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8 Ideal Theory, Epistemologies of Ignorance, and (Mis)Recognition

Mari Mikkola

Introduction

In considering what makes epistemic injustice as understood by Miranda Fricker (2007) wrongful, Matthew Congdon (2017) has recently argued that this cannot merely be understood in terms of bad consequences. Instead, there is a “deeper intrinsic indignity at work”¹: epistemic injustice is made wrongful (in part) by involving forms of epistemic *misrecognition*. This is not so solely relative to Frickerian epistemic injustice, but a general feature of epistemologies of ignorance. For example, Congdon takes the same deeper indignity to be at work in racial domination that is supported by epistemologies of ignorance as discussed by Charles Mills. For Congdon, as for Bratu and Lepold (2018), theories of recognition may therefore afford particularly fruitful ways to theorise what goes on (and wrong) in cases of epistemic injustice. Most basically, “a person A recognises another person B if A realises that B has some property *p* that is normatively relevant and if A treats B accordingly”.² As Arto Laitinen (2012) contends, misrecognition subsequently involves an inadequate and insufficient responsiveness to A’s normatively relevant features.

Prima facie, this befits Fricker’s idea of testimonial injustice: bluntly put, due to negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes about one’s social kind, one unduly experiences a credibility deficit and is not recognised as a knower. Insofar as testimonial injustice involves an apparently inadequate and insufficient responsiveness to normatively relevant epistemic features of the agent, it looks like a form of misrecognition in Laitinen’s sense is present. Drawing on Axel Honneth’s well-known work,³ Congdon holds that epistemic injustice involves forms of misrecognition such as epistemic disrespect, disesteem, and neglect.⁴ Subsequently, at least part of the remedy would be for the agent to be properly recognised as a knower. Bringing together epistemic injustice and recognition theory literature should help us not only to diagnose pathologies in the “credibility economy”⁵ but also to better diagnose and even cure those pathologies.⁶

Bringing these strands of theorising together opens up novel and interesting avenues to explore ignorance and recognition. However, I do not

straightforwardly discuss the application of recognition theory to understand Fricker's cases of testimonial injustice. Rather, following Congdon's remarks that other types of epistemologies of ignorance involve misrecognition in ways similar to Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice, I will consider whether and how ignorance may *not* involve the same types of misrecognition. That is, I contend that there may be, as of yet, unexplored and surprising ways in which ignorance and recognition work *in concert*: some cases of genuine ignorance do not involve *misrecognition*, but a kind of *recognition*. I have argued elsewhere that some cases of dehumanisation involve an odd 'paradox'⁷: to dehumanise seemingly involves an *affirmation* of humanity and personhood. Dehumanisation is not about viewing and treating someone as not human or as a lesser human, but (as Kate Manne (2017) puts it) treating another as human, all too human. Ignorance affords a similar sort of paradox: sometimes it is not about being insufficiently responsive to some normatively relevant features of another agent, but being *too* responsive to them. In other words, sometimes epistemologies of ignorance do not involve misrecognition as understood by Congdon and Laitinen; rather, ignorance involves recognition of normatively relevant properties of another agent.

As I will argue in this chapter, we can see this sort of 'paradox of ignorance' in Mills's discussion of white ignorance and ideal theory. For Mills, ideal theory functions *ideologically* in a pejorative sense. It tacitly represents the actual as a deviation from the ideal and, therefore, as not worth theorising. Ideal theory takes such an ideal starting point methodologically as the best one. However, he argues, reliance on idealisations to the exclusion and marginalisation of non-ideal circumstances dangerously distorts the results of our theoretical endeavours. Idealisation as a method obfuscates such endeavours because it ends up functioning like an ideology. For Mills, the hegemony of idealisation is not a result of innocent, value-neutral methodological choices, though. Rather, the predominance of idealisation reflects a set of ideas, values, assumptions, and perspectives that mirror and reproduce privileged perspectives in philosophy. For instance, normative concepts like *freedom*, *personhood*, and *citizenship* defined in ideologically idealised ways include a hidden and concealed "dark side" from the start.⁸ Non-whites and colonised subjects were *foreclosed* from satisfying them: in fashioning freedom and personhood, canonical liberal philosophy presupposed a class of unfree and unequal subpersons whose fate 'proper' persons and citizens ought to avoid. Some people were not forgotten in theorising; rather, they were acknowledged and from the outset constitutively precluded from satisfying important normative concepts.

