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The Politics of Relevant Alternatives

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to use the resources of relevant-alternatives contextualism to provide an account of an unrecognized form of epistemic injustice that I call *irrelevance-injustice*. Irrelevance-injustice occurs either when a speaker raises an alternative that is not taken seriously when it should be, or when a speaker raises an alternative that is taken seriously when it should not be. Irrelevance-injustice influences what alternatives are perceived to be relevant and patterns of knowledge ascriptions in ways that are unfair. Asymmetries in whose alternatives are taken seriously affect how many alternatives members of different groups must rule out prior to being ascribed knowledge. Because knowledge ascriptions have socially valuable functions, asymmetries in whose alternatives are taken seriously mean asymmetries in who gets to do socially valuable things with knowledge ascriptions.

According to relevant-alternatives contextualism (for example, Lewis 1996; Blome-Tillmann 2009; Ichikawa 2017), the truth of knowledge ascriptions—sentences of the form “S knows that p”—requires that S’s evidence eliminate every not-p alternative that is relevant in the conversational context in which the knowledge ascription is made. Some contextualists (for example, Lewis 1996; Blome-Tillmann 2009) claim that the set of relevant not-p alternatives can expand as participants in the conversation raise salient alternatives to the proposition that figures in the knowledge ascription. On these views, if S claims to “know” that p, and I say “but, what about this not-p alternative?,” S’s evidence must eliminate the alternative if they’re to be able to continue truly claiming to “know.”¹ But contextualists have neglected the fact that the emphasized conversational contexts are themselves embedded within broader social contexts, and that facts about these broader contexts leak into conversational contexts to affect which conversational participants can pull off the conversational moves that expand the set of relevant alternatives. One feature of social context that has been taken to affect speakers’ conversational abilities is power. The relationship between power and conversational abilities has been much discussed in debates about silencing (see, for example, Langton 1993; Langton and Hornsby 1998; Langton and West 1999; Maitra 2009; McGowan 2009; Davies 2016; Hesni 2018) and epistemic injustice (see, for example,

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Jones 2002; Fricker 2007; Dotson 2011; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013), but the relationship between power and the context-shifting mechanisms that interest contextualists has gone largely unexplored.²

This article investigates the relationship between the power relations that pervade our social context and the ability to successfully raise alternatives. This investigation turns up an unrecognized form of epistemic injustice: irrelevance-injustice. Irrelevance-injustice occurs either when a speaker raises an alternative that is not taken seriously when it should be, or when a speaker raises an alternative that is taken seriously when it should not be. Irrelevance-injustice is a matter of alternatives being mistakenly perceived to be relevant or irrelevant, which in turn affects patterns of knowledge ascriptions in ways that are unfair. Asymmetries in whose alternatives are taken seriously affect how much epistemic labor one must undertake in ruling out alternatives prior to being ascribed “knowledge.” Because knowledge ascriptions have socially valuable functions—they’ve been associated with identifying reliable informants (Craig 1990), bringing inquiry to an end (Kelp 2011), and tracking the norms of assertion (Williamson 2000) and action (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008)—asymmetries in whose alternatives are taken seriously mean asymmetries in who gets to do socially valuable things with knowledge ascriptions. Thus, in addition to illuminating the underexplored relationship between power, raising alternatives, and the perceived relevance of alternatives, this article also illuminates the underexplored relationship between epistemic injustice and knowledge ascriptions.

A quick clarification of my aim before we get going. As we will see, identifying the conditions under which irrelevance-injustice takes hold has implications for relevant-alternatives contextualism in that it sheds light on when an alternative is relevant. However, my primary aim is not to explore the consequences of irrelevance-injustice for contextualism, but rather to show that contextualism has the theoretical resources to illuminate an unrecognized form of epistemic injustice.

Section I describes relevant-alternatives contextualism and highlights the important features given my aims in this article. Section II examines paradigm cases, and develops a theory, of irrelevance-injustice. Section III contrasts irrelevance-injustice with other forms of epistemic injustice. Section IV concludes.

I. Relevant-alternatives Contextualism

Consider the following pair of cases:

NARROW: Hannah and Sarah are discussing whether the bank is open on Saturday. Hannah recalls, “I’ve been in there on a Saturday before.” She says, “I know that the bank is open on Saturday.” Sarah agrees.

WIDE: Hannah and Sarah are discussing whether the bank is open on Saturday. Hannah says, “I’ve been in there on a Saturday before.” But Sarah replies, “Banks can change their opening hours. You don’t know that the bank is open on Saturday.” Hannah agrees. (Tuckwell and Tanter 2020, 2; variation on McKenna 2017, 321; variation on DeRose 1992).

Assuming that Hannah is in the same epistemic position in both cases and that the bank is open, contextualists claim that both Hannah’s knowledge ascription and Sarah’s knowledge-denial are true. Contextualists explain this by claiming that the

truth-conditions of knowledge claims vary with the context of the ascriber. According to relevant-alternatives contextualists, for “S knows that p” to be true, S’s evidence must rule out all of the relevant alternatives to p, where different alternatives are relevant in different contexts. Truth also requires that p be true, that S believe that p, and that S’s belief be properly based.³ Prominent defenders of relevant-alternatives contextualism include David Lewis, Michael Blome-Tillmann, and Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (Lewis 1996; Blome-Tillmann 2009; 2014; Ichikawa 2017).⁴ The set of alternatives to the proposition that the bank is open on Saturdays that’s relevant in NARROW is narrower—it doesn’t include the possibility that the bank has changed its opening hours—than the set of alternatives that are relevant in WIDE—which does include the possibility that the bank has changed its opening hours. Hannah’s evidence rules out the set of relevant alternatives in NARROW, but not those that are relevant in WIDE. Thus, it’s true to say that Hannah “knows” in NARROW but not in WIDE.

There are a few important points to keep in mind going forward: First, contextualism is a view about knowledge-ascribing sentences—sentences of the form “S knows that p”—and knowledge-denying sentences—sentences of the form “S does not know that p,” not about the metaphysical property of knowledge itself. The injustice that I’ll be describing involves knowledge ascriptions and denials, rather than knowledge itself. Second, we can make mistakes in our judgments about the truth or falsity of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences. “S knows that p” might be true, yet someone might mistakenly judge it to be false. “S knows that p” might be false, yet someone might mistakenly judge it to be true. As we’ll see, irrelevance-injustice involves these kinds of mistaken judgment about the truth and falsity of knowledge ascriptions and denials. Third, one cause of mistaken judgments about the truth-values of knowledge claims can be mistaken judgments about whether alternatives are relevant or irrelevant. When a speaker raises an alternative by saying, “what about this not-p alternative?,” it might be judged to be relevant when it is irrelevant, leading to mistaken knowledge-denials, or the alternative might be judged to be irrelevant when it is relevant, leading to mistaken knowledge ascriptions. As we’ll see, irrelevance-injustice involves these kinds of mistaken judgments about the relevance and irrelevance of raised alternatives, which in turn leads to mistaken judgments about the truth-values of knowledge ascriptions and denials.

