

# Epistemic Neglect

Shannon Brick

## Abstract:

In most testimonial transactions between adults, the hearer's obligation is to accord the speaker a level of credibility that matches the evidence that what she is saying is true. When the speaker is a child, however, the adult must often respond by extending a level of trust greater than that warranted by the evidence of past epistemic performance. Such trust, which I call 'hopeful trust,' is not extended on the basis the child's extant credibility, but on the basis of their epistemic potential. Hopeful trust communicates to the speaker that she has reason to trust her own epistemic capacities and thereby enables her to do so. Extensions of hopeful trust thus function as a kind of *proleptic* mechanism; by treating individuals *as if* they are reliable, they are enabled to actually become reliable. While not all adults bear the responsibility to extend hopeful trust to children, those who occupy positions of educational authority do. Failure to discharge this responsibility constitutes a distinct kind of epistemic injustice that can take both transactional and structural forms.

**Key Words:** trust, hope, education, epistemic injustice

Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) occurs when a person is wronged in their capacity as a knower. The most basic and paradigmatic form of epistemic injustice is testimonial injustice, and it has been the primary focus of the literature in this area. However, 'epistemic injustice' was originally intended to be an 'inclusive, generic notion,' one that is 'up for further elaboration' (Fricker 2010, 175.). This paper contributes to such further elaboration by identifying a new kind of epistemic injustice, one that can occur when an individual is denied a particular, undertheorized form of trust. I call this wrong 'epistemic neglect' and argue that its ground is the professional role responsibility of educators.

I begin, in §1, by comparing the kind of trust that is wrongly denied in instances of testimonial injustice with a different kind of trust, which I refer to as 'hopeful trust'. I distinguish two varieties of hopeful trust – one epistemic, the other practical. In §2 I explain why extensions of hopeful epistemic trust are necessary in educational contexts and argue that its absence constitutes an epistemic injustice. In §3, I show how prejudice may or may not feature in epistemic neglect and sketch the difference between transactional and structural forms the injustice may take.

## I. Testimonial Injustice and Two Kinds of Trust

When you tell me something I don't already believe, whether I come to believe you or not will depend on how credible I take you to be. The credibility I accord you will, in turn, depend on how sincere I take you to be and how competent I deem you as a knower in the relevant domain. If I take you to be both sincere and competent, then I take you to be credible – that is, epistemically trustworthy. Testimonial injustice is a kind of unjust dysfunction that can occur in such exchanges. Miranda Fricker (2007, 28) defines it as an 'identity prejudicial credibility deficit.' If a hearer accords a deficient level of credibility to a speaker due to their harboring a prejudicial stereotype about them, they do the speaker a testimonial injustice. Importantly, what makes it the case that an injustice occurs is not that the hearer invokes a stereotype, but that the stereotype invoked is prejudicial. This is because, Fricker insists, stereotypes are useful heuristics for judging credibility and only contingently culpable. When stereotypes are formed without proper regard for the evidence of a group's qualities and capacities, they are epistemically culpable. When such stereotypes are caused by prejudice and associate members of a group with attributes at odds with sincerity, competence or both, those who harbor them are liable to inflict testimonial injustice.

What makes testimonial injustice a distinctly *epistemic* injustice is that it harms the speaker in her capacity as a knower. The specific knowing capacity with respect to which one is wronged when they suffer testimonial injustice is the capacity to give knowledge and contribute to its generation. To be accorded less credibility than one deserves and can reasonably expect to be accorded is to be insulted in a way that can be extremely painful. While this insult is the primary harm of testimonial injustice, it can have serious secondary harms too. For instance, it can cause the speaker to draw inaccurate conclusions about her own cognitive competence, which may lead to a deflated level of intellectual self-trust. As Karen Jones (2012) notes, deflated self-trust renders one less disposed than they ought to be to rely on the deliverances of their own belief-forming methods, and so more inclined to defer to others. Indeed, Fricker says that, if it is true that a certain level of confidence in one's intellectual capacities is needed for epistemic justification, then testimonial injustice can actually cause the speaker to lose knowledge. Testimonial injustice is therefore capable of causing harms that are serious and long term.

