

# Common Ground, Conversational Roles and Epistemic Injustice

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*Abstract:* People partaking in a conversation can add to the common ground of said conversation by performing different speech acts. That is, they can influence which propositions are presumed to be shared among them. In this paper, I am going to apply the common ground framework to the phenomenon of epistemic injustice. In doing so, I am going to focus on two kinds of speech acts: making assertions and asking certain kinds of questions. And I am going to look at three varieties of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, inquiring injustice and interpretative injustice. I am going to argue that what all these varieties of epistemic injustice have in common is that they unfairly inhibit the speaker's ability to add to the common ground in the way intended by her. This in turn negatively affects which conversational roles a speaker can play in a given conversation. Based on these results, I am going to end by looking at some of the harms that epistemic injustice inflicts upon its victims.

*Keywords:* Common ground; conversational roles; conversation-types; epistemic injustice; Miranda Fricker; Mitchell Green.

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## 1. Common ground

Mitchell Green (2017a), drawing on Robert Stalnaker (2002; 2014), defines the common ground (CG) as follows: “A proposition [p] is common ground between agents A and B just in case both A and B accept p, both accept that both accept p, both accept that both accept that both accept p, and so on [...]. This definition readily generalizes to more than two agents and to multiple propositions” (Green 2017a, 1589). We can understand “accepting” p as treating p as true for some purpose—e.g. believing that p is true, supposing that p is true for the sake of argument, imagining that p is true for the sake of a story (cf. Stalnaker 2014, 39; Green 2017a, 1589).

Here is an example to make this more vivid. Let’s assume my friend Laura says to me: “Let’s meet at the library at 3 pm”. In this situation, she assumes the following, among potentially many other things, to be common ground between the two of us: (1) We both accept that we both have the same library in mind. (2) We both accept that we are both aware where it is located. (3) We both accept that we both have the same day in mind. (4) We both accept that we are in the same time-zone. We both accept that we both accept (1)-(4), and so on.

I might respond to Laura in several ways. I might agree with her: “Yes, let’s do this”. In this case, I signal to her that I assume the same common ground as her and that I can make it on time.<sup>1</sup> Or I might respond: “Sorry, I can’t make 3 pm. What about 4 pm?”. In this case, I signal to her that I assume the same common ground as her, but that I won’t be able to comply with her proposal. Or I might respond: “Which library do you mean?”. In the last case, I deny that it is common ground between us which library she is talking about. Here, Laura would have to say something like this: “I mean the library next to the university”. In doing so, Laura proposes to add a new proposition to the common ground. She wants to make it the case that I accept that the library Laura wants us to meet at is the one next to the university. If she succeeds, she thereby makes it the case that we now both accept that we are both aware of which library Laura wants to meet at,

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<sup>1</sup> At least regarding the propositions listed above. In what follows, I will omit this complication for the sake of simplicity.

and that we both accept that we both accept this, and so on. In other words, Laura has successfully *updated* the common ground between us.<sup>2</sup>

For reasons that will emerge in §2, I'll focus on two ways to update the common ground—by making assertions and by asking questions of a certain kind.<sup>3</sup> Let's assume I assert: "Meryl Streep holds the world record for most Oscar nominations". By asserting this, I want to make it the case that the proposition that Meryl Streep holds the world record for most Oscar nominations is accepted as part of the common ground between me and my interlocutor. More specifically, I want my interlocutor to believe that it is indeed Meryl Streep holds this distinction. My interlocutor might respond by saying "Wow, I didn't know this". She thereby signals to me that she believes me and hence that my attempt to update the common ground between us has been successful.

However, my attempt to update the common ground by making an assertion might also be resisted or challenged in various ways.<sup>4</sup> My interlocutor might respond: "How would you know? You don't even own a tv". Here, she registers my belief but challenges my competence to update the common ground in the desired way. That is, she doesn't accept the content of my assertion. It would now be up to me to answer her challenge. If I can't do so to her satisfaction, the content of my assertion won't become part of the common ground between us. Or my interlocutor might challenge the factual correctness of my statement: "No, that's Helen Mirren." Or she might doubt my sincerity: "You do not really believe this, do you?" Again, these challenges might lead to the content of my assertion not becoming part of the common ground between us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Also cf. Lewis (1979) on "scorekeeping".

