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Echo Chambers, Epistemic Injustice and Anti-Intellectualism

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C. Thi Nguyen's (2020) recent account of echo chambers as social epistemic structures that actively exclude outsiders' voices has sparked debate on the connection between echo chambers and epistemic injustice (Santos 2021; Catala 2021; Elzinga 2021). In this paper I am mainly concerned with the connection between echo chambers and *testimonial injustice*, understood as an instance whereby a speaker receives less epistemic credibility than they deserve, due to a prejudice in the hearer (Fricker 2007).

Contra Nguyen (2020) and Santos (2021), Catala (2021) argues that because echo chambers per definition undermine the credibility of assertions that do not align with their core beliefs, they necessarily involve a form of testimonial injustice, namely *incidental* testimonial injustice based on *epistemic* prejudice. Here, the term incidental refers to the notion that the injustice's impacts on the speaker are, typically, highly localized (Fricker 2007, 27).

When, for example, a climate-change scientist's testimony is not given apt credibility in climate change denial echo chambers, this will hardly affect his life in significant ways. However, it still constitutes an authentic case of testimonial injustice. *Systematic* testimonial injustice on the other hand is typically interwoven with other forms of social injustices, and these seems to be the kind that both Nguyen and Santos have in mind when they claim testimonial injustice is not conceptually inherent in echo chambers. Catala contends that the connection between echo chambers and systematic testimonial injustice is contingent on the prejudice causing the credibility deficit being an identity prejudice.

In her reconstruction of the types of testimonial injustice, Catala implicitly equates incidental testimonial injustice as resulting from epistemic prejudice and systematic testimonial injustice as resulting from identity prejudice. As I will argue, there are certain cases that fall in between these interpretations, namely instances of incidental testimonial injustice, whereby the impact on the speaker is localized, but where the credibility deficit nevertheless results from identity prejudice. One example of how this can manifest is the structural distrust against health-care experts in anti-vaccination echo-chambers, wherein said experts' testimony is dismissed due to unwarranted assumptions regarding their motives qua their social type.

Though these cases might not be as normatively problematic as systematic testimonial injustices, they are still genuine cases of testimonial injustice that involve identity-prejudicial credibility deficits even if the speakers targeted belongs to a 'privileged' group. Such instances of testimonial injustice are especially important to acknowledge given the societal trend of increasing distrust against experts. Even if the personal harms to the speaker are highly localized, structural distrust against experts is detrimental for any healthy functioning epistemic community, given the epistemic authority experts have in their domain of expertise.

To understand the importance and severity of the testimonial injustices in echo chambers, we need to look beyond the specific harms that are done to the targeted speakers and the immediate loss of knowledge, but also take into account the consequences for fairness in public deliberation—the latter being a fundamental condition for procedural democratic

legitimacy. Before I present these arguments, a description of this ongoing debate and some clarifications of terminology are in order.

### **Echo Chambers, Structural Ignorance and Epistemic Injustice**

Nguyen defines an echo-chamber as “*an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members*” (Nguyen 2020, 146). In order to be considered a member of an echo-chamber, you have to buy into their core beliefs. Not only are certain views *actively* excluded from these echo-chambers: the credibility of outside sources is structurally undermined, whilst the credibility of in-group members is overstated. This makes it practically impossible to correct false or unwarranted beliefs, shared by members of echo-chambers, even in the face of counter evidence. On the contrary the fact that outsiders’ testimonies do not align with the core beliefs, combined with the background belief that outside sources are non-reliable in aiming at the truth, only reinforces the insiders’ conviction that the shared core beliefs must be true. In other words, the credibility deficits for outside sources and credibility excess for inside sources frustrates fruitful testimonial exchange and hinders the circulation of knowledge.

As Nguyen points out, the mechanisms of distrust that are present in echo chambers are compatible with Miranda Fricker’s (2007) account of testimonial injustice and Charles Mills’s (2007) account of white ignorance—though he maintains that these social epistemic phenomena are conceptually distinct from echo chambers (Nguyen 2020, 149). Both Breno R.G. Santos (2021) and Amandine Catala (2021) have recently expanded on the relation between echo chambers, epistemic injustice and active ignorance, arguing that these phenomena are more closely connected than Nguyen acknowledges.