As should be clear from this quick sketch, victims of testimonial injustice are denied something that they deserve, where what they deserve is gauged by the evidence of their epistemic track record; by whether, in the past, they've proved competent and sincere. However, while it is certainly true that the question of whether we ought to extend or withhold trust is, in standard cases, determined on the basis of such evidence, many philosophers (Jones 1996; Holton 1994; Petit 1995; Mcgeer 2008) acknowledge that in some circumstances it can be appropriate to extend trust on different grounds. Richard Holton (1994, 63) gives the classic example of such a case. He describes a shop owner who discovers that his new employee has just been convicted of petty theft, but decides to continue trusting him with the till. Here, Holton stipulates that the employer's decision to trust is based on the belief that, by extending his trust to the employee, some other valuable end will be achieved, like drawing his employee back into the moral community. Indeed, even if the employee steals in the short-term, the shop owner reasons, he may nonetheless be effected by the employer's action in such a way that, in time, he reforms and so becomes truly reliable (see also Petit 1995; Jones 1996; Mcgeer 2008).

If Holton is right that the shopkeeper's action is appropriate, then it does not follow that trust is only ever appropriate when the trusted agent has a good track record. I call the kind of trust that is based on the evidence of one's track record, 'evidence-based trust.' Perpetrators of testimonial injustice wrongly deny speakers this kind of trust. For reasons I will soon make apparent, I call the kind of trust that is knowingly extended despite the lack of such evidential support, 'hopeful trust.' Holton's shop owner extends hopeful trust.

Given my gloss on Holton's example, some people might be tempted by the thought that hopeful trust is really just a pretense of trust – a matter of acting 'as if' one is trusting. This is not true. This is because when one extends hopeful trust, one voluntarily renders themselves vulnerable to the trusted person and, having done that, foregoes opportunities to reduce that vulnerability. This is what Holton's shop owner does and it is, importantly, what it means to trust someone (Jones 1996; Mcgeer 2008). The difference between hopeful trust and evidenced-based trust, therefore, is that appropriate extensions of the former are not based on the belief in the other person's occurrent reliability. The conditions that make hopeful trust appropriate can be extrapolated from Holton's example. Holton thinks that when we trust despite the lack of evidence-based trustworthiness, we adopt what Strawson called the 'participant attitude' (1994,

66) towards the other person. The participant attitude is a way of regarding your reliance on the other such that ‘you have a readiness to feel betrayal should it be disappointed, and gratitude should it be upheld’ (Holton 1994, 67). When you take up the participant attitude, you regard your act of reliance as something that the other person should be responsive to in a certain way. The practical attitude thus involves a belief about the way the other should respond to your act of trust, regardless of their past record. Given that ought implies can, it thus involves the belief that the other person can be engaged by your act in a particular way. So, in Holton’s example, the shop owner believes that his employee is worth trusting because he believes the employee’s capacities outstrip what the evidence of his past behavior suggests, and because he believes the employee’s potential to become trustworthy is capable of being engaged by the extension of trust. The appropriateness of hopeful trust is thus secured by the reasonableness of two beliefs. Firstly, a belief in the other’s *potential* trustworthiness. Secondly, a belief about the way that potential may respond to an act of hopeful trust, an act which communicates to the trusted the first belief of the truster – namely, the belief in their potential to become reliable. Victoria McGeer (2008, 242) calls the attitude one takes towards another person when one holds such beliefs about them, ‘hope’. This is why I call the kind of trust which these beliefs ground ‘hopeful trust.’

Hopeful trust may be rational even when one doesn’t know very much about the particular, trusted other (McGeer 2008, 251). This does not mean it is always rational, however. If, in the process of extending hopeful trust, evidence appears that suggests that the truster is being exploited by the trusted, it may be rational for them to cease trusting and maybe even withhold their hopeful trust in the future.<sup>1</sup> Absent such evidence and given one’s knowledge about the way people are, in general, often empowered to change their behavior when others extend them hopeful trust, hope and the extension of hopeful trust will be reasonable. By extending hopeful trust, therefore, the truster is not engaging in foolish, wishful thinking but taking reasonable action towards the agency of the other person.

---

<sup>1</sup>That hopeful trust is always inappropriate in the face of such evidence is not something I claim here. However, such cases, I am assuming, differ from the more common kind that I’m interested in here. In the more common kind of case, evidence of occurrent exploitation is lacking. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to consider this point.

