether diners are at separate family-sized tables, individual booths, or shared long tables for multiple parties. How we conceptualize and create personal space is influenced by race, culture, physiology, age, and interpersonal relationships.

Jim Crow segregation in restaurants is an example of coordination of white diners, business owners, and lawmakers whose specific motivation was the desire for “together” to only include white people. When Bill Riddick, the Black organizer of the charrette, first brought Ellis and Atwater together to discuss being co-chairs, he chose a neutral place in Durham for the three to eat lunch. Ellis couldn’t sit down when he arrived at the table where the two of them sat waiting but instead paced back and forth through the dining hall. Although he had agreed to the meeting and knew their race, Ellis struggled with the act of sitting down to eat with them. Part of it was how it would “look” to others.

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24 Rosegrant & McCroskey, 1975  
25 Hall, 1966; Watson, 1970  
26 McBride, King, & James, 1965  
27 Willis, 1966  
28 Evans & Howard, 1973; Little, 1965
to see Ellis sharing a meal with two Black people. That imagined “look” was not necessarily any one specific person’s perspective but rather the “we” perspective of everyone in the dining hall (and perhaps Durham if you consider the community as a part of the representation). He wasn’t wrong - “all around them people were gawking at the trio and whispering” although each person assumed they were saying different things. When he finally did sit down, Ellis and Atwater only communicated through Riddick - once again, signaling that this is not a joint activity and the goal is not the same as a normal meal. They refused to look at each other. That Atwater was “inches away” and “capable of sitting in a chair in a restaurant and eating food was a revelation to him.” Her doing something so “ordinary” was beyond the powers of his imagination. He could smell her hair, “hear the grinding of her teeth, feel the warmth emanating from her body” and something “churned inside of him.” He knew it wasn't sexual attraction or disgust but the unbearable feelings of confusion finally caused him to leave.

This visceral experience of eating a meal with someone is, as described, quite ordinary. When sharing a meal, we expect another person to chew their food and sit close if necessary. Yet Ellis couldn’t make sense of the incongruence between his current experience and his default cognitive representation of the joint activity. Even though he was resisting, Ellis still opened himself up to a new experience by sitting at the table for which he was unprepared in terms of its transformative powers. He now had this epistemically transformative experience to imagine, remember, and plan as part of the “we” (him, Atwater, and Riddick) leading the charrette. Sharing this meal humanized

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29 Davidson, Best, 262.
30 Davidson, 263.
Atwater to Ellis that was one of the first small steps to Ellis being able to show empathy towards not just Atwater but the Black community in Durham.

Playing: Sports

The ability to act and perceive one’s surroundings are going to be somewhat limited in any sports game. As you play, you create a cognitive representation of the game that involves all the players’ limitations, roles, and tendencies as well as the rules, potential plays, and informal social norms and relationships like rivalries. When you’re playing on the same team, you have an increased desire to know what those limitations are so you can help provide them opportunities to act or assist when appropriate in your own role. When you’re the quarterback, you have a cognitive representation that includes your own perspective but also of the field and your teammates. To successfully pass the ball, the quarterback (QB) needs a strong grasp of the individual teammates’ abilities to see, catch, and run or provide defense given the layout and their own perspectives. The QB tends to run away from the scrimmage involving the rest of players from both teams (unless they can get through the defense to the QB) at the start of the play. Even though the receivers do not know how well the QB can actually see and they know the QB has a first-person perspective, they assume the QB has more of an overhead view of battle and trust the QB’s cognitive representation (which includes the receivers’ perspectives and abilities) since they are in the midst of being on the battlefield yourself.

Part of memorizing plays is creating this shared representation for the team to follow without having to consciously think about it. Similarly, Confucian *wu-wei* requires
practice and memorization before you can let go and be successful in the moment.

Making and memorizing plays is engaged in shared intentionality - involves not only goal but how to get it and the roles and the expectations involved.

If a play breaks down, QBs point receivers towards where they want them to go.

Receivers will wave their hands if they are open to get the quarterback's attention and signal the quarterback to throw to them. However, the QB carries an authority with giving feedback that requires the receiver to pay attention and change behavior accordingly. A certain amount of trust in the QB’s perspective and decision-making is required which is also why the role is considered to be one of leadership for the team as a whole.

Knowing your teammates (and opponents) well is key because their actions will then give you information about what the next best play is. If you know that certain players are really aggressive so you might interpret their responses to you in a different way than others. Strategizing about the other team requires knowing their tendencies.

Sports involve a large amount of physical and mental coordination. One must simultaneously know what is supposed to happen (in terms of the play) yet be aware of and adjust to what is actually happening...while your teammates do the same thing. The backdoor in basketball is a play that involves faking out the defense. The originally intended pass is no longer open because of the opposing team’s defense so another player cuts around back to go set up for a lay-up by the net. However, it requires that the person with the ball be flexible and have some kind of representation with all the players in order to watch for this to happen. Another wu-wei way of playing basketball: if your teammate is guarding someone with the ball but your teammate loses them (and you find yourself
nearby), you leave the person you’re guarding and start guarding your teammate’s player and your teammate takes yours. Usually you yell out “switch!” but a lot of the time it’s just an unspoken understanding. Hockey and soccer will set plays but often “organic” plays come about largely due to player chemistry and anticipating where a person will go. This free, unconscious exchange of information about each other within the “we” perspective allows us to get feedback but only if we pay attention and build trust.

LeBron James commits himself to knowing his opposing teams and their plays well. While it helps that he also has a photographic memory and reports being able to remember the locations of all 10 players on the court throughout an entire basketball game, he studies beyond his own games. He’s known for calling out the plays and, because he watches footage of opposing teams playing, he has a very detailed, flexible, and knowledgeable cognitive representation of the team’s “we” perspective and could share that with his team. Quinn Cook, his teammate, speaks to how James “helps us get prepared just with his voice” signaling the kind of social cooperation he inspires. James is known for his high “Basketball IQ” which involves being able to see and predict things that are going to happen before they happen. This sense is very similar to the Confucian *wu-wei* as James spent serious time and energy practicing and memorizing these skills but makes them appear effortless when playing. The practice and memorization of Confucian ritual activity serves the same purposes so that you can relate to another person with the kind of attitude you need to have and express it effortlessly and

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31 Thank you to Carly Rex Smith for this example.

32 I am grateful to Ian Cruise and Matt Hernandez for these insights.

spontaneously. Then, you can make on the spot adjustments to the particular others involved and the current situation (like the backdoor pass). This quote is particularly telling: "I've been in those positions so many times throughout my career. I can literally close my eyes and know where my guys are going to be at, and be able to read and react to that." Due to his memory, studies, and quick decision-making, James has created an adaptable cognitive “we” perspective he’s using more than his own subjective first-person perspective. This allows him to be fully in *wu-wei* which involves appropriately interpreting and responding to the situation. Properly reading the situation and his own role allows James to take off running down the court for alley-oop dunks seemingly from nowhere.

*Working: Co-Chairs*

When Ellis first got involved with the school programs, he was doing it more to be disruptive and spy for the Klan than actually help so he was uncomfortable with the nomination.\(^\text{34}\) Atwater was not at the meeting when she was nominated and couldn’t sleep after refusing the position over the phone. She worried about how it would be interpreted by the newspaper so she called them in the morning to let them know she accepted and to print in the paper that she would work with *anybody* to help fix Durham schools.\(^\text{35}\) Atwater was the first in this sense to establish the clear shared goal and open the “we” perspective up to Ellis.

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\(^{34}\) Davidson, *Best*, 251, 257

\(^{35}\) Davidson, 258.
Although he resisted at first, Ellis was clearly committed to co-chairing as he started getting death threats days after having lunch with Riddick and Atwater. He immediately called Atwater to have their first one-on-one conversation that wasn’t a public yelling match. Appealing to “our kids...suffering in school,” Ellis asked Atwater if they could set aside their feelings to work on the charrette. He did the same when defending his position which he felt was in line with his Klan identity, claiming that “the charrette was the last, best chance to help white children.” The joint commitment between them was now settled and that opened the door for direct conversations between the two of them.

Ann also had to defend her involvement and appealed to the same goal:

“Mr Ellis has the same problems with the schools and his children as I do with mine and we now have a chance to do something for them...we are going to have to lay aside our differences and work together. This will be the first time two completely different sets of philosophies have united to work for this goal of better schools. If we fail, at least no one can say we didn’t try.”

Riddick played a key role in getting them to focus on what obstacles they would face in terms of backlash but framed it in terms of the tremendous potential for positive change “precisely because they were heading into the center of a racial storm.” This charrette was “bigger than either of you are,” he said. This goes back to wu-wei which requires feeling part of some framework of values larger than oneself. Riddick was appealing to

36 Davidson, 264.
37 Davidson, 269.
38 Carolina Times Interview, 269-270
39 Davidson, Best, 262
this sense of community, future generations, and the injustices they saw in the school system.

3. Personal: Seeing Each Other

“They did it because they knew that whatever else he was, he was also a human being. And simply because of that fact, he possessed a certain dignity. They had known this simple truth all along, even if he hadn’t, and now it was a gift they had given him.”

How Ann, Riddick, and all the others at the charrette treated him with “respect” despite his spewing “the most vile racist hatred” at them transformed Ellis, who had been raised in an abusive home and went into the Klan for feelings of belongingness and worth. Ellis and Atwater really began to bond after the second night of the charrette over the difficulties they faced in being co-chairs. “They forgot their exhaustion in the excitement of discovering how similar experiences were” is a clear sign of the state of wu-wei they entered which lead to them also talking about what parenting in poverty is like and sharing those experiences as parents. They also shared growing up in similar poor homes on dirt streets and soon felt like “old friends.” Absorbed in their connection, they became “oblivious to the world around them”

“Mirrored in her face were the same deeply etched lines of work and worry that marked his own face. And suddenly he was crying.” Ellis says this is the first time he ever cried

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40 Davidson, 289.  
41 Davidson, 275.  
42 Davidson, 276.
(an unlikely friendship doc). Awkwardly but “instinctively,” Atwater took his hand to
comfort him then began to cry herself.

Ann doesn’t report feeling anything in particular for Ellis nor should she have to provide
a mirror for Ellis. But she stayed and allowed herself to share these feelings of pain with
Ellis, which was transformative for him. Emotional contagion is the “tendency to
automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and
movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally.”43
Oxytocin is known for being a bonding hormone released in moments of intimate
physical touch. Perhaps this shared emotional display of vulnerability, visceral release of
stress, and surge of oxytocin opened the door for transformation.

Atwater doesn’t report feeling anything like empathy at the time. However, after that
night, Atwater “saw him suffering and wanted to ease his pain” despite wanting to slice
his neck not too long before (281). What made seeing each other so epistemically and
personally transformative? One might say, “They had seen each other.” But what does
that actually mean?

Eating: Sawubona

The Zulus greet each other with the phrase, sawubona, which is often translated as “I see
you” but is closer to “I see you as you are” or “do you see me?” if looking at the values

43 Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994, 153– 54
and framework under which sawubona works. Orland Bishop translates sawubona as “we see you” so it’s not a single “I” person. As he puts it, his seeing includes his ancestors and the gods. Sawubona is also more than a greeting: “Seeing is a dialogue. It establishes you as a witness to some phenomenon that can also be a witness to your presence.” Being in sawubona means acknowledging you’re seeing each other and asking why you were both in the same place, at the same time, seeing each other. Bishop looks at the oppression as being due in part to losing “imagination of what sight meant, of what these inner capacities really mean.” Nell and Aldous argue that the translation goes beyond just a greeting and requires that everyone feel and be recognized, accepted, and valued (2019, 4). Racial discrimination and asymmetrical power dynamics prevent sawubona.

Practicing sawubona was the goal of the community supper at St. Peter’s in Mowbray, Cape Town, South Africa. A majority of guests and volunteers were marginalized members of society, particularly for having a criminal record or “sleeping in the rough” which implies not having a home. One guest said, “What I appreciate most of the community dinners is that for the hour that I am here ... I am human ... there are people who are interested in me.” Nell and Aldous found that a “reciprocity in relationships and a re-humanising on both fronts” in which not only were marginalized members humanized but also the middle-class rehumanized who previously were seen as superior (4). More people reported coming for the “dignity” and “finding humanity” than food.

Key to the successful sawubona practice are the explicit values of “equalizing power” and “acceptance” as part of the dinner (and not anything to do with church).

Sitting down to have a meal together, especially when making food with or for another person, can be an act of intimacy when cooperative, not transactional. The “we” perspective must involve treating the other person like a person whose perspective and commitment matters to what you’re doing. It requires paying attention to their experience and mental states and communicating in the right way. Being intentional about sharing intimate space and direct eye contact makes a difference given our cultural stereotypes. Perceived violence and level of criminality tend to affect personal space in that people are generally less reluctant to sit next to an individual who has never committed a crime than to violent and non-violent offenders.45

To understand how feedback works when sharing a meal, consider a first date or job interview. In such situations, compare one in which you cannot get a read of what the person thinks of you versus one in which you do know what they think. Even if the person’s reaction is bad, you’d almost always rather be in the second case. You usually spend much of the time consciously thinking or trying to avoid thinking about it unless you’re in a state of wu-wei. To a certain extent (while being considerate), one should not be paying attention to what the other person thinks of oneself but rather paying attention to the other person. Compare the first date and job interview folks to a couple that has been dating or lunching together a long time and is in “sync” (their own version of wu-wei). They have ways of relaying feedback to each other and “seeing” each other - “why...

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aren’t you enjoying your favorite dish, is something wrong?” - or knowing not to bring up happy hour if their companion suffers from alcoholism. Conversely, we still get feedback from the person who has disengaged and refuses to look at us. By no longer taking part in the social aspect of the meal, the person sends a message that one is unworthy of sharing this intimate experience. That is partly why the sawubona practice at the community supper was successful - the breaking of bread together signaled a kind of vulnerability (I’m human, I eat too) as well as equality (we are all worthy to eat together).