<sup>3</sup> Stalnaker takes assertion to be the speech act by which we paradigmatically update the common ground (cf. Stalnaker 2014, 36; Green 2017a, 1591). Green (2017a, 1590 f.) also examines the way in which we can update the common ground by asking questions. I will say more on the latter below.

<sup>4</sup> On the right to challenge speakers who make assertions cf. e.g. Hinchman (2005) and Goldberg (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Green (2017b) identifies three dimensions of commitments a speaker undertakes in making an assertion—liability, frankness, fidelity. Because the speaker makes a claim about how things are, she is "liable to being correct or incorrect depending on

A similar picture emerges with regard to questions (cf. Green 2017a, 1590 f.). Let's assume I ask: "Which movie won best picture at the Oscars in 1973?". By raising this question, I want to make it part of the common ground between me and my interlocutors that I don't know the answer to this question and also, typically, that the issue is worth looking into. If the question isn't answered immediately or shot down as irrelevant, then this means that it is accepted into the common ground as an *open question*. That is, we both accept it as true that we don't know, and that we both accept that we both accept that we don't know which movie won best picture in 1973, and that this is an issue that is worth looking into. Alternatively, it might happen that my question isn't shot down as irrelevant, but answered immediately. Here too, in a sense, the question is accepted into the common ground. After all, it is dealt with appropriately. However, once it has been answered, it will no longer be part of the common ground as an open question. Irrespective of this, by accepting the question into the common ground, we both also accept an existential presupposition into the common ground, namely that there was (at least) one movie that won best picture in 1973, and thus also the meta-linguistic presupposition that there is (at least) one correct answer to the question raised. And we both accept that we both accept these presuppositions, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

My interlocutor might now look up the information on her smartphone and assert: "It was the Godfather". If the content of her assertion is accepted then it is in turn added to the common ground. The issue is now settled.

However, a question might be resisted or challenged as well. Let's assume I ask: "Is right-wing populism on the rise in Europe again?" Here, my

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how things are". She is also committed to "frankness"; that is, committed to believing what she asserts. Moreover, Green uses the term "fidelity" to express the notion that a speaker who makes an assertion thereby commits herself to respond to challenges by justifying her claims. We can see these commitments in play in the above examples. Because of "liability" and "frankness", it is appropriate to challenge the speaker's assertion in the ways indicated above. Because of "fidelity", the speaker is committed to respond to such challenges. Moreover, how well she is able to respond to such challenges will (at least in part) determine whether her assertion becomes part of the common ground.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on this issue.

interlocutor might respond: “Don’t be ridiculous, of course it is. How can you even doubt this?” Or she might respond: “Don’t be ridiculous, of course it isn’t. How can you even ask this?” In both cases, my question is rejected as illegitimate, because the issue is taken to be settled already and hence not worthy of (further) investigation. It doesn’t become part of the common ground (what will likely become part of the common ground is that I have asked this question).

Somewhat more generally, Green states:

CG depends on what interlocutors accept, so if certain parties to a conversation refuse to acknowledge that one speaker has performed a speech act, then neither its force nor its content will become part of CG, which will only register that this speaker has performed an act of speech. Or perhaps they acknowledge the performance of an illocution, but put the speaker up to impossibly high standards before the content of that illocution is absorbed into CG. (Green 2017a, 1600 f.).

These remarks suggest that a speaker might be unjustly prevented from adding to the common ground. In what follows, I am going to take up this suggestion. That is, I will be using the common ground framework outlined so far to look at the debate on epistemic injustice. I am going to argue that in cases of epistemic injustice, what typically happens, among other things, is this: *A speaker is, due to a negative identity stereotype against her, unfairly*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth stressing that I take the prevention in question to be unfair because it is based on a negative identity stereotype. Of course, this leaves open the possibility that there might be other unfair reasons for preventing a speaker from adding to the common ground in the way intended by her. Moreover, I take it that is not always unfair to prevent a speaker from adding to the common ground due to considerations connected to the speaker’s identity. To see this, consider the following example: I have a friend who is an expert in economics but who is ignorant about physics. Both is known to me. Now, this friend makes two claims—one about the economical aspects of nuclear energy and the other about its hazardous nature. If I accept her first claim, but not the second (which, as a consequence, doesn’t become part of the common ground between us), it seems that I am hardly behaving unfairly towards her. The reason is that my rejection of her second claim is not based on a negative identity stereotype against her. Rather, the rejection is based on a fair

*prevented from adding to the common ground in the way intended by her.*<sup>8</sup>

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assessment of her respective qualifications to make statements concerning different topics. (Thanks to Maciej Witek for pressing me to be clearer on these issues and for suggesting the example).