Holton's example of hopeful trust involves an extension of hopeful *practical* trust. The shop owner trusts his employee to do (or not do) certain things, and so engages the latter's *practical* agency. However, I am interested in identifying a form of epistemic injustice that can occur when one is denied hopeful *epistemic* trust. This is the kind of trust that is extended in order to engage, and thereby alter, an agent's epistemic agency. To help illuminate the kind of injustice I care about, and which I will ultimately call 'epistemic neglect', I'll therefore need an example of distinctly epistemic hopeful trust. Here's one from my own experience. When I was about twelve years old, I was generally good at mathematics although I would often really struggle at the beginning of a new unit. I remember having a lot of difficulty when I started learning algebra and would frequently ask my mom, who is good at math, for help. After giving me a cursory explanation of how I ought to go about completing the problems I was assigned to do at home, my mom would usually leave me to it on my own, telling me I could figure it out without her. Although this would usually frustrate me a little because, from my perspective, it didn't feel like I could solve the problems without help, I also trusted my mom when she told me this. After all, she knew me well and had witnessed my ability to surmount challenges that I'd once thought were beyond me. Plus, she was speaking from experience, as well as from a position not dissimilar to my own. That is, she was someone who had already managed to figure math out and she was relevantly similar to me, not just in that we shared the same genes but insofar as she was someone I could relate to – she was, after all, my mom. After these sorts of exchanges, I'd usually spend a lot of time working on my own. I ended up doing well in math.

I think it's appropriate to say that my mother extended hopeful epistemic trust to me and that, moreover, her doing so helped me realize my capacity for mathematics. This, then, is an illustrative example of the kind of hopeful trust the absence of which, I will argue, can constitute a distinct kind of epistemic injustice. However, one might immediately worry about the prospects of this argument succeeding. This is because in Holton's example, it seems like the shop owner does something supererogatory when he trusts his employee. At the very least, it's not obvious that he would be blameworthy if he decided not to trust his employer with the till. This suggests that his reasons for extending hopeful trust do not rise to the level of obligation. Justice, therefore, does not require the shop keeper trusts his employee the way he does. One way of capturing this is to say that the reasons for which the shop owner acts when he extends hopeful trust are non-insistent or enticing reasons – reasons that make a certain response

appropriate, but do not make the agent vulnerable to criticism if she does not act on them. (Kolodny 2003; Dancy 2004) Does the same hold of hopeful epistemic trust? Would my mother have done something blameworthy, or merely not supererogatory, had she not trusted me in the way that she did? I am reluctant to think that she would have done something wrong had she not extended me hopeful trust. As such, I don't think my mother's acting as she did was a requirement of justice. Nonetheless, I think an injustice *can* occur when one is denied hopeful epistemic trust.<sup>2</sup> In order to show this, I'll need to establish that there are certain contexts in which extending hopeful epistemic trust is not merely permitted and virtuous, but actually required. This is what I'll do in the next section.

For the rest of the paper, then, I will only be concerned with hopeful *epistemic* trust – and not with hopeful practical trust. As such, I'll use the term 'hopeful trust' to refer to hopeful epistemic trust exclusively.

## II. Epistemic Neglect in Education

In the last section, I recalled my mother's extending hopeful trust to me when I was young. While I don't think this story is unique to me, I also don't think it's universal – not everyone has a suitable person at home extending them hopeful trust in the way my mother did to me. This fact is, I claim, part of the rationale for institutionalized education; by tasking educators with extending hopeful trust to students, institutionalized education ensures that children's epistemic development is not unduly contingent on the idiosyncrasies of one's family. My argument in this section will help motivate this claim. I'll argue that extending hopeful trust is necessary if educators in institutional contexts are to discharge their professional role responsibility. Moreover, I'll show why a failure to discharge this responsibility harms students in their

---

<sup>2</sup>Given that the epistemic injustice I'm identifying consists in the wrongful denial of trust, it may be conceived of as a kind of trust injustice. The term "trust injustice" is not new in the literature, as Gerald Marsh has argued that testimonial injustice ought to be conceived of as a variety of trust injustice – one involving epistemic trust, in particular. However, insofar as Marsh is concerned only with evidence-based trust, whereas I am concerned only with wrongful denials of hopeful trust, he and I have different projects. A further difference consists in the fact that the kind of injustice Marsh discusses is not necessarily epistemic. The injustice I identify here is, on the other hand, squarely epistemic. See Marsh, 2011.

capacities as knowers and is appropriately conceived of as a form of epistemic injustice. To capture the nature of the wrong involved, I'll call this epistemic injustice 'epistemic neglect'.

Here is my argument for the necessity of hopeful trust in educational contexts. Educators have a professional responsibility to enable children to fully develop their epistemic capacities and so become competent knowers. The nature of this responsibility is not merely epistemic, however, it is also ethical; by enabling students to become knowers, educators enable children to become autonomous persons. This requires, however, instilling in children a sufficient level of hopeful *intellectual self*-trust and this, importantly, is achieved by extending them hopeful trust. Educators, therefore, have a moral and epistemic obligation to extend hopeful trust to students.

I'll spend the majority of this section motivating the different steps in this argument.