What makes an alternative relevant? This is a difficult and much debated question (see, for example, Austin 1946; Dretske 1970; Goldman 1976; Stine 1976; Lewis 1996; Blome-Tillmann 2009 for discussion). Lewis’s attempt to specify a list of rules that tell us when an alternative is relevant is the most comprehensive attempt to answer this question. Lewis’s rules include the rule of actuality, which says that if some not-p alternative is actual, then it is a relevant alternative (Lewis 1996, 554–55), the rule of belief, which says that alternatives that the subject of the knowledge-claim believes, or should believe, are relevant (555), and the rule of resemblance, which says that alternatives that saliently resemble other relevant alternatives are themselves relevant (559).⁵ What’s important for our purposes is that speakers can change which alternatives are relevant by making certain conversational moves. Which conversational moves affect which alternatives are relevant is a matter of dispute. Lewis proposed the rule of attention, which says an alternative becomes relevant when a conversational participant brings it to the attention of other conversational participants (559). For example, when Laura raises the possibility of the bank changing its opening hours, it becomes relevant. The truth-conditions for the ascription change such that the possibility of changed hours must be ruled out if the knowledge-claim is to be true. This

rule is now widely rejected because it makes “knows” too difficult to satisfy. It allows that I can always undermine the truth of knowledge ascriptions by raising a far-out, skeptical hypothesis (see, for example, Williams 2001, 15; Blome-Tillmann 2009, 246; Ichikawa 2017, 25 for discussion of this criticism). In the second part of section II, I’ll explain that another reason to reject the rule of attention is that it leads to misdiagnoses of cases of irrelevance-injustice. Blome-Tillmann proposes a different view on which, in order for an alternative to be relevant, not only must attention be drawn to it, but it must also be taken seriously by the participants in the conversation (Blome-Tillmann 2009, 249–56). Ichikawa has argued that this rule is subject to counterexamples (Ichikawa 2015). In the next section I’ll make some of my own suggestions for what makes an alternative relevant. In particular, I’ll suggest that if an alternative is raised in an exercise of intellectual virtue, then it is relevant. I’ll also suggest that if an alternative is taken seriously by someone who is competent in a domain, then it is relevant. These suggestions are motivated and supported by their ability to help us to diagnose cases of irrelevance-injustice and develop a theory of irrelevance-injustice.

Let me reiterate the important points from this section to take into the rest of the article: relevant-alternatives contextualism is the view that the truth of sentences of the form “S knows that p” requires that S rule out different alternatives in different contexts. Which alternatives are relevant can be a matter of conversational participants making certain conversational moves. People can make mistakes about the relevance and irrelevance of alternatives. These mistakes can cause further mistakes about the truth or falsity of knowledge ascriptions and denials. The project of the rest of the article is to show that these mistakes can be a site of injustice.

II. Irrelevance Injustice

Running parallel to conversations among contextualists about how speakers can affect which alternatives are relevant have been conversations about how speakers’ social identities and the power that attends to them affects which conversational moves a speaker can pull off. The literature on epistemic injustice, and testimonial injustice in particular, has been one important site of discussion. Canonically, Miranda Fricker argues that identity power operates in testimonial exchanges to produce testimonial injustice. Fricker defines social power as a capacity to control others’ actions (Fricker 2007, 13). Identity power is social power that depends on shared imaginative conceptions of some identity (14–15). In cases of testimonial injustice, a hearer has an identity prejudice that operates as identity power to prevent a speaker from conveying knowledge (28). Among the many others to discuss this theme are Karen Jones, Kristie Dotson, Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., José Medina, and Derek Egan Anderson (Jones 2002; Dotson 2011; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013; Anderson 2017). Another important site of discussion is the silencing literature. The core idea is that speakers can be silenced by being made unable to pull off certain speech acts. For example, Rae Langton has famously argued that women are silenced in their attempts to refuse sex as they are unable to secure uptake from men for their locutions because of the effects of pornography on men’s ability to recognize women’s intention to refuse (Langton 1993). Among the many others to discuss this theme are Langton and Jennifer Hornsby, Langton and Caroline West, Ishani Maitra, Mary Kate McGowan, Alex Davies, and Samia Hesni (Langton and Hornsby 1998; Langton and West 1999; Maitra 2009; McGowan 2009; Davies 2016; Hesni 2018).

Largely missing from these discussions is an investigation into how the two conversations interact (Ichikawa 2020 provides the one very recent exception that I’ll discuss at

length in section III). In this section I investigate how social identity and power affect whether speakers can successfully raise alternatives to relevance, how this affects the practice of ascribing and denying knowledge, and whether injustice lies therein. A distinctive form of epistemic injustice is revealed: irrelevance-injustice.

I'll proceed by examining three cases of irrelevance-injustice before arriving at a definition. Each case demonstrates a different form that irrelevance-injustice can take. Along the way I highlight points of difference from already recognized forms of epistemic injustice and some implications for how to understand epistemic injustice. Here's the first case:

BOARDROOM: The employees of Punch are meeting to discuss the company's recent decline in profits. Mr. X. asserts, "I know that spending inefficiencies are the sole explanation of the company's decline in profits." Miss Triggs, a competent business analyst and the only woman present, points out that the economy has recently undergone structural changes, and that if Mr. X. can't rule that out as an explanation, then he does not know that profits have declined solely because of spending inefficiencies. The structural changes explanation is relevant and is not ruled out by Mr. X.'s evidence. Yet, because they harbor a prejudice that women are not well placed to make claims about business and economics, the other meeting participants dismiss Miss Triggs's alternative as irrelevant and continue to ascribe knowledge of the spending inefficiency explanation to Mr. X.⁶

BOARDROOM is a case of irrelevance-injustice. Miss Triggs raises a relevant alternative that is not taken seriously by her more powerful audience because of a prejudice they harbor against women that results in direct epistemic harm to her, and in distortions in the pattern of knowledge ascriptions. The alternative is relevant because Miss Triggs raises it in an exercise of her competence as a business analyst. This is in line with Georgi Gardiner's claim that it is dogmatically stubborn to ignore error possibilities that other competent people take seriously (Gardiner 2020, 12). A further reason why Miss Triggs's alternative is relevant is that she raises it in an exercise of the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness. As the disposition to consider a variety of viewpoints in order to further one's understanding or to get at the truth, open-mindedness is the intellectual virtue that is closely associated with raising relevant alternatives (see Riggs 2019 for an overview of open-mindedness). Miss Triggs plausibly displays open-mindedness when she raises the alternative that Punch's decline in profits is at least partly explained by structural changes in the economy. These facts mean that the alternative is relevant even if we suppose that structural changes in the economy are no part of the explanation for Punch's recent misfortunes, and so are not ruled in by virtue of being actual.

Miss Triggs is not taken seriously by her more powerful audience. The relevant form of power here is epistemic power. Dotson defines epistemic power as "differing ranges of privilege and underprivilege that's co-extensive with one's epistemic status" (Dotson 2018, 130). She defines epistemic status as "positive or negative assessments of one's epistemic position" (131). Epistemic status is domain-specific and can be legitimate, such as when positive epistemic status is conferred on a climate scientist with respect to climate change, or illegitimate, such as when positive epistemic status is conferred on a man with respect to business simply because he's a man. The privileges conferred by having high epistemic status include the ability to have one's claims taken seriously and being able to dismiss the claims of others. In Dotson's terms, having epistemic

power enables one to seize the epistemological high ground, which is a “contrastive privilege that generates defense of one’s claims and the ability and/or authority to challenge competing claims” (139).

