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Abstract

“Mansplaining” is by now part of the common cultural vernacular. Yet, academic analyses of it—specifically, philosophical ones—are missing. This paper sets out to address just that problem. Analyzed through a lens of epistemic injustice, the focus of the analysis concerns both what it is, and what its harms are. I argue it is a form of epistemic injustice distinct from testimonial injustice wherein there is a dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of hearer and speaker in a testimonial exchange. As these are roles of power and are crucial to our existence and functioning within epistemic communities, the wrong and harms suffered from this injustice are serious and, I argue, distinct from other types already discussed in the literature. I close by considering an alternative model of mansplaining as a form of silencing, as well as briefly diagnosing its general underlying cause and possible solutions.

Keywords: mansplaining, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, silencing

Being told that, categorically, he knows what he’s talking about and she doesn’t, however minor a part of any given conversation, perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light.

- Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me”

Introduction

“Mansplaining,” described as when men explain to women things that they already know, is by now part of the common cultural vernacular. Once a term frequent only in feminist circles, the term has reached such familiarity that it has been entered into the Merriam-Webster dictionary.¹ People have even created charts

¹ As of March 2018. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>. The initial understanding of mansplaining given in the previous sentence is not the definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

about it.² Yet, academic analyses of it—specifically, philosophical ones—are missing.³ There are important philosophical questions to be answered about this cultural phenomenon. Is it bad? If so, what is so bad about it? Why is it gendered, as something a man does to a woman? Is it something that can be done between people other than men to women? What is the underlying cause of it? But, also, perhaps most importantly, what *is* it?

This paper sets out to give a philosophical analysis of mansplaining. The focus of the analysis will be both what it is, and what its harms are. I will approach both of these questions through an epistemic lens, specifically one of epistemic injustice.⁴ Mansplaining, I will argue, involves a pernicious subversion of epistemic roles, wherein the speaker/giver of knowledge is forcibly relegated to the role of hearer/receiver of knowledge.⁵

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I begin with some real-life examples of mansplaining. I then review two theoretical models most plausibly within the realm of mansplaining: epistemic injustice, and silencing. Equipped with an understanding of these models, I proceed with a conceptualization of mansplaining as a particular instance of epistemic injustice involving a dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker/giver of knowledge and hearer/receiver of knowledge, which is distinguished from testimonial injustice. Lastly, I survey its distinct wrongs and harms, and close by sketching a brief diagnosis of the phenomenon, both in terms of its possible causes and solutions.

² Specifically, Kim Goodwin (2018). See <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180727-mansplaining-explained-in-one-chart> and <https://twitter.com/kimgoodwin/status/1020029572266438657> for the chart itself.

³ The exception is an extremely brief mention of the mechanics of mansplaining by Luzzi (2016). Academic but nonphilosophical works on mansplaining are Bridges (2017) and Lutzky and Lawson (2019). Johnson's (2020) article on mansplaining has appeared after this paper was written; still, the account she favors of mansplaining as a type of silencing is discussed and ultimately rejected in section 4.

⁴ This is because, as will be explained, an approach of epistemic injustice is what is needed to unify all the cases discussed.

⁵ Throughout the paper, I follow Fricker in using the terms "speaker" and "hearer" as epistemic notions to designate the role in testimonial exchanges properly occupied by the agent who has knowledge to give to other agents, and the role in testimonial exchanges properly occupied by the agent who is to be the recipient of knowledge, respectively. "Giver of knowledge" and "receiver of knowledge" are used to clarify such epistemic use.

1. Mansplaining in Action

Before giving a philosophical theory of mansplaining, let's begin with some concrete examples that have been widely acknowledged⁶ as instances of mansplaining:

Solnit and Mr. Very Important (Solnit 2014, 2–3):

Mr. Very Important: So? I hear you've written a couple of books.

Solnit: Several, actually.

Mr. Very Important: And what are they about?

They were actually about quite a few different things, the six or seven out by then, but I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life.

Mr. Very Important: And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?

He was already telling me about the very important book. . . . So, Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when Sallie interrupted him, to say, "That's her book" . . . But he just continued on his way. She had to say, "That's her book" three or four times before he finally took it in.

Amanda Seals and Steve Santagati (CNN 2014):

Seals: I live this life every day. . . . This [street harassment] is not complimentary, which is funny because I think guys think that by letting you know that they would be interested in sleeping with you that that is a compliment, and actually it's really just objectifying me when I'm trying to walk in my daily life. I have a whole fifteen-minute set on stage about this. . . . And I can see you shaking your head but you are not an expert on this, my brother, because you are not a woman walking in the street.

⁶ Widely acknowledged by the general public, as evidenced by nonacademic articles published on the topic.

Santagati: No, no, but I am more of an expert . . . than you, and I'll tell you why: because I'm a guy, and I know how we think.

Effie Brown and Matt Damon (*Project Greenlight* 2015):

[Here, Brown is a panelist on a television show Damon is heading, and the two are conversing about which contestant to select to direct a screenplay centered around a black female prostitute and a white male pimp.]

Brown: I just want to bring up something. I just want to urge people to think about, whoever this director is, the way that they're going to treat the character of Harmony. That her being a prostitute, the only black person being a hooker who gets hit by her white pimp. You have you looking at this group, right here, and who you're picking, and the story that you're doing, and I just want to make sure that we're [putting] our best foot forward [in terms of diversity].

. . .

Damon: When we are talking about diversity, you do it in the casting of the film, not in the casting of the show.