No human being is born competent in many, if any, domains. There are very many epistemic domains in which children are, subsequently, rarely suitable targets for evidence-based trust. In order to become suitable targets, they must first be extended hopeful trust. In other words, children must be extended trust on the basis of their *cognitive potential* and the capacity for that potential to be engaged by just such an extension of trust. The basic mechanism by which this works is a causal constructive one. Causal constructive power is a kind of self-fulfilling power one's action towards others may wield. This power is at play in any social interaction when, by treating someone as if they have such a feature, they are caused to actually have that feature. Such causal constructive power is wide-spread and can have a negative, distorting impact on the agency of others – as happens when, for example, a passenger's criticism causes one to actually start driving badly (Fricker 2007, 57). However, it can also have a positive, empowering effect. Causal constructive power of the positive, empowering kind is an essential mechanism in education and, I claim, it functions by instilling in the trusted person an attitude of hopeful *self*-trust.

To see why hopeful *self*-trust is so important, we need only consider the familiar fact that, in order to become competent in some new intellectual domain, it is usually necessary that one pays patient, persistent attention to the challenges that that domain presents. Such attention is made possible by the belief that success is possible – that even if one does not succeed immediately, one's current effort is bringing success a little closer. One must believe, in other

words, that one's extant skill in some domain does not exhaust their potential and that, despite present limitations, one does already possess the intellectual resources that improvement requires. Such beliefs are very close to those that McGeer takes as constitutive of hope. In her discussion of the effect of hope when it is self-directed, McGeer (2008, 244) explains that it does not merely provide motivation, it also gives us a realistic, helpful road-map to success – something that attitudes like wishing and fantasizing do not. This is because an essential aspect of hope is an acknowledgement that we are limited in our present capacity. By directing our attention to our present limitations, hope prepares us to recognise what particular kinds of effort might enable us to overcome them. The sort of self-directed beliefs that are constitutive of hope are, of course, those that enable hopeful self-trust. When one trusts themselves hopefully, one is capable of engaging their own capacities in new challenges with the belief that even if success is not immediate, the very effort of engagement brings the hoped-for end closer. Such beliefs lessen the anxieties that uncertainty about one's progress might otherwise bring, as well as provide a motive to continue. The hopefully self-trusting are thus emboldened to persevere in their efforts in the face of difficulty – they are capable of paying the kind of persistent, patient attention to the challenges presented by a new intellectual domain that is nearly always necessary for the acquisition of competence.

At this point, I should say something about how hopeful self-trust is both similar and different to the kind of self-trust that Karen Jones identifies in her discussion of the harms of testimonial injustice. Like the self-trust Jones (1996, 242) defines, hopeful self-trust is still an 'affective attitude' directed towards one's cognitive capacities. This means self-trust has both a cognitive and an affective dimension, where the latter ties self-trust to a disposition in the agent to rely on her own belief-forming methods and mechanisms. Jones' discussion of self-trust, however, is focused on the evidence-based variety of self-trust. This is because Jones is concerned with showing how testimonial injustice distorts self-trust – how it causes levels of self-trust that are inappropriate given the evidence of individuals' actual, extant capacities. When one is subjected to testimonial injustice, she explains, they can be led to falsely believe that they are not competent in some area, because the perpetrator of the wrong has withheld the evidence-based trust that they deserve. *Hopeful* self-trust, in contrast, is an affective attitude directed not towards one's actual, extant capacities in some domain but towards one's potential capacities there.

It seems plausible, of course, that with greater self-trust of the evidence-based kind comes a higher level of hopeful self-trust. This is because when we become competent in some new domain, we also gain a reason to believe that competence is, in general, something we are capable of gaining and expanding. If I am appropriately self-trusting of my skills in philosophy, for example, I will also be appropriately optimistic about the extent to which, with extra effort, I might increase my competence there. At the same time, my experience of having been educated in philosophy gives me reason to believe that, with patience and persistence, I may gain skills in other domains too. Thus, prior experiences of learning provide one with a kind of evidence that can ground hopeful self-trust – learning itself can teach us both that learning is possible and what, more specifically, it actually requires. Appropriate self-trust of the evidential kind is, therefore, a kind of evidence for the reasonableness of hopeful self-trust. However, having not already gained competence in many domains, children do not have much past experience on which such self-directed beliefs about their capacity to learn can be based. (Such experiences are, at least, not usually remembered and so unable to give children reason to trust themselves hopefully.) Indeed, with respect to what they can believe about themselves, children are, in general, highly dependent on the beliefs about them that they see expressed by others. The grounds for children’s hopeful self-trust must therefore come from external, trusted sources. Extensions of hopeful trust from sources like parents and teachers are a powerful source of such beliefs. This is because extensions of hopeful trust communicate a set of beliefs about the trusted other’s potential and agency. By extending hopeful trust a teacher thus communicates, to her student, her belief in that student’s potential, thereby enabling the student to believe the same things and so trust herself hopefully.