<sup>8</sup> One might wonder about cases in which a speaker is unfairly prevented from adding to the common ground, not due to a negative identity stereotype against her, but due to some more specific features the speaker exhibits. Wouldn't such cases also count as examples of epistemic injustice? Let's assume I wrongly don't believe a speaker because she exhibits some nervous tick, which I mistake for a sign of dishonesty. Although such behaviour would be somewhat unfair and potentially harmful to the speaker, I wouldn't, following Fricker (2007), classify this as an instance of epistemic injustice, but rather of an instance of "epistemic bad luck". Here, it's not that I don't believe the speaker because I am harbouring prejudices against her. The only reason I'm not believing her is that I am missing important information about her. She exhibits a behaviour commonly associated with dishonesty because she is nervous, not because she in fact is dishonest. What is more, if I had this piece of information, then I would likely believe her. It's just bad luck for her that I do not. The latter is not the case with epistemic injustice. In the above examples, the speaker doesn't suffer a credibility deficit because the hearer lacks important information. Instead, the (unjust) reason for distrust is more systematic and more deeply rooted.

Of course, this is not to say that in cases where testimonial injustice is present, acquiring more information about the speaker can't change a hearer's perception of the speaker's credibility. To see this, consider the following example: A woman, who has a degree in nuclear physics, claims that nuclear energy is dangerous. Her male interlocutor, who doesn't know she has the relevant expertise, dismisses her claim as the ramblings of an anxious woman. Moreover, let's assume that (a) he would have believed her, had he known about her physics degree, and that (b) he would have simply believed a male interlocutor making the same claim, independent from whether he had any relevant background information about said interlocutor, and that (c) this difference in reaction on his part is due to a negative identity stereotype he harbours against women. Here, we have a case of testimonial injustice where having additional information would affect how the hearer perceives the speaker's credibility. That being said, it is worth stressing that this example is different from the nervous tick-example in so far as here a negative identity stereotype, and not just lack of information, is crucial for explaining the low credibility initially attributed to the speaker. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the second example and for pressing me to be clearer on this issue).

## 2. Varieties of epistemic injustice

Miranda Fricker (2007) discusses two kinds of epistemic injustice—*testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*.<sup>9</sup> The former is what I am going to focus on in this paper. One is a victim of testimonial injustice if, in making a statement, one suffers a credibility deficit due to negative identity stereotype. One of the examples Fricker provides for this phenomenon is the following: In the screenplay for Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* Marge Sherwood wants to convince the father of her fiancé, Herbert Greenleaf, that his son has been murdered by Tom Ripley. Mr. Greenleaf responds to this by dismissing the content of her assertion— "Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts". Here, Marge isn't believed by Mr. Greenleaf, although she is in fact right, due to a credibility deficit based on a negative identity stereotype: As a woman she is taken to be emotional rather than rational. Hence, so Herbert Greenleaf's thinking goes, one shouldn't attach too much weight to her words in this situation.<sup>10</sup> The injustice Marge suffers here is epistemic in kind in so far as she is not taken seriously as a valuable informant, and hence as a provider of knowledge, on the issue in question.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview over the epistemic injustice debate cf. McKinnon (2016).

<sup>10</sup> McGowan (2009) and Caponetto (2020) discuss a similar phenomenon under the moniker "authority silencing", which takes place, for example, "when women speak, or try to speak, as experts in male-dominated fields. [...]. Often, in spite of being competent and thus satisfying the requirements for counting as an expert in a given area, a woman finds that her utterances do not count as expert speech acts. Her expert status is not recognized and hence fails to give hearers any special reason to trust what she claims" (Caponetto 2020, 7). I believe, however, that the phenomenon of testimonial injustice, as conceived by Fricker, is broader than this. Marge, in the example above, is clearly epistemically wronged. But she is not wronged as an expert in a male-dominated field. After all, she isn't a police officer and hence doesn't make her statement concerning Tom Ripley's guilt in this capacity.