I started with the example by Rebecca Solnit, as she is commonly taken to be the person who first introduced the concept of mansplaining. In her essay "Men Explain Things to Me," Solnit (2014, 13) describes the story above, taking it to be part of a patterned problem wherein "some men explain things they shouldn't and don't hear things they should . . . it's when they explain things to me I know and they don't." When first conceptualizing mansplaining here as a kind of overexplaining, one may wonder what is so problematic about it. However, as I will argue, the examples above are all instances of a pernicious epistemic injustice that carries serious harms.

2. Epistemic Injustice and Silencing

After seeing these instances of mansplaining, two existing theoretical conceptions initially seem most fitting as models of the phenomenon, for they both concern injustices that can occur in conversational exchanges: epistemic injustice, and silencing. Here, I survey both models.

The topic of epistemic injustice is by now an extremely fruitful field, despite its recent beginnings. Broadly, epistemic injustice is the study of our epistemic practices and concepts as they intersect with injustices (oppression, marginalization, violence) within our social-political landscape. Authors working on the topic approach this study from a nonideal perspective, looking at the ways in which social-political

injustices affect our epistemic practices, and likewise at the ways that our epistemic practices create distinct cases of injustice.

Many authors in contemporary analytic philosophy attribute the start of the field of epistemic injustice to Miranda Fricker's (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. In it, Fricker gives a theory of two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. As hermeneutical injustice concerns concepts that describe the experiences of the marginalized which are missing, we will here focus on Fricker's theory of testimonial injustice. Although I will later argue that mansplaining is a kind of epistemic injustice importantly distinct from testimonial injustice, an understanding of testimonial injustice is important moving forward, as it will serve as an illustrative foil by which to articulate the epistemic injustice involved in mansplaining.

In the good case of testimony, a speaker states p , and a hearer comes to know that p , solely on the basis of the speaker's saying so.⁷ Work in traditional epistemology considers what criteria must be met in order for an act of testimony to produce knowledge—for example, whether the speaker has to themselves know that p , or have a justified belief that p , or whether the hearer needs to believe that the speaker is reliable, and so forth.⁸ On Fricker's (2007) conceptualization, testimonial injustice is when a speaker is judged by the hearer to be less credible than they in fact are due to prejudicial identity stereotypes that influence the hearer's judgment of their credibility. Oftentimes, this results in the speaker not being believed and so failing to contribute knowledge that they otherwise ought to be able to.

Fricker (2007) argues that in virtue of being given an unduly low credibility judgment, speakers are *wronged*, and wronged in a unique way: in their capacity as knowers. This is a significant wrong, and a kind of moral wrong, because it cuts to the quick of our intrinsic value.⁹ What is essential to our value as persons is our ability to reason, and to do so in social and socially recognized ways. Insofar as testimonial injustice blocks this, it dehumanizes the speaker, communicating that they are less-than their peers, making the best case one of objectification wherein they are mere sources of information. Beyond this wrong committed against the speaker, there are also several types of harms that run downstream from instances of testimonial injustice, including epistemic harms (speakers can lose confidence in what they

⁷ Of course, it need not be a verbal utterance. See Lackey (2010).

⁸ See, for example, Hintikka (1962) and Audi (1997) for arguments in favor of a knowledge requirement, and Lackey (1999, 2010) for arguments against a knowledge requirement.

⁹ See especially her chapter 2, and page 44, for her explication of how this is a moral wrong.

know), practical harms (speakers can be sentenced as guilty and sent to jail), and personal (speakers can lose facets of their personal identity).

Alternatively, mansplaining might seem to be captured by the concept of silencing.¹⁰ Very generally, silencing is the phenomenon wherein speech fails to occur: utterances that otherwise could be made are not said or entered into conversational exchanges. The notion of silencing was first introduced as a linguistic phenomenon through work by Rae Langton (1993) and Jennifer Hornsby (Hornsby and Langton 1998).¹¹ In taking a speech-act approach utilizing J. L. Austin's (1962) work on the subject, Langton analyzes how it is that women's sexual refusal (in saying no) oftentimes is not successful in stopping men from committing sexual violence against them. In her analysis, she introduces three types of silencing: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary silencing occurs when no utterance is made. Illocutionary silencing (perhaps Langton's greatest contribution to the literature) occurs when someone makes an utterance, but it is not successful at being the speech-act the speaker intends it to be. For example, this is when a woman says no, but the speech is taken by men to be not an act of refusal but rather something else (a request, for example, to try harder). Lastly, there is perlocutionary silencing. This is when a speaker makes an utterance, uptake is secured such that the speaker's intended speech act is successful, but they fail to achieve the effects that they aim to through their speech act.

Since Langton's (1993) work on silencing, other forms of it have been introduced. Aside from the Austinian model of silencing, it can also be understood as cases where speakers either refuse to speak or otherwise entirely fail to have their speech register as utterances. Additional types of silencing that will be briefly surveyed here are testimonial smothering, preemptive testimonial injustice, acts of ignoring, and testimonial quieting.

First, there is *testimonial smothering*. This term was first introduced by Kristie Dotson (2011) to describe a kind of self-censorship wherein speakers limit what they report because their audience has failed to demonstrate testimonial competence. That is, knowledgeable speakers share less knowledge on a given topic than they otherwise could because the maximal testimony they could share carries significant risks of being misinterpreted and misunderstood by their audience and, as a result, leading to false beliefs that can do serious social-political damage. This misunderstanding isn't a random fallibility of hearers but rather an incompetence because it has roots in pernicious and socially situated ignorance: it is because one

¹⁰ For such an account, see Johnson (2020). As will be made clear at the end of the paper, I argue against such an account.