Applied to BOARDROOM, the men have epistemic power, in that they enjoy positive epistemic status of being judged competent in the world of business. This gives them the privilege of being able to dismiss Miss Triggs’s (relevant!) alternative and subsequently continue being (falsely!) ascribed knowledge.

A helpful way to see that it’s not the mere failure to take an alternative seriously that makes for irrelevance-injustice, but rather failure to take an alternative seriously by those who possess power in the context, is by considering what happens when those who lack power fail to take an alternative seriously. Suppose that it’s Mr. X. who raises an alternative, and that it’s not taken seriously by Miss Triggs. It’s hard to imagine, given her social identity and attendant lack of social and epistemic power in the context, that Miss Triggs not taking Mr. X. seriously prevents his alternative from being judged to be relevant and in need of ruling out before “knowledge” is ascribed.

Now to the harms and consequences. In being taken to lack the epistemic competence required to contribute to the investigation at hand, Miss Triggs suffers an affront to her epistemic agency that is the hallmark of epistemic injustice. This affront plausibly has further harmful consequences. Epistemically, Miss Triggs may suffer from diminished intellectual courage—the intellectual virtue of not ceasing to contribute to an epistemic activity too easily—due to having her confidence shaken by being so swiftly dismissed. Practically, Miss Triggs might miss out on professional benefits that come with being seen as a meaningful contributor to a workplace meeting.

The harms to Miss Triggs highlight one of several important differences between irrelevance-injustice and testimonial injustice, the injustice in which a speaker is not given the credibility they are due when testifying because of a hearer’s identity prejudice. According to Fricker, the victim of testimonial injustice is harmed in their capacity “as a giver of knowledge” (Fricker 2007, 45). But whether Miss Triggs knows is never at issue. In raising an alternative, she is not attempting to give knowledge; rather, she’s attempting to take part in an inquiry into a particular question. Irrelevance-injustice thus supports Mikkel Gerken’s proposed broadening of epistemic injustice from involving a harm done to someone in their capacity as a knower (Gerken 2019, 2), as Fricker proposes (Fricker 2007, 1), to harm done to someone in their capacity as an epistemic subject.

The harms suffered by Miss Triggs are significant, but the downstream effects are perhaps even more significant. Dotson points out that epistemic power can be accumulated, which can in turn serve to uphold and exacerbate unjust power relations that set up the conditions for the perpetration of further injustice (Dotson 2018). BOARDROOM provides a stark illustration of this process of the accumulation of epistemic power. In irrelevance-injustice, alternatives that are in fact relevant and alternatives that are taken to be relevant come apart in a way that leads to distortions in the patterns of knowledge ascriptions that facilitate the accumulation of epistemic power and the stabilization of injustice. Because Miss Triggs’s alternative is relevant, Mr. X.’s knowledge ascription is literally false. But because those with epistemic power don’t take Miss Triggs seriously, they mistakenly judge that Mr. X.’s knowledge ascription is true. This is the distortion: Mr. X. is ascribed knowledge when he should not be, and the merely apparent truth of Mr. X.’s knowledge ascriptions is sustained by the judgments of those with epistemic power.

The significance of this distortion is tied up with the socially valuable functions of knowledge ascriptions. It has been suggested that knowledge ascriptions function to

identify reliable informants (Craig 1990), signal the appropriate end of inquiry (Kelp 2011), and track the epistemic norms governing assertion (Williamson 2000), belief, and practical reasoning (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). In being ascribed knowledge when he should not be, Mr. X. accumulates greater epistemic power by maintaining statuses and permissions that he is not entitled to: he's seen as a reliable informant, as someone who has reached the end of inquiry, and as someone whose epistemic position permits him to assert and act on the proposition. In these ways, Mr. X. benefits from the injustice Miss Triggs faces. These benefits serve to stabilize unjust power relations that set up the conditions for further injustice. Being judged to bear the positive epistemic status of a reliable informant, and as a place where inquiry can legitimately stop, means that the other conversational participants will be led to misplace their trust in Mr. X. Such misplaced trust causes the other conversational participants to be misled both about who "knows" and about what is known. This consolidates power in the hands of Mr. X., as in the eyes of his audience he is a reliable informant who is well placed to dismiss challenges to his knowledge claim. When the further relevant conditions obtain, such dismissals constitute further injustices.

How much power must an audience have if their reception of an alternative is to have the harmful consequences characteristic of irrelevance-injustice? It's hard to provide a precise answer, but we can at least say that the harms of irrelevance-injustice will be most stark when there are serious power differences between the audience of the alternative and the victim of irrelevance-injustice. Things will be more complicated when there is a less dramatic power differential. Some but not all of the harms might take hold, or the harms may be less severe.

In BOARDROOM, the men do not take Miss Triggs seriously because of a prejudice that they hold against women. A variation on BOARDROOM shows that prejudice is not a necessary condition of irrelevance-injustice. Imagine a version of the case in which everything is the same apart from the reason that the men do not take Miss Triggs seriously. Imagine that instead of not taking Miss Triggs seriously because of prejudice that women are not well placed to make claims about business and economics, they instead fail to take her seriously because they feel threatened by her intelligence. In this version of the case, the men use their epistemic power to work together to make it appear as if Miss Triggs's alternative is irrelevant and thereby undermine her ability to take part in the discussion on an equal footing.⁷ The reason that this is an injustice, despite the absence of prejudice, is that the judgment of irrelevance and the harmful consequences that flow from it conform to a general pattern of oppression that unfairly harms some, and privileges others, in the same ways as those judgments that are caused by prejudice. Judgments of relevance that conform to the general pattern of norms that work to harm the oppressed by making it difficult for them to be ascribed knowledge, and that privilege the dominant by making it easier for them to be ascribed knowledge, are of concern even when conformity does not arise from prejudice. Following the Fricker paradigm, in which negative identity-prejudice is a necessary condition for epistemic injustice, will cause us to miss out on cases like this.⁸

Consider a second case.

CLASSROOM: During class, Rashaan, a Black public high school student, gets up out of his seat numerous times to get a tissue from the tissue box. His teacher, Ms. H., interprets his behavior as disruptive and sends him to the principal's office. Ms. H.'s decision to send Rashaan out was guided by racist stereotypes of black students as troublemakers.⁹ Rashaan has witnessed non-Black students behave

just as he did in Ms. H.'s class and yet not get sent out. From this he justifiably infers that Ms. H.'s actions were guided by racism. When Rashaan reaches the principal's office, he finds the principal in conversation with the assistant principal. Both are white men. They're discussing the principal's recent experience of taking his first antiracism course. The principal stops his conversation, invites Rashaan in, and they begin to chat:

- P: Rashaan, why have you been sent to my office?
 R: I was just collecting tissues to blow my nose. I know that this is racism!
 P: Rashaan, it's possible you're mistaken. Can you rule out the possibility that you've misinterpreted Ms. H.'s actions? It's possible that you're systematically misinterpreting the actions of others when directed at you!
 AP: What the principal says is right!
 R: That's irrelevant! I've seen white kids not get sent out for doing the same thing!
 P: If you can't rule out the possibility that you've misinterpreted Ms. H.'s actions, then you don't know that Ms. H.'s actions were guided by racism.