**Playing Together**

David Velleman uses Tomasello’s account to conceptualize love and other significant human activities. Velleman argues these kinds of activities require a capacity to think of yourself as a thinking thing living in the world, an objective-self conception. This objective-self conception is one’s awareness of oneself in space and being attuned to how one should move through it even if not consciously thinking about it. For example, wearing a suit will change Velleman’s posture and gait but, if he forgets he’s wearing a suit and ruins it by sitting in the grass, it’s not some conscious objective self-conception he’s lost. Velleman claims that when you forget yourself in an activity, “what you lose is your objective awareness of yourself as the agent, an inhabitant of the world” which is what happens when he’s wearing the suit (perhaps due to Velleman thinking about philosophy). However, Confucian *wu-wei* requires that one keep this self-knowledge of

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how to hold oneself and act within one's environment albeit unconsciously. Someone in wu-wei would not have to think about the suit because they would have made a habit of not doing certain things when wearing one. The key point for both accounts is that one is not consciously attending to oneself in these situations or having “objectively-reflexive thoughts” even though one is capable.

Being human, for Velleman, means having an objective-self conception, making plans, social interaction, and “enjoying distinctively personal modes of togetherness and apartness” with others. We value doing things with other people because we value a person’s capacity to “themselves as inhabitants of the world, thinking this thought” where the “thought” can be joint intentions, shared perspective, or emotion.\(^{47}\) When doing a joint activity, like watching the sunset together, the joint intention which “determines both visual experiences” because “where each of you looks depends on where both of you intend to look; and where both of you look determines what each of you sees.” Yet, at the same time, “if one is to watch in company with another, being one of the company must enter one’s awareness, even though the sunset has one’s undivided attention.”\(^{48}\) “Joint intentions are operative even when people are doing nothing together besides doing nothing else together”\(^{49}\) Atwater and Ellis were probably tired after the long day of charrette conversations so their conversation may not have started as very deep and intentional. In that one-on-one interaction, they were able to look into each other’s eyes and begin to really see each other. As Velleman puts it, “What we see when we look into someone’s eyes is his self-awareness, because we see him seeing us likewise, hence

\(^{47}\) Velleman, 2013, 325.
\(^{48}\) Velleman, 329.
\(^{49}\) Velleman, 328.
seeing us seeing him, ad infinitum – a regress in which he goes on endlessly seeing himself being seen.”\textsuperscript{50} This infinity exists inside each of us as particular individuals who can comprehend our smallness in a centerless universe yet still feel the significance of our subjectivity.

Velleman draws this last point from Thomas Nagel’s views on personhood and builds on this sense of wonder we can have towards ourselves as well as other people. When we feel love for another person, we feel “amazement at the personhood of another.”\textsuperscript{51} Velleman argues that love is less like an emotion and more like a “syndrome” in which one particular “strand” inside all kinds is the sense of wonder. Research with loving-kindness meditation towards others and oneself is a method of focusing one’s attention on that strand by first thinking of people to whom one feels love then directing it towards oneself and other people. Evidence shows that it can help treat depression\textsuperscript{52} and that those that regularly practice this meditation have increased empathy towards others.\textsuperscript{53}

“The mere knowledge of someone’s personhood is not an emotional matter: before one can get emotional about someone’s personhood, one has to notice and pay attention to it.”\textsuperscript{54} When they talked about their children together, Atwater and Ellis paid attention to each other’s personhood which opened the door for friendship. We tend to be moral

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\textsuperscript{50} Velleman, 331.
\textsuperscript{51} Velleman, 331.
\textsuperscript{54} Velleman, 2013, 331.
because, “left to coordinate on their own” away from powerful interest groups, people favor ways of life that are hospitable to valuing persons” such friendship and love.55

Working: Education

To get Atwater and Ellis really working together, Riddick assigned them a task every night to help prepare for the charrette. The tasks did not necessarily involve talking but they did require them to come together for hours. Riddick made sure to phrase the task according to the needs of the charrette and the issue they both cared about: education.56 “I wasn’t trying to tell them they needed to be together,” Riddick said. He would just say, “We need to staple these together because we need to pass them out at our next session.” Their joint attention would be directed towards a task which would make it less likely they could focus on their hatred towards each other. The task itself could be small but Atwater and Ellis knew it played a role in tackling the bigger issue.

To stay motivated, Atwater and Ellis shared a goal of better education for their children. If you’re genuinely working “together” with someone, you must reveal the relevant parts of yourself: emotions, goals, what you see and thinking. This exchange of seeing another person and being seen came as the charrette allowed for people to be vulnerable and share and establish a certain level of intimacy with each other over several hours and days.

55 Velleman, 333.
A transformative moment for Ellis came from hearing a Black mother claim the school treated her “as if they were stupid troublemakers” because they were poor and black. He felt as if she took the words out of his own mouth as it reminded him of how his own children were treated for being poor “white trash.” “Even more amazing” was that the experience kept happening over and over throughout the day with different Black parents. “For the first time in his life, C.P. really listened” to Black people and was “stunned” as he heard “his own concerns coming from their mouths.” It seemed that the working-class children were disproportionately punished and inner-city schools were getting worse supplies than the suburbs (which continues today in the US although we know statistically that race does play a role). “It had never occurred to C.P.” that Black children were treated as his own and it “puzzled” him. The new perspective of Black people caused confusion, which Ellis was unable to evaluate at first. The willingness of Atwater and others to develop a friendship was essential for Ellis’ repeated exposure and self-reflection. Further experiences lead him to reevaluate his representations and seek more information such as getting tours of the predominantly Black schools.

4. Cultural: Being Together

To accept Tomasello’s theory of cultural cognition, one’s theory of cultural evolution is particularly relevant. Under his view, “human culture is the form of social organization that arose in human lineage in response to specific adaptive challenges” with its most

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57 Davidson, 1996, 274.
distinct characteristic being its high degree and uniqueness of cooperation. Slingerland uses evolutionary psychology to give support for why wu-wei works. We sense that the conscious, verbal mind can be sneakier and that spontaneous behavior is harder to fake. When someone is pleasant and attractive to others, we trust them when it appears automatic and effortless. We are “not autonomous, self-sufficient, purely rational individuals but emotional pack animals” according to both evolutionary theory and Confucianism.

Some evolutionary definitions of culture include “information that is acquired from other individuals via social transmission mechanisms” and “information capable of affecting individuals’ behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through...social learning.” We can look to cultural evolution to see what conditions allow for human flourishing, peacefully addressing conflict, healing from collective trauma, and rebuilding intergroup trust. Inclusivist moralities “reject restrictions on membership in the class of beings who have the highest moral status that are based on gender, race, and ethnicity and deny that only members of the human species have moral standing.” Moral progress in this area involves expanding one’s sense of community “beyond tribal boundaries and mutually self-serving cooperative relationships between groups.”

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58 Tomasello, 2019, 3.
59 Slingerland, 2014, 11
60 Slingerland, 15.
61 Mesoudi, 2011, 2-3
62 Richerson and Boyd, 2005, 5
64 Buchanan and Powell, 62.
Part of my account of transformative shared experiences is developing a naturalist approach to social inclusion. Here I see the work building on approaches to human nature that do not presuppose a competitive, exclusive approach to group dynamics and morality. For example, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell argue that a certain culture’s moral psychology is exclusive to the extent they suffer (or significantly believe they suffer) from harsh conditions of threat. Under their account, inclusivist morality is a luxury good that people can develop when they feel safe - which also means not falling prey to cognitive biases and “defective social-epistemic practices” that could cause them to believe they aren’t.

The transformative role of culture is providing the kinds of practices and spaces that people use to identify themselves, which can then turn into habits, which then turn into vices or virtues. Our social and institutional practices affect what kind of shared experiences in which one engages and who one will trust in those experiences. We are biased towards associating with others similar to ourselves but certain shared experiences have a variety of participants. One might choose to engage in a shared experience prior to knowing the other participants. How much one values the shared experience influences how receptive to other participants one is.

While I do not have the space to defend this view here, Tomasello’s cultural cognition is well-suited for a theory of moral progress. Most cultural evolution theories tend to focus on transmission only (“acquired” being the key term). Tomasello’s evolutionary view involves a specific coordinative, creative dimension of culture. This dimension is

65 Buchanan and Powell., 188
uniquely human and our kind of sociality which include its motivational aspects and the
new social relationships that these engender. Without this special kind of sociality, the
coopera tive practices of cultural transmission would not be possible.

a) Eating Together

The way one experiences shared agency will differ according to the role one plays as a
participant. Many social practices, even meals, designate authorities as part of the
structure of the activity and to enforce the norms. A shared experience can take different
forms depending on whether it’s a more social or institutional practice. Institutionalizing
these social practices involves (often informal) legislation surrounding roles of authority
and rules to follow. The “authority” of a meal could be the head chef who prepares it, the
pastor who prays over it, the country club socialite who organized it, or the local public
health official who approved it. Yet, a cultural authority comes from eating recipes that
have been passed down for generations. Beyond just taste, traditional recipes in multiple
cultures involve cooking and combinations of foods that bring out the best in terms of
nutrition and safety.66

Transformative shared experiences (TSEs) could involve eating foods from other cultures
but the roles of participants and the extent to which the experience is shared. Food can
become a source of familiarity and open-mindedness as one comes to like flavors and
dishes that may have seem strange at first. This open-mindedness to different cultures via

66 Henrich, Secret to our Success
food. Supporting restaurants owned by immigrants or outsiders to one’s community allows for a sharing of cultural knowledge but not necessarily an experience with those making one’s food. Finding ways to develop relationships with others with different backgrounds and sharing meals maintains the important cognitive and personal parts of a TSE. Similarly, supporting local businesses allows one to know the people who are making one’s food and potentially “see” their humanity. However, the roles of authority and the capitalist function creates barriers for a TSE.

b) Playing: Media

Media such as literature, movies, TV shows, and podcasts can be transformative. Not only do these stories and perspectives teach us about others, they teach us about ourselves. Films can “afford us self-knowledge, by awakening feelings in us we never knew we had and enabling us to examine them apperceptively” (Carroll, 2008, 148). They do this in part by playing with our emotions, which then changes the way we perceive things. Only when we’re absorbed in the story or the way it’s told do we get caught up in whatever the emotions are. Once again, we can apply *wu-wei* to notice the differences in how and with whom we consume media and how that changes our experience of it. You typically feel less fulfilled after bingeing a raunchy reality show by yourself than watching a nature documentary or laughing at a witty comedy with friends. Talking about with others about their impressions allows one to compare, notice what one missed or took differently, and use that information to self-reflect and/or reflect on the cultural narrative.
What’s interesting about films (and TV) is their ability to do this often across cultural and group identity divides. Although we don’t always watch them physically together, we consume TV and movies in our various communities. The images and narratives create particular cognitive representations of what the culture (and we as viewers) deems significant, normal, and existentially human. Building on the role of cultural foods, many TV shows such ones hosted by Anthony Bourdain set out to help expose people not only to new recipes but also the communities and the people who make the food.

“The bodily feelings that are then provoked by the emotional state, in turn, bias or organize our apprehension of the eliciting state of affairs in accordance with the criteria that govern the prevailing emotion.” (Carroll, 157). That means that a movie can change the way you see that situation, not only in the moment but in the future, by reorganizing your perspective and reaction. It also can change the way that you relate to and control the relevant emotion. This is the exact worry that some have regarding violent media and the desensitization that could come with it (while it’s shown to be short-lasting in how it affects one’s decision-making, one could still question how the quantity of media could make a difference).

c) Working Together

Another culturally shared experience of working together is military duty. Military duty has varying social and institutional norms depending on the country but the sense of shared agency is necessarily central. You must trust and rely on others not only to
achieve the common goal but also to stay alive. Working together is crucial for survival which is why military duty involves different practices to instill habits of moving, thinking, even speaking in unison.

The military is one of the oldest racially integrated organizations in the United States. The shared agency between those in the military, regardless of race, is partly responsible for igniting the civil rights movement. In post-World War I Durham, divisions between the Black working class and Black aristocracy arose partly because of the former’s demands for the “democracy they had risked their lives for” which threatened the local political order the latter preferred.67 Having a shared experience with other White men fighting and living overseas in Europe, Black men returned from World War II with a new perspective.68 Although they faced racism within the military, “the war also afforded African American soldiers a look at the world outside of the United States...the war gave them the opportunity to live in countries where there was no such thing as segregation and meet people who did not treat them as less than human based on the color of their skin.”69 The shared perspective to which they were exposed involved norms of equal treatment that implied the possibility for a less segregated reality. While the common goal was fighting the war and not segregation, the shared experience gave Black men important feedback about their identities.

C. Limitations

67 Davidson, 52-54
In the last section, I present several cases of transformative shared experiences that can create change on a cognitive, personal, and cultural level. Such changes help a person overcome ignorance and see themself through another person’s eyes. It would be naive to assume these kinds of experiences will necessarily end up with everyone (or even most people) knowing themselves better and seeing the world and each other more justly. Here I cover some of the more obvious concerns.

1. Biases

Cognitive biases affect not only our self-reflection but our perception and evaluation of people and the environment (as discussed in Chapter 3). Shared experiences with those who are different from oneself might not always result in a shared perspective. For example, confirmation bias makes us likely less to see things that would disconfirm our previous beliefs. Our stereotypes have significant influence not only on how we represent the world but also on how we represent another’s perspective. It’s unclear whether one could prevent implicit biases or ignorance from distorting or diminishing one’s mental simulation of another’s perspective.

Transformative shared experiences also seem to rest on capacities like empathy. Serious reservations about using empathy as a model have been raised by philosophers such as Jesse Prinz (2011) and psychologists such as Paul Bloom (2016). Some reasons to doubt empathy are empirical such as its capacity being tied to similarity more than compassion as well as moral like the questionable value of emphasizing with a hateful, evil person.
Sharing perspectival ownership, as Zahavi would put it, with this kind of person would be transformative in potentially harmful ways such as internalizing their views.

When confronted with someone who disconfirms a stereotype, a person might also judge that individual as an exception to the rule. Atwater was not Ellis’ only Black friend he made at the charrette nor was she the only person he reports making a difference to his perspective or self-view. Howard Clement, a rich Black man in Durham, also changed Ellis’ perspective in recognizing the role of class. The two became friends but were never close because of their differences in wealth and lifestyle which made Ellis uncomfortable.