Looking at the idea of foreclosure enables us to see how recognition can be constitutive of ignorance – ignorance need not involve misrecognition as Congdon holds, but rather presupposes recognition in order to work. Or so I will argue here. Mills himself does not make this case, to

the best of my knowledge, but some philosophical exegesis of his discussion of ideal theory and white ignorance (it seems to me) helpfully points to this idea that recognition, rather than its absence, may in some cases be the driving force of epistemologies of ignorance.

It is worth clarifying from the outset that I will not argue for or assume any particular theoretical account of recognition in my discussion. Rather my argument proceeds as follows: let us first look at how epistemologies of ignorance supposedly involve recognition deficiencies understood either as misrecognition or non-recognition; next, let us see whether such epistemologies indeed involve the absence of recognition. As I will argue, some forms of ignorance do not involve recognition omissions, but precisely the opposite. Nonetheless, I will not define what recognition positively amounts to or make use of any positive theoretical account of recognition. There are many ways in which we could understand recognition and I do not wish to endorse any one account here. However, if recognition deficiencies signal the opposite of recognition *and* if some epistemologies of ignorance do not involve such deficiencies, they *prima facie* involve recognition instead of mis- or non-recognition.

I will start by saying more about the putative role of recognition theory in analysing our credibility economy (§I). I will then outline Mills's critique of ideal theory and argue for how foreclosure conceivably works without involving the lack of recognition (§II). I end the chapter by further considering how ignorance and recognition may work in concert (§III).

I

Recognition and Credibility

To begin, I wish to sketch out how recognition theory plausibly connects to epistemologies of ignorance and epistemic injustice. Paul Giladi writes that, from the perspective of diagnostic social philosophy, social conflict is generated by misrecognition or non-recognition: in the former case, the subjectivity of a group or minority is acknowledged but not afforded the “same level of respect and value” as the majority; in the latter case, the majority “incorrectly fails to acknowledge the subjectivity of a group or minority, affording that group or minority no positive normative status at all”.⁹ He further notes that from this perspective, testimonial injustice as understood by Fricker is especially worrisome since “it robs a group or an individual of the status of a rational enquirer, thereby creating an asymmetrical cognitive environment in which that group or individual is not deemed one’s conversational peer”.¹⁰ This not only leads to exclusionary practices, where one is not being heard and not taken to be occupying the space of reasons; it also leads to self-alienation: in being treated as less credible than others in the credibility economy, one is alienated from their own rationality that undergirds membership in the community of enquirers.¹¹

The harm hence suffered, Congdon holds, amounts to a sort of indignity “best captured as a failure of recognition”.¹² In other words, recognition theory takes the positive ‘practical relation-to-self’ to be dependent upon our relations with others. Therefore, it makes sense to think about epistemic injustice involving a recognition failure: it involves withholding or denying “forms of social validation that are necessary for the development and maintenance of the specific relation-to-self involved in regarding oneself as a knower”.¹³

Congdon contends, drawing on Honneth, that basic forms of recognition involve respect, esteem, and love. These, he holds, are not applicable merely in the realm of social interactions, but also in the credibility economy. Epistemic respect then is about

an expressive act conveying the acknowledgment of the minimal set of capacities we grant to any knower whatsoever, irrespective of particular expertise, experience, or situatedness ... as well as a minimal set of rights and responsibilities we afford any knower whatsoever.¹⁴

Epistemic esteem involves recognising some specialised forms of epistemic accomplishment grounded in (e.g.) expertise or exceptional honesty. Epistemic love, finally, refers to “forms of epistemic nurturing and attentiveness that confirm a burgeoning knower’s epistemic trust and confidence, as well as epistemic skills like literacy and communication in early childhood”.¹⁵ When recognition in these senses is absent, the pathologies of epistemic disrespect, dishonour, and neglect surface. They signal and are constitutive of epistemic misrecognition.

