



<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Intricacies of Ideology and Ignorance: A Reply to Mason

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Hänel, Hilkje C. “The Intricacies of Ideology and Ignorance: A Reply to Mason.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (7): 58-62. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-62M>.

In response to my article “Who’s to Blame? Hermeneutical Misfire, Forward-Looking Responsibility, and Collective Accountability” (2021a), Elinor Mason (2021) raises a couple of insightful remarks. I want to focus on two.

First, in a very illuminating way, Mason draws a distinction between a simple ethical and a simple epistemic view and contrasts these with Fricker’s complex view. Here, I want to reply that the simple ethical view necessarily collapses into the complex view according to my account.

Second, Mason expresses her worry about the “reduction of all ideological ignorance to willful ignorance” (21-22). Using the example of the internet as “an engine of ideology” (22), she concludes that it is at best hard to say that a perpetrator engulfed in ideology ‘should have known better’. Here, I want to reply that any ideology (at least of the sort that we are confronted with in liberal democracies) is fragmented. This relates in interesting ways to some of the arguments that Mason brings forward in her recent book, *Ways to be Blameworthy* (2019), on blameworthiness.

### **Simple and Complex Views**

According to Mason, we can distinguish between the simple ethical view, the simple epistemic view, and the complex view with regard to the question of what constitutes an epistemic injustice. The simple ethical view maintains that an epistemic harm or injustice refers merely to the causes of the harm. Someone suffers a harm when their well-being or interests or health is truncated and someone suffers an injustice when this is done without justification (cf. Mason 2021, 18).

To use the example that Mason brings forward in line with Fricker (2007), Tom Robinson is harmed by not being believed because he is convicted of a crime he did not commit. Mason then concludes that according to this view perpetrators of sexual violence do not normally suffer epistemic injustice—especially when they are not held responsible. This is precisely the question that I pose in my original article and try to answer by drawing a distinction between hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical misfire.

The simple epistemic view is concerned merely with the epistemic context and not with the background conditions of it. Accordingly, someone is epistemically harmed if they are rendered ignorant and someone suffers from an injustice if they are rendered ignorant without justification. Mason correctly concludes that “there is no asymmetry between those who are privileged by ignorance and those who are oppressed by it” (2021, 19). Otherwise, both the perpetrator and the victim of sexual violence would suffer from epistemic injustice, a conclusion that I aimed to avoid due to its deeply problematic assumptions about the suffering of perpetrators and victims being on *a par*.

Finally, Mason argues that neither of these views catches what Fricker has in mind. Rather, according to Fricker, there is a harm which is both epistemic and ethical at the same time; hence, the complex view. Famously, Fricker maintains that “[t]o be wronged in one’s

capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value” (2007, 44; cf. Mason 2021, 20). The idea is that “members of oppressed groups have ignorance imposed on them in a fundamentally disrespectful manner” (Mason 2021, 20).<sup>1</sup> And, following Mason, this is important for it shows the asymmetry between perpetrator and victim; the victim suffers from epistemic injustice, the perpetrator does not.

### **Hermeneutical Injustice and Hermeneutical Misfire**

According to my account, in order to cash out the asymmetry between the perpetrator and the victim, we should distinguish between hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical misfire. As Fricker specifies, someone suffers from hermeneutical injustice precisely because they are harmed in their capacity as a knower, and this is mainly due to the deeply unjust background conditions. In contrast, someone suffers from hermeneutical misfire if they are ignorant due to their social privilege; they misunderstand an important aspect about the world because they are in a position of social power. In the case of sexual violence, the victim suffers from hermeneutical injustice because they fail to make intelligible or articulate their experience adequately due to the deeply problematic background conditions, or in Mason’s words, they “have ignorance *imposed on them* in a fundamentally disrespectful manner” (2021, 20). Here, I am merely following Fricker without making any adjustments.