2. Uniqueness

Another limitation to transformative shared experiences concerns the uniqueness of each person’s individual experiences so we cannot draw conclusions about what the outcomes of TSEs would be. One’s unique perspective, subjectivity, and intersecting identities is often both an advantage and limitation. The shared perspectives is still a representation that, to some extent, remains private and subjective to the individual. Besides implicit biases, each person will be somewhat limited in their ability to simulate another’s perspective because they will have to rely on their own imaginative abilities, experiences, and background beliefs. The shared (to whatever extent) perspective is not considered an actual “birds-eye” view and will differ slightly from person to person, within and across groups and culture.
3. Group think

Groupthink is "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Janis, 1982, p.9). The desire for harmony or conformity outweighs good epistemic practices. An “excessive form of coherence-seeking among members of high prestige,” group think occurs because members value the group (or being part of it) more than anything else (Hart, 1991, p.247). The phenomenon occurs when we are no longer critical of those with authority and power or the ways they give us feedback. When groupthink affects beliefs, “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” begin to suffer because of group pressures to conform (Janis, 1972, p.9). The results are “irrational or dysfunctional decision-making processes, a distorted reality, excessive optimism producing hasty and reckless policies, and a neglect of ethical issues” (Hart, p.247). These deficiencies put the group in epistemic (and potentially moral) danger of making poor choices with disastrous consequences.

Those within the group are directly pressured to not disagree (or, at least, not express arguments against) the group’s views. In relation to silencing dissenters, group members suppress personal doubts about their decisions or judgments. Self-censorship of doubts or deviations from the perceived group consensus leads to a lack of proper evaluation of the group’s views. Both symptoms contribute to the “illusion of unanimity,” which causes the group to quickly jump to conclusions regarding the group decision or judgement. The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous as they follow the group
leader(s)’ suggestions. Groupthink also leads to stereotyped views of those outside the group. To achieve a feeling of superiority, they create immoral or evil attributes of the out-group. With negative views of the out-group, the in-group will fail to value effective responses to conflict.

Transformative shared experiences can easily lead to groupthink under the wrong conditions. The four different symptoms of groupthink include: direct pressure on dissenters, self-censorship, the illusion of unanimity, and stereotyped views of out-groups. Experts suffer from a lack of dissenters because of the excessive epistemic deference that takes place. Those at the top of the social hierarchy are less likely to raise arguments against their privilege and views of superiority. The social hierarchy is based on stereotypes regarding group identity so that certain groups are disenfranchised through identity categories. Prejudice within shared meanings and discursive practices goes unquestioned when people assume everyone agrees on the shared understandings of group identities regardless of whether the stereotypes are harmful. Cults are an extreme example of groupthink often brought about by manipulation and/or abuse. Cults take advantage of our natural inclination for TSEs as the cult activities usually involve doing most (if not all) daily activities together, increasing one’s vulnerability, and bringing about a sense of “losing” oneself for some greater “good” (as defined by cult leader). I’m only interested in the TSEs that have value in the sense of making you better off.

At a minimum, in terms of self-knowledge but often some degree of moral transformation occurs. Even if just acquiring a new motivation like wanting to be a better person, “seeing” yourself more clearly through the TSE can play a causal role. The problem is
that we won’t always have a clear way to tell cults from religious groups, peaceful communes, and close-knit corporate conglomerates.

4. Dominant Perspectives

In Chapter 1 and 4, I discuss dominant perspectives in oppressive environments. These perspectives work to cloud vision, control and perpetuate (often oppressive) goals, and dictate the way events are experienced (and who gets to experience them). For example, Charles Mills’ concept of white ignorance is a structural kind of “active” ignorance based in white supremacy that maintains itself through people and institutions perpetuating false beliefs and avoiding hard truths about racial differences. We can see how white ignorance is a dominant perspective in the U.S. not only through obvious acts of racism but also through the valuing and centering of the White experience. Racial stereotypes still influence the “we” perspective even when the activities appear shared.

For example, the rarity of Black quarterbacks and coaches signal that the positions of leadership are associated with Whiteness. Black players make up most of NFL teams but rarely as quarterbacks or coaches which suggests that those who make up teams (even before the professional leagues) are fine with using Black bodies but not Black minds. In a 2017 interview, Tyrod Taylor, who was the Buffalo Bills’ starting quarterback, said, “It’s always going to be twice as bad just because of who I am — an African American
quarterback. And that’s not anything I just found out. It’s been that way since I was a kid.”

Talent scouts divide quarterbacks into two categories that tend to be racialized. The “dual threat” designation primarily refers to black quarterbacks because they assume a Black quarterback is going to run with the ball, while “pro style” usually refers to white quarterbacks because their ability to memorize, see, and execute plays is more salient to the scouts. NFL draft experts buy into and perpetuate racial stereotypes given their studies’ results showing consistently lower ratings for Black players in terms of leadership and intelligence/decision-making. White male athletes are often characterized as intellectual and disciplined whereas Black male athletes don’t think, just react. We can also look at the treatment of Black quarterback Colin Kapernick in taking a leadership role. Kapernick took a knee during the National Anthem to protest police brutality and racial discrimination in 2016 which caused an uproar. The San Francisco 49ers fired Kapernick and the NFL is considered to have “blackballed” him despite many other players kneeling that season. His athletic career ended before the age of 30 despite no injuries or disease.

Films, TV, and advertising provide the main images for a culturally shared perspective. The “male” gaze is a term used to describe the way that women’s bodies are portrayed in media such as films. Often only certain body parts (breasts, buttocks, legs) appear and the

71 https://theundefeated.com/features/how-long-will-black-qbs-have-to-endure-racist-double-standards/
73 Brown, Anderson, and Thomson, 2012, 72
women’s faces and/or heads are unseen, signalling a lack of humanity and personhood. This use of “gaze” is both literal and metaphorical. The director or photographer guides the viewers’ joint attention through camera angles, cuts, and close-ups to tell us who and what matters. The “gaze” refers to a kind of dominant perspective in terms of these patterns of perception and value and specifies a particular way of “seeing” that can distort reality.

In researching sawubona, the authors of the earlier study explicitly mention their worries about the “postcolonial” gaze and the “academic researcher” gaze. In general, the experience of being the object of someone’s gaze, something which ethnographers try to be especially sensitive to/aware of. Researching sawubona potentially counteracted the practice because it was no longer about mutuality. In terms of wu-wei, the background framework of values was thwarted: “the idea that these relationships were framed and scrutinised by being a PhD student was always simmering in the background, subtly gnawing away at the integrity of the whole process” of sawubona (6). The greatest danger is when a member of a subordinated or oppressed group is wondering whether to embark on shared activity with a member of a dominant group.

IV. Practices of Resistance

Just as feedback can change you for the better, it can also transform you for the worst. In the last chapter, I discussed the dangers of feedback and its transformative power in discriminatory environments. While all members of society face manipulation and control via feedback, oppressive or “disformative” feedback is an epistemic injustice that targets and harms certain groups’ ability to form beliefs about themselves. Some
situations involving feedback and interactions with others put group members who are already oppressed at serious risk. While Atwater remained steadfast in her identity, she did not seek out white nationalists as friends or ask for their feedback nor should we.

Why focus on resistance instead of just rejecting false information? Under my and others’ accounts, resistance can be a virtue so we should look at the appropriate practices for achieving it. Epistemic resistance is “the use of our epistemic resources and abilities to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustains those structures” (Medina, 2012, 3). In relation to feedback, resistance is more than rejection but rather involves a stance towards fighting against oppressive stereotypes. As I outlined in Chapter 2 and 4, feedback’s often subtle transformative power, makes it hard to recognize and evaluate. Additionally, certain views and structures in oppressive environments dominate society controlling who is seen, included, and how. Here I examine how we might approach self-knowing that has a place for resistance, specifically cases that weaken the influence and chance for internalization of feedback from oppressive environments.

Epistemic and political resistance often go hand in hand so I look at both in the context of cognitive, personal, and cultural resistance. Resistance is an important part of self-knowing for anyone in an oppressive environment as feedback in such an environment is likely to lead to ignorance and lack of self-determination. This analysis skims the surface of a rich and deep discussion across feminist and queer theory, critical race studies, sociology, psychology and clinical psychiatry, and social activist circles. My aim is to provide an overview for future research on these practices by noticing the intersections between these disciplines and groups.
A. Resistance and wu-wei

“The wu-wei person move(s) only through the open spaces in life, avoiding the difficulties that damage one’s spirit and wear out one’s body” (Slingerland, 21). Since wu-wei is associated with a kind of graceful movement around obstacles, one might assume it’s contradictory to resistance, which is typically defined in terms of opposition and friction. However, wu-wei is relevant for resistance in the following ways:

1. One may look to cultural and ancestral forms of resistance for guidance when appropriate. What kinds of historical cases of political resistance and their practices provide models for epistemic resistance? Should we resist feedback and, if so, how? What are some ways to appropriately resist feedback and remain virtuous?

2. Resistance involves a framework of values such as being anti-oppression of all kinds - how does resisting feedback as a route to self-knowledge also help break down oppressive structures in one’s environment? How does it fit within the moral backdrop?

3. Recognizing and rejecting certain kinds of oppressive feedback require practice and self-reflection at first. Yet appropriate resistance, especially to oppressive feedback, could also have “seeds” in human nature.

4. “Effortless action” is the goal, not self-conscious resistance. Privileged people shouldn’t constantly have to be reminding themselves to not feel superior but they might need to recognize the feedback they’re getting might have to do with privilege. Oppressed people want to brush off or knock down feedback without
getting discouraged or upset. How this resistance works could depend on other methods for preventing that kind of feedback in the first place.

5. Social interaction and cooperation are part of resistance. Resistance doesn’t always mean anger. For example, Medina conceptualizes resistance as a kind of “friction” that is necessary for a truly democratic society. Nor does anger always negate love as Myisha Cherry argues when looking at the anger of civil rights activists. Confucianism holds that moral autonomy involves finding harmony through negotiation with others and their interests in the situation and adjusting accordingly.\(^{74}\) Yet, this harmonization still takes place “in the light of the interdependence of individuals and the various communities to which they belong, and also the interdependence of the goods toward which they aim.” So, harmony (and wu-wei) does not mean pleasing everyone or prioritizing all interests the same.

**B. Cognitive Resistance**

Resisting at a cognitive level means fighting against false information or oppressive feedback that can distort perceptions and thoughts. General reasons to resist, not just reject, feedback include abusive situations in which the feedback involves harm to one’s well-being or cases of manipulation that threaten one’s autonomy. In Chapter 4, I discuss how certain groups are more vulnerable to this dangerous kind of feedback due to

\(^{74}\) Wong, Relational and Autonomous Selves, 427
discrimination and oppression. Here, I discuss possible routes to resisting oppressive feedback that can distort one’s perspectives of oneself. While I primarily focus on marginalized groups, these practices apply to everyone in oppressive environments. If one cares about resisting active ignorance, then engaging in these practices will be worthwhile for self-knowledge and transformative justice.

1. Critical Eye

We live in an unjust world and that is, and should be, a factor in how we form beliefs about other people (Basu, 2018). One should also recognize this fact when forming beliefs about oneself. What meanings we choose to use and promote should take the backdrop of oppression into account. Recognizing the distortions in one’s conceptual framework matters whether one is more privileged or oppressed - often it involves realizing that one can be both.

Taking a critical eye refers to the practice of noticing and asking questions about the way we use identity terms, how we decide social arrangements, and what causal stories about ourselves we value and promote. Appropriate and successful cognitive resistance will likely require other virtues to work alongside self-knowing. Virtues like intellectual curiosity and virtuous skepticism allow one to question the feedback and the meanings behind words, images, and cultural narratives. Larry May refers to this practice as “taking a critical distance” (p.139-141) which is more than just a particular viewpoint but rather a kind of achievement that one works towards in attaining a progressive standpoint.
Iris Murdoch gives us an idea of how this critical eye might work in her example of the mother-in-law (M) who comes to see her daughter-in-law (D) in a new way. The assumption is M is “intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to the object which confronts her.” The transformation occurs when M tells herself…“I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded...Let me look again.’...reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters.” In the case of resisting feedback, the object of one’s “vision” could be the feedback, the source, or oneself. Murdoch recognizes that such cases could be unclear in terms of whether one should alter one’s vision or whether one is reflecting for the right reasons. For Murdoch, the right motivation will be love and justice (18). Murdoch argues these virtues not only motivate us to take this position of critical reflection but help us see the truth. Resisting feedback that contributes to oppression, whether one’s own or towards another group, involves learning more about oppression but also being motivated to critically reflect in the right way. Throughout the dissertation, I’ve drawn attention to the limitations of self-criticism but my argument is not that one should refrain from self-criticism. Rather, one must be particularly sensitive to the ways that one’s social position and environment could influence the process. The process also need not be discussed only as a purely introspective activity if we consider cases of transformative shared experiences.

In order to maintain certain people or interest groups’ power, oppressive environments manipulate how one forms one’s intersecting identities of superiority and inferiority. Recognizing that class was often the salient group in the shared oppression between races played a huge role in Ellis coming to resist the feedback of white supremacy. He realized
that, in some cases, race was “a facade tacked onto a superstructure of class,” embellished to distract people (278). In this way, transformative shared experiences play a key role in cognitive resistance against dominant perspectives like white supremacy and capitalism.

In the U.S., the movement to call out the racist origins of slang words and phrases serves to call attention to the original meanings so that people will then associate the word or phrase with that meaning. While advocates realize most people don’t use the words in that way, the original dominant meanings of words still linger as part of that concept and therefore do damage by reinforcing negative stereotypes. This kind of “uncovering” is not adding a new meaning onto the word but rather revealing its underlying force (racism is why it became popular).

This kind of resistance tells us how to explore and reject certain conceptual frameworks and words but not how to replace them when forming beliefs about the self. How does a marginalized, oppressed person know themselves given the conceptual tools that society forces them to use to categorize and understand their experience?

2. Reframing

When we reframe something, we change the way we see or experience an object, event, behavior, thought, or memory. Different therapeutic approaches have ways of helping a person change distorted representations that can occur due to addiction, abuse, or other emotional issues. Psychoanalytic therapy seeks to reveal how one’s past experiences shape the way one interprets one’s present experiences and other people. For example, a
person could interpret their failure at an activity as indicative of their worthlessness if they’ve been abused or abandoned. The therapist helps provide feedback so that one sees the connection and hopefully overcomes the problem by reframing the situation with the issues in mind. Slingerland takes Mencius to be a “moral psychoanalyst” in how he interacts with others to help them grasp seeds of virtue through “a combination of psychological insight and careful questioning” (2014, 124). When we seek sources of feedback, we should look for moral guides but the goal is eventually finding and fostering these seeds on our own.

