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Echo Chambers, Epistemic Injustice, and Ignorance

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The connections between echo chambers, on the one hand, and epistemic injustice and ignorance, on the other hand, are important to identify and theorize, and have indeed started to draw the attention of philosophers working on these issues (Nguyen 2020; Santos 2021). C. Thi Nguyen (2020, 149), for example, notes that the phenomenon of echo chambers can co-occur with, but is nonetheless independent from, the phenomena of epistemic injustice and ignorance as theorized respectively by Miranda Fricker (2007) and Charles Mills (1997; 2007; 2015). According to Nguyen, echo chambers may, but need not, stem from and reinforce the type of oppressive power relations that tend to generate epistemic injustice and ignorance: for instance, white supremacist echo chambers certainly do, whereas echo chambers centered on particular exercise regimens or parenting methods often do not.

Expanding on Nguyen's account, Breno R. G. Santos (2021, 111) grants that echo chambers may be distinct from epistemic injustice and ignorance, yet also deems that more ought to be said to address their sometimes real and detrimental connections. I am in full agreement. In what follows, I take a closer look at the connections between echo chambers and epistemic injustice as well as between echo chambers and ignorance. My aim in doing so is to provide some starting points toward a more systematic account of these connections in the hope that such an account might be useful to better understand epistemic injustice and ignorance as they arise in the particular context of echo chambers.

Echo Chambers and Epistemic Injustice

It will be useful to begin with some terminological and conceptual clarifications. An echo chamber is a particular type of epistemic community that actively excludes and unwarrantedly discredits outsiders' views (Nguyen 2020; Santos 2021). For example, climate change deniers actively exclude and unwarrantedly discredit the views of climate scientists and advocates; antivaxxers actively exclude and unwarrantedly discredit the views of vaccination experts and proponents. What makes an echo chamber an *epistemic* community is that it is formed around and defined by a particular belief (or set of beliefs)—for example, the belief that climate change is not real or is not caused by CO₂ emissions, or the belief that vaccines are harmful or unnecessary. Membership in a given echo chamber is thus based on the adoption of this belief (or set of beliefs) and on the attendant automatic and preemptive rejection of evidence that runs counter to this belief. What all members of an echo chamber have in common is this particular pairing of belief adoption and counterevidence rejection. Indeed, it is this particular epistemic pairing that makes them members of this echo chamber.

Because echo chambers actively exclude and unwarrantedly discredit outsiders' views, they are inherently connected to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), and more specifically, to testimonial injustice. *Testimonial injustice* occurs when a hearer does not adequately believe a speaker because of prejudice. Depending on the type of prejudice underlying the hearer's diminished credibility judgment, testimonial injustice may be systematic or incidental. When this prejudice concerns the speaker's social identity (e.g., women are irrational; Blacks are uneducated), we have a case of *systematic* testimonial injustice, because this prejudice is part of a broader system or pattern of social injustice (e.g., sexism; racism), which means that this

prejudice is likely to follow the speaker across multiple spheres of social life. For example, women or Blacks may not be taken seriously as knowers across the professional, economic, civil, medical, or legal spheres: that is, they may be unduly dismissed by employers, bankers, landlords, doctors, or judges alike.¹

By contrast, when this prejudice is more localized and confined to a particular sphere (e.g., quantitative research is superior to qualitative research), we have a case of *incidental* testimonial injustice. For example, qualitative scholars working in a predominantly quantitative field may be unduly dismissed by their quantitative colleagues in their professional sphere, but this methodological prejudice will not typically follow them into other spheres of their lives: it generally will not affect their interactions with, say, store clerks, neighbors, nurses, or police officers. It is important to note here that incidental testimonial injustice, while limited to a particular area of social life, is no less unjust than systematic testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007, 29). Still, the literature on epistemic injustice has focused mostly on systematic testimonial injustice, because of its connection to background power relations and oppression.