Consider Fricker’s discussion of testimonial injustice here. Certain negative identity prejudices and stereotypical beliefs (about women, people of colour) can result in testimonial injustice, which is first and foremost about ways in which others evaluate and judge us. Fricker discusses the example of Marge Sheerwood from the novel *Talented Mr. Ripley*. In short: Marge’s fiancée Dickie disappears under odd circumstances, and Marge (rightly) suspects that Dickie’s newfound friend Tom Ripley has killed him. However, Marge’s intended future father-in-law Herbert Greenleaf dismisses her accusations as ‘women’s intuition’ and brands her a hysterical woman who simply cannot face her fiancée leaving her for another woman. The background assumptions framing the male characters’ interpretative horizons (most prominently, 1950s gender relations) had the effect of diminishing Marge’s status as a reliable witness, and a knower – despite her fiancée’s philandering past, she *knew* from the cues around her that Dickie had not left her, but was in fact dead. *Prima facie*, Marge is not being recognised as a knower, which undergirds her being subject to testimonial injustice.

Marge seemingly faces epistemic disrespect as understood by Congdon. There is no acknowledgement of the minimal set of capacities granted to knowers. As Herbert Greenleaf proclaims when dismissing Marge's suspicions: there is women's intuition, and then there are facts. Marge also faces epistemic dishonour or lack of esteem in being denied expertise: she is not considered to have expert knowledge about her own relationship with Dickie, but rather thought to be a woman who just cannot 'face the facts'. Finally, there is probably epistemic neglect at play as well: given the 1950s gender relations and norms, Marge and women in general were not subject to epistemic nurturing and attentiveness to the extent that they should have been.

Thinking about Fricker's other example case of Tom Robinson from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* affords a similar analysis of racial domination and racist epistemologies of ignorance. Tom, an African American man in Alabama at the time of the Great Depression, is being accused of sexual violence against a young white woman. Even though there is incontrovertible evidence of Tom's innocence, an all-white jury finds him guilty. Racial prejudice is clearly a driving force for the jury's failure to give Tom credence in denying the charges. Tom faces serious and deep-seated epistemic disrespect in that there is no acknowledgement of him as having the minimal set of capacities granted to knowers. Tom is also subject to epistemic dishonour: he is taken to embody exceptional *dishonesty* by virtue of his racial social kind membership. In fact, we might say that Tom is not epistemically misrecognised; he is non-recognised, in that the white jury members fail to afford Tom any positive normative status whatsoever as an epistemic agent.

I think that there is much right about these analyses, and I will not take issue with them. However, I contend, we should not situate Mills's discussion of epistemologies of white ignorance as such parallel to Fricker's analysis of testimonial injustice as Congdon does. In other words, the ways in which ignorance and recognition (or the lack thereof) work together in Mills and Fricker are subtly different. In short: for Fricker, we can see clearly how ignorance involves misrecognition in Congdon's senses, but for Mills, some forms of ignorance seemingly involve recognition. To see this, let us consider Mills's work on white ignorance and ideal theory.

II

Mills on Ideal Theory and Ignorance

We should start by considering Mills's work on ideal theory, before connecting it to white ignorance. Mills (2005) takes certain prevalent ways of doing philosophy to be ideological or ideologically governed: specifically, ideal theory in philosophy (he holds) functions like an

ideology. In general, a functional explanation of a social practice explains why that practice exists by making reference to the purpose or needs served by the practice.¹⁶ For Mills, the needs served by ideal theory as a way of doing philosophy pertain to problematic relations of social power as it serves the interests of a small number of privileged persons hugely overrepresented in philosophy. As a method, then, it obfuscates philosophical analyses because it ends up functioning *qua* ideology: “a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population – middle-to-upper-class white males – who are hugely over-represented in the professional philosophical population”.¹⁷ That is, the kind of theoretical reflection philosophy typically involves is not methodologically innocent, but ideological in a pejorative sense.

How might ideal theory involve epistemic misrecognition? To illustrate this better, consider what I take to be the central tenets of ideal theory according to one historically leading ideal theorist, John Rawls (1971). Rawls distinguished ‘ideal’ theory from ‘non-ideal’ theory. According to him, an ideal theory of justice “develops the conception of a perfectly just basic structure and the corresponding duties and obligations of persons”, while non-ideal theory asks what principles of justice one should adopt “under less happy conditions”.¹⁸ The principles that Rawls develops and articulates in *A Theory of Justice* are part of ideal theory, and hence are meant to cover societies that are well-ordered, where “everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice” and “the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles”.¹⁹ Rawls puts forward a theory that assumes *strict compliance* with these principles of justice. Non-ideal theory development, where compliance to ideal principles of justice can be merely *partial*, only comes after we have articulated the ideal – perfect – conception of justice.²⁰ This is a task that Rawls explicitly refuses to undertake in forging his theory of justice.