¹¹ Here I am focusing on Langton's (1993) earlier work for the sake of space. See also Peet (2017).

occupies a certain social position (typically that of dominance) that one fails to have the relevant stock of background beliefs necessary to aptly interpret and understand the testimony.

Another model of silencing identified by Fricker (2007) is *preemptive testimonial injustice*. This occurs *before* a testimonial exchange even occurs. Here, it is not that knowledgeable speakers' utterances fail to be believed because of unduly low credibility judgments, but rather that they are not even engaged in testimonial exchanges to begin with because of unduly low credibility judgments. The credibility of such speakers antecedently suffers from such massive losses that potential hearers do not even bother asking them for information on subjects they are knowledgeable about because they judge that it is not even worth asking them; no speech is made to begin with. As a result, once again, marginalized speakers are excluded from contributing to collective epistemic communities because knowledge that otherwise could've been passed on isn't, and isn't because of the operation of prejudicial stereotypes.

Then, there is the basic concept of *unjust ignoring*. One sense of silencing-through-ignoring is described by Fricker (2007) as it relates to Catherine MacKinnon's (1987) work on sexist oppression through sexual objectification.¹² Here, MacKinnon analyzes the issue of women's attempted acts of sexual refusal failing to be successful, arguing that it is due to the sexual objectification of women in pornography. Giving an epistemic analysis of this problem of MacKinnon's focus, Fricker (2007, 139–140) states, "In such a situation, women's testimony is not quite pre-empted (they do say things to men), but it might as well be, since it is not heard as genuine testimony at all. . . . The man never really *hears* the woman at all—her utterance simply fails to register with his testimonial sensibility." This appears to be a case of ignoring as women here are speaking—they do say no—but their utterance doesn't register with the hearer as an utterance at all, as the hearer proceeds as if nothing was said to begin with. So, although with preemptive testimonial injustice members of marginalized groups really never do speak because they are not approached as candidate knowers in testimonial exchanges, in *unjust ignoring* members of marginalized groups do speak but literally are not heard as doing so; and again, both of these occur because of the prejudicial identity stereotypes operating in hearers.

Lastly, there is *testimonial quieting*. Focusing on the crucial role an audience plays for acts of testimony to be successful, Dotson (2011, 242) states that "the problem of testimonial quieting occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower. A speaker needs an audience to identify, or at least recognize, her as a

¹² Because Fricker (2007, 139) herself describes the phenomenon MacKinnon describes as "not quite pre-empted" but nevertheless a type of silencing, I proceed to distinguish it as a distinct concept from preemptive testimonial injustice.

knower in order to offer testimony.” Unfortunately, unlike in the case of testimonial smothering, Dotson provides no concrete examples of testimonial quieting, making it difficult to fully understand whether the phenomenon she conceptualizes is ultimately distinct from those already covered. For this depends on the explanation for the audience’s failure. With the quotation above, it seems as though the failure is in audiences identifying who is a candidate knower to even approach for knowledge, thus depriving some knowers of the opportunity to distribute their knowledge via testimony, as the issue highlighted is that one is unable to even *offer*, or attempt, any testimony; but this seems the same as Fricker’s notion of preemptive testimonial injustice.¹³ Alternatively, when Dotson (2011, 243; emphasis added) states that the issue is the “failure of audiences to communicatively reciprocate black women’s *attempts* at linguistic exchanges by routinely not recognizing them as knowers,” this seems to imply that speakers who suffer testimonial quieting have already spoken and made testimonial reports, but that there is a failure for such reporting to be a successful testimonial exchange of knowledge. Here, this can be either because the audience fails to understand that what the speaker is doing with their speech is testifying, or because the audience judges them to be less than credible, and so though they understand the speaker is intending to testify, they do not believe what they say.¹⁴ However, if it is the former, this appears to be no different from Langton’s notion of illocutionary silencing;¹⁵ and, if it is the latter, this appears to be no different from Fricker’s testimonial injustice. Since it is unclear how exactly testimonial quieting is distinct from the variations of silencing already covered, going forward my analysis will focus only on setting mansplaining apart from those other forms of silencing previously discussed.

3. “Well . . . Actually . . .”: A Theory of Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice

Let’s take a closer look at the examples introduced in section 1, to consider what they have in common as instances of the same phenomenon of mansplaining. First, they all involve instances where one person is more knowledgeable about the

¹³ Likewise, this interpretation is supported when Dotson (2011, 243; emphasis added) states that “that epistemic disadvantage [of testimonial quieting] exists only because of the dependency every speaker has on an audience to be *recognized as a potential* testifier or knower.”

¹⁴ The latter interpretation is supported by Dotson’s explanation of how those who suffer testimonial quieting, especially black women, have a lack of credibility due to stereotypes about them.

¹⁵ This fits most well with the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s* (Grasswick 2018) characterization of testimonial quieting as the audience not giving “appropriate uptake” to the speaker.

subject of conversation than the other: Solnit had just written a highly acclaimed book on the subject of Muybridge; Seals has both first-personal and professional experience on the subject of street harassment; and Brown, as one of very few successful producers who are women of color, likewise has both first-personal and professional experience on the subject of achieving diversity in the film industry. This kind of expertise pales in comparison to their conversational partners: Mr. Very Important, having never written a book on the subject; Santagati, being a man and having never experienced street harassment; and Damon, a straight, cis, white male, having no first-personal experience working in the film industry as a member of a marginalized group or very much experience working on projects intentionally aiming to increase diversity in the film industry. Secondly, let's look at what happens within the conversations themselves. We see both that the women are speaking, and that their conversational partners do proceed in the conversation by addressing their speech. It is not, in other words, as though their conversational partners start a new conversation or pretend as if they have said nothing at all.¹⁶ Lastly, we should note that despite the fact that the conversational partners proceed in the conversation by addressing what was said, they proceed as if *they* are the knowledgeable ones. We see this in the Solnit case where Mr. Very Important continues to explain Solnit's own book to her; where Damon tells Brown how diversity is achieved in the film industry; and where, most heinously, Santagati explicitly states, "I am more of an expert than you."