<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I shall follow Fricker in concentrating on cases in which there is a negative identity stereotype against the speaker. However, one might also hold that giving a speaker a credibility access due to some positive identity stereotype constitutes a form of epistemic injustice. As Medina (2013) points out, credibility judgments often have a contrastive quality. That is, the credibility of a testifier is

In the wake of Fricker’s influential work, philosophers have identified further varieties of epistemic injustice. For instance, Christopher Hookway (2010) draws attention to a phenomenon we can call *inquiring injustice*. Hookway notices that a person can become a victim of epistemic injustice not just when she asserts something, but also when she asks questions of a certain kind. That is, she can become a victim of epistemic injustice when she raises questions that attempt to shape an *inquiry*. When I talk of “epistemic injustice” in connection with raising questions, it’s such *inquiry questions* I have in mind, although I will sometimes simply talk about “questions” for the sake of brevity.<sup>12</sup>

Here is an example to make more vivid what I mean by “inquiry questions”: Imagine a philosophy seminar on knowledge during the 1950<sup>th</sup>, when contextualist approaches to knowledge ascriptions weren’t on people’s radars.<sup>13</sup> During this seminar a student asks: “What if the truth values of knowledge ascriptions are context dependent?” The student raises this question in order to draw attention to a worthy subject of inquiry. Her professor however dismisses this question, because she believes that students don’t have the philosophical skills to determine which questions do and do not merit philosophical inquiry. Here, the student also suffers a kind of epistemic injustice. Due to her identity—just a student—she is not taken to be the kind of person who can contribute to a philosophical inquiry by raising questions that might shape said inquiry.

One might object to this assessment on the basis that the student, unlike Marge, didn’t assert something. Hence, it is not the case that the student is wronged in her capacity as an informant or source of knowledge.

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assessed against the credibility of others. Greenleaf, to pick up on the above example, assesses Marge’s credibility against Tom’s. And the credibility deficit that Marge suffers is, at least to some extent, due to the credibility excess Greenleaf assigns to Tom. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out).

<sup>12</sup> I use this locution to distinguish the kinds of questions I am interested in in this paper from more mundane questions, such as “What time is it?”, “What’s your favourite ice cream?”, “Are you eating that?”, and so on.

<sup>13</sup> Although there are some precursors, contextualist approaches to knowledge ascriptions became prominent in the 1990<sup>th</sup> due to e.g. DeRose (1992), Lewis (1996), Cohen (1999).

Nevertheless, I believe that an epistemic injustice is committed against the student. After all, an inquiry is an epistemic activity in so far as it is aimed at generating knowledge or fostering understanding.<sup>14</sup> And the student is, due to a negative identity stereotype against her, unfairly prevented from contributing to this activity.

As should be apparent from the discussion of the above examples, the reason why I shall focus on assertions and inquiry questions is that they are especially important from an epistemic perspective. Assertions serve the function of sharing information and, if all goes well, spreading knowledge.<sup>15</sup> And inquiry questions serve the function of shaping activities aimed at gathering knowledge and promoting understanding. That being said, I don't deny that other speech acts (e.g. conjectures) are of epistemic importance as well.

What both testimonial injustice and inquiring injustice, as presented here, have in common is that the contents of certain contributions are dismissed when they shouldn't be, and that this happens due to negative identity stereotypes against the speakers who try to make these contributions. Andrew Peet (2017), however, points out that epistemic injustice can happen even earlier in the process of communication. One can also become a victim of epistemic injustice in virtue of the way one's utterance is interpreted; before the utterance is then further assessed for credibility and/or merit. Due to one's identity, one's utterance might be interpreted in ways one never intended.

As an example, following Fricker's (2007) reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Peet imagines a black man saying about a white woman "she seemed vulnerable to me". What the latter tries to convey is that he wanted to help her, because she didn't have anyone and he felt sorry for her. However, his interlocutors interpret his statement as saying that she would make an easy victim. In interpreting his statement like this, they are

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<sup>14</sup> For more on why inquiring should be understood as a distinctly epistemic activity and what the characteristics of this activity are, cf. Freedman (2019, forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kelp (2018) for related discussion.

guided by a negative identity stereotype that takes black men to be aggressive and prone to criminality.<sup>16</sup>