The details of Rawls’s principles of justice are not important for my purposes. Rather, what matters are two methodological theses to which his view is wedded. First, what I call ‘the **Normative Priority Thesis** (NPT)’: that we need to articulate an ideal theory of justice before we are able to tackle non-ideal circumstances. The thought here is that we need to know what perfect justice consists of in order to examine injustices through its lens. As Rawls writes,

[T]he ideal part presents a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can. Existing institutions are to be judged in the light of this conception and held to be unjust to the extent that they depart from it without sufficient reason.²¹

Moreover, principles that define the perfectly just arrangement of basic institutions “set up the aim to guide the course of social reform”.²² Rawls takes the NPT to yield *better* theorising:

The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems [dealt with by partial compliance theory]. The discussion of civil disobedience, for example, depends upon it. ... At least, I shall assume that a deeper understanding can be gained in no other way, and that the nature and aims of a perfectly just society is the fundamental part of the theory of justice.²³

Second, Rawlsian ideal theory is committed to another methodological thesis, which I call ‘the **Distancing Thesis (DT)**’:

The deeper the conflict, the higher the level of abstraction to which we must ascend to get a clear and uncluttered view of its roots ... formulating idealized, which is to say abstract, conceptions of society and person ... is essential to finding a reasonable political conception of justice.²⁴

Good theory building supposedly starts by distancing away from actual states of affairs, both current *and* historical. In so doing, such theorising relies on either possible, but non-actualised, or impossible *idealizations* about (for instance) the natures of citizens and political institutions. Rawls’s famous thought experiment of ‘the Original Position’ displays the sort of distancing I have in mind. He asks us to imagine what principles of justice would be chosen behind a hypothetical ‘veil of ignorance’, where agents’ particular social locations are unknown to them, but they do know *some* facts about biology, psychology, history, and social science. The basic idea is that not knowing how those behind the veil are gendered, racialised, socioeconomically located, and what their ‘natural’ talents may be, enables agents to choose in fair and impartial ways the most rational principles of justice to govern basic social institutions. In other words, abstracting away from personal circumstances when choosing these principles supposedly enables us to gain a clear and uncluttered view of the matter at hand.

As previously noted, for Mills, ideal theory that upholds both NPT and DT functions ideologically. To specify what is objectionable about ideal theory, Mills distinguishes theorising that is committed to either (1) *Ideal-as-Normative* or (2) *Ideal-as-Model* conceptions of ideal theory. The former denotes theory that makes an appeal to normative values and ideals. Of the latter, Mills outlines two versions. By way of illustration, suppose that we aim to model university education in the United Kingdom. On

the (2a) *Ideal-as-Descriptive-Model*, the representation of UK university education purports to be descriptive of its crucial aspects and of how such education actually works. This necessarily involves abstracting away some features and making simplifying assumptions based on importance (focusing on countrywide teaching and examination procedures, for instance). On the (2b) *Ideal-as-Idealised-Model*, theorising produces an idealised normative representation of UK university education: an exemplar of ideal education.

This yields gaps between current reality and utopia, between the descriptive and idealised models, and between how university education *is* and how it *should* be organised. With these distinctions in mind, Mills explicates what is problematic about positions like Rawls's. The problem is not (1) that his theory appeals to values and ideals (like the ideal of justice). (2a) is also unproblematic: making some simplifying assumptions and abstractions is necessary for all theoretical modelling exercises. Importantly, this model can help in non-ideal theorising provided that one does not abstract away from the right phenomena and thereby generate ignorance. Rather, (2b) captures the problematic sort of ideal theory: it tacitly represents the actual as a deviation from the ideal and as thus *not worth theorising* (i.e. DT), and it takes the ideal starting point methodologically as the best one (i.e. NPT). The distinguishing feature of (2b) is its reliance on *idealisations* to the exclusion and marginalisation of actual circumstances, which distorts our results.