Now given that these instances all involve conversations between two people wherein there is an exchange of knowledge that has gone wrong, to understand the phenomenon itself, let's consider our most basic model of testimonial exchange. Remember that in the good case, a knowledgeable epistemic agent (speaker) passes on their knowledge to an epistemic agent lacking in that knowledge (hearer) by means of their speech: the hearer comes to know that *p*, on the basis of the speaker's say-so. In the cases of mansplaining offered above, this goes wrong, but in a particular way. But it does not go wrong because of typical reasons: it is not as though the speaker is not knowledgeable, nor that the hearer does not actually listen to what the speaker is saying. Rather, what is happening in these cases, I contend, is that there is a *dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer*: those who *ought* to be in the role of hearer due to their lack of knowledge and expertise (Mr. Very Important, Santagati, Damon), falsely assume the role of speaker, and treat the rightful speaker (Solnit, Seals, Brown) as a hearer on the topic. What's more, this reversal of epistemic roles of speaker/giver of knowledge and hearer/receiver of knowledge is not accidental but rather forceful, in the sense of there being often

¹⁶ This is one important feature that I will return to which I will argue sets mansplaining apart from certain types of silencing.

repeated attempts to occupy this role despite lacking the epistemic credentials for it and despite not being asked for any information (or worse yet, being told to not speak on the subject). We see, for example, Mr. Very Important repeatedly reasserting his right to the role of speaker by continuing to speak about the book as if it were his own despite the continual reminders that “that’s *her* book.” As a kind of refusal to hear the speaker, it can be classified as a kind of epistemic violence.¹⁷ However, it is more than merely a refusal to hear the knowledgeable agent when they speak or treat them as knowledgeable: it is a refusal to treat them—the rightful speaker—as a speaker in a testimonial exchange—that is, *as a potential giver of knowledge*.

To be clear, despite occupying the role of speaker within a testimonial exchange by speaking, mansplainers still do something wrong by speaking, for they unjustifiably and forcefully come to occupy such a role. It is not in virtue of their epistemic credentials of possessing knowledge that they come to occupy such a role, for they lack knowledge on the topic at issue, at least compared to those they ‘splain to. But, as an epistemic role, the role of speaker does not just refer to the agent who happens to be speaking; rather, it is fixed epistemically, as the agent who possesses knowledge and is capable of giving it. Since in the functional, ideal case of testimonial exchange, it is the (more) knowledgeable epistemic agent who inhabits the role of speaker, this forceful occupation of the epistemic role of speaker by an agent who (comparatively) lacks knowledge makes such a testimonial exchange *dysfunctional*. In this way, the case of mansplaining highlights another way in which speakers are dependent on hearers for successful communication (Hornsby 1994; Dotson 2011): namely, that an audience or hearer must not only understand the meaning of the speaker’s utterance but also, in the case of testimonial exchanges, understand them as one who possesses knowledge that they lack and, most importantly, understand their rightful role in the epistemic community.

Mansplaining as a dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer is significant because these roles are ways in which we understand ourselves and each other, and the functionings available to us in our epistemic communities as “giver of knowledge” and “receiver of knowledge.”¹⁸ As a dysfunctional subversion of such roles, Mansplaining cuts to the core of issues of epistemic agency and the ways in which it is possible for us to exist in epistemic

¹⁷ See Dotson (2011). Importantly, this refusal need not be intentional, as Dotson notes as regards epistemic violence.

¹⁸ The way in which mansplaining can affect our own personal identity is explained at the end of this section.

communities.¹⁹ It is not as though the women in the examples are solely explicitly or implicitly told that they are not knowledgeable, but rather that they are treated as having mistakenly believed that they are the appropriate givers of knowledge in the testimonial exchange when really they are the receiver of knowledge.²⁰ This highlights one important way in which mansplaining differs from testimonial injustice: it is not as though they face issues in properly functioning as speakers in testimonial exchanges (having their word believed), but rather that the epistemic role of speaker or giver of knowledge is *not even made available to them*. The judgment made by the rightful hearer is not that the rightful speaker is a *bad* speaker or an *untrustworthy* testifier, but rather that they *aren't a speaker—that is, aren't a giver of knowledge—at all*.²¹ They are not the kind of agents who are givers of knowledge in this epistemic community; they are the kind of agents who are receivers of knowledge. They ought to listen, not speak.

That explains the epistemic dysfunction that is at the core of the phenomenon of mansplaining. Now, we should turn our attention to the mechanisms at work behind such epistemic dysfunction. It is important here to note that the examples above are all instances of women speaking to men on a subject about which the women are knowledgeable, and about which the men falsely assume their own expertise. Hence the description of it as *mansplaining*. Solnit herself takes mansplaining to be a gendered issue, as one that women repeatedly face from men. Given this, we can say that the cause for such a forceful subversion of epistemic roles is rooted in social identities and is not an accidental feature of human fallibility. In these cases, the men are taking the role of speaker because they assume, either consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, that as a woman their conversational partner could not be more knowledgeable on the subject, that their identity as a man affords them such expertise. Remember here Santagati's response

¹⁹ The way in which mansplaining affects the way in which we exist or function in epistemic communities is clarified in what follows, where an analysis of the explaining aspect of mansplaining is given.