With these terminological and conceptual clarifications in place, recall Nguyen's (2020, 149) point, which Santos (2021, 111) grants, that echo chambers are a distinct phenomenon from that of epistemic injustice, meaning that the two will not always go hand in hand. While this is correct with respect to *systematic* testimonial injustice, it is incorrect with respect to *incidental* testimonial injustice. Indeed, as I will explain momentarily, echo chambers are inherently connected to incidental testimonial injustice. To be fair, Nguyen (like Santos) seems to have systematic, rather than incidental, testimonial injustice in mind when making his point about the distinction between echo chambers and epistemic injustice—a stance which, as mentioned above, reflects the focus of most of the literature on epistemic injustice. Still, if we want to identify and clarify the connections between echo chambers and epistemic injustice, our analysis will be more accurate and comprehensive if we distinguish between systematic and incidental testimonial injustice.

In what sense, then, can echo chambers be said to be inherently connected to incidental testimonial injustice? Echo chambers—understood as epistemic communities that actively exclude and unwarrantedly discredit outsiders' views—by definition generate at least incidental testimonial injustice. That is, echo chambers automatically create an undue credibility deficit for outsiders based on a type of prejudice that concerns not the *social* group to which outsiders belong (e.g., women or Blacks), but rather, in this case, the *epistemic* group to which outsiders belong (e.g., climate advocates or vaccination proponents), regardless of the social groups to which these outsiders may otherwise belong.

Indeed, echo chambers distinguish between members and nonmembers, or insiders and outsiders, based on whether individuals have the particular epistemic pairing of belief adoption and counterevidence rejection that defines (membership in) the echo chamber. Because of this, nonmembers are automatically dismissed as untrustworthy because of an epistemic prejudice regarding the kind of beliefs they hold, namely, beliefs that contradict those of the echo chamber's members. That is, echo chambers, by their very nature and

¹ For more on the importance of epistemic justice in the legal context specifically, see Fricker 2013; in many other contexts, see Kidd et al. 2017.

structure, always preemptively grant an undue credibility deficit to nonmembers who are their epistemic opponents: they always perpetrate incidental testimonial injustice, based on epistemic prejudice.

The case of climate change deniers, for example, illustrates how echo chambers lead to incidental testimonial injustice. As Santos (2021, 115) rightly notes, climate advocates, while automatically dismissed by climate change deniers on the basis of their membership in the climate advocacy epistemic group, do not typically face similar undue credibility deficits across other spheres of social life outside the specific sphere of discussions about climate change, and more specifically still, the specific sphere of the climate change denial echo chamber. That is, the epistemic prejudice that underlies the diminished credibility judgment that climate change deniers hold toward climate advocates is highly localized and confined to a specific sphere; the epistemic prejudice does not generally follow climate advocates elsewhere in their social life.

Let me now specify my earlier claim that echo chambers will generate *at least* incidental testimonial injustice, or otherwise put, that echo chambers can in some cases additionally generate systematic testimonial injustice. To illustrate, consider the case of white supremacist echo chambers. As *echo chambers*, they will automatically dismiss anyone who does not have the particular epistemic pairing of belief adoption and counterevidence rejection that defines the echo chamber (in this case, anyone who questions or does not believe in the good of white supremacy), regardless of the social groups to which these individuals may otherwise belong. That is, as echo chambers, they will automatically perpetrate *incidental* testimonial injustice against nonmembers because of an epistemic prejudice, or a prejudice that concerns the epistemic group to which nonmembers belong (e.g., antiracists). As *white supremacist* echo chambers, however, they will additionally dismiss BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) individuals as untrustworthy because of their membership in social groups racialized as nonwhite. That is, as white supremacist echo chambers, they will additionally perpetrate *systematic* testimonial injustice against some nonmembers because of prejudice regarding their social identity.