Although, intuitively, an injustice is committed in Peet's example, it might, compared to the two previous examples, be less obvious why we are dealing with a case of epistemic injustice here. After all, it's not that the black man's interlocutors don't believe him when he says that the woman seems vulnerable to him. Rather, the problem here is that they unfairly misinterpret the attitude expressed in his statement. The statement is taken to express malice rather than sympathy and pity. Nevertheless, there clearly is an epistemic dimension to the injustice committed here. The unfair misinterpretation happens because the black man's interlocutors have false background beliefs about black people and are not open to counterevidence that might challenge these beliefs. In fact, they fail to see his statement as potential counterevidence against their preconceived notions and instead unfairly interpret it in a way that fits these preconceived notions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peet (2017, 3432). The phenomenon Peet draws our attention to bears resemblance to what is often discussed under the headline "silencing" (cf. e.g. Langton 1993; Hornsby 1995a, 1995b; Langton & Hornsby 1998; Maitra 2009, 2017; McGowan 2009; Dotson 2011; McKinnon 2016; Caponetto 2020). A paradigm case to illustrate this phenomenon is the following: "A woman says 'No' to a man, intending to refuse sex. The man understands the conventional meaning of her utterance, and recognizes the content it expresses. Nevertheless, the utterance does not do what she wants it to do: it does not deter him from forcing sex on her" (Maitra 2009, 313). Although different accounts of silencing differ in their diagnosis of what goes wrong in this scenario, they are united by the thesis that the woman is silenced in so far as she gets disabled in her ability to communicate her refusal of sex. One possible explanation for this, that is given in the literature, is that her refusal gets misinterpreted. The man interprets her "No" not as a genuine refusal, but rather as an attempt to not appear too sexually forward. According to this interpretation, like in Peet's example, the message that is received is drastically different from the one that was intended to be conveyed.

<sup>17</sup> One might wonder whether the cases that were presented to illustrate testimonial injustice and inquiring injustice might instead be regarded as cases of interpretative injustice. For instance, Mr. Greenleaf might be regarded as misinterpreting Marge's utterance by taking it to be an expression of her fears, rather than an assertion issued with the required 'illocutionary' authority. Moreover, one might take the professor to misinterpret the student's utterance as a case of showing-off, rather than as a genuine question aimed at shaping the course of inquiry. While it is certainly

Let us briefly take stock: I have given an overview over three varieties of epistemic injustice—testimonial injustice, inquiring injustice and interpretative injustice. In each case, a speaker is treated unfairly due to a negative identity stereotype against her on the part of her respective interlocutor. Yet, apart from their common origin, these three varieties of epistemic injustice look quite different. Testimonial injustice is concerned with assertions. Inquiring injustice is concerned with questions of a certain kind. And interpretative injustice is concerned with how a speaker's message is understood by the hearers. In spite of these apparent differences, I want to suggest that these varieties of epistemic injustice are united by their effect. To do so, I will be utilizing the common ground framework laid out in the last section.

However, before exploring this idea, let me briefly address what might appear to be a tension between the common ground framework and the debate on epistemic injustice, especially regarding the first two examples. The common ground framework seems to be linked to the assumption that speakers engaged in a conversation are typically co-operative in a Gricean (e.g. 1975) sense. For example, a natural explanation for why the common ground between interlocutors can often be updated quite effortlessly is that the interlocutors implicitly assume each other to be co-operative. But such an assumption of cooperation seems not to be (at least not fully) present in conversations in which epistemic injustice takes place—e.g. those committing epistemic injustice tend to assume that their interlocutors' contributions are not relevant or of low quality.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, this tension disappears upon closer inspection. It's not that instances of epistemic injustice constitute counterexamples against Grice's

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possible that things like this might happen, we can simply stipulate that this is not what happens in the examples given in the main text. That is, we can stipulate that Mr. Greenleaf (correctly) understands Marge's utterance as an assertion. It's just that he dismisses said assertion due to a negative identity stereotype. Similarly, we can stipulate that the professor understands the student's contribution as a genuine inquiring question. It's just that, due to a negative identity stereotype, the professor doesn't engage with this question—she simply thinks that students are in no position to evaluate what are worthy subjects of philosophical inquiry. (Thanks to Maciej Witek for raising this issue).

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry.

cooperative principle. It's rather that we can use this principle to diagnose what, among other things, goes wrong when epistemic injustice takes place. In cases of epistemic injustice, an interlocutor falsely and unfairly assumes that the speaker violates the cooperative principle—e.g. an interlocutor falsely and unfairly assumes that the speaker's contribution falls short of certain standards of relevance or quality.