²⁰ In this way, it is not as though mansplainers believe women know nothing at all, but rather that they have nothing to learn from women on the topic of that context in the sense that women have no knowledge of their own to contribute to the epistemic community regarding that topic. They are in this way *treated* as nonknowers.

²¹ Of course, this is not to say that a woman is treated as though she knows nothing about any subject whatsoever—for I'm sure mansplainers would defer to women as speakers on gender-typed topics like what laundry stain remover works best—but rather that she is treated as having no knowledge to contribute on that topic within that conversational exchange. For work on how being treated as knowledgeable (only) on stereotyped topics is a kind of epistemic injustice, see Davis (2016).

of “I’m a guy” in his insertion of himself in the role of speaker. We can now see that, just as in the case of testimonial injustice, mansplaining involves the operation of identity prejudicial stereotypes.²² Plausibly, we could surmise that, in the Solnit case, it is the stereotype that women are not academics; with Seals, it is the stereotype that women cannot make reliable judgments about what is good for them or even what is happening to them; for Damon, it is the stereotype that women’s heads are in the clouds and lack practical tact at getting things done. Importantly, because prejudicial identity stereotypes are involved, mansplaining is not only something that men do to women: it is a kind of epistemic injustice that can apply to all marginalized social groups. This is because, in sum, the injustice of mansplaining is that the epistemic dysfunction of reversal of epistemic roles cuts across social lines of oppression and marginalization; it is something that is done to members of marginalized groups as a facet of their oppression. Given that mansplaining is an issue of epistemic roles and agency, and that it is a type of injustice done to members of marginalized groups, we can define mansplaining, and its generic variation, as follows:

Mansplaining: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of gendered prejudicial identity stereotypes.

X-splaining: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of a prejudicial identity stereotype.²³

Having analyzed what mansplaining is as a type of epistemic injustice, we should now move to consider what the core wrong of it is that makes it so pernicious.

²² I say “involves” here because I wish to remain agnostic both as to whether there may be additional causal mechanisms behind instances of mansplaining, and how precisely these stereotypes operate in the case of mansplaining. The precise causal mechanisms of mansplaining beyond the operation of such stereotypes—e.g., whether these stereotypes affect credibility judgments of the speaker or hearer or both, whether they serve not as credibility judgements but rather as some sort of motivational mechanism, whether they affect the audience’s perception of the speaker—is a deserving topic but unfortunately one outside the scope of the current paper.

²³ This epistemic injustice of mansplaining when applied to other groups has been called, e.g., whitesplaining, cissplaining, etc.

At the heart of Fricker's (2007, 43–44) account of epistemic injustice is the moral wrong wherein one is "wronged in their capacity as a knower." This is such an egregious wrong, Fricker contends, because our capacity as a knower is essential to our human value and intrinsic worth, as it is tied to our ability to reason in a social and socially recognized way. Thus, in committing an act of testimonial injustice, we are wronging the speaker by dehumanizing her. Fricker (2007, ch. 6) explains that such dehumanization, as the foundational harm of testimonial injustice, denies one's epistemic subjectivity, such that at best one is objectified in the sense of being treated as a mere source of information rather than an informant. In being treated as a kind of epistemic object akin to a thermostat, one is ousted from the epistemic community and its cooperative enterprise of pooling knowledge. Taking a general Kantian approach to value, Fricker contends that this wrong of objectification foundationally lies in its denying one the status of rational agency, the center of human value, thereby exhibiting a kind of deep disrespect.

The case of mansplaining presents a similar but somewhat different wrong. As we've seen, mansplaining is rooted in a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles of speaker/giver of knowledge and hearer/receiver of knowledge. What it shares with testimonial injustice is the core wrong Fricker outlines: that of undermining the epistemic agency of the rightful speaker and thereby denying their status as a fully rational being. This is due to their being denied the role of speaker, as being able to give knowledge to others is a central aspect of agency. However, when considering the wrong of mansplaining as a type of epistemic injustice, there are two aspects that constitute it: that of the rightful speaker/giver of knowledge being relegated to the role of the hearer/receiver of knowledge, and that of the explaining action being done by the rightful hearer/receiver of knowledge. A closer analysis of these two aspects will reveal the notable contours of the wrong of mansplaining as a distinct kind of epistemic injustice.

With respect to the first aspect, remember here that mansplaining undermines one's epistemic agency at a basic level: one is denied the ability to be a speaker within testimonial exchanges, to be a giver of knowledge. Those rightful speakers who suffer it suffer a loss of epistemic functioning in a crucial respect, in the sense that being perceived as a *possible* giver of knowledge is the most basic condition for actually making knowledge contributions to an epistemic community. One is being wronged in their capacity as a speaker, as a giver of knowledge. This could be seen as a wrong that is antecedent to the one Fricker outlines, in the sense that before one can contribute knowledge to the epistemic community, one has to be capable of being the kind of agent that can make any such epistemic contributions, rather than merely being the kind of agent who can only receive them; and likewise, in order to be judged a credible speaker, one must first be taken to be a candidate speaker in testimonial exchanges. There is a difference between being judged or treated as a *bad* giver of

knowledge in the case of testimonial injustice where one is judged as *not a credible knower*, and being judged or treated as *not being capable of being a knower or giver of knowledge at all* in the case of mansplaining: in the latter, one is denied epistemic agency except in the most passive sense of being able to receive knowledge on the words of others. In the former, one is still seen as the kind of agent who could, potentially, contribute knowledge to the epistemic community; in the latter, one is seen as the kind of agent who essentially couldn't contribute knowledge to the epistemic community.