In explaining Mencius’ approach, Wong is open to the idea that Mencius helps re-frame memories and their emotional significance as we remember them: “One might feel emotions again, but the feelings might not be quite the same, as one’s subjective interpretation has shifted”75 Cognitive behavioral therapy uses a specific approach called cognitive reappraisal which involves construing a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in a way that changes its emotional impact (Lazarus & Alfert, 1964). The framework can be as basic such as learning to see cigarettes as unhealthy or complex as acknowledging traumatic reactions from sexual assault. This psychological tactic for emotional and self-regulation is positively correlated with life satisfaction. Some people naturally take this approach to regulating their emotional reactions (Gross and John, 2003). It can involve different combinations of cognitive and linguistic processes to help achieve a desired reaction when remembering or faced with certain situations.

75 Wong, Responses to Snow, Miller, and Seok, 2017, 578.
A cognitive process in reappraisal involves shifting attention to a particular part of one’s representation (either in the present via one’s perceptual experience or in the past via one’s working memory) to regulate the emotions. This strategy has been successful in terms of people’s self-reports and brain activity of emotional regulation ([https://doi.org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1177/0956797612449838](https://doi.org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1177/0956797612449838)). A linguistic process in appraisal involves identifying one’s thinking patterns by observing, naming, and reframing them. The idea is that by identifying how one engages in fallacious and harmful thinking or “cognitive distortions,” a person can then actively change them through positive reframing. For example, one might keep a diary to catch for “overgeneralization” thinking by observing when thoughts or rules involving “always” or “never” appear. Partners have been shown to help positively reframe thoughts to help relieve stress ([https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07347332.2018.1555198?journalCode=wjpo20](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07347332.2018.1555198?journalCode=wjpo20))

Cognitive reappraisal allows one to reframe the information one receives about the self and how one experiences that feedback. Victims of abuse are often told things such as “You liked it”[^76] or “You were asking for it” or “Why didn’t you leave?”[^77] that distorts how they encode that situation. By recreating experiences with a certain framework such as a “birds-eye” view and integrating important information like background beliefs about what sexual assault is, the person comes to recognize and see similar events and behavioral patterns with this framework in mind. Similarly, a person can potentially use

[^76]: [https://care.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/men_and_sexual_abuse.pdf](https://care.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/men_and_sexual_abuse.pdf)
[^77]: [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/20/fka-twigs-abuse-victims-reframing-conversation#:~:text=%E2%80%9C%5BA%5D%20I%20often%,holding%20someone%20hostage%20with%20abuse%3F](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/20/fka-twigs-abuse-victims-reframing-conversation#:~:text=%E2%80%9C%5BA%5D%20I%20often%,holding%20someone%20hostage%20with%20abuse%3F)
reappraisal to recognize and reframe feedback according to the discrimination at play rather than attributing to themselves.

I want to extend this practice of reframing to how we reference ourselves whether it be one’s behaviors, emotions, or body. As we become adults, we tend to seek out relationships in which “one helps another to grow by prompting recall and perhaps reinterpretation of what that person has done.” This reinterpretation or reframing by a friend or trusted source can help us see our blindspots or point out our potential. Reframing is one way to resist cognitive distortions from oppressive environments. Using different language and concepts like gender neutral language is affirming partly because they reframe aspects of the self not only for other people but for the individual themselves. Cross-cultural findings suggest that there is an increase in people identifying as non-binary or genderqueer (Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2012; Yeadon-Lee, 2016; Spizzirri, et al. 2021). In the U.S. and other countries, it’s becoming more common that one can be accepted as non-binary without having to physically alter anything. In a study with over 200 trans youth from 2017-2018, researchers found nonbinary youth were significantly less likely to have accessed medical interventions to affirm their gender than binary youth (8.4% vs. 46.2%).

Using gender-neutral language for oneself is a form of reframing one’s experiences outside of the gender binary. We can all catch ourselves when using binary gendered language and actively replace these terms. Robin Dembroff and Daniel Wodak (2018) make the “radical claim” that we have a duty to not to use gender-specific pronouns to

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78 Wong, Responses to Snow, Miller, and Seok, 2017, 578.
refer to other people, regardless of their gender identity. While this duty is defeasible if someone desires to be gendered with binary pronouns, using gender-neutral pronouns like “they” combat the transmission of essentialist beliefs about gender identity. Moving away from gendered terms can have a positive affect on everyone, not just trans and non-binary people. As we resist gendered language and reframe terms and concepts outside of binary gender, we make membership in those categories less exclusive. By changing our gendered language practices, we can resist gendering people (including ourselves) according to the binary and its stereotypes.

Linguistic reframing is a common tactic of resistance. Labeling and reframing problematic but normalized behaviors can help us call things out like mansplaining or sexual harassment. However, this step requires overcoming forms of hermeneutical injustice which involve the lack of conceptual resources for marginalized group experiences. Since language and concepts are structured according to the interests and experiences of those in power, we might lack the terms necessary for reframing. I’ll say more on this problem later.

Reappropriating terms such as slurs is one way to reframe the experience of feedback within the limitations of language. Yet this approach also requires a cultural kind of resistance in that one cannot reappropriate a term on one’s own. The reappropriation of slurs is also controversial because the old meaning is unlikely to just fall away. Sally Haslanger argues for “conceptual amelioration” or engineering which is the process of questioning and adjusting our concepts in light of how they are used, whether they are

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80 https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/he-shetheyze.pdf?c=ergo;idno=12405314.0005.014;format=pdf
tracking what we want them to track, and whether we should change them in light of moral and practical truths. One important component for conceptual amelioration is imagination.

3. Imagination

Imagination is a cognitive activity that involves forming a quasi-sensory mental representation distinct from believing or remembering (Spaulding, 2016). Imagination is crucial for cognitive resistance as one needs to be able to imagine themselves differently from the conceptual resources they’ve been given by society. For Mencius and many other philosophers, imagination is a key part of getting to our moral intuitions and emotions. To achieve *wu-wei*, a “combination of introspection, practice, and imaginative extension” is necessary (Slingerland, 125). This imaginative extension involves “taking this feeling here” that one experiences in an imaginary scenario then applying it to “what is over there” in other real situations. These guided exercises allow one to embody the important emotions connected to the virtues such as compassion.

Imagination also plays a key role in successful action planning and foreseeing how one will meet obstacles. Gabrielle Oettingen’s research has shown that we are much more likely to achieve our goals if we not merely imagine what we desire but if we contrast it with a reality that would impede our desired outcomes. Her “WOOP” approach involves visualizing (Wish) one’s desired result (Outcome) along with what could prevent it (Obstacles) and creating a specific intention in response (Plan). Confucianism takes the same approach in achieving *wu-wei* by inviting us to engage in imaginistic reflection as
well as actual practices. By imagining and embodying different practices of *wu-wei*, one can be realistic about the obstacles and strategies for overcoming them. When we apply this strategy to resisting oppressive feedback, one imagines the outcome even if it goes against what one has been told. The obstacle is the specific disformative or oppressive feedback that prevents one from believing certain truths about the self. The plan is a “If, then” statement (implementation intention) that creates a specific action response for when one receives that kind of feedback. One might say, “When I hear X microaggression, I will take a deep breath and tell myself that statement is not about me but about a stereotype.”

One can also use this strategy from a privileged position to resist epistemic injustice towards sources of feedback. When students used the strategy of imaginative “mental contrasting” between negative xenophobic fantasies and positive outcomes of immigrants moving into their neighborhood, they were able to increases their reports of tolerance and willingness to exert effort in welcoming outsiders. They also had more concrete plans for integrating newcomers when asked two weeks later. In the same way, we can contrast imagined cases of negative feedback from those different from us and how that might feel with positive outcomes related to social justice.

Amy Kind (2020) argues that imagination can actually teach us quite a bit that the discussion on transformative experience ignores or rejects. Recall that Lewis (and Paul) claim that experience is necessary for certain capacities such as the ability to imagine with that particular concept like the color red. Experiential knowledge, like the kind Mary

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gets when she sees red, is not propositional but similar to know-how. But, as Kind points out, we can know how to do things we’ve never done before when we imagine them in the right way. We rely on “imaginative exercises to help us make better, more informed choices” even if imagination isn’t an “infallible guide” (136). Kind introduces the process of “imaginative scaffolding” which involves “imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications” to other experiences you’ve had. So, it’s plausible to say that you could know what hiking an unfamiliar trail is like before ever hiking it if you have enough experiences with similar content and are a skilled imaginer.

Two kinds of imagination, transcendent and instructive, result in two different kinds of corresponding skills, the latter being more grounded in reality. Transcendent imagination allows “escape or look beyond the world as it is” whereas instructive imagination enables us “to learn about the world as it is” (Kind and Kung, 2016, 1). Kind claims that the instructive kind of skilled imaginer is “very good at constraining their imaginings to fit the facts of the world.” (142). She must commit to this feature of instructive imagination so that she can maintain the epistemic role she wants imagination to play in forming knowledge.

In cases of resistance, I’m not sure we want these imaginative skills to come apart. Even Kind’s own cases of instructive imagination rely on a high level of creativity that doesn’t necessarily map onto the world at the moment of conception. For example, Kind cites Temple Grandin who imagines from a “cow’s eye view” to develop more humane forms of animal handling equipment as a case for instructive imagination. However, while Grandin’s equipment is successful, “Grandin’s designs were so innovatively different...that animal handlers were deeply skeptical that they would work” which
suggests her imaginative skills were not entirely reflective of (at least known) facts about the world (142). It’s hard to know when imagination is transcendent or instructive until one can measure or test it against the world. Those in the disability community who challenge physical and social structural arrangements are often engaging in a mix of the two imaginative skills as they often “look beyond” the way the world is set up.

To avoid perpetuating social harms, instructive imagination must be transcendent and/or have some familiarity with resistant concepts. Otherwise, the imaginative scaffolding is likely to rely on dominant concepts such as stereotypes and result in exclusion and stigmatizations. Medina (2013, 252) argues that imagination can play a role in both the production and prevention of social harms. “Resistant ways of imagining” can help us combat these harms and become more “sensitive to the suffering of excluded and stigmatized subjects.” Medina argues for a “radically pluralized” imagination that involves not only multiple perspectives and meanings but a radical openness to difference (266). I return to Medina’s view on the role of communities and social imagination later.

Imagination is then key for taking steps towards social justice. “Any writing I do, even if it isn’t explicitly political, is still a transformative act,” activist adrienne marie brown claims. She asks, “How do we cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream together beyond fear?” and notes that “showing Black and white people sitting at a lunch counter together was science fiction.” Art allows a person to imagine new ways of being, to express themselves, to project their experience back out into the world, to help the world see differently. When we read or watch or listen or engage in other ways

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82 Emergent Strategy, 36, 2017
83 p.59
with art, we stretch our imaginative muscles and skills. Through these practices, we can engage in cognitive resistance and find new ways to define ourselves. However, the role of the community is important as one can rarely make imaginative possibilities a reality on one’s own.

C. Personal Resistance

In this section, I look at how we can resist feedback on a personal level through epistemic resilience, transformative choices, and aspiration. Since disformative feedback threatens one’s self-knowledge by distorting the relationship one has to one’s inner states, it threatens one’s ability to form beliefs and make decisions. While these strategies focus on rational choice theory, we can apply them to self-knowledge and how we evaluate feedback. In particular, these strategies seek to reestablish the relationship one has to one’s personhood through forms of self-determination. The extent that self-determination reflects reality influences whether it counts as a practice of self-knowing and not just one of practical optimism. When one is able to resist oppressive feedback, one can change facts about oneself. Ways we change facts about ourselves involve making choices about what to believe, who we want to be, and what kinds of activities define our lives.

1. Grit & Epistemic Resilience

In this section, I look at grit and epistemic resilience to understand resisting feedback is part of self-knowing. “Grit” is a psychological concept used to describe the characteristics of a person who is resilient and perseveres towards long-term goals in the
face of obstacles. Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul (2019) explore the concept of grit to pull out a special feature that goes beyond willpower which is epistemic resilience. Epistemic resilience involves rationally responding to evidence in such a way that it does not lead to self-doubt. A failure to persevere can occur when one experiences “a significant decrease in confidence that one is likely to succeed if one tries.” The authors want to defend cases of grit that are rationally permissible even when changing course could provide a better alternative. To do so, they eliminate cases of ignoring evidence or nurturing positive illusions.

For some, the obstacles they face serve as evidence that they lack the ability or discipline to achieve their goals. Audre, the wavering graduate student, will get some journal rejections in her early academic career. Those with grit treat obstacles with a different “evidential significance” so they can respond in ways that allow them to maintain their confidence. The evidential significance of one’s evidence (like personal experiences and feedback) will be partly determined by one’s evidential policies. Evidential policies are second-order ways of reasoning about one’s evidence that are evaluated separately from one’s first-order evaluation about whether to believe the evidence. While the authors do not want moral or pragmatic reasons to bear on the epistemic assessment of the evidence, they hold that such reasons “legitimately shape the standards by which we reason about our evidence” i.e. evidential policies. Audre’s evidential policies might change when she realizes that a journal rejection is common, especially for graduate students.

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85 Morton and Paul, 2019, 178.
86 Morton and Paul, 2019, 179.
Whether one is epistemically resilient and has grit rests on one’s commitments and values. “Commiting to an end can alter the way in which an agent should subsequently reason about whether to abandon that end” which is why a puzzle arises in how to rationally approach one’s commitments.\textsuperscript{87} “How much unfavorable evidence” a person’s preferences can “absorb without changing” partly depends on how much the person values their “chosen activity over all the alternatives.”\textsuperscript{88} However, our long term goals such as career choice or who to date often have “equally or incomparable valuable alternatives” so we can’t always appeal to this move.\textsuperscript{89} Also, we can place a high value on a goal even if it’s completely unachievable. Audre’s commitment to a career philosophy could then justify her grit. Her grit allows her to resist the discouraging feedback of her professors regardless of whether she would be a successful philosopher. Just like many long-term goals, certain beliefs about the self carry value and significance.