In thinking about the distortions concerning epistemic recognition, we must specify what is problematic about idealisation – how does it putatively involve pathologies of recognition that encroach upon the credibility economy in worrisome ways? This is where the notion of *foreclosure* becomes particularly helpful. I take *constitutive foreclosure* to denote a phenomenon of pre-emptively excluding certain discursive and representational possibilities.²⁵ It is not simply or merely about leaving something out in the creation of meanings and representations, and hence ending up with something defective insofar as our systems of meaning-making and conceptual resources inaccurately represent the matter at hand. Rather, given ideological forces (or what we might call 'hegemonic and normalising discourses'²⁶), foreclosure is a feature of theorising that hinders and prevents the possibility of *particular* representations. As a result, some meaning-making conceptual resources and apparatuses are rendered impossible. Moreover, the foreclosed resources are in a sense always threatening in that they have the power to disrupt conventional and prevalent ones. And, importantly for my purposes, tools like idealisation that involve constitutive foreclosure must recognise and acknowledge the actual states of affairs *in order to* distort them. This, in short, homes in on my central claim here: some (though not all) epistemologies of ignorance work precisely *via* a mechanism of recognition, rather than being driven by forms of

misrecognition that Congdon discusses – namely, of epistemic disrespect, dishonour, and neglect.

To illustrate this idea and a sort of ‘paradox of ignorance’, consider Mills’s critique of the traditional social contract tradition, and its failure to address racism and white supremacy:

Insofar as racism is addressed at all within mainstream moral and political theory, it is usually treated in a footnote as a regrettable deviation from the ideal. But treating it this way makes it seem contingent, accidental, residual, removes it from our understanding.²⁷

Rather, Mills argues that at the heart of the traditionally conceived social contract is a racial contract *establishing* people of colour as subpersons to be outside of and defined in opposition to free and equal citizenry to which the social contract applies. In other words, the failure to theorise racism and white supremacy was not an unfortunate oversight or a case where theorists unfortunately abstracted too much relevant information with the result that people of colour were not under the purview of the social contract. A better and more accurate way to understand traditional social contract theory is to realise that although race was made to seem marginal, it was as a matter of fact central to the contract and established key norms of the polity. The contract was *designed* to exclude people of colour; hence, it is a racial contract.

Mills holds that just like the traditional social contract, the racial contract is socio-political and moral: “[i]t explains how society was created or crucially transformed, how the individuals in that society were reconstituted, how the state was established, and how a particular moral code and a certain moral psychology were brought into existence”.²⁸ However, the racial contract is also epistemic in that it prescribes cognitive norms to which signatories must adhere. In so doing, the racial contract establishes some as ‘white’ and coextensive with full personhood and others as ‘non-white’ and coextensive with subpersons with subordinate civil standing and inferior moral status.²⁹ Hence, the social contract tradition was not based on innocently having failed to recognise and acknowledge the importance of race. Rather, it recognised the importance of race all right, and by foreclosing race when defining the supposedly “raceless Western ideals”,³⁰ the contract was constituted in a racialised manner.

This turns the social contract into “an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority”.³¹ These patterns of cognitive dysfunction have the result of rendering whites ignorant and unable to comprehend “the world they themselves have made”.³² White ignorance “requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity”.³³ And so,

instead of pretending that the social contract outlines the ideal that people tried to live up to but which they occasionally (as with all ideals) fell short of, we should say frankly that for whites the Racial Contract represents the ideal, and what is involved is not deviation from the (fictive) norm but *adherence* to the actual norm. [This demonstrates] how the polity was in fact a racial one, a white-supremacist state, for which differential white racial entitlement and non-white social subordination were defining.³⁴

Once we understand that mechanisms of exclusion are at the heart of traditional social contract theory, so the argument goes, we can constructively see how these mechanisms may be overcome and how the contract itself needs to be modified – the appropriate response is not to insist that *now* people of colour should be party to the contract as well. The contract itself needs to be rethought.