As Solnit (2014, 9–10) remarks, although there is a difference in not being believed and in not being perceived and treated as a speaker or giver of knowledge, this latter wrong of mansplaining is still tied to the undermining of one's humanity, though: "Most women fight wars on two fronts, one for whatever the putative topic is and one simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being."

Although both types of epistemic injustice undermine one's epistemic agency, testimonial injustice and mansplaining differ in how they do so, in the type of dehumanization that occurs. Instead of at best featuring a kind of objectification wherein one is treated as a mere source of information, at the heart of mansplaining is rather a kind of *degradation*. In being relegated to the role of hearer, those rightful speakers undergo a change in their epistemic agency in which it is not so much wholly denied as distorted: they are still included in the epistemic community and its cooperative efforts, but in a dysfunctional way. Insofar as their rational agency is undermined, it is not done so wholesale but rather specifically with respect to their epistemic autonomy. What is undermined is their ability to be a full epistemic agent by way of denying their epistemic independence: they are epistemically deprived, in need of knowledge, and unable to get it on their own such that they are epistemically dependent on others, the speakers or givers of knowledge. Instead of at least being capable of providing information to other epistemic agents within the epistemic community as in the case of objectification, the participation of those who have been epistemically degraded is limited to a nonautonomous role of mere absorption of information, as they are treated as a mere epistemic vessel. As Solnit (2014, 8) explains, "Explaining men still assume I am, in some sort of obscene impregnation metaphor, an empty vessel to be filled with their wisdom and knowledge." This goes some way to explain what is so offensive about being mansplained to, as one feels as though one is being treated like a child, utterly lost in the world and dependent on others for their ability to get about the world. A denial of such autonomy is a serious wrong on the same grounds as a denial of one's rational agency is, for it cuts to the quick of what is central to human value, and moreover what makes us equals.

Of course, mansplaining wouldn't be mansplaining without the explaining, the second aspect of the phenomenon to which we now turn our attention.²⁴ What is crucial to first note is that the difference in the roles of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge within epistemic communities is one of an inherent power asymmetry between that of speaker and hearer: the speaker possesses knowledge that the hearer needs or otherwise lacks. This need not be bad in itself, but it can go wrong in a number of ways, and mansplaining is one such way. On this understanding, within the dynamics of mansplaining one is forcefully relegated to a position of comparative powerlessness. We can say, then, that the explaining action of the rightful hearer functions to institute an epistemic hierarchy within the epistemic community. It is, ultimately, a power grab wherein the rightful hearer forcefully asserts their false authority and therefore dominance over others. Although the explaining is meant to look innocuous, such "helping" is really hurting, a self-interested move thinly veiled as self-sacrifice. It is not meant to empower the false hearer with knowledge—for they already have it—but rather to empower the false speaker: such false speakers prove their worth to the epistemic community not by proving their epistemic credentials as individuals, but relationally by showing how needed they are by others in the community, how lost these others would be without them. Again, given that such action involves the operation of identity prejudicial stereotypes, the hierarchy is dysfunctional in the sense that it is an ordering not according to epistemic merit (who has knowledge being in the more powerful role of speaker) but rather according to social identity. Mansplaining therefore recreates the unjust social hierarchies found in the social-political domain within the epistemic domain. Ultimately, it is a power move that seeks to further institute and solidify unjust social hierarchies within an epistemic community.²⁵

In sum, the wrong of mansplaining is that of degradation by way of denying one's epistemic autonomy as a rational agent. Mansplaining wrongfully denies one an epistemic identity of power, of one's very capacity to be the kind of full epistemic agent that *could contribute knowledge* to the resources of the epistemic community. One is worse than an unreliable informant (testimonial injustice), worse than a mere

²⁴ Although both mansplaining and testimonial quieting concern, at the most general level, the way in which marginalized agents aren't recognized as knowers, this is one major way in which they are different. This aspect is also what sets mansplaining apart from being a case where 'splainers merely think of themselves as peers with those who are 'splained to: for someone who thinks of themselves as a peer to someone else does not explain core tenets of the topic under discussion to their peer but rather proceeds collaboratively.

²⁵ Here I do not mean to attribute any particular intentions or conscious thoughts within the mind of the 'splainer; rather, I am explaining the effects such actions have.

source of information (epistemic objectification): one is merely an empty epistemic vessel.

Continuing to follow Fricker, mansplaining can also be analyzed in terms of its secondary harms, including epistemic harms, practical harms, and harms to one's identity. Some of these harms follow from single instances of mansplaining, while others are the cumulative effect of experiencing multiple instances of it. First, the epistemic harms. Fricker (2007) notes that in the case of testimonial injustice, this can result in a loss of knowledge both in the speaker themselves and in the epistemic community at large, as well as the loss of epistemic virtues in the speaker like epistemic courage. In the case of mansplaining the epistemic harms are likewise a loss of knowledge. However, the way in which knowledge is lost differs. In the case of testimonial injustice, knowledge isn't disseminated throughout the epistemic community because hearers do not come to believe speakers when they should. In the case of mansplaining, knowledge is lost to the epistemic community because women can come to self-silence and stop even attempting to share their knowledge after suffering repeated instances of mansplaining. Solnit (2014, 4) notes this effect when she states, "Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world." Additionally, there are issues concerning how epistemic goods like credibility are distributed across an epistemic community, and how this is a distinct epistemic harm.²⁶ As McKinnon (2016, 440–441) states, "When speaking of epistemology and knowledge, the unevenly distributed resources are concepts, credibility, and knowledge." Our epistemic roles—concepts central to the heart of analyses of epistemic harms—are missing in this analysis. Further, I suggest that our epistemic roles are goods in themselves, attributed to us by others and unevenly distributed: specifically, the unevenly distributed roles of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge.