It’s also worth pointing out that extending hopeful trust to children does not require according them an inflated level of credibility. In other words, it does not require crediting children’s false statements as true and so acting ‘as if’ the child were already competent. At the same time, however, fulfilling one’s responsibilities with respect to hopeful trust will involve different things in different situations. Sometimes, if doing so does not risk instilling in children a false belief that could have serious consequences for their epistemic development, extending hopeful trust may involve accepting certain false statements from children – not affirming them as true so much as ‘letting them pass’. At other times, however, drawing a child’s attention to their inaccuracy will be required. Doing this is not inconsistent with extending hopeful trust

insofar as hopeful trust is not grounded in the same doxastic commitments as is evidence-based trust and so does not, therefore, communicate the same beliefs as do judgements of credibility. Rather than communicating a belief in the speaker's extant competence, hopeful trust communicates the truster's belief in the child's epistemic potential – the belief that that potential outstrips past performance. Indeed, I suspect that part of why extensions of hopeful trust can be so empowering is that the act communicates a belief in one's agency that is wedded to an acknowledgement of one's present limitations. The communication of this kind of belief creates space for the child to be honest about her own capacity and so openly seek assistance when it's needed, without worrying about being a source of disappointment. The awareness that my flaws are seen, but not seen as exhaustive of who I am, is a form of recognition that can be incredibly motivating; it means that I am seen as capable of more than I am at present.<sup>3</sup> In the context of testimonial exchanges with children, then, what is required for effectively constructive extensions of hopeful trust is an expression, on the part of the teacher, that the speaker's incorrect perspective does not reflect a fundamental cognitive dysfunction and that, moreover, the very reason they are being corrected is that they are capable of ultimately succeeding.

Importantly, what extending hopeful trust demands of educators will also depend on the particularities of the individual child involved. In most cases, enabling hopeful self-trust will not require that teacher's extend students hopeful trust at every opportunity. This is because extensions of hopeful trust work by transmitting a belief with a particular, self-directed content and how many individual acts of extending hopeful trust are required, by the teacher, to transmit this belief will vary from child to child. For example, if a child has few other people in her life giving her some reason to hopefully trust her potential, or if she has been given some positive reason to actually distrust her potential, an educator will need to do more to successfully transmit his belief in her potential. That is, he will need to extend hopeful trust to her more often. In short, then, extending hopeful trust and so successfully avoiding epistemic neglect will require different things in different circumstances, and is unlikely to require that teachers extend hopeful trust at every opportunity that presents itself. In other words, epistemic neglect is best thought of as a diachronic phenomenon – as something that occurs over time, in the same way as the

---

<sup>3</sup> I suspect this is partly why receiving overly positive feedback on one's intellectual performance can sometimes feel like your intellect is not being taken seriously – like you are either not respected enough to receive real attention, or you not viewed as capable of responding appropriately to criticism.

teacher-child relationship is a temporally extended affair. Therefore, whether or not any individual failure to extend hopeful trust contributes to epistemic neglect will need to be determined with an eye to the particularities of the child as well as the broader pattern of the teacher's conduct towards her.<sup>4</sup>

Extending hopeful trust enables children to gain epistemic competence. Epistemic competence encompasses a broader range of skills than the capacity to utter true propositions. It includes, for instance, the capacity to ask relevant questions, express opinions and communicate new ideas or hypotheses (Fricker 2007, 60). These skills are necessary for the generation and transmission of new knowledge, as well as the realization of personal autonomy. There are reasons to think that this fuller sense of epistemic competence cannot be gained without hopeful self-trust. Consider Jones's (1996, 244) observation that self-trust manifests in a readiness to self-reflect. For the self-distrusting, on the other hand, such reflection can be a liability. If I am self-distrusting in philosophy, for example, I am not going to be able to arrive at a judgement about the quality of my work if I step back and reflect critically on the matter (at least not a judgement that I am going to be willing to stand by and seriously defend in the face of others.) Unlike the self-trusting, the self-distrusting lack the capacity necessary to, as Jones puts it, 'put the brakes on reflection' (1996, 244). Distorted self-trust may thus result in a reduced disposition to self-reflect – after all, why go in for an activity that is only going to lead to excessive rumination? If I do not even have *hopeful* self-trust, however, I am even less likely to go in for such critical and creative reflection. This is because hopeful self-trust equips one to endure uncertainty as to one's present accuracy, and taking a critical and creative epistemic stance requires the capacity to entertain a degree of uncertainty. A lack of hopeful self-trust thus makes engaging in such thinking more difficult and less likely to become a stable disposition. Indeed, if the intellectual domains that call for critical and creative reflection are perceived as more circuitous pathways to knowledge – pathways paved with more uncertainties and potential false-starts – the self-distrusting are less likely to engage with them at all.