Evidential policies that matter for feedback about the self include:

- Whether one’s social position puts one at an advantage or disadvantage to know
- Whether one’s sources are trustworthy in terms of potential biases
- Whether one values and is committed to certain aspects of the self
- Whether one is more risk-averse or risk-seeking\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{87} Morton and Paul, 2019, 179.
\textsuperscript{88} Morton and Paul, 2019, 182.
\textsuperscript{89} Morton and Paul, 2019, 185.
\textsuperscript{90} How this works in terms of the ways we form beliefs: if someone is more risk averse, they will be more cautious in forming certain beliefs, especially when the stakes are high. If someone is more risk-seeking, they will be less concerned with potential costs of forming a false belief.
For Mark the feminist mansplainer, his belief that he is a feminist is important to him and impacts how he relates to others. Instead of viewing the feedback about his mansplaining as evidence of his inability to be a feminist, Mark could (and perhaps should) respond to the feedback as helping him become a better feminist. When one is in a privileged position and aspires to be an ally to marginalized groups, the goal should not be recognition or success as an individual. Being a feminist or anti-racist is about fighting those power structures rather than self-cultivation (even if that is an important step). Perhaps one should not seek out and value reaffirming feedback in this area but rather change the evidential significance of critical feedback.91

The moral and pragmatic reasons should not mix with the epistemic assessment but come into play if you get reasonable disagreement. Some of these involve serious higher-order uncertainty - for instance, how structural ignorance could impact the credibility of one’s sources. The scope of reasonable disagreement is much larger than it may appear at first glance. According to Morton and Paul’s account, cases in which it’s epistemically rational to resist feedback would be:

- when the evidence is somewhat inconclusive because the “horizon is distant and flexible” regarding one’s success92

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91 Jose Medina’s use of epistemic friction applies here. In order for epistemic friction to have epistemic and moral benefits, the parties must have certain virtues - resilience may be one of them.
92 Morton and Paul, 2019, 193
- Statistical evidence is “relevant” but “does not licence a straightforward inference” to one’s own case.\(^93\)
- When there can be disagreement between rational agents on how to reason about and respond to the evidence: “the available evidence does not compel a single conclusion for any rational thinker”\(^94\)

Choosing to believe one is the exception to the rule and resisting feedback can be “immodest” but need not be irrational or ignorant. Epistemic resilience depends on one’s “evidential threshold” for when evidence is compelling enough that one should accept the feedback about one’s ability (or other beliefs in the case of self-knowledge). Different rational thinkers have different evidential policies for evaluating evidence, including one’s experiences and feedback from others. We might look at social position for reasons why one’s evidential policies should veer towards accepting or resisting feedback. In the last chapter, I argued that disformative feedback disrupts the relationship one has to evaluating one’s experiences and abilities thereby creating self-doubt. To resist disformative feedback in a rational way, we will want to know what evidential policies help maintain epistemic resilience.

When evaluating feedback from others, it’s permissible (if not advisable) to consider the value of the evidence along other factors. In terms of obstacles in the form of disparaging feedback, epistemic resilience requires one still examine it in order to improve one’s chances at success. For Audre, the value she places on being a philosopher (as shown by

\(^{93}\) Ibid, 192
\(^{94}\) Ibid, 193
her desire to go to graduate school) could itself outweigh the other reasons for not going into the field. Yet, she should still value the feedback even if she disagrees with its content.

In cases of oppressive feedback, the information is harmful but often reflects real stereotypes and barriers that a person will have to face in achieving their goal. The evidential significance of feedback can change depending on whether the environment is oppressive, the kind of sources, and other opportunity costs. Factors related to the individual, their personal traits (and whether they know them), and “talent, opportunity, social context, and a good deal of luck” matter to whether a person is rational in having grit.95 The authors also recognize that “exhibitions of grit are often somewhat crazy, and that can even be part of what we admire about them.” (182). Whether epistemic resilience is rational will depend in part on whether the person is in “contexts of poverty or severe discrimination” in which case they might do better if more sensitive to new evidence (according to the authors). Is the sensitivity mere awareness, a kind of integration, or acceptance?

Paul and Morton provide an answer to the question of how far we should allow moral and pragmatic reasons to intrude on our reasoning about evidence. Yet, the burden is still there for how to interpret “reasonable disagreement” especially if some evidence is available to the agent alone. Given the likelihood of higher-order uncertainty, we must ask ourselves about general yet individualized policies for how we seek and evaluate feedback.

95 Ibid, 176.
Neither the account of epistemic resilience nor pessimism traps address the role of expertise testimony and transformative experience. What also needs to be considered is the role of certain personality characteristics that make a person more resilient, ambitious, and admirable in resisting justified feedback against the odds. Indeed, some people do achieve what others in similar positions do not. In terms of how to respond to feedback, the problem is that one must rely on self-knowledge in order to decide whether to accept that feedback. If one has that insight, then one is in a good position to make that call. However, we are often unsure whether we demonstrate the necessary qualities for facing and overcoming obstacles. We can seek feedback about those qualities but some qualities, like ambition, are the kind that a person needs to believe about themself for the quality to be successful. I say more on how this works in the next section.

2. Transformative Choices

In the last section, I looked at how one can be rational in having grit and resisting feedback in cases of reasonable disagreement concerning the evidence itself or how to respond to the evidence. Grit requires one to know one’s commitments and values. To resist feedback, we can make choices that impact knowing who we are. Ruth Chang’s concept of transformative choice provides a way to understand how our choices matter for self-knowledge. Here I look at how transformative choices can provide the reasons for one to resist feedback in unclear cases. Some life-changing events happen to you, some you choose and decide to make part of your identity. Transformative choices are decisions that change who you are when you
make them, before anything else happens downstream from making the decision.96 Chang argues that Paul tends to treat transformative experiences as happening downstream (after the choice). For Chang, certain transformations can happen the moment you make the choice.

Perhaps Audre is deciding whether to go into Philosophy or Gender Studies for a career. When Audre commits to some feature of a career in Philosophy, she thereby makes it true that she has the most reason for going into Philosophy. If Audre feels forced into going into Philosophy (say, to please their intellectual parents), Audre might not be transformed by the choice - Chang is unclear but since voluntariness is key, we can safely assume it needs to feel willed by the agent themselves. When you make a transformative choice, you change who you are in (at least) this small way by creating for yourself a new reason you didn’t have before.

Performing the act of choosing to be a certain kind of person changes you into a person that didn’t have that reason before. The choice itself is the event that transforms you. Even if small, your motivations and priorities change which can have further effects as you make more decisions that build on them and add to your evidential basis. However, transformative choices can impact one’s evidential policies as well. Someone who decides to become a Muslim still has to perform a specific ritual as part of their faith but the choice itself could change their evidential policies.

For example, choosing to become the kind of person who wants to be a parent does not make you a parent but still changes you if genuine. The way you make plans such as

[96] I discuss Chang’s view in more depth in Chapter 4.
finances or perceive events like sex and menstruation transform depending if one has made a conscious “willing” to be a parent. Unlike other kinds of events, you transform because you are choosing to be the kind of person who wants that decision.

By making choices about what kind of person one wants to be, one is able to combat disformative feedback from others. However, being a certain kind of person will often require doing certain things, developing certain skills, and engaging with the world in ways that make the belief about who you are true.

3. Aspiration

Rational grit and different kinds of evidential policies provide a way to resist disparaging feedback. Transformative choices can also generate reasons that change one’s evidential basis or policies so resistance is justified (or at least permissible). A possible concern is how realistic one’s transformative choices are. Delusional optimism is not a clear path to self-knowledge. For resisting feedback to part of virtuous self-knowing, it must be truth-tracking as well as appropriate. Making a transformative choice can be the first step but often other changes are necessary. If one wants to resist becoming the kind of person that disformative feedback pressures one to become, then one must act in resistance. Yet oppressive environments do not always provide the conceptual resources, supporting evidence, or opportunities for one to become otherwise.
Agnes Callard argues that transformative choices cannot themselves change us into becoming a certain person on their own. While Chang could be right about how such choices generate special reasons, Callard holds that the choices cannot tell the whole story about transformation. Certain activities are transformative by doing them. Similarly, resistance could be more than a choice about belief or what kind of person one is. Here, I look at resistance as a transformative activity that involves aspiration to be a better person or someone different. Callard’s aspiration model of rationality rests on a special kind of reasons, proleptic, that concern your future self. With these reasons in mind, we can justify believing and acting in resistance.

Earlier, I discussed transformative activities as part of many transformative shared experiences. Transformative activities are temporally-extended transformations that require a person engage with the experience. To transform, you have to be choosing to not only do but inquire after the things that allow you to change. The sense of active comes apart for Chang and Callard. Callard finds many transformations involve the ways we actively react to being part of the world but are improperly understood as “decisions.” Instead, we inquire and “find out” what being a certain kind of person is like and becoming that person cannot be reduced to a single event or choice.

Some things we receive feedback about are in “transition.” When we resist feedback, we could be unsure of whether we are fully equipped with the reasons or resources to claim its falsity. We want to maintain one’s epistemic reasons for resisting (resilience) and transformative choice only provides one reason (albeit a potentially powerful one).

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reason for belief is a consideration in favor of accepting it. A reason for resistance is a consideration in favor of challenging or rejecting feedback.

One often arrives at one’s transformation through “years of reflecting, conversing, and writing” about one’s experiences. The “relevant change is unaccomplished at the time of the decision.” Aspiration involves working to learn to become a certain kind of person as well as acquiring knowledge of value. Understanding why being a classical music lover or parent is desirable requires developing into that person through activities over time. While Callard holds aspiration as necessarily positive, one’s aspirations can be a particular skill, role, or identity. For her account, aspiration goes beyond ambition. When one aspires to become a certain kind of person, success entails a value-change. One could be ambitious and succeed without transforming their values.

The problem, as Callard sees it, when one is aspiring to become a certain kind of person, one does not yet have what we consider the good reasons for being that person yet. The person usually acts on other reasons besides the ones they will come to value eventually in the role. So, aspiring to be a parent doesn’t seem rational (especially if one is given evidence that one will be a bad parent) In the case of Audre, she may not have the reasons available to her yet for being a philosopher. But, Callard argues, “unlike in other testimonial contexts, the aspirant’s goal is nothing other than coming to see the value for herself.”

People have understood self-creation as either you make a decision on basis of fulfilling the desires you currently have or you get a whole new self after the transformation.

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98 Callard, 2020, 152.
99 Many parents with disabilities were/are discouraged to have children (see Chapter 4).
100 Callard, 2018, 80
Callard argues that relations of rational entailment go the other way than typically described in decision-making models. For Callard, the later future self can govern the current self instead of vice versa. One’s present self knows that one’s future self will have more developed reasons and preferences than one has now. You’re still responsible for your character based on how and what you’re aspiring to. Callard’s aspirational account provides a way to understand how a person could resist feedback by introducing proleptic rationality. Proleptic reasons are “the reasons that rationalize large-scale transformative pursuits.”

A proleptic reason is an “acknowledgedly immature variant of a standard reason” that both marks one’s inadequacy in terms of those resources (like the value of the activity) and motivates one to learn more about being that kind of person (a better valuational condition). In other words, you have some knowledge of your ignorance but that drives you to get knowledge about the value as well as transform into valuing it.

Proleptic reasons require some level of self-knowing. Whether you know if the reasons for you in the present or you in the future matters for what you believe about yourself. For self-knowledge, one might resist feedback as an action in acquiring knowledge about what it means to be different than the feedback. When a teacher gives feedback on their student’s work, the criticisms are often necessary parts of the process of being successful (even when the student is more talented than the teacher, the teacher has a deeper understanding of the activity partly because of the knowledge of the value of it).

Whether this is rational partly depends on how deeply formed and embedded are the

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101 Callard, 2018, 80.
102 Callard, 2018, 88
person and their preferences, abilities, and identities. Some people will better set up than others to engage in practices of resistance and self-knowing. Having to fight for one’s survival could make one less inclined to seek being the best or even better at certain activities.\textsuperscript{103} Excelling at resistance does not necessarily mean excelling at that which you were told you could not do. This kind of excellence relates to the virtue of self-knowing. One can aspire to be better at noticing and resisting disformative feedback. Perhaps one decides to learn and works towards becoming a certain type of person, perhaps a yogi or scientist, because knowing one can be that kind of person is valuable on its own. Resistance could look like participating in activities even if one is not very good at the activity. By engaging in the activity, you learn and practice and eventually become that kind of person. However, even if you do not fully succeed, your participation can challenge the norms around that activity such as who gets to participate. One’s participation can impact the evidential basis for who belongs in a group like yogis or scientists.

Another way resistance works is how we determine what activities and skills constitute certain aspirational identities. I touch on this issue in Chapter 4 when I discussed the way “mother” is an aspirational identity and how that can backfire by creating stereotypes and unwarranted negative judgments towards certain mothers. We can accept the aspirational model, which relies on transformative activities temporally-extended experiences (specifically, activities), and still question whether we want to accept what society deems as aspirational to be legitimate.

\textsuperscript{103} Callard addresses this issue in the last chapter of \textit{Aspiration}.
Due to the conceptual necessity of goodness, Callard claims that one cannot aspire to be immoral or bad at something. Callard’s account fits virtue theory well because she focuses on the learning and the doing of the activity. Development with the right kind of people and environments is also important. Yet, we can think of communities and their members that would use the concept in the wrong way. Derek would say that he aspired to be a white nationalist leader. So, resistance against what society has deemed aspirational could itself be a necessary step for personal resistance through aspiration. Here, again, we see a need for resistant communities who create and participate in their own meaningful activities that challenge the norms around an aspirational identity and what it looks like to be that kind of person.

D. Cultural Resistance

Under my account, transformative shared experiences are key to cultural resistance to oppressive feedback. Important mechanisms for change are these everyday interactions and forms of shared intentionality in how we eat, play, and work together. Large-scale social movements such as political revolutions are built on transformative shared experiences between individuals who desire cultural change. brown argues that social activism must acknowledge the need to to “create futures in which everyone doesn’t have to be the same kind of person” that allows for “interdependence...and continued evolution.”