The other set of harms mansplaining carries are to one's identity. Mansplaining carries harms to identity that can happen downstream of the actual instance of mansplaining that takes place wherein one's epistemic role as speaker is forcefully subverted. First, mansplaining carries the risk of reinforcing prejudicial identity stereotypes through what McKinnon (2017) calls an "epistemic circle of hell."²⁷ It occurs when, in an instance of mansplaining, S is not taken as a speaker, and so judged to be ignorant on the subject, which then creates more evidence that they

²⁶ See McKinnon (2016) and Medina (2013).

²⁷ This downstream harm of epistemic injustice has been noted by McKinnon (2017), Peet (2017), and Buckwalter (2019).

couldn't possibly be trying to speak on the subject, thus leading to more occasions where they are denied the role of speaker. If sometimes we think people can gain credibility as an expert on a topic merely by talking about it a lot, then people can also lose it by not speaking about it. Generally, this seems true: we are surprised when someone suddenly starts speaking on a topic we had never even heard them mention before, and we usually approach them with suspicion: "I didn't know you knew about X." But in conditions of structural injustice, this surprise can become "You *don't* know about X; if you did, you would have spoken about it before."

Additionally, with cumulative instances of mansplaining, one can suffer a harm to one's very practical identities. As Solnit (2014, 2) notes after her encounter with Mr. Very Important, she momentarily doubts her own identity as author and expert: "So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingenue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it." After suffering multiple instances of mansplaining, it is plausible that one's specific self-conceptions as an expert would deteriorate. Especially in academic contexts, this could mean that one loses one's identity, both one's self-identity and the way in which others identify oneself: one is no longer an epistemologist but someone who merely dabbles or has an interest in the subject.

Lastly, there are the practical harms. One point to consider at the outset is that authorship is a social-political good. Continuing on in looking at specific domains in which an epistemic identity as a speaker is most crucial, we can see once again significant practical harms for those in academia. For it is in academic arenas that it matters most who gets credit for things like speaking, expertise, and "original ideas" when it comes to practical goods like tenure and promotions. But even outside of academic contexts, lacking authorship of one's statements and ideas results in significant practical harms for anyone in the workforce when it comes to job offers, especially those that require leadership roles. If members of marginalized groups aren't seen as speakers, as people capable of contributing epistemic resources like knowledge and creative ideas, but rather only as people capable of inspiring and following the notions of others, they will not be seen as people capable of being effective in the more high-paying, high-esteem leadership roles. Hence, we see that the epistemic injustice of mansplaining intersects with class-based oppression that members of marginalized groups face. All of those "Well, actually . . ." moments don't just cut at one's patience but also cut at one's pockets. As this last harm goes to show, there are structures that exist that not only fail to punish mansplainers but reward them with goods like esteem, money and professional power.

Having articulated a theory of mansplaining as an instance of epistemic injustice alongside its wrongs and harms, I will now turn to briefly consider silencing as an alternative model of it, arguing that it is a less ideal model.

4. Against Silencing

When analyzing how mansplaining compares to silencing, we should first note that speech as testimony is occurring. This immediately sets it apart from Dotson's notion of *testimonial smothering*, Fricker's notion of *preemptive testimonial injustice*, and Langton's notion of *locutionary silencing*. Each of these forms of silencing have at their core the idea that knowledgeable speakers aren't speaking either at all or as much as they otherwise could. But in the case of mansplaining, knowledgeable speakers do speak, and speak fully (that is, without withholding their knowledge in the particular instance in which mansplaining occurs).

Secondly, we should note that the speaker's testimony does in fact register with the hearer. This is evinced by the fact that the hearers respond directly to what the speaker has said and engage with it, as they often refer back to what the speaker has said. This can be seen most clearly in the case of Brown and Damon, where Damon states that *they* are talking about diversity, explicitly acknowledging both that they are in a shared conversation and that he correctly heard Brown to be talking about issues of diversity. This means that mansplaining is a different phenomenon from *unjust ignoring*, as hearers do not in fact or in action fail to hear the speaker.

The last serious type of silencing mansplaining might fit under would be as a kind of *illocutionary silencing*. Under this understanding of mansplaining, although the speaker aims to make a report, they are instead understood as engaging in some other kind of speech act, like inquiring about a topic, or requesting help or advice, or airing a confusion. Hence, rightful hearers assume the role of speaker in order to proceed in a way that is natural to the conversational exchange under the interpretation of the speaker as doing something other than making a report: they answer the speaker's "question" or clear up their "confusion." Although this is an interesting and plausible candidate for understanding mansplaining, it still falls a bit short. This is because it does not seem as though, in all instances of mansplaining, the hearers really do genuinely take the speaker to be doing something other than reporting. (If only all mansplainers were so decent.) This is evinced by Solnit's own example, where it is implausible to think that Mr. Very Important really understands Solnit to be asking questions about her own book, as well as the general fact that many instances of mansplaining are known to proceed by the hearer exclaiming, "What she was trying to say was . . .," thus indicating that they typically do take the speaker to be making a kind of statement or report rather than asking a question or requesting help. Of course, this is not to say that illocutionary silencing might be an *additional* injustice also happening in some instances of mansplaining. Rather, the claim here is that it is not the core phenomenon that unifies all such instances, such that mansplaining as such ought to be understood as a form of epistemic injustice.