The principal, confidence bolstered by his recent training, and the assistant principal, convinced of the effectiveness of the training, judge the principal to be capable of detecting racism. With Rashaan unable to eliminate the possibility that he's misinterpreted Ms. H.'s actions—a possibility that he cannot rule out by his own observational evidence alone—the principal denies that Rashaan knows that Ms. H.'s actions were guided by racist prejudice.

CLASSROOM is also a case of irrelevance-injustice, but in a different way from BOARDROOM. Whereas BOARDROOM involves the dismissal of a relevant alternative because of a prejudice against the speaker, in CLASSROOM the principal raises an irrelevant alternative that is taken seriously, by those with power in the context, because of a prejudice they harbor in the principal's favor.¹⁰ The principal's alternative is irrelevant, and Rashaan is competent to judge it to be. Above I suggested that an alternative is relevant if it is raised by someone who is competent in the relevant domain. We can take this idea further by saying that we can also figure out if an alternative is irrelevant by deferring to those who are competent in some domain. Sometimes it might be unclear to some whether or not an alternative is relevant, yet extremely clear to competent others because they are experts on the matter at hand or because they occupy the relevant standpoint. It's been convincingly argued that we often have good reason to accept the testimony of those who are experts or who occupy particular standpoints (see, for example, Wylie 2004; Alcoff 2005). The same reasons carry over from how we should respond to testimony to what are appropriate judgments of relevance. We can see this more clearly by adding to CLASSROOM that, in addition to the observational evidence possessed by Rashaan, after several years of being repeatedly targeted by racial stereotyping and being sent to the principal's office for minor offenses, he's become attuned to patterns of racial discrimination in his school life. Taking seriously the thought that particular social locations often come with epistemic advantages, when it comes to accessing knowledge about the racism faced by Black people, Black people are well positioned to know when and how it manifests because they experience it frequently and in a patterned way. If this is correct, then this gives us additional reason to

take Rashaan seriously when he resists the principal's suggestion that perhaps he's seeing racism where there is none. Generalizing, we can look to those who occupy epistemically privileged standpoints to determine relevance or irrelevance.

The irrelevant alternative is judged to be relevant by those with epistemic power in the context because of a prejudice they have in favor of the principal. Both the principal and the assistant principal's epistemic power derives from their institutional as well as their social positions. The principal has a positive prejudice toward himself that leads him to overestimate his own ability to detect racism based on his recent training. The assistant principal also has a positive prejudice in the principal's favor that leads him to overestimate the principal's racism detection capabilities, and that leads him to take the principal's alternative seriously. The assistant principal thereby confers positive epistemic status on the principal, enabling the principal to accumulate even greater epistemic power, and likely boosting the principal's own self-trust further. The role of the assistant principal mirrors the mechanism described by Jones by which dominant agents can scaffold one another's self-trust to excessive degrees and shore up one another's epistemic power beyond what is warranted, thereby creating the conditions in which epistemic injustice can flourish (Jones 2012, 245–47). The principal is judged not only to be well placed to detect racism, but is judged to be better placed than Rashaan. The overestimation claim is plausible. Evidence suggests that the measures employed in anti-racism courses are largely ineffective.¹¹

CLASSROOM involves different harms and consequences from BOARDROOM. Unlike in BOARDROOM, the "knowledge" of the target of the injustice in CLASSROOM is at issue. This is again connected to the distorting effect of the reception given to the raised alternative on the economy of knowledge ascriptions. Because the principal's alternative is irrelevant, Rashaan's knowledge ascription remains literally true after the alternative is raised. But because those with epistemic power take the principal's alternative to be relevant, they mistakenly judge that Rashaan's knowledge ascription is false. This is the distortion: Rashaan is denied "knowledge," when he shouldn't be, because an irrelevant alternative is taken seriously by those with epistemic power, when it shouldn't be. Consequently, Rashaan loses out on the statuses and permissions that come with being ascribed knowledge. He suffers an affront to his epistemic agency in being seen as an unreliable informant. He is perceived as lacking permission to assert and act on the proposition that he was a victim of racism. Being perceived to lack the permission to act, any actions that he takes will be open to criticism, potentially shaking his confidence in the righteousness of his protest and his determination to take action. Thus, alternatives being mistakenly taken to be relevant by those with epistemic power can undermine actions and place barriers in the way to achieving justice.

Like testimonial injustice, this form of irrelevance-injustice involves a testifier being unfairly judged not to "know," but the mechanism that brings about this judgment is quite different. In testimonial injustice, a speaker is judged not to know because the audience harbors a prejudice against the speaker. In irrelevance-injustice, a speaker raises an alternative that is taken seriously when it should not be because of a prejudice in the speaker's favor, which in turn leads an audience to mistakenly judge that an alternative needs to be ruled out and to a mistaken knowledge-denial.

Looking at BOARDROOM and CLASSROOM side by side reveals an asymmetric ability to influence what's perceived to be a relevant alternative, which in turn affects the ease or difficulty with which the differentially socially situated agents are ascribed knowledge. Those who have their alternatives taken seriously can increase the size of

the set of alternatives that others must rule out prior to being ascribed knowledge, but the reverse is not true. Consequently, there is an asymmetry in the amount of epistemic labor that differentially situated agents must expend, both in gathering evidence and in demonstrating their possession of such evidence, prior to being ascribed knowledge. Miss Triggs not being taken seriously reduces the amount of epistemic labor that Mr. X. must expend in order to be ascribed knowledge. The principal being taken seriously increases the amount of epistemic labor that Rashaan must expend in order to be ascribed knowledge. Irrelevance-injustice shows how the powerful can make epistemic life easier for themselves and harder for others.

Now for a third and final case.

DINING CLUB: Charles, a white man hailing from an elite social class who has just made the transition from being a student at an elite public school to being a student at the University of Oxford, is having dinner at the Oxford Bullingdon Club. The topic of conversation is a recent survey report revealing that an astonishingly high number of women have experienced sexual harassment as students at the University. Charles raises the skeptical possibility that many of the reported cases are really instances of women overreacting to harmless flirting. The other diners unanimously and vociferously agree.¹²

DINING CLUB presents a third case of irrelevance-injustice which is importantly different from the other two we've looked at. In DINING CLUB, an alternative is taken seriously when it should not be,¹³ but not because of any prejudice toward the speaker. Rather, the alternative is taken seriously because the audience harbors a prejudice pertaining to the alternative's content. As a first pass we can say that the audience harbors a content-prejudice in that they are prejudiced against a group that the alternative is about. I'll develop a more thoroughgoing definition below in the third part of this section (*Condition (iii)*). The diners hold the prejudicial belief that women are unreliable in their judgments about whether they have been sexually harassed.¹⁴ They would've taken the alternative seriously whatever the identity of the speaker. This shows that irrelevance-injustice can be a matter of an alternative's content in the sense that it involves an alternative being problematically received because of its content, rather than because of who raises it. This marks another important difference between irrelevance-injustice and testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice, as Fricker develops it, always involves an identity prejudice toward the speaker, DINING CLUB shows that this is not required for irrelevance-injustice.