I now want to suggest that this double (both incidental and systematic) testimonial injustice likewise seems to be at play in the example of the “gender ideology conspiracy” Santos (2021, 116) offers in his analysis of echo chambers in relation to epistemic injustice. As Santos explains, this conspiracy theory grew in the years prior to, and was subsequently amplified by, Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right electoral campaign. According to this conspiracy theory, the Brazilian left intended to destroy Brazil’s “traditional values” by imposing a gender ideology on the country (including the country’s children)—for example, by propagating the claim “that there are no defined genders or that everyone is gay” and by “mak[ing] it illegal to be a straight, cisgender man in Brazil” (Santos 2021, 116). This conspiracy theory, Santos explains, became popular in *bolsonarista* circles and what he characterizes as “the *bolsonarista* echo chamber” (Santos 2021, 116). To connect Santos’s example to my above analysis, the same type of double (incidental and systematic) testimonial injustice seems to arise in the case of the *bolsonarista* echo chamber as in the case of the white supremacist echo chambers.

From what Santos describes, the *bolsonarista* echo chamber, as an *echo chamber*, automatically dismisses anyone who does not have (what I previously referred to as) the particular epistemic pairing of belief adoption and counterevidence rejection that defines the echo chamber (in this case, anyone who questions or does not believe the gender ideology conspiracy theory), regardless of the social groups to which these individuals may otherwise belong. That is, as an echo chamber, the *bolsonarista* echo chamber automatically perpetrates *incidental* testimonial injustice against outsiders because of an epistemic prejudice, or a prejudice that concerns the epistemic group to which outsiders belong (here, opponents of the gender ideology conspiracy theory). As the *bolsonarista* echo chamber, however, it additionally dismisses LGBTQ individuals as untrustworthy because of their membership in social groups that do not identify as heterosexual, cisgender, or part of the gender binary. That is, as the *bolsonarista* echo chamber, it additionally perpetrates *systematic* testimonial injustice against some outsiders because of prejudice regarding their social identity.

Having offered the foregoing point about double testimonial injustice as a complement to Santos's analysis of the connections between echo chambers and epistemic injustice, let me now turn to Santos's analysis of these connections in terms of the concept of hermeneutical domination (Catala 2015). Hermeneutical domination arises as a result of both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (the two main types of epistemic injustice identified by Fricker). Hermeneutical domination occurs when the testimony that is dismissed by the majority or dominant group (e.g., whites) through testimonial injustice is an attempted hermeneutical contribution on the part of the minority or nondominant group (e.g., Blacks)—that is, an attempt by the minority group to provide an alternative understanding of a given social practice, situation, or experience that concerns the group (e.g., blackface as racist and stigmatizing rather than as fun and harmless).

As a result of the undue dismissal (testimonial injustice) of its hermeneutical contribution (hermeneutical injustice), the minority group finds itself essentially subjected to a social understanding of the relevant practice, situation, or experience (e.g., blackface as fun and harmless) that is wholly formulated by the majority group. That is, the majority group imposes a mainstream understanding of the relevant practice, situation, or experience that it is impossible for the minority to effectively contest and replace. In this situation of hermeneutical domination, the majority group exerts a hermeneutical monopoly over mainstream understandings: it dictates how the relevant phenomenon should be understood or interpreted in that society and excludes or rejects alternative understandings. Note that this hermeneutical monopoly reinforces the testimonial injustice that lies at the root of hermeneutical domination: by unilaterally imposing “the” correct understanding of the relevant phenomenon (e.g., blackface as fun and harmless), it simultaneously discredits the voices that offer a contrary understanding (e.g., blackface as racist and stigmatizing).

Santos compellingly shows how echo chambers can generate hermeneutical domination. As Santos (2021, 115) puts it, echo chambers can be “ways of perniciously shutting dissident voices down by a radical undermining of their epistemic worth. The way they do that is by monopolizing epistemic understandings about the world and about social practices and experiences.” In the case of the *bolsonarista* echo chamber and its gender ideology conspiracy theory, which has now become backed up and amplified by political authorities under Bolsonaro's presidency, Santos (2021, 117) explains that the echo chamber preemptively and automatically rejects counterevidence “by imposing, as a literal or political majority, a

monopoly on the ways we should see activism for gender and sexual rights in the country. In the ‘gender ideology case’, it imposes collective understandings on the matter, sometimes by the force of the law,” as there are several legislative proposals, Santos (2021, 118 note 13) adds, to criminalize “the teaching of ‘gender ideology’.”