After having addressed this potential worry, let's take another look at the examples considered so far to explore the thesis put forward at the end of the last section. The thesis that in cases of epistemic injustice the speaker is, due to a negative identity stereotype against her, unfairly prevented from adding to the common ground in the way intended by her: Marge wants to update the common ground by adding the proposition that her fiancé, Dickie Greenleaf, has been murdered by Tom Ripley. However, her attempt to do so is resisted by Herbert Greenleaf. He deems her justification for her assertion—Tom is wearing Dickie's ring and Dickie promised her to never take it off—to be unsatisfactory. He brushes her accusation against Ripley off by saying "Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts". Consequently, the content of Marge's assertion does not become part of the common ground (it only becomes part of the common ground that Marge believes that Tom Ripley is guilty).

The student wants to update the common ground by proposing a question she takes to be a worthy starting point for philosophical inquiry. However, her professor believes that students are not in a position to determine what is and what isn't worthy of such inquiry. Therefore, she dismisses her question. Hence, although the question is registered, it doesn't become part of the common ground in the sense that it is accepted that perusing it might lead to interesting results. It won't be taken as worthy of further investigation in the context of the seminar.

And the black man in Peet's example intends to make it part of the common ground that there was a vulnerable woman that might have benefited from getting some help. However, this is not how his statement is interpreted by his interlocutors. They rather take him to classify her as a potential victim of his. What they take away from the conversation is very different from what he had in mind when he made his utterance.

It is worth stressing here that, in all of these examples, it might very well be the case that some proposition becomes common ground between the speaker's interlocutors as a result of her utterance. Crucially, however, in each instance, this won't be the proposition intended by the speaker. And what is more, said proposition will likely be anathema to the speaker's intention and unfairly proof harmful to her<sup>19</sup>—"Marge is a hysterical woman" instead of "Tom Ripley has murdered Dickie Greenleaf"; "This

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<sup>19</sup> The qualifications "harmful", "unfairly", and "as a result of her utterance" are crucial for characterizing instances of epistemic injustice. After all, it is frequently the case that a speaker's utterance will lead to propositions becoming part of the common ground between all or some of those involved, although the speaker didn't intend them to become part of the common ground. Imagine someone says "I just picked up a new suit from my tailor". As a result of this utterance, it might become part of the common ground between his interlocutors that the speaker is well off and that he is particular about his clothes, although this wasn't intended by the speaker. But, intuitively, we wouldn't say that these interlocutors commit an epistemic injustice against the speaker. Presumably, part of the explanation for this assessment is that we wouldn't say that these propositions are anathema to the speaker's intentions, or that they will proof unfairly harmful to him.

Or imagine that a male driver says "Sorry for being late, there were so many slow women drivers on the road today" (this example is adapted from Faulkner (2011)). Here, the speaker intends to give his interlocutors a reason for him being late. But it might very well become part of the common ground between his interlocutors that he is a sexist, although he did not intend this to happen. While this addition to the common ground might lead to the others viewing the speaker in an unfavourable light, we would hardly say that this is unfair towards the speaker.

Finally, imagine the following scenario (suggested by an anonymous reviewer): Suppose that Marge accuses Tom of being Dickie's murderer while bursting into tears. Moreover, suppose Greenleaf believes her, but also takes her tears to be a symptom of her overly emotional female nature. This thought then becomes common ground between Greenleaf and a few other male figures who listen to Marge's accusation. Here, the common ground would be updated in a way that is both unfair to Marge and harmful to women. Nevertheless, intuitively, we wouldn't be dealing with a case of epistemic injustice. The reason is that the common ground doesn't get updated in this way as a result of Marge's utterance per se. Rather, the common ground gets updated in this way because of the emotion Marge displays while making her utterance. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on these issues.).

student hasn't understood part of the lecture" instead of "Context-sensitivity is a worthy subject of inquiry"; "He wanted to rob her" instead of "She needs our help".

Moreover, it is worth stressing that the proposition might not become part of the common ground of the conversation that the speaker herself is part of. After all, the speakers in question will likely not accept the respective proposition. Still, the proposition might well become part of the common ground of conversations that the speaker's interlocutors subsequently (or even simultaneously) have among themselves. Marge, for example, will likely not accept the proposition that she is a hysterical woman. Hence, this proposition will not become part of the common ground of the conversation she herself is part of. Still, the proposition that she is a hysterical woman might well become part of the common ground of conversations that her male interlocutors subsequently (or even simultaneously) have among themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The considerations presented in this section confirm the thesis that was put forward: *Different varieties of epistemic injustice are united by their effect: A speaker is, due to a negative identity stereotype against her, unfairly prevented from adding to the common ground in the way intended by her.* Moreover, it was indicated in this section that this is bound to have negative effects on the speaker. I am going to end by discussing some of the negative consequences that might arise as a result; for the speaker and for the conversational project she wants to contribute to. To do so, I am going to make use of Mitchell Green's examination of different conversation-types.