Unlike in BOARDROOM and CLASSROOM, those who are harmed by the injustice that takes place in DINING CLUB are not themselves participants in the conversation. Rather, the reception given to the raised alternative causes distortions in the economy of knowledge ascriptions that harm people outside of the conversation. Particular alternatives being seen as irrelevant in one context can reinforce what alternatives are seen as relevant in other contexts. Imagine that having taken Charles's skeptical possibility seriously, those inside the conversation less readily ascribe knowledge to women they later encounter, who claim to have experienced sexual harassment, because they apply skeptical standards. The women are seen as lacking the statuses and permissions that come with being ascribed knowledge. The judgment that the women are unreliable informants reinforces the stereotype that women are unreliable testifiers about sexual harassment. They will be judged as not being positioned to act on the proposition that they

were sexually harassed. Such judgments may feed into criticisms of actions, and such criticisms may stop the women in their tracks, undermining the pursuit of justice.

With these three examples in mind, we can say that irrelevance-injustice occurs when:

- (i) S raises p as an alternative to some proposition already under discussion, q; and
- (ii) p is not taken seriously when it is relevant, or p is taken seriously when it is not relevant, by those members of S's audience who possess epistemic power in the context;
- (iii) for the reason that either S's audience is prejudiced toward S, or S's audience is prejudiced toward the content of what S says, or taking/not taking p seriously conforms to a general pattern of oppression.

I will now discuss each of the conditions listed in greater detail. In section III I will spend some more time comparing irrelevance-injustice with two other forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and contextual injustice (Ichikawa 2020).

Condition (i): Raising Alternatives

Condition (i) has three main components. First, "proposition already under discussion, q" refers to the proposition that's initially being discussed to which an alternative is raised. The proposition might be under discussion by figuring in a knowledge-claim, such as the proposition that Punch's recent decline in profits is explained solely by spending inefficiencies that figures in Mr. X.'s self-ascription of knowledge in BOARDROOM, or the proposition might come up as part of a discussion of whether it's true, such as the proposition that an astonishingly high number of women have experienced sexual harassment as students in DINING CLUB.

Second, an alternative to the proposition under discussion is one that's incompatible with the proposition that's initially under discussion. For example, that the company's decline in profits is (at least partially) due to structural changes in the economy is incompatible with the proposition that Punch's recent decline in profits is explained solely by spending inefficiencies. Whether we attribute knowledge depends on whether we judge that the subject can rule out the alternatives that are taken to be relevant. Whether knowledge claims are true depends on whether the subject of the knowledge-ascription can in fact rule out alternatives that are in fact relevant.

What does raising an alternative—the third component of condition (i)—amount to? One possible answer conceives of raising an alternative as a distinct speech act, one that has its own set of felicity conditions that must be satisfied for its successful performance. But a less theoretical account will do for our purposes: a speaker raises an alternative whenever they bring an alternative to salience. This can be achieved with different sentence types. For example, I might raise an alternative by uttering a declarative sentence, as Miss Triggs does when she declares that "the economy has undergone structural changes" in BOARDROOM. Or I might raise an alternative by asking the question "but what about p as an alternative to q?," as the assistant principal does when he asks of Rashaan "Can you rule out the possibility that you've misinterpreted Ms. H.'s actions?" in CLASSROOM. Or I might bring an alternative to salience by asserting a proposition that is incompatible with q.

Condition (ii): Taking Alternatives Seriously

Understanding condition (ii) requires: an account of when an alternative is, and is not, taken seriously; an account of when an alternative should, and should not, be taken seriously; and a sketch of what it takes to possess power in a context. Let's take each in turn.

Let's say, following Blome-Tillmann, that a speaker takes an alternative seriously when that alternative is compatible with their pragmatic presuppositions (Blome-Tillmann 2009):

Pragmatic Presupposition: S pragmatically presupposes p in C iff S is disposed to behave, in her use of language, as if she believed p to be common ground in C. (Blome-Tillmann 2014, 26, amended from Stalnaker 1974)

Where common ground is:

Common Ground: It is common ground that p in a group G iff all members of G accept (for the purposes of the conversation) that p, and all believe that all accept that p, and all believe that all believe that all accept that p, and so on. (Stalnaker 2002, 704)

Applied to the cases we've been discussing, in BOARDROOM all conversational participants, apart from Miss Triggs, do not take seriously the proposition that Punch's decline in profits is due to structural economic changes because they are disposed to behave as if they believe the incompatible spending inefficiency hypothesis to be common ground. Miss Triggs raises the alternative, and all other conversational participants continue to ascribe knowledge to Mr. X. as if Miss Triggs had never spoken. In CLASSROOM the principal and his assistant take seriously the proposition that Rashaan sees racism where there is none in that it is compatible with how they are disposed to behave as if what they believe is common ground. They act as if they believe Rashaan's self-ascription of "knowledge" that he suffered from the racial prejudice of his teacher is false, and it's compatible with this that Rashaan misinterpreted the actions of Ms. H. Finally, in DINING CLUB Charles's audience takes seriously the proposition that many cases that women report as sexual harassment are really overreactions to harmless flirting in that they are disposed to behave as if it's common ground.¹⁵

An alternative should be taken seriously when it is relevant and should not be taken seriously when it is not relevant, where different alternatives will be relevant in different contexts. I made some suggestions about what makes an alternative relevant in the course of presenting the cases of irrelevance-injustice. On my view, two ways that speakers can make alternatives relevant is by raising them in an act of intellectual virtue and by raising them when competent in the relevant domain. An alternative is irrelevant when it is not ruled in by any of the rules of relevance. I don't intend these considerations to be exhaustive of what determines relevance. In light of Dotson's caution against closed conceptual structures that risk inadvertently perpetuating new forms of epistemic injustice at the same time as theorizing about it (Dotson 2012, 41–42), it'd be unwise to claim to have settled when an alternative is and is not relevant, and thus when we have an instance of irrelevance-injustice on our hands. Note also that the definition of irrelevance-injustice is compatible with different accounts of what makes an alternative relevant. This means that even if you don't agree with my proposals for what makes alternatives relevant, you can still accept the reality and importance of the phenomenon of irrelevance-injustice.

An interesting payoff of developing a theory of irrelevance-injustice is that it can help us to establish further rules of relevance. We might encounter cases that we clearly judge to be cases of irrelevance-injustice. We might then use our judgments about such cases to develop an account of what makes an alternative relevant. For example, the theory of irrelevance-injustice provides us with a new reason to reject Lewis's rule of attention, which says that any possibility that is attended to is relevant (Lewis 1996, 559). Accepting the rule of attention would lead us to fail to diagnose cases of irrelevance-injustice, and this is a reason to reject it. The rule of attention entails that as soon as any alternative is mentioned it becomes relevant, and so would rule that there is no injustice in CLASSROOM or DINING CLUB given that the principal and Charles mention the problematic alternatives.

The final component of condition (ii) is an audience's possession of epistemic power in the context. This component was unpacked in the discussion of the central cases.