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104 brown, 2017, 57
One form of resistance is language. By challenging dominant meanings, establishing new words and concepts, and getting rid of old and unjust language like slurs, communities allow for virtuous self-knowing. One can resist from the inside of a homogenous community to foster diversity or create one’s own community to establish different kinds of shared experiences. Resisting feedback can look like calling out oppressive feedback explicitly but it can also look like imagining and utilizing conceptual frameworks and representations that oppose the oppressive ones.

The shared experience of being stereotyped, objectified, or made invisible can result in feelings and perceptions of oneself as powerless. When able to form groups based on solidarity of these kinds of shared experiences, individuals can invoke new identities from these smaller units. A new shared perspective, one of resistance, emerges as participants come to identify themselves as a group with agency and shared values. Since marginalized identities are often made invisible, such as lesbian or disabled, people may not recognize certain forms of oppression even if they experience oppression. Therefore, different resistant communities and perspectives are necessary for helping people recognize and resist oppressive feedback. By providing cultural scaffolding for meanings, concepts, choices, and aspirations, resistant communities allow for resistance on a cognitive and personal level. The role for the virtuous agent is finding the right kinds of resistance, right communities, and resistant meanings.

1. Resistant meanings
“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” — Toni Morrison

At times, one should reject what might seem like a true statement about the self because of the oppressive meanings within the statement. Cultural resistance provides the foundation for cognitive resistance using concepts and language. Here I go into further reasons for self-reflecting on our language practices and importance of resistant meanings and concepts. Resistant meanings explain how a marginalized person can still know themselves to be a certain kind of person without accepting the oppressive features of the identity category.

Earlier, I briefly discussed Dembroff and Ze’s argument for rejecting binary pronouns as a way to resist gender oppression. “We live in a culture of compulsory gender” that makes a person without a gender “that is considered socially coherent and identifiable” supposedly unintelligible. When a person is not considered to be gender-normative, they often face negative judgment if not discrimination. In order to avoid harm, one must “aspire to exemplify a gender” through constant “gender identity maintenance” in the form of self-presentation, bodily styling, and various social practices. “Gender is something at which one must work” in order to be granted social acceptance and safety.

Trans people often face “identity enforcement” in which their trans identity is either erased, devalued, or disfigured as they are told they are really their assigned gender,

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105 Overall, 2013, p. 254
106 Ibid, p.257
pretending to be another gender, or a “fake” gender. Rejecting one’s assigned gender identity means rejecting more than a label or category but includes the conceptual framework for understanding oneself, one’s society, and where one fits inside that society. “The extent to which this constant misgendering during our formative years shapes our relationship to gender (and our own self-perception) cannot be underestimated.” Part of identity enforcement is policing identity concepts and their meanings such as who counts as a “woman.”

Bettcher’s multiple-meaning model serves as a response to identity enforcement and what she calls the “single-meaning position” of gender, which holds a gender term has one meaning only. An individual’s self-knowledge will often involve identity concepts with multiple meanings like mother (biological, social, or moral role?) or American (citizenship or mindset?). The mainstream or dominant meaning is that which most people in the society will assume when they hear “woman” in that they will assume that the person has certain genitalia and body parts, physical characteristics and mannerisms, and other designated feminine features. The conflict goes beyond whether a particular trans woman “counts” as a woman to the actual meaning of woman.

Semantic contextualism is one way that philosophers explain and attempt to resolve meaning conflicts. A term like “bank” means something different depending on whether one is talking about withdrawing money or going to swim at the river. The context the speaker is using then determines the single meaning of a term. Bettcher notes that an upshot of the view is that it allows any woman to count as a woman by “allowing for

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107 Serano, Julie. *Whipping Girl*. Serano, 180
contexts in which the standard of self-identification is salient in determining correct applicability” and giving metaphysical reasons – “reasons owing to the semantics of the term ‘woman’ and the facts that obtain in the world of that context rather than for political reasons or decisions” to why trans women count.

However, Bettcher argues, semantic contextualism allows for transphobic identity enforcement because the “extension of ‘woman’ changes depending on context” so it is still a single-meaning position. People often defend their trans-exclusionary stance by appealing to the context they’re using. According to one supposedly “biological” context, the meaning of woman depends on chromosomal sex or physical appearance. Suddenly, a person’s status as a woman changes depending on the context. A trans woman is now only a woman when using a particular “political” context in which she meets the criteria for the meaning of woman. We have no way to explain how the identity enforcer is wrong and, while facts about Wynn obtain, trivializes Wynn’s self-knowledge by demoting to a separate context.

Bettcher’s model holds that the same term or concept such as “woman” can contain multiple meanings within the same single context. In the case of “woman”, the mainstream meaning concerns physical characteristics and dominates culture but the “resistant” meaning and concept of woman exists in trans subculture. The subculture is not a separate context and recognizes the dominant meaning but rejects the meaning in favor of their own in which gender identity is not enforceable from the outside. Bettcher is not saying that the same term has different meanings in different contexts. Instead of meaning shifting from context to context, the multiple meanings are contained within the same term.
When people wonder how the world will function without their dominant meanings, it’s not always a lack of imagination. Often, vices of epistemic laziness or active ignorance of current resistant meanings is the problem. We are constantly making political choices with our language, especially identity concepts, even if it’s not culpable ignorance. Work on microaggressions has brought attention to certain problematic phrases and terms but Bettcher is calling on us to look at how meanings and concepts that appear justified originate in exclusion and perpetuate oppression.

These debates regarding what constitutes self-knowledge in such conflicts (that is, whether the person’s belief is justified or factive) rest on the normative question of which meanings are best employed. This normative question, I argue depends largely on how we conceptualize feedback and whether it’s oppressive. So, the choice of what meaning to use is always there if one is aware of the multiple meanings. Using the default, dominant meaning is a moral and political choice whether or not one realizes it.

Applying Bettcher’s multiple-meanings model to self-knowledge helps us understand when it is appropriate and justified to resist feedback. When forming beliefs about oneself and others, one must take a position on what meanings should be used. Instead of assuming a “true” meaning for identity concepts, one should be prepared to give ethical and social and political arguments for one’s preferred meanings. Self-knowledge comes when one determines where the self falls under the appropriate meanings. This can be a matter of exploring and confronting one’s own subjective experience of the self (especially under resistant meanings which give special weight to these experiences), which can be challenging and require courage and the ability to
withstand social disapproval, sometimes from those closest to oneself. It can involve keeping track of the multiplicity of meanings because one needs to interpret how others are thinking and how they will be reacting to oneself. Resistance can require courage and resolve in hanging onto the meanings one has adopted for oneself while being aware of the alternatives that others are using. One way to gather this courage and resolve is immersing oneself in the resistant culture and finding resistant communities that recognize one’s identity and reject harmful alternatives.

2. Resistant communities

Just as resistant meanings are key for cognitive resistance and how one sees oneself, resistant communities provide ways for personal resistance and identifying oneself outside of dominant ideologies. They help thwart attempts of oppressive environments to make it seem like the world is only experienced one way. J.S. Mill’s “experiments in living” were part of his argument for free speech as communities that provided one the ability to figure out ways to reason, be happy, and interact with each other. Resistant communities fill this role as they “develop these different conceptions of life and see what it’s like to live under the rules that the group imposes on itself.”\textsuperscript{108}

Callard also claims we are not individually responsible for moral character because we need others in order to have and develop aspirations since they involve learning processes (which require others).

\textsuperscript{108} Muldoon, 2017, 336
Virtue theory includes a role for communities in how one develops knowledge and moral behaviors. Yet, since following and honoring ancient traditions is central to Confucianism, resistant communities seem out of place. Two things: First, resistant communities have always been around. We just don’t always have historical records of them because of what groups control history, the narratives, and who is remembered. While not the same ancient culture that Confucius and Xunzi use, we can still look to past traditions and cultures for guidance.

Second, we can use the emphasis on community and cultural transmission of knowledge through practices. For some people, being part of resistant communities will mean giving up privileged status and the comforts of active ignorance. Bettcher based her multiple-meanings model and use of term “woman” off the queer resistant community in the 1990s in California. The resistant meaning of “woman” as self-identity was not a new phenomenon nor was it exclusive to that community. However, communication between resistant communities, whether particular ones of a similar kind or different kinds, is often hard because keeping such groups apart is one way of enforcing oppression (as Ellis came to realize). Trans representation and communication in the printed press, queer theory, and the internet allows for connection, visibility, and education about gender identity.

Resistant meanings of gender are finally beginning to get recognition from other communities in the U.S. but such communities remain resistant. For example, the “bathroom bill” HB2 in North Carolina required people to go to the bathroom of the gender they were assigned on their birth certificate. In many of the small, liberal cities like Durham and Asheville, the law was counterproductive and led to more gender-
neutral bathrooms. Here is an example of when a community becomes more resistant in response to cultural identity enforcement.

3. Resistant perspectives

Military service provided the scaffolding for resistant perspectives of Black men when they returned home, thereby providing momentum for civil rights when they would return home from fighting with white men. According to Louisianan William Bailey, "After getting out of the service, knowing the price that I had paid and the problems I had faced . . . why shouldn't I exercise the rights and privileges of any citizen? . . . If I could go over there and make a sacrifice with my life I was willing to do it here." 109

Transformative shared experiences (TSEs) of oppression lead to resistant communities and corresponding resistant perspectives. However, resistant perspectives can involve other kinds of TSEs and impact those outside of the resistant community. When filmmakers from marginalized groups are given the opportunities, resources, and support to tell their stories (in the ways they want to tell them), audiences of all kinds can learn. Movies such as Moonlight create new, diverse perspectives on marginalized identities that are often ignored or invisible.

One should be cautious in using any one perspective to represent an entire community as having a singular perspective. Part of the importance of diversity in resistant perspectives concerns how oppression affects people in different ways, so

different experiences yield complexities of emotion. Just like we can stretch our physical and intellectual capacities through exercise, we want to do the same by exposing ourselves to films outside of one’s own community and culture to learn not only about differences but similarities. Reminding us of Audre Lorde’s call to come together against the various forms of oppression as we realize the ways in which they intersect. It does not mean we will always share the same experience, perspective, or goal.

Audiences are changing in terms of how they receive these stories and whether our cultural narratives should value those that present a marginalized person for another’s personal redemption. The movie The Best of Enemies did poorly partly due to its treatment of racism as a thing of the past,110 centering on Ellis’ “white hero transformation,”111 and reducing Atwater to invisible or a caricature of an angry Black woman.112

The movie Music is a similar example of how the resistant perspective can impact mainstream perceptions over time, leading to significant change. The offensive portrayal of an autistic person led to a petition113 and film reviews comparing it to a

113 At this time of writing, the petition was signed by over 150,000 people and covered by multiple news outlets. See Carras, Christi. “Thousands sign petition condemning Sia’s ‘Music’ after outcry from autism community” February 16, 2021.
“neurodivergent minstrel show”\textsuperscript{114} and “indistinguishable from mockery.”\textsuperscript{115} An able-bodied, neurotypical person portraying a disabled character or a white person’s narrative being centered in interracial relationships were, and still are, quite common practices. Having a certain conceptual framework of historical marginalization and exclusion allows one to see how this contributes to a simultaneous erasure and monetizing of a marginalized identity. Watching certain films can be physically uncomfortable when one senses the perpetuation of stereotypes through caricatures of real identities. While an actor should be open to playing roles different than who they are, these roles and stories and their presentation take place inside of a culture that uses media to understand the world and relate to each other (and themselves). As such, taking a resistant perspective means looking for underrepresented perspectives in media to learn from and taking a critical eye to the way that films and TV shows give feedback. Considering the movie’s major awards nominations like the Golden Globes, the views on disability are still resistant.

Resistance involves recognizing and resisting oppressive feedback while often relying on resistant perspectives (which involve resistant meanings, concepts, and communities) to form beliefs about the self. In the last two sections, I looked at ways to resist on a cognitive and personal level. However, those ways are likely to be unsuccessful (if not impossible) without the support of others that help one see the world and themselves in a different way.

\textsuperscript{114} Seitz, Matt Zoller. "Music Review" \url{https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/music-movie-review-2021}
V. Some Worries

A. Trying Too Hard: Laozi’s Worry

In this chapter, I rely primarily on a Confucian view of wu-wei. Yet trying too hard to cultivate practices of self-knowing could be ineffective. In doing so, perhaps we warp the normal relationship we should have with self-knowledge and feedback. Slingerland presents such a view in his interpretation of Laozi’s concept of wu-wei involving no effort at all. Laozi’s view of achieving wu-wei opposes Confucianism by making cultural training and active striving enemies of de. Laozi saw the world as corrupt “characterized by glaring social inequities, economic chaos, and superficial consumerism” and not in accord with Way of Heaven.\(^{116}\) For Laozi, less cultural practices (not more) is better. We should follow our innate dispositions and culture is like a disorder that warps our desires. Education and training are counterproductive and responsible for the corruption in the world.

For Laozi, the worst kind of person is one who rigidly adheres to rituals and imposes their sense of what is right on other people.\(^ {117}\) For instance, we can imagine a person who merely “virtue-signals” seeking feedback. Such a person performatively engages in practices of shared transformation and resistance without truly being open or anti-oppression. Laozi warns against this hypocritical “triumph of image over substance” way of looking virtuous. In reality, this appearance is a “misleading outward symptom of a deeply entrenched sickness” and its threat is one of the main reasons Laozi claims we

\(^{116}\) Slingerland, 2014, 87
\(^{117}\) Ibid, 95
need to avoid “conscious, goal-oriented attempts to be virtuous.” No rigorous hard work or particular ways of behaving will get us to *wu-wei*. Rather, we need to “undo rather than do, gradually unwinding” the mind and body, shed “book learning and artificial desires,” and “relax into a state of perfect nondoing.” Some practices of self-knowing that Slingerland would attribute to a Laozian approach include meditation, “unplugging” (a term for when someone takes a break from media consumption), going into nature, and doing psychedelic drugs. These practices often involve a loss of self-consciousness in order to have positive effects.

Laozi’s “less culture” stance is appropriate in certain situations, particularly those of resistance. “He who speaks does not know” is Laozi’s motto about “the tendency of verbal labels to cloud our judgment and our ability to see what is right in front of us” (Slingerland, 89). Laozi’s approach could be appropriate as a kind of resistance to formative feedback as one reconnects with one’s more “infant” self, free from expectations and roles and oppressive stereotypes. Resistance is often about resisting society’s labels like identity categories and aligns with Laozi’s argument that the act of socially labeling things as beautiful or good “distorts our natural, spontaneous judgment” (89). Taking this stance could be a pivotal step in the kind of “meaning-making” for which Medina argues.