Santos argues that a specific understanding of ignorance is inherent in Nguyens notion of echo chambers, namely “*socially supported active ignorance*” or simply “*structural ignorance*” (Santos 2021, 113). The idea is that the active ignorance displayed by individuals is depended on a certain epistemic superstructure, or on how credit is distributed in their epistemic community. Furthermore, Santos points out a link between echo chambers, structural ignorance and *hermeneutical domination* (a term taken from Catala 2015). Hermeneutical domination refers to an instance of epistemic injustice whereby marginalized groups do have the epistemic resources and terminology to understand their experiences (so there is no hermeneutical injustice involved) but their testimony is dismissed not only by individuals (which would be a testimonial injustice) but by the majority, effectively excluding their understanding from the collective imagination.

While Santos is thus arguing for an inherent conceptual link between echo chambers and structural ignorance, he nevertheless agrees with Nguyen that an echo chamber is conceptually distinct from testimonial injustice (Santos 2021, 115). They are distinct because testimonial injustice, as Santos argues, needs to be rooted either in systematic identity prejudice or in hermeneutical marginalization—two aspects that are not necessarily present in echo chambers. For example, climate change denial echo chambers might reject the testimony of a climate change scientists, but this epistemic maltreatment won’t affect the climate change scientist in other aspects of their life beyond the echo chamber (Santos 2020, 7).

As Catala rightfully points out, both Nguyen and Santos neglect to distinguish between *systematic* and *incidental* testimonial injustice (Catala 2021, 30). Fricker and subsequent writers on testimonial injustice have mainly been concerned with *systematic testimonial injustice*, or what Fricker terms “*the central case of testimonial injustice*” (Fricker 2007, 28). In such cases, the credibility deficit results from a *negative identity prejudice* that *tracks* the speaker through other facets of life (e.g. financial, political, social). Given the social significance of such relevant prejudices it is only rightfully so that such cases have deserved priority in philosophical, conceptual work on epistemic injustice.

The primary example case Fricker uses to illustrate systematic testimonial injustice is the trial of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. In this trial, which takes place in Alabama during the Great Depression, the falsely accused Tom is not believed when he pleads innocent to the crime of raping a young white woman by the name of Mayella. It was due to their prejudice beliefs, mirroring the inherent racial inequality of their society, that the all-white jury *assumed* Tom, a black man, to be dishonest and guilty—even if the evidence available to them pointed in another direction (in fact, it was Mayella who had made advances towards Tom and had been rejected by him—something that was inconceivable to the all-white jury).

We can easily see how this type of racial prejudice (“black people cannot be trusted”) would ‘track’ agents belonging to that social group throughout many aspects of their life. *Incidental* testimonial injustice on the other hand are still genuine testimonial injustices (the speaker receives a credibility deficit based on prejudice in the hearer) but the social significance of the prejudice and accompanied epistemic harm is highly localized and doesn’t typically affect the speaker in other aspects of their lives. This is not to undermine the severity of possible consequences of such injustices to the individual, and they might still be persistent in that they happen often over *time*, but they are not systematic or severe in their synchronic aspect.

Like most writers on the topic, Santos and Nguyen seem to have *systematic* testimonial injustice in mind—indeed, Santos links testimonial injustice to “*some pernicious tracking across different areas of one’s life*” (Santos 2021, 115). Catala concedes that Nguyen and Santos are right in claiming that echo chambers and *systematic* testimonial injustices are merely compatible and not inherently connected concepts. However, the (dis-)trust mechanisms in echo chambers *are* conceptually integrated with *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 (Catala 2021, 31).

It is important to underscore that according to Catala, echo chambers generate *at least* incidental injustice. They can however generate additional systematic testimonial injustice. For example, a white supremacy echo chamber automatically generates incidental testimonial injustice by undermining the credibility of outsiders view that don't align with the echo chamber's core belief (epistemic prejudice). Additionally, it will manifest systematic testimonial injustice by excluding views on the basis of identity prejudice against people who are black, indigenous or people of colour (Catala 2021, 32). In short, Catala argues that echo chambers necessarily involve incidental testimonial injustices based on epistemic prejudice, and possible also involve systematic testimonial injustice based on identity prejudice.

### **Testimonial Injustice from Identity Prejudice**

I agree with Catala that notions of incidental testimonial injustice are inherent in echo chambers and that systematic testimonial injustice in echo chambers requires further conditions. However, I take issue with the implicit classification of incidental testimonial injustice as always resulting from epistemic prejudice. What sets systematic testimonial injustices apart from incidental testimonial injustices is not that they are based on negative identity prejudice, but rather that the work is done by a “tracking” identity prejudice that is connected to other forms of social injustice (such as gender inequality or institutional racism).