Condition (iii): Prejudice and Patterns of Oppression

Let's work through the three disjuncts of condition (iii). The first concerns prejudice toward the speaker. On Fricker's account, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is not given the credibility they deserve when testifying because of the operation of negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes in the audience. The notion of a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype needs unpacking. On Fricker's account, an identity-prejudice is a prejudice against or in favor of an individual in virtue of their membership in some social group. Prejudices can be felt through stereotypes, which Fricker takes to be widely held associations between a social group and one or more attributes (Fricker 2007, 35). Where identity-prejudicial stereotypes are negative, the association involved is a disparaging one. Identity-prejudicial stereotypes are resistant to counterevidence. Negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes, then, are disparaging stereotypes employed in our judgments of people that are resistant to counterevidence. Testimonial injustice occurs when such stereotypes are employed in our judgments of a person's testimony such that we're led to give them deflated credibility when testifying. Applying the notion of negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes to irrelevance-injustice, we can say that irrelevance-injustice occurs when a relevant alternative is raised, yet the alternative is not taken seriously by the audience because of the operation of a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype. In BOARDROOM, Miss Triggs suffers from irrelevance-injustice in that the other conversational participants wrongly fail to take her alternative seriously given that they harbor a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype that says that women are not well placed to make claims about economics and business.

We must depart from Fricker by allowing for positive identity-prejudicial stereotypes to figure in irrelevance-injustice too. Fricker rejects the possibility of positive identity-prejudicial stereotypes figuring in testimonial injustice because she thinks that inflated credibility assessments don't generate harms (Fricker 2007, 21).¹⁶ Following Fricker here would prevent us from making sense of cases involving the taking seriously of alternatives when they should not be. For example, in CLASSROOM it's the overly inflated judgment of the principal's ability to discern when racism exists that leads both the principal and his assistant to take the raised alternative seriously. This explains why Rashaan is wrongfully denied knowledge and the statuses and permissions that come with it.

The second disjunct also concerns prejudice, but the prejudice attaches to what the speaker says rather than to the speaker's identity. While discussing DINING CLUB, I

glossed content-prejudice as “prejudice against a group that the alternative is about.” Although this is surely one way to harbor content-prejudice, it will not do as a definition. It is both too broad and too narrow. It is too broad because it implies that an audience has a content-prejudice toward every alternative that is about a group against whom they harbor some prejudice. Charles is prejudiced against women, but he is surely not prejudiced against every alternative that is about women. It is too narrow because it allows for prejudice only toward one class of speech act, namely, alternatives. Robin Dembroff and Dennis Whitcomb have recently argued that there is a class of epistemic injustices that they call content-focused injustice which is “epistemic injustice focused not on the identity of a given speaker, but rather on the things that the speaker communicates” (Dembroff and Whitcomb [forthcoming](#), 3). Dembroff and Whitcomb discuss cases in which audiences have prejudices against a group that some assertion is about or associated with (7). *DINING CLUB* shows that irrelevance-injustice can itself take the form of content-focused injustice. It will be useful to have a definition of content-prejudice that illuminates these different varieties of content-focused injustice. Dembroff and Whitcomb do not provide one; rather, they elucidate the notion by providing some examples of content-focused injustice. Here’s a definition that I think gets things right:

Content-prejudice: An audience A is prejudiced against a content C if A has an identity-prejudice toward the group that C is about or associated with and A’s identity-prejudice influences A’s assessment of C.

The definition avoids being too broad since it doesn’t imply that Charles is prejudiced against every content that is about women; rather, it implies that he has a content-prejudice only when his prejudice against women is influencing his assessment of a content. It also avoids being too narrow since it allows for prejudice against any speech act and can thus be employed to illuminate different varieties of content-focused injustice, including those discussed by Dembroff and Whitcomb.

The third disjunct follows a suggestion made by Derek Anderson (Anderson 2017, 211). The judgment that a raised alternative is not relevant when it is, or is relevant when it is not, does not have to be caused by prejudice for it to count as an injustice. Rather, what’s important might be whether the judgment of irrelevance or relevance conforms to a general pattern of oppression. This disjunct was motivated by the variant of *BOARDROOM* that I described above, in which the men don’t take Miss Triggs’s alternative seriously because they’re threatened by her. This case doesn’t involve prejudice, but it surely involves misogyny (Manne 2017). I want to provide another variant of *BOARDROOM* in which the perpetrators do not harbor any malicious attitudes in order to illustrate that injustice can be perpetrated and systems of oppression can be maintained in the absence of any malicious individual attitudes. Suppose that the reason that the men in *BOARDROOM* fail to take seriously the alternative that Miss Triggs raises is not because they are prejudiced against women, but rather because they are committed to an economic theory that implies that the considerations that Miss Triggs raises can only have had a negligible effect on Punch’s profit margins. Suppose that men tend to believe this theory more frequently than women, and that this commitment regularly gives rise to a failure to take seriously relevant alternatives that are raised by women in business contexts. Making prejudice a necessary condition means this wouldn’t count as irrelevance-injustice: the wrong result. We can get the right result by making prejudice sufficient, but not necessary. Instances where there

is no prejudice, but mere conformity to a general pattern of privilege and oppression, still unfairly privilege some and harm others in the same ways as those judgments that are caused by prejudice. When judgments of relevance conform to the general pattern of norms that work to harm the oppressed by making it difficult for them to be ascribed knowledge, and privilege the dominant by making it easier for them to be ascribed knowledge, they are of concern even when conformity does not arise from prejudice.

III. Irrelevance-Injustice and Other Forms of Epistemic Injustice

I'll finish up by noting some important differences and connections between irrelevance-injustice and other forms of epistemic injustice.

Irrelevance-Injustice and Testimonial Injustice

Some important differences between irrelevance- and testimonial injustice have already been noted. I'll finish up by mentioning three further differences in order to dispel any lingering doubts about the distinctiveness of irrelevance-injustice.

First, irrelevance-injustice and testimonial injustice don't always co-occur. BOARDROOM and DINING CLUB-type cases of irrelevance-injustice are fundamentally different in structure from testimonial injustice. Whereas in testimonial injustice the victim of injustice is always the person testifying, in these forms of irrelevance-injustice the person raising the alternative is the perpetrator. BOARDROOM-type cases of irrelevance-injustice are more similar in structure to testimonial injustice, but there will not always be co-occurrence in these cases either. Testimonial injustice arises in a hearer's evaluation of whether a speaker's utterance is known or credible, but irrelevance-injustice arises in an audience's evaluation of whether an utterance is relevant. This means that there can be cases in which a hearer correctly judges a speaker's testimony to be known, and so does not perpetrate testimonial injustice, yet incorrectly judges the same piece of testimony to be irrelevant, thereby perpetrating irrelevance-injustice. Suppose that in BOARDROOM Miss Triggs is correctly judged to know that there have been structural changes in the economy, and thus does not suffer from testimonial injustice. However, what Miss Triggs says is incorrectly judged to be irrelevant to explaining the cause of Company X's losses. Thus, we have a case of irrelevance-injustice that is not at the same time a case of testimonial injustice.

Second, testifying and raising an alternative as relevant are distinctive epistemic activities. One way to see this is to think about how best to classify testimonial and irrelevance-injustice in terms of the distinction that Christopher Hookway draws between epistemic injustices that are perpetrated from the informational perspective and those perpetrated from the participant perspective (Hookway 2010). Informational-perspective epistemic injustice involves an agent being wrongly treated as an unreliable source of knowledge. Participant-perspective epistemic injustice involves an agent being wrongly taken to lack the competency required to participate in some epistemic activity besides the possession or transmission of knowledge. To characterize irrelevance-injustice in terms of this distinction, we have to expand it to also include in the category of participant-perspective epistemic injustice cases, where agents are wrongly taken to possess the competency required to participate in epistemic activities besides knowledge-transmission. This is necessary to be able to couch BOARDROOM- and CLASSROOM-type cases in terms of this distinction. With this broadening in

mind, we can say that testimonial injustice is an epistemic injustice of the informational-perspective variety. As the label has it, it involves the speech act of testifying. The primary epistemic function of testifying is to put forward some proposition as true, and thereby transmit knowledge to an audience. Irrelevance-injustice, on the other hand, is an epistemic injustice of the participant-perspective variety. It involves the raising of alternatives, the primary epistemic function of which is to inquire into whether a proposition under discussion is true or justified in being believed, and thus whether it's "known."