While the concept of hermeneutical domination as originally formulated (Catala 2015) goes hand in hand with political power understood in the broad sense of social power relations that produce and maintain structural inequalities that privilege dominant groups while subordinating nondominant ones, Santos’s analysis powerfully shows how hermeneutical domination can also be coupled with political power understood in the narrower sense of the exercise of governmental and legal power. Because, in this case, the exercise of political power seems unconstrained—that is, not forced to track the interests of those over whom power is exercised (Pettit 1997)—and includes the public denigration and possible criminalization of alternative understandings of gender and sexuality, hermeneutical domination seems to co-occur with political domination.

Santos’s analysis, then, pushes us to consider the links between echo chambers, politics, and epistemic injustice. In doing so, Santos’s analysis importantly invites us to reflect further on the ways in which law and law enforcement practices can be used as political tools of socio-epistemic repression even in democratic contexts that are not typically characterized as repressive or authoritarian regimes. One might think, for example, of police violence in the context of Black Lives Matter protests in the US or anti-blackface protests in the Netherlands. One interesting point to note here is that the alternative hermeneutical understanding these protests aim to get across (black lives matter; blackface is racist) contradicts not just the dominant understanding of the relevant phenomenon (e.g., police violence as justified; blackface traditions as harmless fun), but also the dominant view or understanding the country or mainstream society has of itself: e.g., the US as a post-racial, equal-opportunity society or the Netherlands as a tolerant, anti-racist country (for more on the latter case, see, e.g., Catala 2019). It seems a similar double hermeneutical tension might be at play in Santos’s “gender ideology” example.

From what Santos describes, it seems like the alternative understandings that movements for gender and sexual rights aim to contribute (e.g., LGBTQ people should be viewed and treated as equal citizens) contradict not only the dominant understanding of gender or sexual minorities (e.g., LGBTQ people as deviant and inferior), but also the dominant understanding the country has of itself (e.g., Brazil as the protector of traditional “family values”). In this sense, it appears that some prior (or meta) dominant hermeneutical understandings regarding the mainstream society (e.g., the US as post-racial; the Netherlands as tolerant; Brazil as upholding traditional “family values”) may pre-emptively affect the (lack of) uptake of nondominant hermeneutical understandings regarding certain practices or experiences in that society (e.g., black lives matter; blackface is racist; LGBTQ people as equal citizens). Whether this pre-emptive dismissal operates in similar ways as it does in the case of echo chambers would be a question worth exploring further.

One final remark on the connections between echo chambers and epistemic injustice before turning to the connections between echo chambers and ignorance. One interesting point to

extrapolate from Santos's analysis is that, while echo chambers, as explained above, always involve incidental testimonial injustice and sometimes additionally involve systematic testimonial injustice, the possibility for an echo chamber to lead to hermeneutical domination arises only in cases where the echo chamber involves systematic testimonial injustice. This is because hermeneutical domination involves the imposition of a hermeneutical understanding by a dominant group (e.g., whites; *bolsonaristas*) over a larger social domain that comprises both dominant and nondominant groups (e.g., Blacks; LGBTQ people). This means that the relevant group must be dominant not just in the epistemic sphere of the echo chamber, but also in the broader social sphere. As seen above, this is precisely the case in systematic testimonial injustice, but not in incidental testimonial injustice. So, when echo chambers involve systematic testimonial injustice, the possibility of hermeneutical domination arises. By contrast, when echo chambers involve only incidental testimonial injustice, the possibility of hermeneutical domination is precluded, because the epistemic authority of the echo chamber is confined to it and does not overflow into mainstream society.