However, things look different when considering the perpetrator’s cognitive gap. Fricker clearly states that the perpetrator does not suffer from hermeneutical injustice as long as they are not hermeneutically marginalized; hence, the asymmetry between victim and perpetrator. Yet, more can be said than that the perpetrator suffers from nothing but a cognitive gap. Here, my aim was to propose an adjustment; namely, that the perpetrator suffers from hermeneutical misfiring due to their position of social power.

As many have argued before, social privilege can result in ignorance because “[p]eople in powerful positions tend to insulate themselves from the claims of those over whom they exercise power, to censor, discount, or misunderstand the claims of those beneath them, to construct systems of law and moral accountability” (Anderson 2014, 8). They thus fail to have the kind of experiences which would bring to light the “moral rupture” (Hänel 2018, 915) and hermeneutical gap or distortion. Or, in Mills words, the ignorance at play is “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions [...] producing the outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (1997, 18; see also Pohlhaus 2012, 722); in our case, perpetrators are unable to understand the world they have made. The idea is that there is more to the ignorance of the perpetrator than a mere cognitive gap.

Pohlhaus (2012) has traced this thought to argue for her theory of willful hermeneutical ignorance and to draw attention to the fact that perpetrators are not merely ignorant but in fact willfully so. In contrast to Pohlhaus I attempt to show that perpetrators are responsible not for their ignorance (although I agree with Pohlhaus on this point) but for their own

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<sup>1</sup> Mason defends the view that the wrong of epistemic injustice lies in its potential for dehumanization (cf. 2021, 20). I take the view that the wrong of epistemic injustice is at least partly a failure of recognition as Giladi (2018) has shown for instances of testimonial injustice, I (Hänel 2020) have shown for instances of hermeneutical injustice, and Congdon (2017) has shown for epistemic injustice in general.

actions performed out of ignorance—and that this is the case even when they are ideologically ignorant. In other words, there is no excuse for why they acted the way they did; they ‘should have known better’.<sup>2</sup> This brings us to the second point that Mason raises, namely, her worry about the “reduction of all ideological ignorance to willful ignorance” (2021, 21-22).

According to Mason, we should be wary to say that a perpetrator engulfed in ideology should have known better. In cases of willful ignorance, the perpetrator is culpable of being ignorant or making themselves ignorant for reasons that Pohlhaus (2012) specifies nicely, e.g., manifesting “a systematic and coordinated misinterpretation of the world” (731) that serves to uphold their power and privilege. In cases of ideological ignorance, the perpetrator is not obviously culpable in the same ways. Yet, while Mason writes that ideological ignorance is “ignorance that comes about through non-culpable inculcation of a dominant ideology” (21), I contend that things are not so easy. In fact, most ideologies are fragmented.

### **Addressing Blameworthiness**

We are not engulfed fully but often are confronted on a regular basis with views that directly critique said ideology. Hence, to blindly follow the path of ideology implies to actively ignore many uncomfortable views that threaten the interpretation of the world the perpetrator has built for themselves. Holding on to the ideology is in many ways similar to refusing to learn different hermeneutical tools and, thus, is often willful as specified by Pohlhaus. The difference being that ideological ignorance works mostly unreflectively; being engulfed in it is the easier way to go about life, yet, going about life in this way is not an active decision, it is more like acceptance of the norm. If this is the case, then obviously ideological ignorance has to be resisted with different strategies than willful ignorance, which is why I argue for strategies of community accountability instead of blame.