Plausibly, the different epistemic activities involved in testimonial and irrelevance-injustice each require the cultivation of different epistemic virtues. Testimony might be associated with the virtue of intellectual courage because courage is required to put forward propositions as something that others can take your word for. When you testify, you put forward a proposition as true, and so take the matter to be settled. Raising alternatives is to take the matter to still be open. So, though requiring courage, raising alternatives also involves the virtues of open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity. Open-mindedness was discussed earlier. The intellectually curious person is motivated to engage in inquiry, to ask and answer questions, and to improve their epistemic standing as they consider and rule out more alternatives (see, for example, Ross 2020 on the virtue of curiosity). Thus, suffering from each may lead to inhibiting the cultivation of, and eroding, distinct epistemic capacities. What's more, lumping together epistemic injustices that involve distinct epistemic activities may obscure the differences in the solutions required to address each. Fricker's "virtue of testimonial justice" might work as a response to testimonial injustice (though, see Alfano 2015 for a critique), but not to irrelevance-injustice. Treating the two as the same phenomena can obscure this fact.

One final point worth registering is that testimonial and irrelevance-injustice arise from an audience's failure to comply with different norms. Testimonial injustice, on Fricker's account, arises when a hearer fails to comply with an evidentialist norm of credibility because of the operation of an identity prejudice, where the evidentialist norm of credibility says that a hearer, H, should match their credibility judgment of S to the evidence that S is offering the truth (Fricker 2007, 19). Irrelevance-injustice, by contrast, arises when a raised alternative is either wrongly not taken seriously or wrongly taken seriously as dictated by the rules of relevance. This is important to note because it shows that if one is to avoid the perpetration of both testimonial and irrelevance-injustice, one must acknowledge and comply with two different sets of norms. Merely complying with one will be insufficient.

Irrelevance-Injustice and Contextual Injustice

Contextual injustice, as applied to knowledge ascriptions, occurs when the standards for "knows" are prejudicially raised to an inappropriate level, and a testifier is wrongfully denied to "know" as a result (Ichikawa 2020, 16). In contextual injustices, raising alternatives to salience does in fact raise the standards such that the knowledge-denial is literally true, but, Ichikawa claims, it is nevertheless unjust because "inappropriate" (9).¹⁷

Irrelevance-injustice and contextual injustice are not entirely co-extensive. For one thing, contextual injustice is always a matter of wrongful knowledge denials. But in BOARDROOM-type cases of irrelevance-injustice, whether the victim "knows" is never at issue. For another thing, Ichikawa seems to make negative identity-prejudice against the testifier or against the content of the testimony a necessary condition for

contextual injustice (16). For the reasons described in *Condition (iii)* in section II, I think this is too restrictive. We will miss out on classifying cases in which an irrelevant alternative is taken seriously when it should not be because of positive identity-prejudice—such as in CLASSROOM—and cases in which judgments of irrelevance or relevance conform to a general pattern of bias against marginalized groups or in favor of dominant groups—such as in modified BOARDROOM.

Irrelevance-injustice and contextual injustice are not entirely disjoint either. Consider a version of CLASSROOM in which the reason that the principal raises the skeptical alternative is because of racist prejudice that black people often see racism where there is none. This version of CLASSROOM counts both as a case of irrelevance-injustice and as a case of contextual injustice. But the explanation for why it's an injustice is different on each theory. On Ichikawa's view, contextual injustice involves the literal manipulation of the truth-conditions of knowledge-ascriptions. When the principal raises the skeptical alternative, it is made relevant. Because Rashaan can't rule it out, his knowledge-ascription is false, and the principal speaks truly when he denies that Rashaan "knows." The injustice, on Ichikawa's view, is that the standards for "knows" that the principal invokes are unfair. So, although the principal's knowledge-denial is literally true, it is nevertheless unjust. On my view, by contrast, the skeptical alternative that the principal raises is irrelevant, and so does not alter the truth-conditions of the knowledge-ascription. Yet the alternative is perceived to be relevant by those who possess epistemic power in the context, and this leads them to mistakenly deny that Rashaan "knows." Although the principal's denial of Rashaan's knowledge is literally false, it is perceived to be true by those with epistemic power in the context. Rashaan suffers an injustice because "knowledge" is denied where it should be ascribed.

Which analysis should we prefer? The answer comes down to whether the skeptical alternative is in fact relevant. Ichikawa says that it is; I say that it is not. It's not entirely clear why Ichikawa thinks the alternative is relevant. In other work, Ichikawa makes it clear that he rejects both Lewis's rule of attention and Blome-Tillmann's rule of pragmatic presupposition. He writes: "Lewis's Rule of Attention is too weak" (Ichikawa 2017, 25). In Ichikawa 2015, he proposes a series of counterexamples to Blome-Tillmann's proposal that he takes to be grounds for rejecting the view. Why then, on Ichikawa's view, is the principal's alternative relevant? It's not clear. Rather than trying to figure out when exactly Ichikawa thinks an alternative is relevant and then trying to settle who's right about relevance—a task that could not possibly be settled here since it has occupied contextualists for decades—I want to point to an area of agreement that gives us reasons for having both the concept of irrelevance-injustice and the concept of contextual injustice. One thing that we both agree on is that cases like CLASSROOM involve an injustice and that we need concepts that help us to track the injustice. We disagree about the explanation. Intuitions vary. I suspect that some will agree with me about the relevance of the principal's alternative, and that others will agree with Ichikawa. The fact that intuitions vary and that there doesn't seem to be any way to settle the dispute about relevance anytime soon justifies having both concepts. The goal of tracking the injustice in cases like CLASSROOM is best served by having both concepts. If your intuitions are with Ichikawa, then you have a case of contextual injustice. If your intuitions are with me, then you have a case of irrelevance-injustice. Crucially, wherever your intuitions lie, you have managed to track the injustice, which is the reason for developing such theories in the first place. There's an injustice for both intuitions. Thus, the fact that the two concepts don't

have entirely different extensions doesn't undermine the importance and usefulness of having different concepts (see Anderson 2018 for further discussion of the point that two concepts don't have to have entirely different extensions for it to be worth having both).

IV. A Previously Unrecognized Form of Epistemic Injustice

Our investigation into the relationship between social context, conversational context, and the mechanisms of raising alternatives to relevance emphasized by epistemic contextualists has revealed an unrecognized form of epistemic injustice: irrelevance-injustice. Irrelevance-injustice occurs either when a speaker advances an alternative that is not taken seriously when it should be, or when a speaker advances an alternative that is taken seriously when it should not be. Irrelevance-injustice causes distortions in the economy of knowledge ascriptions, affecting how much epistemic labor members of different social groups must undertake in ruling out alternatives prior to being ascribed knowledge, and thus whether they end up being ascribed knowledge. Given that knowledge ascriptions have socially valuable functions, irrelevance-injustice generates asymmetries in who gets to take advantage of these socially valuable functions.