### 3. The conversational harms of epistemic injustice

Green (2017a, 1593 ff.) provides a taxonomy of conversation-types. In doing so, he, following Stalnaker (1970), differentiates between *inquiries*

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<sup>20</sup> That's why it says in the preceding paragraph "it might very well be the case that some proposition becomes common ground between *the speaker's interlocutors* as a result of her utterance" (emphasis added), rather than "it might very well be the case that some proposition becomes common ground between *the speaker and her interlocutors* as a result of her utterance".

and *deliberations*. Inquiries aim at answering theoretical questions while deliberations aim at answering practical questions.<sup>21</sup> In both types of conversations, speakers can play different roles—symmetrical and asymmetrical ones. When speakers occupy symmetrical conversational roles, they pool their information and negotiate their desires to achieve the common goal of the conversation. If the roles are asymmetrical, a speaker answers theoretical or practical questions for the others (asymmetrical didactic). Or a speaker leads the others to answering theoretical or practical questions for themselves (asymmetrical socratic).

This analysis of conversational roles can help us to better understand the negative effects of epistemic injustice. As was shown in the last section, different varieties of epistemic injustice are united by the common feature of unfairly preventing speakers from adding to the common ground in the ways intended by them. This in turn severely limits the roles these speakers can play in a given conversation. As they are typically not believed, not taken seriously, or misinterpreted when they assert something or raise an inquiry question, they are curtailed in their ability to make contributions that might help to solve theoretical or practical questions.

Consider the examples from the previous section: As Marge is not believed, she is prevented from providing information that might help to answer the question what happened to Dickie Greenleaf. Because the student is not taken seriously, she is not in a position to ask questions that might shape the course of an inquiry concerning knowledge ascriptions. And because the black man in Peet's example is viewed as a predator, rather than as a good Samaritan, he is not seen as someone who might be a force for good in his community. Put in more general terms: *Victims of epistemic injustice are impeded in their ability to play a symmetrical role in a given conversation.*

To avoid a potential misunderstanding, a qualification is in order here. By “impeded” I don't mean that victims of epistemic injustice won't be able to play symmetrical roles in a given conversation at all. It's just that, in virtue of the negative identity stereotypes against them, the symmetrical

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21 Similarly, Stalnaker, roughly speaking, takes inquiries to be concerned with finding out what is the case, and deliberations to be concerned with finding out what to do (cf. Stalnaker 1970, 280).

contributions they can make will be unfairly curtailed. That is, these contributions will be limited to topics where the speaker is not viewed in light of a negative identity stereotype, or where the negative identity stereotype does not deflate the assessment of credibility or competence, or where there might even be a positive identity stereotype associated with the speaker; e.g. a woman might well play a symmetrical role in a conversation on how to raise a child, a student when it comes to the latest university gossip, or a black man when it comes to the athletic performance of a sports team.<sup>22</sup>

That being said, victims of epistemic injustice will often be forced into an asymmetrical role, if they are allowed to participate in the conversation at all. They are told things. Or things are explained to them. Think of “mansplaining” as a prototypical example for such an asymmetrical conversation dynamic. For our purposes we can understand mansplaining as the phenomenon where a man condescendingly explains something to a woman, although he possesses less knowledge on the issue in question than she does.<sup>23</sup> Here, the man automatically (and wrongly) assumes that a woman is not on equal footing with him regarding the topic at issue. She might learn from him but not vice versa. Thus, he will be prone to dismiss her attempts to contribute to the conversation in ways meant to educate him on the issue in question. Rather, her best shot at getting his attention and getting him to engage with her contributions will be to ask him for information, asks him to explain things to her, asks him how to do stuff, or makes statements that play into his preconceived notions, like “I don’t understand”, “Ah, I see now”, “Thank you for explaining”. In short, mansplaining constitutes a case of epistemic injustice in so far as the man doesn’t take his female interlocutor seriously as a source of knowledge from whom he might learn, but one-sidedly sees her as someone who could benefit from his knowledge.