Fricker acknowledges that there can be exceptions wherein identity-prejudicial credibility deficits lead to *incidental* testimonial injustice. She gives the example of a scientific conference where the attendees consist of research scientists, historians of science and philosophers of science. At this particular conference (or perhaps in this particular field) the research scientists and historians of science look down upon the philosophers of science such that they hold them in intellectual disdain. As a result, the philosophers' views are not given apt credit. This case illustrates merely a case of incidental testimonial injustice since this prejudice against philosophers of science is not a tracking prejudice tied into other social injustices—they might even be considered privileged speakers. Nevertheless, it is an *identity prejudice* against the identity category of ‘philosophers of science’ that makes for the credibility deficit (Fricker 2007, 28-29).

In short, identity prejudicial credibility deficit can be present in incidental testimonial injustices against privileged speakers—at least on Fricker's understanding of the concept. This is important to acknowledge, as it provides additional nuanced understandings regarding about the nature of the testimonial injustices that might be at play in echo chambers where the distrust is aimed at groups qua their social identity, even if they are not a marginalized group.

Fricker defines a negative identity prejudice as “*prejudices with a negative valence held against people qua social type*” (Fricker 2007, 35). As I argue, even in echo chambers where the testimonial injustice is merely incidental (they don't perpetrate systematic testimonial injustice or subsequent hermeneutical domination) there can be identity prejudice at work *alongside* the epistemic prejudice. I will illustrate such identity prejudice in incidental testimonial injustice through the example of distrust against healthcare experts in anti-vaccination echo chambers. What makes this case so interesting is that the targeted group is not affected by other forms of social injustices nor by epistemic distributive injustice, on the contrary: they

are partially identified exactly by their access to epistemic goods and those indicators that are typically taken to increase one's credibility such as education.

Within anti-vaccination echo chambers, group members receive credibility *excess*. The anecdotal stories of concerned parents and the claims of anti-vaccination advocates are believed at face value without evidence or good epistemic reasons (Ma and Stahl 2017). At the same time, health care experts are not believed to be trustworthy sources of information, despite the array of scientific evidence confirming their testimony. What explains this dysfunctional credibility appraisal?

Mark Davis (2019) argues that it is a (common) mistake to analyse anti-vaccination discourse in isolation. Instead, we ought to see in as part of what David terms *anti-public discourse*. This anti-public discourse is, amongst other things, typified by a strong anti-elitism (Davis 2019, 358) and a hostility against expert-knowledge (Davis 2019, 362). In other words, anti-vaccination discourse seems riddled with anti-intellectualism, here understood as a negative attitude of distrust against experts. A distrust against health care experts is indeed reported by vaccine denialist (amongst other factors) as a reason not to trust expert's testimony on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines, and subsequently not to vaccinate their children (Wilder-Smith and Qureshi 2020, 56).

When we evaluate someone's credibility, we judge not only their level of competence, but also their sincerity (Fricker 2007, 45). Anti-vaccination echo chamber members interpret the testimony of health care experts as attempts to silence them or shield them from the truth, in an effort to promote their own political or financial aims.

In the anti-public discourse, the credibility of elite or experts is structurally undermined, as their testimony is dismissed as oppressive or corrupt. It seems then, that those features that traditionally serve as credibility indicators (education, career status or 'being an expert' for short) are taken by certain agents to be indicators of insincerity (which, in turn, leads to credibility deficits). In other words, experts are not trusted by those with anti-intellectual attitudes as they assume ulterior motives associated with the identity category of 'experts'. These ascribed motivations are unwarranted; they do not align with the evidence available but are based on identity prejudice.

Not surprisingly, empirical research indeed shows a correlation between distrust against experts and scientists and opposition to scientific consensus (Motta 2018; Pasek 2018; Merkley 2020). These findings at least support the idea that identity prejudice might also play a role in echo chambers where the testimonial injustice involved is merely incidental. This is not to say that epistemic prejudice does not play a role at all. In fact, epistemic prejudice might even play a mitigating role in cases where someone is perceived as belonging to the social type of "experts" but are nevertheless seen as epistemically trustworthy when their testimony aligns with core beliefs of the echo chamber.