However, while it’s true that culture has this powerful effect, Laozi’s position is not reflective of our evolutionary history and developmental psychology. As Tomasello’s work shows, culture plays an essential role in our social development.

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118 Ibid, 96.
Similarly, “the driving force of constantly ramped-up desire and social status seeking” is one of our many psychological adaptations to maximize reproductive success despite tension with individual happiness (Slingerland, 92). While sleeping all day might make us happy as individuals, it doesn’t bode well for one’s survival or social cooperation. Also, being passive is rarely seen as a desirable position for overcoming injustice and oppressive systems. The general view of *wu-wei* here is “if the world has gone to hell, trying to change it will only make it worse.”\(^{120}\) Not exactly a battle cry for social justice. To be fair, Confucian rituals do not necessarily lend themselves to this project (depending on how one conceives of it) as they are focused on perpetuating social ranks and maintaining the hierarchy.

The use of “unplugging” as a form of self-care appears in relation to marginalized communities and specific situations. For example, the large amount of images of police brutality against Black bodies in 2020 helped raise awareness but traumatized Black communities, particularly in the US. \(^{121}\) The constant stress of racism can be exacerbated by other intersecting forms of discrimination such as sexism, transphobia, or classism. Here, “unplugging” serves to lower the allostatic load (bodily damage brought by chronic stress) and allow the body some time to recover. It could be useful for anyone to “unplug” from outside sources and go into nature. Still, we should be wary of this becoming a form of complacency and contributing to active ignorance by avoiding hard truths. I draw out this concern in the next objection.

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\(^{120}\) Slingerland, 2014, 85

\(^{121}\) While the conversation around sharing images of violence against Black bodies or “trauma porn” was prominent in 2020, it wasn’t new. See Beckford, K., 2016, “Stop Posting Videos of Black Folks Dying”; Downs, K. 2016, “When Black death goes viral, it can trigger PTSD-like trauma”; Reign, A. 2016, “Why I will not share the video of Alton Sterling’s death”
This conception of *wu wei* (and thus the strength of this objection) is dependent on Slingerland’s very literal translation of Laozi. Yet Slingerland argues that Laozi believes thinking and verbalizing hinders our ability to fully experience life and takes us away from *wu-wei*.\(^{122}\) We should then be careful in interpreting a text, especially one whose primary message is the untrustworthiness of language. Laozi’s overall message is that we should be guarded in assuming we can perfectly describe and capture what is in the world or the best way to act in the world. Instead of preaching general moral laws, Laozi uses language and aphorisms as a kind of nudge to get us out of entrenched ways of thinking.\(^{123}\) These aphorisms are similar to proverbs or cultural sayings and not meant to be taking literally. Laozi’s proverbs are not about literal objective truths but “corrective, compensatory wisdom” responding to particular tendencies that can lead us away from *wu-wei*. Proverbs have a “different relation to reality” in that the meaning is “exhausted by making a point against a particular target in a particular situation.”\(^{124}\) The “no effort” descriptions serve to knock us off a ritualistic mindset that being efficient means going into the situation with a plan and aggressively acting on it without regard to who else is in the situation. What is happening in the present may require you to abandon whatever preconceived plans you had.

**B. Bypassing Worry**

\(^{122}\) Ibid, 90.  
\(^{123}\) LaFargue, Michael. The Tao of the Tao Te Ching: A Translation and Commentary (State University of New York Press, 1992), 203-205.  
\(^{124}\) Ibid, 205.
We might worry about the practices of resistance as being too optimistic. Jennifer Morton (forthcoming) warns against using optimism as a strategy in cases of marginalized group members. Often such strategies ignore the risks, opportunity costs, and significant barriers within oppressive environments thus setting a person up for failure. Achieving wu-wei involves being an effective agent which could help to answer Morton’s concern. Yet one might still wonder whether focusing on wu-wei bypasses some of the harder truths and detracts from fighting for social justice.

“Spiritual bypassing” refers to the use of spiritual practices as a way to avoid dealing with unresolved emotions, trauma, or other psychological issues.¹²⁵ In terms of self-knowing, spiritual bypass involves avoiding feedback or hard truths about yourself by focusing only on spiritual or transcendent beliefs and experiences. Certain resistant practices such as transformative choice seem vulnerable to being used in this way. For example, choosing to be the kind of person who “transcends” suffering could lead to one ignoring the oppression of others and/or misinterpreting their experiences through one’s own rosy, spiritual lens. By “transcending” suffering, one might dismiss the anger of protests against racism and claim that meditation, love, and peace is all we need. If one is a member of a marginalized group under threat, this strategy could potentially do well on a personal, practical level. It matters whether the spiritual practice is a form of avoidance or healing. Ideally, meditation is a practice of the latter kind. Avoidance is rarely successful as a psychological strategy. In cases of spiritual bypassing, it tends to result in the exaggerated need to control others and the self, shame, fear, emotional

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confusion, high tolerance of inappropriate behaviors, obsession and addiction, blind beliefs in charismatic leaders, and abdication of personal responsibility.126

While spiritual bypassing could help one survive trauma, it could also lead to a kind of learned helplessness in which one fails to escape the situation because they fail to see the problem. When the problem affects more than just you and you’re in a better position than others to help, the avoidance becomes more concerning. Membership in a marginalized group alone does not permit one to focus on practices of resistance that only serve one’s personal interest, even if those practices should be a high priority given one’s vulnerability to oppressive feedback. The concept of resistance, even in cases of self-knowing, is not an individual project.

My focus on communities concerns framing acts of resistance within the larger social framework of values such as anti-oppression. Seeing yourself within a resistant perspective means also seeing others through that perspective. If the shared value is anti-oppression, perhaps we should not be in complete wu-wei all the time. Living in an oppressive environment should make us feel out of sorts and not at ease (to a certain degree). If one is going to a protest, one may achieve a certain sense of wu-wei after learning important habits but the practice should not necessarily be enjoyable. One may brush off feedback such microaggressions but such behaviors can lead to complicity and harms for others.

In cases where significant “friction” seems important, achieving wu-wei looks more complex than mere ease. Confucius was not afraid to reprimand people who he felt were not being respectful. For example, when he found Yuan Rang sprawled out on the

126 Picciotto and Fox, 2018, 67.
floor to greet him instead of a formal kneeling posture, Confucius hit him in the shin with his staff (Slingerland, 2014, 56). This action is aggressive and shows that Confucius doesn’t mess around. We can and should include these kinds of actions in our accounts of de and wu-wei even if they are less “at ease” with the world.

VI. Conclusion

Although he was white, Ellis suffered from a life of poverty and working-class status. The KKK was a secretive group that provided solidarity for Ellis and allowed him to feel shared agency and the power to change things. Despite the KKK already losing public approval at that time, the fact that the KKK still exists today speaks to the strength of a historical perspective such as segregation even when it loses its dominance.

Atwater had a resistant perspective in the South during the 1960s. She saw herself and other black people as equal to and just as deserving of rights as white people. A working-class single mother, Atwater was tired of those in power or with authority stigmatizing her and her children. Shared experiences, such as the restaurant lunch and crying together, slowly lead Ellis and Atwater to rethink their initial hatred of each other. Through shared experiences as co-chairs and parents, they could recognize that they had a shared experience of suffering certain barriers related to poverty. For Ellis, realizing that Atwater experienced the world in similar ways humanized her to him. Within a shared perspective, they were able to see how the South's power structure had oppressed and exploited them both as working-class citizens. Sharing a perspective with Atwater
allowed Elis to notice the similarities in how Black citizens and the working class suffered.

In this chapter, I looked at appropriate receptivity as well as resistance to feedback. At times, we will need to let ourselves be vulnerable and open to feedback (even if it might change us). Other times, resistance can be a better practice for us all, including those in more privileged social positions. Sometimes, the feedback and situation are ambiguous so we must make choices and goals for ourselves about what to believe about ourselves and other people. Using *wu-wei* and anti-oppression as a moral framework, we can explore virtuous practices of self-knowing.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

I. Introduction

The dissertation begins by introducing different frameworks for answering the question, “How does one know oneself?” Criticisms from those such as the introspection skeptics and standpoint epistemologists create a need for an account of feedback in how we achieve self-knowledge. Outside sources and one’s social environment shape the ways in which one learns about oneself, others, and the world. Certain social arrangements, such as oppressive environments, force social realities with enough social coordination and power to make it appear that some groups are inferior to others. I use the concept of social power to identify sources of feedback and the ways we get feedback from those sources. This concept of social power allows us to address how epistemic injustice, the systemic harming of certain group members as knowers based on identity prejudice, occurs in cases of self-knowledge and exchanges of feedback. I also address the role of epistemic authority and the potential tension between one’s own self-representation and others’ view of oneself.

Our moral psychology is important for knowing how one should seek self-knowledge. Understanding the metaphysics of the self also helps provide answers of who a person is, particularly when conflicting beliefs about the self arise. To situate the virtue approach to self-knowledge, I consider aspects of the self that are often overlooked in
traditional theories. Looking at relational metaphysics in Parfitian personal identity, social constructionism and Confucianism, we have serious reasons to consider the role of feedback and communities in self-knowledge theories. I also take the concept of transformative experience to raise new questions for self-knowledge concerning feedback and its powerful influence in shaping who we become, for better or worse.

II. Chapter Summaries

The second chapter, “Self-Knowing as an Epistemic Virtue,” had two main aims. First, I set out to establish the importance of assessing feedback (information about the self) and one’s sources of feedback. To do so, I present three cases concerning the role of feedback and how one should treat sources of information about oneself. Second, I argue that virtue epistemology can best explain self-knowledge and what is happening in said cases. Unlike other models, epistemic virtue includes important aspects of self-knowledge like forming beliefs in the right kind of way, how one should respond to feedback, and how one should treat sources of feedback. I also argue that the practice of self-knowledge, self-knowing, exemplifies the different criteria of an epistemic virtue. Treating self-knowing as a virtue itself allows us to focus on that practice (which concerns how one treats one’s sources) rather than some end product with a particular truth value.

There’s something special about self-knowledge and the stakes of whether one gets things right or wrong. Where can we go wrong when we seek self-knowledge? I present two different kinds of vices that stem from excessive or deficient deference to...
outside sources and their feedback. Each vice has a special relationship to epistemic harm and injustice. Epistemic virtue in these cases lies in appropriate exposure to the right kind of sources, treating one’s sources in the right kind of way, and acceptance of the right kind of information. Therefore, I argue virtuous self-knowing requires an excellence of evaluating one’s sources of information on the self. With such a framework, we can see the ways in which self-knowledge is tied to epistemic injustice as well as epistemologies of ignorance and resistance. At the end, I address objections to treating self-knowing as a virtue.

In the third chapter, “Variety of Sources,” I took a deeper look at how ignorance arises by favoring certain sources over others. Examining how accurately one receives and assesses feedback about the self, I argue that one commits an epistemic injustice when discrediting epistemic sources without warrant. What’s interesting about these cases of epistemic injustice is how they harm not only the source of testimony but also the self-knower in terms of their ability to gain true beliefs about the self. I propose that seeking a variety of sources might allow us to recognize and combat biases involved in receiving and evaluating feedback. I then defend this proposal against the objections that it places an unfair burden on marginalized group members and that it argues for the inclusion of bad epistemic sources.

The fourth chapter, “Disformative Feedback,” concerns feedback that can thwart and sometimes destroy self-knowing. First, I present a certain kind of feedback that changes a person in a way that creates problems for how we approach self-knowledge. While the role of feedback is typically understood as a source of information, I explore how feedback can also be a casual source in that it affects future actions, preferences, and
experiences. In this way, feedback does more than just inform but can transform who a person is. A special dilemma arises when feedback is no longer something the person can evaluate as a piece of fixed information because of its causal influence on the person. I call this kind of feedback disformative feedback.

Disformative feedback is often unconscious and unintentional and encompasses cases such as gaslighting and pessimism traps. In these cases, I argue that false feedback can distort the first-personal authority and rationality characteristic of self-knowledge by appearing to be accurate. This kind of feedback is problematic not only for self-knowledge but also oppressive when systematically targeted at certain groups. When disformative feedback is based on a person’s social status, it constitutes an epistemic injustice. I look at how disformative feedback manifests in two social structures, education and medicine, and particular cases of epistemic injustice and oppression.

Disformative feedback suggests that self-knowledge cannot consist in merely having what appear to be accurate or rational beliefs about the self. Sometimes, “accurate” or seemingly justified beliefs are grounded in epistemic injustice and oppression. I argue that, besides epistemic reasons, moral reasons such as resistance to oppressive stereotypes give one sufficient justification to believe otherwise. To have epistemically just self-knowledge, one must recognize and reject feedback that can distort one’s agency and experiences of the self.

In the fifth chapter, “Practices of Self-Knowing,” I look at appropriate receptivity as well as resistance to feedback. At times, we will need to let ourselves be vulnerable

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1 I use the term “structures” in order to encompass not only particular agents and institutions but the opportunities and costs within those systems.
and open to feedback (even if it might change us). Other times, resistance can be a better practice for us all, including those more privileged in society (i.e. gender norms). Sometimes, the feedback and situation are ambiguous so we must make certain choices for ourselves about what to believe. If self-knowing is an epistemic virtue, then a virtue account should include the ways in which someone develops the right response to feedback. I attempted to draw out examples that demonstrated the right kinds of habits, practices, experiences, and communities that lead one to develop *wu-wei* which includes the right kind of skills and traits for self-knowing.

Here I look at moral transformations, such as those of C.P. Ellis, and the conditions that lead them to change. Specifically, I want to look at the role of feedback and interactions with others in knowing oneself and becoming a better person. I introduce the concept of transformative shared experiences which involves people sharing an experience, perspective, and certain kind of intentionality that then leads to at least one person coming to see themselves in a new, significant way. However, individual and cultural perspectives are often more dominant and can transform others in oppressive environments. I look at how resistance should play a role in our self-knowing practices on a cognitive, personal, and cultural level through finding the right kinds of resistant communities.