The professional role responsibilities of educators is partly constituted by the moral and epistemic responsibility of enabling students to become epistemically competent. I have argued

---

<sup>4</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to sharpen the ideas in this paragraph.

that extending hopeful trust is necessary if educators are to discharge this responsibility. The failure to extend hopeful trust therefore harms children in their capacity as knowers and is an epistemic injustice I call epistemic neglect. Unlike testimonial injustice, however, the primary harm of epistemic neglect is not the experience of being wronged or undermined. This is because students are unlikely to know, when they suffer epistemic neglect, that they are being denied something that they are owed – namely, the capacity for hopeful self-trust, for which they are wholly dependent on others.<sup>5</sup> The primary harm of epistemic neglect is, instead, the thwarting of one’s capacity to become a competent epistemic agent – something that is essential to human value and is necessarily realized in relationship with others. Epistemic neglect thus deprives children of something that, as vulnerable and dependent epistemic agents, they are owed by the educational institutions that we entrust them to.

One might object to my argument here by claiming that extensions of hopeful trust in the classroom are best thought of as a feature of exceptional pedagogy, rather than an obligation of all teachers. One reason for this objection comes from a worry about blaming teachers.<sup>6</sup> By framing hopeful trust as an obligation, it might seem that we make educators unfairly vulnerable to blame. Blame seems unfair if we think that features of contemporary institutional education, like increasing bureaucratic demands, large class sizes, and limited resources, prevent teachers from extending sufficient hopeful trust to each student. And, if teachers are unable to do otherwise when they fail to extend hopeful trust, it seems wrong to deem them blameworthy.

I agree that we ought not blame teachers for failing to extend hopeful trust when institutional demands of their job prevent them from doing otherwise. Fortunately for my account, however, we are not forced to do so. This is because it is possible to act wrongly without being culpable. Indeed, one can even be responsible for the wrong one does, without at the same time being blameworthy for it. As Scanlon (2012) notes, for instance, that coercion can undermine an agent’s blameworthiness but not their responsibility, by either changing the permissibility of their act or by changing the act’s meaning – that is, the reasons for which it is done. In the case of the competent and well-meaning teacher who is overworked and under-resourced, I think it’s appropriate to consider the professional demands that constrain her agency

---

<sup>5</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for this point.

<sup>6</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for pushing me to consider this objection.

as a kind of coercive force, one which does not render her failure permissible but changes its meaning and, thereby, renders her non-culpable. The competent and well-meaning teacher that is constrained by large class sizes and excessive bureaucratic responsibilities does not believe her students lack the potential to become fully competent epistemic agents, nor does she fail to believe she ought to extend hopeful trust to them. As such, the intentions that motivate her conduct in the classroom are not blameworthy. Yet, insofar as she fails to communicate to her students her belief in their potential she will be non-culpably responsible for epistemic neglect (although, certainly, she will not bear total responsibility).

Thus, we don't need to frame extensions of hopeful trust as a matter of supererogation or pedagogical virtue rather than a strict responsibility in order to avoid blaming well-informed and well-meaning teachers. We have positive reasons, moreover, not to frame it this way. The professional responsibility of an educator is to enable students to become epistemically competent and it is incorrect to say that it is virtuous, rather than required, to perform some task that is necessary for the discharging of responsibilities partly constitutive of one's professional role. I have argued in this section that extending hopeful trust is necessary if teacher's are to enable students to become epistemically competent. Extending hopeful trust is, therefore, part of their professional role responsibility. The fact that institutional forces makes discharging this responsibility difficult gives us reason to change those institutional settings, rather than relinquish the claim that hopeful trust is an essential aspect of what children are owed by institutional education. Indeed, to relinquish that claim is to inadequately acknowledge what is at stake – namely, the epistemic competence of students.