An obvious example is Andrew Wakefield, whose article suggesting a link between MMR vaccines and autism was retracted after public peer review revealed it to contain flawed and unethical research methods as well as a financial conflict of interests (Hussain et al. 2018).

Wakefield is one of the few intellectuals that actually portrays the negative attributes of publishing flawed results and falsehoods for financial gain—yet because his work aligns with the core beliefs of the anti-vaccination echo chamber, in these epistemic spaces the paper is still seen taken to be a valid epistemic source on the ‘dangers of vaccination’.

### **The Harms of Testimonial Injustice**

It might be helpful at this point to clarify the harms that incidental testimonial injustices in anti-vaccination echo chambers cause. To recap, the injustice in testimonial injustice from identity prejudice is manifested in the fact that the speaker is discriminated against and not recognized as a full participant of the epistemic practice. The direct epistemic harm involved in testimonial injustice is a loss of knowledge, as it prevents the hearer from receiving information and insights from the speaker. More broadly, it can create blockages in the circulation of knowledge. These direct epistemic harms constitute a loss mainly for the hearer and the broader audience. But there are also ethical harms involved that directly affect the speaker—these are the harms Fricker is mostly concerned by.

The primary ethical harm consists in the speaker not being recognized in their capacity as a knower, which, so Fricker argues, amounts to being wronged in a capacity central to being human.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent secondary ethical harms can be either practical (e.g. personal or professional consequences) or epistemic in kind (by affecting the speakers future epistemic conduct, e.g. persistently receiving credibility deficits can undermine the speaker’s epistemic confidence).

In the case of identity prejudice against health care experts, analogous harms can be detected. The direct epistemic harm in our case is constituted by the fact that the speaker fails to transmit their knowledge to the hearer, regarding the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. The intrinsic ethical harm relates to the fact that the health-care expert is not recognized as a good informant.

Regarding the secondary epistemic harms, it might be objected that, contrary to the systematic cases, health care experts most likely have an epistemic community that provides them with resources to counteract any negative impact from testimonial injustices on their epistemic development—they are less likely to develop epistemic self-doubt. Still, persistent encounters of undeserved distrust might discourage them from giving testimony in the future.

One might further object that the health care expert in this case is unlikely to encounter secondary moral harms, e.g. their careers won’t be affected by their credibility appraisal in such an echo chamber. This does not undermine the fact that we are here dealing with a genuine testimonial injustice nor that it is based on identity prejudice; it merely confirms that this concerns an *incidental* testimonial injustice. However, despite the fact that these epistemic injustices do not typically lead to secondary harms towards these speakers, there are other significant epistemic and practical harms that result from it.

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<sup>1</sup> Following Edward Craig, Fricker takes the capacity of being a good informant, or a trustworthy testifier, to be central to the notion of being a knower.

The identity prejudice against experts might not (yet) be dominant in broader societal structure: it is not confined to the echo chambers. The fact that levels of anti-intellectualism is increasing throughout society could explain why vaccine related expert testimony is disputed or rejected even by those who do not (yet) identify with the core beliefs of anti-vaccination echo chambers—and I suspect similar analysis will apply to other denials of scientific consensus (e.g. climate change deniers or flat earthers). An upshot of this analysis is moreover that echo chambers are not only closely linked to political oppression: they can be utilized as effective means to foster and maintain anti-intellectualism causing further epistemically polluting effects.

### **Can Advantaged Speakers Receive Epistemic Injustice?**

Even if health care experts' credibility is structurally undermined, they do not belong to an epistemically powerless group. Health care experts are still advantaged speakers in society at large—even if their epistemic authority is under threat. It seems strange to group together what's at stake in for example white supremacy echo chambers with echo chamber where the main epistemic harm consists of a denial of scientific consensus (Elzinga 2021, 42).

Why do we intuitively think it inappropriate to conceive of 'privileged speakers' as being recipients of epistemic injustice? As Morten Fibieger Byskov (2021) illustrates, the driving thought behind this discomfort is that we shouldn't decouple our analysis of testimonial injustice from the broader epistemic inequality structures. The reason for this is that attempts to rectify inequality could then be characterized as injustices. The example he gives is of a male Ivy League alumnus (a privileged speaker indeed) who is a member of some company's board that has been bought up. The company's board was always male-dominated. However, to compensate for this inequality, the new owner decides that from now on, the board should consist of an equal amount of male and female members. The male Ivy Leaguer thus loses epistemic power in the process, but surely this shift in credibility is not an injustice (Byskov 2020, 127). The point Byskov wants to drive home here, is that it would be ridiculous to think that a decrease of epistemic powers of previous advantaged groups, in an effort to rectify epistemic inequality, should be seen as epistemic injustice. I agree that this notion would indeed be absurd.