Somewhat generalizing these observations, we can say that epistemic injustice fosters a power imbalance between conversationalists. The victims of epistemic injustice will likely be cast into a passive role. They will often not be seen as equals who can make a valuable contribution to inquiries or

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<sup>22</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on this issue.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>.

deliberations. Rather, they will typically be cast into the role of an inferior. That is, they will be seen as being dependent on others, and they will be prevented from conversing with others as equals. In short: *Their conversational agency gets impaired.*

Some practical negative effects of this impairment are quite obvious. When people are prevented from adding to the common ground in the way outlined above, they can't get credit for their work or their ideas. After all, substantial contributions they are trying to make are prone to be ignored, dismissed or misinterpreted. Again, consider the previous examples: Marge won't get credit for solving the disappearance of Dickie Greenleaf. The student in the philosophy seminar won't be mentioned by future epistemologists when they discuss contextualism. And the black man who just wanted to help won't be seen as someone who might make his neighborhood a better place. They are all, to borrow a phrase from Ishani Maitra (2009, 331), "unfairly deprived of the benefits of speech".<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the positive effects that the speakers intended to bring about with their utterances might not take place at all, or at least might take place later than they could have otherwise. There might never be justice for Dickie Greenleaf, as Marge was the only one to see through Tom Ripley. An important strand in contemporary epistemology might have gotten off to a much earlier start. The quality of life in the neighborhood might not improve, or improve later than it could have.

However, I believe that the negative effects of this impairment cut even deeper. To see why, it will help to look at what Fricker (2007) identifies as a crucial harm inflicted by epistemic injustice, especially testimonial injustice. According to Fricker, in cases of epistemic injustice "a person is wronged in her capacity as a knower" and "[t]o be wronged in one's capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value"

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<sup>24</sup> I say "borrow" here because the point I make is somewhat different from Maitra's. My point is that victims of epistemic injustice are deprived of the benefits of speech in so far as these victims won't get credit for the ideas they express. In contrast to this, Maitra is concerned with how speech gives people a voice in democratic societies (e.g. to protest or to criticise) and how silencing (cf. fn. 17) deprives people of this voice. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be explicit on this difference.)

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(Fricker 2007, 44).<sup>25</sup> The key idea here is that our capacities to know things and to spread knowledge are crucial parts of our identity qua human beings. Thus, not to be taken seriously in these capacities, as happens in cases of epistemic injustice, is essentially “dehumanizing” (cf. Fricker 2007, 44).

If what I have been saying so far is on the right track, then the dehumanizing effect of epistemic injustice goes even further. While I agree with Fricker that our capacities to know things and to spread knowledge are crucial to our identity qua human beings, surely other capacities are essential here as well. I take it that another essential and related capacity is our capacity to communicate with each other more broadly—a capacity that importantly includes our ability to partake in conversations. But if victims of epistemic injustice are, as I have been arguing, impaired in their conversational agency (in virtue of being impeded in their ability to play a symmetrical role in a given conversation), then this means that their ability to partake in conversations gets curtailed.

The latter is crucial for assessing the dehumanizing effect of epistemic injustice: if the ability to partake in conversations is an important part of our capacity to communicate, and if this capacity in turn is an important part of our identity qua human beings, then this means that victims of epistemic injustice are also dehumanized in virtue of being curtailed in their ability to partake in conversations. Put differently, it’s not just that victims of epistemic injustice are dehumanized in so far as they are wronged in their capacity as knowers. It’s also that they are dehumanized in so far as they are wronged in their capacity as communicators more broadly.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at epistemic injustice through the prism of Mitchell Green’s work on the common ground and on conversation-types. This has allowed me to unearth a feature that different varieties of epistemic injustice have in common. When one is a victim of epistemic injustice, one is, due to this, unfairly prevented from adding to the common ground in

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<sup>25</sup> Here, Fricker in turn draws on Craig’s (1990) genealogical account of our concept of knowledge.

the way one intends. This in turn has an impact on the conversational roles one can play. Victims of epistemic injustice are likely to be forced into asymmetrical conversational roles. That is, they are bound not to be taken as equals who can make valuable contributions to inquiries or deliberations. Rather, they are bound to be perceived as people who need things to be explained to them, or to be shown to them. On a practical level, this is likely to have negative consequences for the victims of epistemic injustice as well as for the conversational projects they are prevented from engaging in properly. Moreover, this is even bound to dehumanize victims of epistemic injustice in so far as they are wronged in a capacity that is essential to human identity, the capacity to communicate.

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