### **III. Sources of Epistemic Neglect**

I have argued that students can suffer epistemic neglect because of institutional forces that constrain the agency of their teachers. When this happens, teachers are non-culpably responsible for the wrong of epistemic neglect. However, it is important to acknowledge that it's also possible for teachers to be culpably responsible for epistemic neglect. In this final section, I sketch some of the features that produce both culpable and non-culpable kinds of this wrong. I also distinguish between two more general forms that epistemic neglect may take. I suggest that the first form, which has been the subject of my focus so far in this paper, is best modelled as a

kind of transactional injustice. The second form, which I think we ought to acknowledge as a real possibility, has a purely structural character and may accrue independently of teachers' actions.

If extensions of hopeful trust are to achieve the desired causal construction that I detailed in the last section, it is necessary that the child has (evidence-based) reasons to trust the educator who is extending that hopeful trust. This is because extensions of hopeful trust have the aim of transmitting beliefs, and they cannot do this if the person extending the hopeful trust is not seen as credible in the eyes of the trusted. It is therefore necessary that students are given reason to believe that their teacher is sincere and also knows enough about student capacities in general, as well as what is unique about them in particular. This requires the existence of a suitable rapport between student and teacher and this will usually require, in turn, that the teacher has sufficient time to get to know her student and (importantly) make it clear to the student that she is paying attention. Again, this will require different things in different contexts. So, for instance, if a child has been given some reason to distrust the teacher, the teacher will need to do more to elicit trust in him, before he can hope to effectively extend hopeful trust.

Unfortunately, features of contemporary institutional education make it difficult for these conditions to be met across the board in classrooms. Large class sizes, limited resources and excessive bureaucratic responsibilities all make it difficult for teachers and students to build the kind of rapport that must be in place if hopeful trust is to enable hopeful self-trust. And, even when such rappings are established, these same institutional features curtail teachers' capacity to actually extend hopeful trust. When teachers are charged with moving a large group of students through a standardized curriculum at a predetermined pace, for example, or prepare for a standardized test that will partially determine the school's longevity or the teacher's career, opportunities for tailoring tasks to students in a way that will appropriately challenge their extant capacities are undermined. In addition to depriving such opportunities, the same institutional pressures are liable to make teacher's more risk averse. Yet extending hopeful trust involves relinquishing some power to students and foregoing the opportunity to reclaim it. For instance, when a teacher tasks a student with, say, researching the U.S. Constitution and then preparing an informative presentation for the rest of the class, she extends hopeful trust and in doing so assumes a degree of risk. The risk is that if the student does not succeed, a portion of class time will be lost to a task that produces no measurable evidence of improvement in student skill or

knowledge. In light of certain sorts of professional pressure, therefore, extending hopeful trust may become less reasonable from the perspective of the teacher. It is thus also in virtue of these kinds of competing professional pressures that teachers need not be culpable for the wrong of epistemic neglect.

Yet, it's important to acknowledge that it is nonetheless possible for teachers to be culpably responsible for epistemic neglect. This will occur when teachers harbor prejudicial stereotypes about certain groups of students – or even students as a whole (Roald Dahl's Trunchbull comes to mind) – in virtue of which they withhold hopeful trust from them. If, for example, a teacher holds a prejudicial stereotype about the potential of students from a certain racial, ethnic or class background, she may fail to call on them as frequently as other students or to entrust them with the kinds of challenging tasks that are designed to communicate to them her belief in their capacities. Such a teacher might also simply fail to establish the kind of rapport with certain students that is a condition of any subsequent extension of hopeful trust functioning effectively. In this respect, the concept of epistemic neglect fills an important conceptual lacuna, in that it gives a name to a kind of wrong that may undoubtedly occur in the classroom but does not easily fall under the rubric of testimonial injustice. After all, testimonial injustice is a matter of denying evidence-based trust because of prejudice and children are, as I've said, often not appropriate targets of evidence-based trust. As such, children will be victims of testimonial injustice less often than their adult counterparts.<sup>7</sup> This will, moreover, be particularly true in the classroom – where teachers are, by design, epistemic superiors. Yet, we need a name for what goes wrong when a teacher consistently fails to call on and encouragingly challenge certain students, and so communicates to some students but not to others that their capacities outstrip their potential. My argument here satisfies this need; these students are victims of epistemic neglect. When the cause of this injustice is prejudice, moreover, teachers are clearly culpable.