However, the previously cited decline of healthcare experts' epistemic authority is different in a number of ways. The anti-vaccination movement utilizes rhetoric that creates a *guise* of rectifying inequality, where the health care experts (and other providers/ promoters of vaccination) are depicted as oppressors portraying a false picture of the truth. Through this guise, it seems like a good thing that these advantaged speakers are now losing epistemic power: it opens up epistemic space to hear other, previously oppressed voices. But this would be an unfair understanding of the testimonial injustices in the vaccination debate.

In the board member case, the disadvantage of female board members was partially so unjust because their epistemic power and ability to give testimony were limited even though they most likely *have* knowledge relevant to the issues the board is trying to solve. Anti-vaccination advocates on the other hand are spreading misinformation, and in effect endangering public health for their own political or financial aim. Their testimonies are

neither genuine nor knowledgeable. That is to say: they *should* be given less credit than the health care expert, as the latter is objectively more credible. Trusting medical expertise backed up by scientific research over unsupported claims in a stranger's Facebook post is not an epistemic injustice that needs to be corrected, but rather a correct credibility appraisal. Even though the health care expert is an advantaged speaker, in this case the diminishing of their epistemic authority is not contributing to a just evaluation of epistemic trust.

If instead one wants to exclude privileged people as possible targets of identity-prejudicial testimonial injustice, what is needed is a narrower account of testimonial injustice than Fricker describes. I stick here to Fricker's conception, both for reasons of clarity and because her framework successfully captures cases of incidental testimonial injustices from identity prejudice where the recipient of credibility deficit belongs to a privileged group such as health care experts—most notably through anti-intellectualist attitudes.

### **How Echo Chambers Undermine Political Legitimacy**

Incidental testimonial injustice might be less significant in the sense that it does not involve identity prejudices that track the speaker throughout other facets of their life. However, this doesn't mean that the moral and epistemic harms involved are therefore without any social significance, in the sense that they affect the broader epistemic community. It leads to significant epistemic losses as well as secondary practical harms, as it causes parents to delay or even refuse the vaccination of their children, thereby imposing unnecessary risks on public health. These instrumental concerns are widely acknowledged. However, less attention has been given to the procedural wrongs that these testimonial injustices against objective epistemic authorities, or epistemically advantaged speakers, entail.

Echo chambers mirror a problematic feature of contemporary political discourse: evaluations of contributions tend to be made on the basis of group membership instead of epistemic value. If echo chambers foster various forms of epistemic injustice, given that our public debate increasingly takes place in these epistemic spaces, there seems to be reason for concern regarding procedural democratic legitimacy. Fabienne Peter argues that democratic decision-making is legitimate only if political deliberation takes place under conditions of political equality and epistemic fairness—where political equality and epistemic fairness are taken to be two sides of the same coin (Peter 2008). As the analysis from Nguyen, Santos and Catala already illustrate, these conditions are often undermined in echo chambers given the inherent disparity in trust.

Federica Liveriero has recently made a case for the claim that structural epistemic injustices thwart procedural legitimacy by violating the ideal of co-authorship (Liveriero 2020). The epistemic injustices Liveriero touches on are those interwoven with social injustices, targeted at marginalized groups. My aim in this paper has been to show that echo chambers prevent not only the full epistemic participation of marginalized groups, but that they also foster unfair epistemic conditions wherein expert's testimony are structurally given less credibility than they deserve. By making explicit that all kinds of groups, including advantaged people, can be targeted by testimonial injustices, I argue that echo chambers can potentially undermine democratic legitimacy by hindering epistemically fair appraisal of many contributions to the public debate, at least by those who identify with one or another echo chamber's core beliefs, due to the variety of testimonial injustices they bring about.

None of this is to deny the idea that systematic testimonial injustices are more pressing or problematic—after all the systematic cases are directly linked to oppression where the incidental one isn't. Neither do I intend to argue that healthcare experts (or any advantaged epistemic agent) are immune to charges of epistemic injustice themselves. Yet, the epistemic and moral harms laid out in this paper point to another risk closely associated with (online)echo chambers—namely how they affect the conditions of democratic deliberation.

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