5. Cause and Solution

I will close my analysis by briefly sketching a diagnosis of mansplaining, both in terms of its broader structural cause and its possible solution.

We know that mansplaining involves the operation of prejudicial identity stereotypes, but I believe there is a deeper story to be told about why mansplaining as a general phenomenon occurs. That is, even if it is the operation of such stereotypes that causes the rightful hearer to forcefully subvert the testimonial epistemic identities and deny the rightful speaker their role as such, one can ask what enables such stereotypes to have such causal effects, to function in such a way.

Here, we should look to the notions of epistemic vices and virtues of the dominant and marginalized that José Medina (2013) analyzes in his book *The Epistemology of Resistance*. Medina argues that the marginalized, due to their social status, actually gain certain epistemic virtues, like humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness. Given this, one could think that the root of the problem is that women have *too much* humility to assert themselves in the role of speaker within testimonial exchanges, leading to men assuming the open role. There are a few problems with this. First, it is inherently victim-blaming: it states that the reason why mansplaining happens to women is because they aren't assertive enough. Moreover, though, it is empirically false. We can see this in the case of Solnit, whose friend repeatedly reasserts that the book Mr. Very Important is talking about is Solnit's, to no avail; Mr. Very Important continues to act as speaker in the conversation. On the other hand, Medina also argues that the dominant suffer epistemic vices like epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and close-mindedness. Instead of holding that it is women's extreme epistemic humility that causes mansplaining, the better explanation is that it is men's epistemic arrogance. The fault, more specifically, isn't the epistemic arrogance they have regarding individual facts that they take themselves to know—that they know that p —but rather the epistemic arrogance they have with respect to their epistemic identity: that they belong, always and as a default, in the active role of speaker. It is an epistemic arrogance to presume that you know more on any given subject under discussion than the other person in the conversational exchange, that they have more to learn from you than you do from them. It is an essentially comparative and social-relational kind of epistemic arrogance that concerns not just what one knows but how one's epistemic profile compares to others, and what social roles one takes to be available to oneself.²⁸ In this sense, it manifests as a kind of sense of entitlement. The issue, then, is plausibly the arrogance that members of dominant groups have which manifests as a sense of entitlement to occupy epistemic

²⁸ This fits nicely with Medina's (2013) model of credibility in which it is essentially comparative in nature (although I make no argument here concerning credibility judgments).

roles of power, regardless of their actual epistemic credentials compared to those of others.²⁹

Given that the issue is epistemic arrogance, any kind of “lean in” solution³⁰—which urges the marginalized to just be louder, be more assertive, be clearer that one is making a statement, is knowledgeable, isn’t asking for clarification—is bound to be ineffective. You can tell someone over and over again that *you* are the speaker, that you *know* what you’re talking about, but if they just cannot see themselves in any role other than speaker, all that one will be met with is confusion at best and a reassertion that the dominant is the real expert. We see the former in the case of Solnit, and the latter in the case of Seals. Rather, the solution to mansplaining lies on the shoulders of men and other dominant groups that commit instances of this epistemic injustice. Men must scale down their epistemic arrogance and stop presupposing their epistemic position as the one of most power. In a way, this will look similar to Fricker’s (2007) proposed solution to unjust credibility deficits that the marginalized suffer: we are to, when hearing the testimony of a member of a marginalized group, automatically ramp up our credibility judgment of them, since there is very good reason to think that a negative stereotype is causing our immediate judgment to be unduly low. Likewise, in the case of mansplaining, when one is in a conversational exchange with a member of a marginalized group, one should, first, ramp down one’s confidence in one’s own comparative expertise on the subject so to treat the issue of epistemic arrogance, and, second, instead of presupposing that one is entitled to occupy the role of speaker, presuppose that one is the hearer in this conversational exchange unless proven otherwise.

However, this is the ideal solution, which will undoubtedly take much time to be realized, if it ever is. In the meantime, members of marginalized groups who suffer from acts of ‘splaining have each other to use as resources. Although reasserting oneself alone as the rightful speaker to a mansplainer is bound to be ineffective, finding solidarity in others reaffirming this reassertion is one strategy that is likely more effective. And plausibly, since mansplaining is due to the operation of prejudicial stereotypes, this type of resounding solidarity against mansplaining would work even better when voiced from members of privileged groups so as to gain buy-in by the privileged ‘splainer.

²⁹ This understanding of epistemic arrogance as a sense of entitlement to epistemic roles leaves open the possibility that it is men’s internal feelings of insecurity that in fact (consciously or perhaps more often unconsciously) motivate them to mansplain.

³⁰ See Sandberg (2013).

6. Concluding Remarks

Men explain things to women. But their doing so, in cases of mansplaining, is an injustice. As I've argued in this paper, it is a type of epistemic injustice as a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles of hearer and speaker due to the operation of prejudicial identity stereotypes. Mansplaining is a serious injustice. For these epistemic roles structure our very existence and functioning within our epistemic communities, and establish the power that we have within them. As women are systematically denied the role of speaker, and instead forcefully relegated to the role of hearer, they are degraded and suffer a host of harms: loss of epistemic and practical identities, loss of practical goods like money and prestige, and loss of their very humanity. The solution I have proposed is not hard: it merely asks that men, and others in dominant groups, renounce their entitlement to the role of speaker and assume the role of hearer in testimonial exchanges with women and other members of marginalized groups. But entitlement and power are difficult to convince anyone to give up. And anyways, in order to convince anyone to give those up, you'd have to first be taken as a speaker on what is best to do about mansplaining. But I'm sure explaining men will have a lot to explain about that subject, too.³¹

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