How does this relate ignorance and recognition? As I see it, foreclosure is not primarily a failure to extend the ideal of (say) personhood to cover non-white and colonised subjects – it does not primarily involve non-recognition understood as the majority incorrectly failing “to acknowledge the subjectivity of a group or minority, affording that group or minority no positive normative status at all”.³⁵ This is because the traditional social contract – being a racial contract – recognised racial subjectivities. Furthermore, constitutive foreclosure is not an instance of misrecognition *qua* failing to see that non-white and colonised subjects share normatively relevant features with white subjects, where this sharing justifies being treated equally. Foreclosure is not about having mistakenly abstracted and distanced away from non-ideal circumstances, thereby failing to acknowledge those normatively relevant factors. Rather, it is about taking non-ideal circumstances seriously and focusing on them in defining (say) personhood.

Engaging in idealisation, which involves constitutive foreclosures, then recognises and acknowledges the actual states of affairs precisely *in order to* distort them. Epistemologies of ignorance at work in the traditional social contract tradition as Mills understands it involve mechanisms of recognition, instead of misrecognition. Consider a distinction José Medina (2018) makes to see this more clearly. He takes one kind of recognition deficiency to involve quantitative recognition deficit that ranges from not being recognised at all (“not being seen or heard, in being utterly ignored in epistemic interactions”³⁶) to not being sufficiently recognised. However, another kind of deficiency involves not being recognised how one deserves or ought to be recognised. In the former case, the remedy is to afford the agent more recognition. However, in the latter case, the pathology present is not about how much recognition one is afforded – it is about “the *manner* in which recognition is accorded and the specific (improper) content of such

recognition”.³⁷ Now, as I see it, ignorance generated by constitutive foreclosure precisely does not involve a quantitative recognition deficit; it involves “*how* one is recognized and whether the *way* in which one is recognized is appropriate or not”.³⁸ In other words, ignorance may involve recognition, but recognition of a kind that is warped by constitutive foreclosure and that subsequently distorts the actual states of affairs – hence, the paradox of ignorance.

Mills’s work on white ignorance affords another way to understand the phenomenon I am aiming to highlight. He takes white ignorance to be a group-based cognitive hindrance that has its corollary in standpoint theory: the cognitive privilege of one group comes with the cognitive impairment of another. Moreover, white ignorance is not something incidental and contingent, but a phenomenon in which white racism and domination play crucial causal roles.³⁹ This causal role includes both “straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation, which may be operative even if the cogniser in question is not racist”.⁴⁰ White ignorance is not always due to ‘bad faith’, though it is always due to situatedness: cognitive processes are situated and, in white dominant and racist societies, such processes are racialised in a manner that engenders white ignorance even in the absence of explicit ill will toward non-white and colonised subjects. In other words, such processes engender both wilful and non-wilful ignorance.

The cognitive processes Mills discusses include perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest. For instance, our perception is selective and “when the individual cognising agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialised”.⁴¹ Different cognisers can quite literally see different things while looking at the same object given their situatedness. Perception involves “viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid”,⁴² which enables us to conceive – what we see and how we interpret what we see are situated. Memory that is involved in inference from perception is also social, not merely individual.⁴³ Finally, recorded testimony is “integrated into a framework and narrative and from the start will have involved the selection of certain voices as against others, selection in and selection out”.⁴⁴ This being the case, in various ways interests can shape what and how we see, what we (individually and collectively) come to remember, whose testimony is solicited, and what putative facts and conceptual frameworks are accepted and reproduced.

Although not directly in relation to Mills’s discussion of white ignorance, Alisa Bierria (2014) provides a fitting example of such situated cognitive processes as part of her analysis of how agency isn’t dependent just on the intentions of an agent but is also socially authored through the way others translate the agent’s actions. Bierria examines the 2005 media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and particularly two photographs published by news agencies. One image

features white-skinned people traveling through the flooded area carrying food, and includes the caption, “Two residents waded through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana”. ... The other image is nearly identical except the subject of the photo is a black man, and this time the caption reads, “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans”.⁴⁵

The same apparently intentional action is defined as “finding” and “looting”, respectively. Scenarios like these highlight how action is socially authored and socially read through the way others discern and translate one’s action. When this takes place in systems of domination it is “facilitated by reasoning designed to reinforce and rationalize” such systems, and “further entrenches an institutionally sanctioned distortion of the intentions of some agents”.⁴⁶ The looting/finding case, then, demonstrates that social reading of the actions does not involve a mere misunderstanding of the black agents’ actions; rather, it involves “a fundamental corruption of the process of good faith translation”.⁴⁷ This analysis fits Mills’s examination of white ignorance as a cognitive hindrance that works on the levels of perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest. All of these cognitive processes are involved in socially authored and socially read action, which in white dominant and racist societies end up being problematically racialised.