### III. Implications

#### A. Epistemic Injustice

This project suggests that epistemic injustice is a wider phenomenon than Fricker originally proposed. Credibility plays a role in how we know ourselves, our blindspots,
and when to trust others. An excess or lack of credibility in our social interactions makes a difference. Knowing that what I am feeling or thinking is credible, that my experience tracks reality, and that I can trust myself is crucial for self-knowledge.

In the context of self-knowing, certain groups could be more at a disadvantage due to their social position. Medina frames this problem as one of active ignorance for privileged groups and presents a conceptual analysis of the related vices of epistemic arrogance, laziness, closemindedness. My project takes a step farther into understanding what is happening within self-knowledge when such vices are forming. It allows us to both separate and connect the active ignorance and epistemic injustice that a male-identified person can have within their self-knowing practices.

Active ignorance and the vices that come along with privilege put the male person at a disadvantage for knowing themselves. However, one implication I did not explore is how oppressive patriarchal environments can give disformative feedback to men by severing the natural relationship they have to their emotions. In such environments, a man learns to not pay attention to, express, or nurture emotion as a way of knowing himself. He is taught to “man up” and ignore emotions thus changing what might be expressed as sadness to another socially acceptable form of manly expression. Instead of seeing emotional sensitivity as natural, it's represented as a weakness in memories and present experience. Here, being a man involves experiencing an epistemic injustice of self-knowing through disformative feedback. However, the extent to which the environment allows for self-trust and escape from the disformative feedback, impacts whether a particular case is one of epistemic injustice. My account allows us to say that

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most, if not everyone, living in an oppressive environment suffers from some epistemic injustice related to self-knowing. To the extent that one’s environment is unjust, even if directed towards another group, so will one’s ways of forming beliefs be unjust.

Taking such a broad stance on epistemic injustice could downgrade its explanatory power and normative force. Treating everything like an epistemic injustice possibly detracts from how it can be a specific form of oppression and the gravity of presence in society. The distinction of epistemic “violence” and silencing could be useful here in allowing for us to separate cases of epistemic injustice that have roots in silencing certain groups and their local knowledge as part of colonial imperialism. Epistemic violence involves “damage (to) a given group’s ability to speak or be heard” so that group’s knowledge “disappears.” The history of physical violence and epistemic violence matters. It applies in cases when the dominant perspective (often Western, white, and male) has made certain experiences invisible through exertion of power. The systematic silencing of groups and their knowledge production (epistemic violence) carries a different moral weight than the systematic shaping of group identity through knowledge production (disformative feedback).

Privileged group members can get disformative feedback in that they are forced to conform to certain expectations and roles and this often happens outside their awareness. To the extent that being a member of that group means one lacks exit options (the ability to be or do otherwise), the question of voluntariness can be raised. However, the element of self-trust becomes relevant in distinguishing harm from injustice. Injustice involves systematic attempts to sever certain groups’ sense of warranted self-trust (even if our blindspots suggest a need for self-doubt as well). In the case of toxic masculinity,
whether the man is still encouraged to trust his own experiences makes a difference. For example, being told to “man up” is still acknowledging that one is having some kinds of feelings. One is being told to downplay them but the feedback is not suggesting, as in many other cases, that the man is wrong about his feelings.

B. Rationality

This project also brings up new questions for the intersection between autonomy and self-knowledge surrounding agency, identity, and moral transformation. Rational choice typically treats the agent separable from their environment but issues like disformative feedback raise questions for how accurate this model is. Introspection skeptics suggest our lack of self-knowledge threatens our rationality. Many positions, such as Callard’s aspiration model, depend on some degree of self-knowing even if it’s just knowing that one does not yet know all the reasons for one’s actions.

A few thoughts on how to approach these questions. First, returning to the Confucian relational autonomy model would be useful. Wong argues that negotiation and harmonization are part of the “co-authored achievement” of relational autonomy which is necessarily moral.3 Being able to have autonomy in this model also means having the right conditions for learning those processes. Being constantly shaped by situational forces without understanding one’s own role will not lead to autonomy. Rather, grasping the forces and their power is one step towards carving out who one is and who one can

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3 Wong, “Relational and Autonomous Selves”, 424-426
be. Audre Lorde uses the term “symphony” and explicitly not cacophony when she refers to the ways that Black women learn to orchestrate their furies at a world that hates their existence.⁴

Second, with this relational model, we should move away from treating autonomy as all or nothing. Carel and Kidd’s distinctions of voluntariness remind us that situational factors cause us to act in ways that we might not otherwise yet we still identify with those choices.⁵ When disformative feedback occurs, we can act in ways that we might not realize come from the situation. Even when we realize that disformative feedback influences our actions, we might not want to give up autonomy. For example, if someone from a poverty-stricken area chooses a career that is more financially stable but contributes to stereotypes about that area, we should not assume they are not acting autonomously. Quill R. Kukla’s argument for negotiation instead of the consent model in sexual practices also concerns the relational and transformative nature of certain activities.

Third, the emphasis on resistance suggests that we should move away from models of irrationality and self-deception because they are too simplistic. While Morton and Paul want to avoid delusions, whether grit is successful is partly consequential.⁶ Since it takes knowing certain things about oneself that may not be available, one could appear to be acting irrational. Additionally, one might choose to use an evidential policy that involves ignoring certain evidence about oneself. I’m not sure whether that is self-

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⁵ See Chapter 4, Sect III, Part A, Sect 3: Voluntariness of Transformation.
deception if one takes the stance knowingly (at least on the meta-level). The aspirational model also involves having underdeveloped reasons that one uses to believe and act but one’s future self (who will have those reasons eventually) has yet to exist. As Carel and Kidd point out, one’s motherhood could be a positive epistemic transformation but negative personal transformation if a person realizes motherhood is not for them.\(^7\) We tend to treat irrationality and self-deception as negative characteristics yet they could play a crucial role in personal and political resistance.

Finally, resistance looks like it will require more than rationality. In particular, resistance builds on imaginative and radical change despite the conditions of the oppressive environment. When we use only epistemic reasons and the evidence to form beliefs about ourselves or social change, we are going to fall short. While we should take oppressive conditions seriously in fighting for justice, we must recognize the sources of evidence are “rigged” in ways that confirm unjust truths.

**C. Bioethics**

I hope to use insights from the dissertation to develop an account of feedback that will help to illuminate debates surrounding information exchanges between the patient and medical professionals such as therapeutic misconception, informed consent, manipulation, and paternalistic interventions. This project highlights particular issues at the intersection of epistemic injustice and medical ethics such as the role of self-reports in

\(^7\) Carel and Kidd, “Expanding Transformative Experience”, 207
clinical practice and the ethical norms of medical feedback related to diagnoses, particularly for adolescents.

The phenomenon of patient self-reports being disregarded or discredited by medical authorities is well-established. Alongside the historical correlation of “hysteria” and female patients, recent data shows male doctors have a significantly worse patient readmission and mortality rate when compared to their female counterparts.\(^8\) Other cases include doctors rating patients of color as having less pain than their white patients and refusing to believe overweight patients when they report their health habits.\(^9\) One case on which I want to focus most in future work is the transgender community regarding what gender (or lack thereof) they have and the numerous ways they must “prove” or justify themselves to the medical community in ways that the cisgender community does not.

My project looks at the tension between wanting to convey the serious need for treatment and avoiding a negative representation of the patient when giving a diagnosis or recruiting for clinical research. When assessing medical feedback, a distinction between distorted and accurate feedback is necessary to determine whether that harm is warranted. While it’s important to give a patient feedback to make an informed decision, medical authorities are at risk for stigmatizing or manipulating a patient as seen in cases related to mental health and sexually transmitted infections and recruitment for trials. We must ensure a patient’s autonomy while allowing the doctor’s expertise to play the appropriate role.

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\(^8\) Brad N. Greenwood, Seth Carnahan, Laura Huang, “Patient–physician gender concordance and increased mortality among female heart attack patients” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Aug 2018, 115 (34) 8569-8574; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1800097115

\(^9\) See Chapter 4, Sect III, Part B: Medical Gaslighting
Cases of diagnosing adolescents raise a particular issue for epistemic injustice as they are learning to form a sense of identity. A positive outcome of diagnosing at an early age is that those patients can receive important care and support. For example, parents can give their children medication for a mental disorder or allow treatment like suppression of endogenous puberty for transgender teens. Yet the long-term effects on the patients’ well-being include the distress a diagnosis can cause the patient. Telling a young person that they have a mental disorder could lead to unnecessary distress as an authority pathologizes their puberty. Along with any stigma attached to the diagnosis, medical interventions can carry dangerous long-term effects that can harm adolescents. Future research involves identifying who is most vulnerable to dangerous forms of feedback and what proper interventions should take place to protect those populations.

IV. Feedback and Self-Knowledge

A. Suck it Up: Taking Negative Feedback

People could be wrong about you but their statements about your social position could come from a place of real evidence and experience. Expressing more intellectual caution and humility in seeking and receiving feedback from others is one proposal. Being receptive to others’ feedback even if you disagree could play a larger role in cultural transformations, particularly resistance. Audre Lorde argues that allowing people to be angry, particularly Black women about racism, then the anger that “stands between us” can be “used for clarity and mutual empowerment.”\textsuperscript{10} When we allow for certain

\textsuperscript{10} Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”, 34.
exchanges of feedback, even if angry, they fit into a larger social and political role that goes beyond self-knowledge.

This role of feedback and self-knowing in deliberative democracy appears in Chantal Mouffe’s arguments for the role of emotions and Medina’s arguments for epistemologies of resistance. For Medina, epistemic friction is a necessary part of deliberative democracy. To be truly democratic, one view cannot dominate another although we must take into consideration which views have been most dominant. When there’s a tension between views about oneself, one can first see if there’s a way to accommodate them both if lacking any clear external reasons or other evidence to favor one or other. Should it still bother me if someone believes me to be inferior if they hold no power over me? Maybe, maybe not. If we value a variety of sources, as my and Medina’s project do, then we might have to allow for exposure to such beliefs. Having other practices of resistance and solidarity would be one way to help combat potential harms or vulnerabilities.

B. Fuck It: Ignoring Feedback

My account of self-knowing as an epistemic virtue involves actively assessing feedback whether one should accept or resist. At times, however, it will be better not to care about what other people think. Such cases involving appropriate resistance in a wu-wei sense (which could mean doing nothing at all). Using grit and aspiration as models for resistance could imply that one needs to be actively doing things to challenge

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disformative feedback. However, virtuous self-knowing also implies learning how to not respond and eventually ignore (if that’s morally right).

Part of what is often being explored in youth is the value of resistance. Yet, resistance involves higher costs for some groups than others because of the oppressive environment. This dissertation is relevant for how to approach education policies not only for giving students feedback but also how to allow for exploration and risk-taking in classrooms. Allowing students more freedom in how they write is one potential path as we recognize the ways that language and concepts can perpetuate oppression.

Another point, as I mentioned earlier, is the potential value of acting irrational. When resisting feedback, one can’t always assume one is acting for future self. Yet it could be permissible to act impractically in ways that benefit others even if you’re not benefited. For example, choosing to go into a certain career that one eventually leaves so that one can change the evidential basis to be more diverse.

Doing some things out of resistance are impractical in that doing them might not give you a better life than not resisting. It depends on how one conceives of a good life. I also think it’s permissible not to aspire and that choice can be a form of resistance. Often, marginalized group members are forced to prove their worth in ways that privileged others are not. For example, a common pro-immigration argument is pointing to the labor that immigrants bring to the community. But perhaps you shouldn’t have to prove your worth in order to receive certain goods like safety and care. Refraining from certain transformations like marriage or high-status careers as a form of resistance seems counter to aspiration but that depends on how we conceptualize aspirations.

C. Fight It: Going Beyond Feedback
“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

– Audre Lorde¹²

Resisting feedback as part of virtuous self-knowing is not based merely on increasing resilience to adversity or oppression but rather fighting oppression itself. Valuing justice and anti-oppression are important factors that take self-knowing to be more than just epistemic and practical. When it comes to resisting disformative feedback, we cannot necessarily reduce it down to one aspect of identity. We are complex creators of our social worlds. The oppressed and oppressor category is rarely one that perfectly maps onto personal interactions because often people suffer under intersecting forms of oppression - whether it be sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, or classism. If we use disformative feedback as a model, we can also expand the ways oppression can harm those who are more privileged than others. My account is broad enough that disformative feedback is likely to be an epistemic injustice for more people than not.

Acknowledging difference is seen as key in moral progress by feminist, race, and queer theorists. We must proceed cautiously as we promote inclusivity to not erase important differences and recognize the uniqueness of an individual’s experience and history. To quote Eve Sedgwick, “People are different from each other. It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A

tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, are pretty much the available distinctions.” These categories are conceptually problematic from the messy conditions for membership to proper application of identity characteristics. While statistical generalizations are useful, they can also be misleading and potentially dangerous. Even if they are true, their truth may stem from injustices and believing them could reinforce discriminatory stereotypes.

In terms of resistance, Neil deGrasse Tyson aspired to be a scientist despite the encouragement to go into sports instead. Part of that resistance was engaging in the kind of activities that would allow Tyson to become a scientist. Obstacles ranging from discouragement to a structural lack of access to opportunities can prevent one from being able to engage and be transformed. Racial, sexual, and other forms of discrimination are a kind of “gatekeeping” around certain activities to ensure that only certain groups of people will have the opportunity to become that kind of person. Sometimes, Callard argues, it’s enough for a marginalized person to have a “glimmer” of the “possibility of living a life unlike the only one” that they’ve been presented with and expected to lead that results in aspiration. We can get this glimmer through those closest to us and with whom we share our transformative activities, thus creating a “transformative bond” such as the one we saw with Elis and Atwater. Finding the right kinds of bonds through relationships and communities leads us to self-knowing and social change.

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16 Callard, 160.
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Biography

H. Bondurant attended University of Missouri-St. Louis from 2007-2012 during which they earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology and Philosophy and a Master’s Degree in Philosophy. H. was a teaching and research assistant for Berit Brogaard from 2010-2012. From 2017-2018, H. held an interdisciplinary ethics fellowship from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. H. was awarded the Southeastern Writing Center Graduate Tutor Award; Teaching Assistantships in Philosophy and Gender Studies; Competitive Summer Research Fellowship for Third-Year and Beyond PhD Students; and various domestic and international conference travel awards.