Interestingly, this relates to some of the details about blameworthiness that Mason discusses in her insightful and recent book *Ways to be Blameworthy* (2019). Here, Mason argues that there is an important distinction between being non-culpably, deeply morally ignorant and being culpably, deeply morally ignorant, the latter describing cases in which the agent has cultivated their wrong moral view (Mason 2019, 158). Deep moral ignorance refers to cases

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<sup>2</sup> One could argue that these two questions are actually the same; if a perpetrator is responsible for their acts even if performed under conditions of hermeneutical misfiring because they should have known better, then they were willfully ignorant. Yet, one could also say, as I want to propose, that a perpetrator should have known better not to act in the way they did despite having a cognitive gap; that is, I am not saying anything about whether they should have known what they did not, but that they should have known not to act. Take Fricker’s popular example to illustrate: On the one hand, one could argue—as Pohlhaus (2012) does and I agree with her on this point—that Wood’s perpetrator was willfully ignorant because he should have learned about the marginal hermeneutical tools with which to understand his cognitive gap; in other words, he should have known better that his acts constituted sexual harassment. On the other hand, one could argue that Wood’s perpetrator was ignorant (whether willfully so or ideologically), but that he should have known the harm he caused to Wood; hence, he should have known better about the harm caused but not necessarily about the concept of sexual harassment. While Pohlhaus does a beautiful job to show the first, I focus on the second. This comes close to a distinction that I draw elsewhere (Hänel 2021b) between moral and conceptual knowledge.

in which “the agent knows what she is doing and genuinely believes that her appalling acts are permissible” (149). While this seems to describe a similar case to the ones that I am interested in with regard to sexist ideology and sexual violence, Mason seems to assume that only moral outliers—specified as those people who are commonly referred to as ‘sociopaths’—can be deeply morally ignorant. Furthermore, moral outliers have no excuse (such as a horrible childhood) for holding such a terrible view, they are simply evil. This is why, according to Mason, they are an example of detached blame (148-9).

In an illuminating way, Mason distinguishes between detached blameworthiness and ordinary blameworthiness; while ordinary blameworthiness applies only to those within our moral communities, that is, those who understand and share our values, detached blameworthiness applies to agents outside of our moral communities. We blame agents even when they are outside of our moral communities and might not know that their act was morally wrong (152).

But in cases of sexist ideology, it is far from clear who is in our moral community and who is not. We are all, in many different ways and to different degrees, influenced by sexist ideology—even when we rigidly oppose it; yet, clearly, there are different degrees of acting morally blameworthy because of the sexist norms and practices that we are influenced by. On the one hand, think about the ways in which we might judge another person on the basis of problematic beauty norms or treat a couple as one single individual by always inviting them together and asking them about “their” plans as if they cannot have individual plans anymore. On the other hand, think about sexual violence, sexual harassment, violence against queer or trans\* persons and other horrible and deeply wrong acts. Are those agents in different moral communities? Should we address ordinary blame to the former and detached blame to the latter? And, if so, are the latter moral outliers? If it is indeed the case that we live within a sexist ideology, then it seems that according to Mason in many cases only detached blame is applicable. However, the majority of people affected in deeply problematic ways by the sexist ideology are not moral outliers. In fact, this is often the reason why it is so hard to attach blame to perpetrators; husbands, boyfriends, friends, uncles, and fathers (and many others) are not sociopaths and moral outliers and are not deeply ignorant about our moral values—they are not just a part of our moral community but of our homes and circle of friends.

In fact, this is the reason why I am very sympathetic to Mason’s theory of blame in which she makes explicit that “our blaming practices are essentially interpersonal, and inextricably linked with the fact that we exist in a moral community with others” (6). But this implies that in many ways, perpetrators should have known better. Here, we disagree about the ways in which our moral communities can be fragmented. And this is important as, in my account, even those who act morally problematic *and* ignorantly should be met with a sort of communicative blame (or held accountable). Especially, if this ignorance is ideological, it needs to be resisted with critical reflection and a learning process. However, I do agree with Mason that we should be careful not to reduce all ideological ignorance to willful ignorance. By raising these questions, I hope to have marked out the similarities as well as the differences between these two forms of ignorance.

I am incredibly grateful to Elinor Mason for taking the time and effort to comment on my paper, her input has given me a great opportunity to clarify some of my claims and to think about many of the issues raised in the paper in more detail.

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