Cases like these demonstrate that exclusionary structures such as white ignorance and epistemologies of ignorance cannot be reformed by merely making them more inclusive and realising that some who have been left out should be included. The phenomenon of foreclosure suggests that the very “conceptual array with which the cognizer approaches the world needs itself to be scrutinized”.⁴⁸ The conceptual apparatus is likely to be forged and inflected by prejudices and biases of the powerful in societies that are structured by racialised domination and subordination relations (and of course by other such relations too, like gender). This has the consequence that “crucial concepts may well be misleading in their inner makeup and their external relation to a larger doxastic architecture”.⁴⁹ In a case where the inner makeup is misleading and exclusionary, it is futile to try to extend that makeup to cover agents previously left out. Let me now connect this discussion back to the ideas of misrecognition and non-recognition.

III

Ignorance and Recognition

As noted earlier, Giladi holds that in the case of misrecognition the subjectivity of a group or minority is acknowledged, but not afforded the “same level of respect and value” as the majority; with non-recognition,

the majority “incorrectly fails to acknowledge the subjectivity of a group or minority, affording that group or minority no positive normative status at all”.⁵⁰ As I see it, neither is present in the previous analysis of white ignorance that turned on the phenomenon of foreclosure (though this does not suggest that mis- and non-recognition too can be driving forces of some forms of white ignorance). For a start, there is no failure to acknowledge the subjectivity of non-whites – so, white ignorance does not simply involve non-recognition. Rather, the subjectivity of non-whites and colonised subjects is acknowledged precisely to be avoided and to be escaped by white citizenry (or, rather by citizenry defined as ‘white’ and hence satisfying the conditions of full subjecthood).

Moreover, it seems that white ignorance neither involves misrecognition in the sense of failing to accord equal levels of respect and value. At least at times, the sort of inverted epistemology that Mills discusses seemingly involves senses of disquiet and apprehension, hence implicating a type of motivated ignorance. That is, at least in part mechanisms of Othering are involved, which are not due to mere failures to assign value and acknowledge normatively relevant features, but rather hinge on actively removing these. In such cases, however, value and normatively relevant features must first be acknowledged in order to be wrestled away. Hence, I submit, the kinds of epistemologies of ignorance Mills discusses involve the ‘paradox of ignorance’. Learning to see the world wrongly, as Mills put it, seemingly involves being able to see the world rightly and as it is. This being so, white ignorance is not equivalent to epistemic injustice in terms of involving a straightforward lack of recognition. Thinking of the notion of constitutive foreclosure enables one to grasp that recognition is not merely lacking in that there is a failure to acknowledge or attribute value, which would render the traditional social contract theory defective. Instead, some forms of value are pre-emptively excluded from being able to be represented. And so, certain meaning-making conceptual and epistemic resources are rendered not possible, which is why we can learn to view the world wrongly. The foreclosed resources, furthermore, are in a sense threatening in that they have the power to disrupt white ignorance. Opportunities for recognition and overcoming ignorance must thus be repeatedly undermined. This is something that methodological tenets of ideal theory (in my view) conceivably do. Relying on idealisations in theory building, whereby we explicitly distance away from actual states of affairs, we end up (re)producing conceptual and epistemic resources that enable us to view the world wrongly.