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Notes

1 Contextualism is a semantic thesis about the verb "knows." In order to be clear that I'm discussing the subject matter of contextualism, rather the metaphysical property of knowledge itself, I will either talk about knowledge ascriptions (to be read as "a sentence expressing that someone satisfies 'knows'") and knowledge denials (to be read as "a sentence expressing that someone fails to satisfy 'knows'") or follow the convention of putting quotation marks around "knows" as much as is possible.

2 Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa is the one very recent exception to this (Ichikawa 2020). I discuss the connections between Ichikawa's view and my own at length in section III of this article. Prior to Ichikawa, Evelyn Brister comes closest to having explored this relationship (Brister 2009; 2017). Drawing on insights from feminist epistemology, Brister argues that philosophical skepticism unfairly concentrates epistemic power in the hands of skeptics, and that this fact of unfairness is a sufficient reason for resisting skeptical moves. Contextualists thus have a way to make it difficult for skeptics to initiate skeptical contexts. Although Brister highlights that skeptics unfairly possess epistemic power, she does not explore the possibility that the power to pull off skeptical moves co-varies with the power that attends to one's social position, and that this may be a site of injustice. Louise Antony also notes that features of the social milieu in which an alternative is raised influences which alternatives are taken seriously (Antony 1995). But Antony's discussion is not related to epistemic contextualism.

3 Though David Lewis famously does not require belief for the truth of knowledge claims (Lewis 1996). This is a widely rejected idiosyncrasy of Lewis's view.

4 Contextualism is sometimes explicated in terms of epistemic standards rather than in terms of relevant alternatives (see, for example, DeRose 2009 for someone who prefers this formulation). The idea is that different epistemic standards are operative in different contexts. It's possible to roughly translate between the two models: the wider the set of relevant alternatives, the higher the epistemic standards. Nothing in my own argument hinges on this choice. I've followed the relevant-alternatives model because most of the discussion of the context-shifting mechanism, which is of central importance for me, is cast in these terms. For detailed discussion of the differences between the two, see Schaffer 2005; Ichikawa 2017.

5 There are yet further rules from Lewis that we might want to endorse. For example, Lewis considers the possibility of endorsing a rule of high stakes, which says that a high number of alternatives are relevant when error would be especially costly (Lewis 1996, 556, n. 12).

6 BOARDROOM is inspired by Riana Duncan's 1988 *Punch* magazine cartoon depicting a sexist boardroom. The cartoon shows five men and one woman sitting down to a meeting in which the woman, Miss Triggs, makes a suggestion that's quickly dismissed. The caption reads "That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it."

7 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this case.

8 See Anderson 2017, 211 for further discussion on this point.

9 It is reasonable to suppose that it is true that Ms. H.'s action is guided by a stereotype of Black students as troublemakers. It is well established that there are racial disparities in school discipline in the United States. Black students are three times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled (Skiba et al. 2002; Fenning and Rose 2007; Skiba et al. 2011). Jason Okonofua and Jennifer Eberhardt have recently revealed the psychological mechanisms involved in bringing about this disparity (Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015). Their studies show that teachers are likely to interpret students' behavior differently based on race: teachers are more likely to perceive minor infractions by Black students as being more severe than those of white students; report being more irritated by infractions of Black students than by those of white students; think it appropriate to punish Black students more harshly than white students for equivalent infractions; and are more likely to view Black students, rather than white students, as troublemakers. The interaction between Rashaan and Ms. H. is based on one of the cases that Okonofua and Eberhardt give to participants in their study that elicited harsher responses when the behavior was said to be carried out by a black student. They based the case on real office-referral reports collected from California public middle schools (Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015, 618).

10 The injustice would be compounded if the principal's motivation for raising the skeptical alternative were racist prejudice: for example, a prejudicial belief that black people often see racism where there is none. But this is not essential to the perpetration of irrelevance-injustice. What is essential to this form of irrelevance-injustice is that there's a prejudice in favor of the speaker that leads his audience to take him seriously when they shouldn't.

11 For example, measures that are designed to mitigate the effects of implicit bias have been shown to be ineffective. Calvin Lai and colleagues have shown that although interventions designed to reduce the effect of implicit racial preferences have some effect immediately after the interventions, this effect disappears several hours to several days later (Lai et al. 2016).

12 The case is fictional, but the belittlement of women has been well documented as a topic of conversation at meetings of the Bullingdon Club (see, for example, Sherwood 2019).

13 A recent meta-analysis found that accusations are 95% reliable (Ferguson and Malouff 2016). Given that the skeptical possibility raised by Charles is very distant from the truth, it should be deemed irrelevant.

14 This is a common prejudice. Deborah Turkheimer cites a survey report of close to 900 police officers in which over half of respondents said that between 10–15% of sexual assault complainants lie about being assaulted (Turkheimer 2017).

15 Making use of the machinery of speech-act theory and following debates about silencing, we might instead conceive of taking and failing to take seriously as a matter of secured and failed uptake. There are different ways to think about uptake. Traditionally, uptake is thought to be active in that it is secured when an audience recognizes the intention of the speaker (Austin 1962, 117). More recently, Langton has pointed out that uptake can also be passive (Langton 2018). Langton's model of passive uptake invokes the phenomenon of accommodation: the process of constant adjustment to the conversational score that makes a move in a conversation count as "correct play." Langton points out that the accommodation of some speech acts requires the accommodation of particular presuppositions. Presupposition-accommodation does not require any active state in a hearer's mind, contrary to active uptake. Rather, it can occur by the mere omission of hearers. However, Langton points out, sometimes presuppositions are not allowed to pass. Instead, they are "blocked." When hearers block what is presupposed, they at the same time block the speech act to which the presupposition contributes. In this way, blocking can lead to uptake failure, illocutionary disablement, and silencing.

We can make use of this machinery to provide an alternative model of how irrelevance-injustice works. The speech act of raising of an alternative requires that the audience presuppose that the speaker has the relevant credibility and/or authority to successfully pull off raising an alternative. But, in BOARDROOM

the presupposition that Miss Triggs has the credibility and/or authority required to successfully raise an alternative is blocked, and Miss Triggs is thereby silenced. Applied to CLASSROOM, Rashaan simply does not have the power that is required to block the presupposition that his principal has the requisite credibility and/or authority to raise the alternative that he does. This enables the principal to assume credibility and/or authority on matters of race that he simply does not have, and undermines Rashaan's claim to knowledge in the process.

There are good reasons to prefer my epistemic-injustice model of irrelevance-injustice over a speech-act model. On a silencing model, uptake is a necessary condition for a speaker successfully raising an alternative. This means that in BOARDROOM-type cases, because the target of the injustice cannot be said to have successfully raised an alternative, the perpetrator of the injustice cannot be faulted on the grounds of not taking the speaker's alternative seriously. But clearly the perpetrator is criticizable. This suggests that my epistemic-injustice model is the more empirically accurate description of what occurs in such cases.

16 See Medina 2011 for a rejection of this point and for an argument that testimonial injustice can follow from credibility excess.

17 Ichikawa develops his notion of contextual injustice on the standards model of contextualism rather than the relevant alternatives model. See footnote 4 for an explanation of the difference and relation between the two models.

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