Echo Chambers and Ignorance

Let me close by turning briefly to the connections between echo chambers and ignorance, and more precisely what Santos (following Medina 2013) calls active ignorance, or the avoidance or rejection of beliefs or worldviews that run counter to one's beliefs or worldview.² Here again, I agree with Santos (2021, 111) that while we may grant Nguyen's (2020, 149) point that ignorance in the context of echo chambers need not take place against the same kind of political or oppressive power relations as it does in Mills's (1997; 2007; 2015) epistemology of ignorance, it is nonetheless worthwhile to address the connections between echo chambers and ignorance.

Indeed, another interesting point to extrapolate from Santos's analysis is that it suggests that ignorance need not be connected to power relations in the larger society (as in the case of white ignorance or male ignorance, which are connected to larger racist or sexist power structures within society) but can also arise in other contexts (as in the case of ignorance about vaccines or climate change, which need not be connected to larger power structures within society).³ As Santos (2021, 114) explains, ignorance within echo chambers is "caused by a social epistemic structure guided by group-related interests. What such ignorance amounts to is not the simple absence of relevant knowledge, but a general epistemically deleterious behaviour of rejecting epistemic contributions." This is true of echo chambers in general, whether they are climate change denial echo chambers or *bolsonarista* echo chambers. That is, echo chambers are inherently connected to ignorance—indeed, they function through ignorance—whether or not they are also connected to broader patterns of power relations in the larger society. This means, then, that we might make a distinction between what we might term (following the terminology of epistemic injustice presented above), "systematic ignorance," where ignorance is connected to larger social power relations (as in

² As Santos (2021, 112), quoting Linda Alcoff (2007, 39), notes, active ignorance is a "*substantive* epistemic practice" that is captured by several accounts of ignorance (e.g., Mills 1997, 2007, 2015; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013).

³ Note that depending on the context, ignorance about vaccines might be connected to ableism, racism, or religion, and that ignorance about climate change might be connected to capitalist interests. In these cases, ignorance would be connected to larger power structures in society.

the case of the *bolsonarista* echo chamber), and “incidental ignorance,” where ignorance is more localized and not connected to larger social power relations. In both cases, however, ignorance will be structural, as noted above in the quote from Santos. Moreover, as in the case of epistemic injustice, we might note that incidental ignorance is no less ignorant or problematic than systematic ignorance.

Santos’s analysis points to another way in which Mills’s analysis seems to apply to echo chambers. Ignorance, on Mills’s (1997; 2007; 2015) account, is not merely the absence of knowledge; it is the presence of mistaken or false beliefs or statements that present themselves as knowledge and render certain realities or facts about the world unintelligible. This is very much reminiscent of what happens in the context of some echo chambers such as climate change denial echo chambers or white supremacist echo chambers, which present falsehoods (regarding climate change or racial inequalities) as truth and automatically invalidate counterevidence as epistemically inadmissible. Indeed, echo chambers are epistemically vicious in a particularly pernicious way in that they manipulate their members’ credentialing beliefs (Nguyen 2020, 157), that is, they “manipulat[e] their [members’] credence levels such that radically different sources and institutions will be considered proper sources of evidence” (Nguyen 2020, 151).

This epistemic manipulation means that members of an echo chamber will be not only objectively ignorant, but also subjectively ignorant (Catala 2019, 17). Ignorance, indeed, concerns not just the object of knowledge or what is not known (objective ignorance) but also the subject of knowledge or the knower (subjective ignorance). *Objective ignorance* includes ignoring certain epistemic contents, such as certain understandings of society or the world (e.g., climate change or racial inequalities). *Subjective ignorance* includes ignoring the cognitive processes or epistemic norms (e.g., lack of critical self-reflection or automatic rejection of counterevidence) that structure and guide one’s apprehension of different parts of society or aspects of the world. More than objective ignorance, I want to suggest in closing, it is subjective ignorance that makes echo chambers particularly difficult to escape.

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