One might object to this analysis in that it sounds too intentional and as if there is some philosophical conspiracy to keep in place epistemologies of ignorance. I do not hold any such view. Having said that, those epistemologies of ignorance that arise from idealisations, and those epistemologies of ignorance in traditional social contract theory, as Mills argues, are far from innocent. This is due to the simple fact that our

cognitive processes are always situated. Recall that the processes of perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest may be cognitively hindering without explicit ill will – and even when explicit goodwill is present. This I take to simply be a fact about human cognition. For instance, the phenomenon of confirmation bias has been well established: we tend to gather and remember data selectively in ways that confirm our previously held beliefs and views.⁵¹ This need not be out of any ill will; it is simply that (as Mills holds) what we see and how we interpret our perceptions may be subject to situated cognitive hindrances. Moreover, social psychological research suggests that those who view themselves as objective observers and reasoners tend to be particularly influenced by unconscious biases in that their trust in their own objectivity prevents them from keeping their biases in check.⁵²

This fits the idea that theorising from the ideal perspective in a manner that matches and maintains broader relations of social hierarchy is not just a sociological accident: it is an example of situated cognition at work. Social position occupancy affects cognition, which suggests that apparently neutral methodological choices are deeply partial and illustrative of the philosophers' own social positioning. Social positions and material life circumstances shape and limit ways of knowing and understanding the world.⁵³ On the one hand, possibilities of direct knowledge from first-hand experiences are limited because one's social position conditions the kinds of experiences that one will or can have. On the other, social position occupancy shapes human cognitive perspectives and ways in which one can interpret phenomena that one encounters. Given the demographics of philosophy, much of philosophical knowledge is produced from a rather restricted set of perspectives. This suggests that there may be widespread and systematic mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation without explicit ill will and prejudice.

Still, if I am right that some forms of ignorance involve constitutive foreclosure and that this phenomenon rather turns on recognition instead of mis- or non-recognition, ignorance is not innocent – despite not being out of intentional malice. It points to the importance of self-reflection and highlights how our theoretical tools and choices need to be made objects of theoretical reflection. In this sense, I too advocate for more recognition. But the work being done for me does not centre around epistemic respect, esteem, and love. Rather, it hinges on a sort of self-recognition: acknowledging our own epistemic fallibilities and working to correct them.

Notes

- 1 Congdon 2017: 243.
- 2 Bratu and Lepold 2018: 2.
- 3 See Honneth (1995a, 1995b).
- 4 Congdon 2017: 250.
- 5 Viz. Bratu and Lepold 2018.

- 6 Viz. Giladi (2018).
- 7 Viz. Mikkola (2020).
- 8 Viz. Mills (1997, 2005).
- 9 Giladi 2018: 145.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Viz. Giladi 2018: 146.
- 12 Congdon 2017: 246.
- 13 Ibid.: 248.
- 14 Ibid.: 249.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Viz. Kincaid (2006).
- 17 Mills 2005: 172.

In fact, Mills writes that ideal theory *is* an ideology, rather than holding that it functions like one. But I take it that glossing the point in functional terms is faithful to Mills's view insofar as he thinks that ideal theory serves certain purposes to do with maintaining patterns of social power and privilege, which disadvantage dissident viewpoints and philosophers from marginalised backgrounds.

- 18 Rawls 1971: 245–246. There is of course much more to say about ideal theory in general than what I do here. I am focusing on specific aspects of Rawls's view in particular because they are the ones that bear on Mills's discussion of white ignorance and on my analysis of Mills.
- 19 Ibid.: 5.
- 20 Ibid.: 246.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.: 245.
- 23 Ibid.: 9.
- 24 Rawls 1993: 45–46.
- 25 See Butler (1997); Hesse (2014).
- 26 Viz. Foucault 1997: 183; 184.
- 27 Mills 1997: 56.
- 28 Ibid.: 10.
- 29 Viz. Mills 1997: 11.
- 30 Mills 1997: 14.
- 31 Ibid.: 18.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.: 19.
- 34 Ibid.: 56–57.
- 35 Giladi 2018: 145.
- 36 Medina 2018: 2.
- 37 Ibid.: 3.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Viz. Mills 2007: 20.
- 40 Mills 2007: 21.
- 41 Ibid.: 23.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Viz. Mills 2007: 24.
- 44 Mills 2007: 24.
- 45 Bierria 2014: 129–130.
- 46 Ibid.: 130.
- 47 Ibid.: 131.
- 48 Mills 2007: 24.
- 49 Ibid.: 25.
- 50 Giladi 2018: 145.

- 51 Viz. Nickerson (1998).
 52 Viz. Uhlmann and Cohen (2007).
 53 Viz. Grasswick (2011); Wylie (2011).

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