It is appropriate to think of the epistemic neglect that is produced in the classroom in the ways sketched thus far as a transactional form of injustice. By transactional, I mean that it is the product of a particular series of exchanges between people, locatable in time and space. Of

---

<sup>7</sup> (This is not to deny that children cannot be victims of testimonial injustice, nor that they are particularly vulnerable in certain situations. See ...Burroughs and Tollefsen 2016) C/f Karin Murris "The Epistemic Challenge of Hearing Child's Voice," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 3 (2013): 245-59.

course, when compared to the transactional nature of testimonial injustice, use of the term ‘transactional’ in this context may seem strained. Several important differences can be distilled from what I’ve said in the first two parts of this paper. Unlike testimonial injustice, epistemic neglect is best thought of as a diachronic phenomenon and the primary harm is objective, in that it accrues independently of the victim’s subjective awareness. And, unlike the perpetrator of testimonial injustice, the agent responsible for the wrong of epistemic neglect is not necessarily blameworthy. This will be the case when the agency of the person responsible has been constrained by overarching structural features of the institution in which they act, examples of which I’ve already given. However, I think it’s worth applying the term ‘transactional’ to the forms of epistemic neglect sketched thus far in order to distinguish it from another, quite different way the injustice may be produced. What I have in mind here is the possibility that structural features of institutional education harm students directly, rather than in virtue of their constraining teachers’ agency. In contrast to the transactional variety of epistemic neglect, which operates by way of impacting the teacher-student relationship, this other form of injustice operates independently of this relationship. It is, therefore, best thought of as a purely structural form of epistemic neglect.

The kinds of structural features I have in mind here include the wider social and political structures in which the practices of institutional education are embedded – specifically, the competitive means by which students gain access to extra resources, continued education, training and employment. When the opportunities for such goods are limited, assessment methods are designed to compare a large range of individuals against the same standard. Given the high stakes involved, such methods of assessment incentivize a style of learning that focuses on internalizing a prescribed task or set of propositions. As such, it becomes increasingly rational for students to refrain from truly independent, critical and creative reflection. My suggestion is that, just as individual teachers can succeed or fail to communicate to their students that they have reason to believe in their epistemic potential, so too can the wider educational system. When that system emphasizes success at standardized assessments in a way that crowds out other conceptions of epistemic competence, it implicitly discourages the kinds of intellectual pursuits – the kind that require that one entertain a degree of intellectual uncertainty – that call for hopeful self-trust. An educational system that fails to encourage such activities not only fails to enable students to become fully competent in that the curriculum is unduly narrowed, it also makes it

increasingly difficult for students to believe that they have reason to trust themselves hopefully. After all, the system is implying that they ought not to – that they ought to, instead, internalize the knowledge and procedures that have been prescribed for them.

Although what I have said here with respect to the effects of standardized assessment, is somewhat speculative, my broader claim is not. If empirical research confirmed that the impacts of such features of contemporary institutional education are as I have suggested, then these features would be responsible for a purely structural form of epistemic neglect. This is a wrong that goes unidentified in discussions of the potential problems with standardized testing. What is wrong with such practices is not just that students might not learn certain content or miss out on gaining certain skills, but that they militate against the emergence of a kind of intellectual self-trust that is necessary for the acquisition of full epistemic competence. As I have already said, this is not merely epistemic wrong but a moral wrong, in that one's capacity as a knower is essential to human value and an integral aspect of personal autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is the professional responsibility of educators to empower children to become epistemically competent in the fullest sense of the notion – that is, to not just give children a large stock of true beliefs, but to enable them to think creatively and critically about how those beliefs hang together. By doing this, educators enable children to contribute to the generation and transmission of knowledge. This is a capacity essential to human value, and one that cannot be developed unless children are empowered by those on whom they depend epistemically. Such empowerment proceeds by extending children hopeful trust, as this enables children to become hopefully self-trusting. The failure of educators to extend hopeful trust, whether or not this failure is culpable, undercuts a child's epistemic development and so harms them in their capacity as a knower. This is both a moral and an ethical harm. The harm is, moreover, a wrong, as it amounts to a form of neglect. To capture the nature of the wrong, I have thus called this form of epistemic injustice, quite simply, 'epistemic neglect'.

---

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Miranda Fricker's very helpful comments on this paper and her willingness to read multiple drafts. I am also very grateful to two anonymous referees.

## References

Burroughs, Michael D. and Tollefsen, Deborah, "Learning to Listen: Epistemic Injustice and the Child," *Episteme: A Journal of Individual and Social Epistemology* 13, no. 3 (2016): 359–77.

Dancy, Jonathan. "Enticing Reasons." In *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.

Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Fricker, Miranda. "Replies to Alcoff, Goldberg, and Hookway on *Epistemic Injustice*." *Episteme* 7, no. 02 (2010): 164 - 178.

Holton, Richard. "Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 1 (1994): 63-76.

Jones, Karen. "The Politics of Intellectual Self-trust." *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 237-51. Jones, Karen. 1996. "Trust as an Affective Attitude." *Ethics* 107, no. 1 (1996): 4 – 25.

Kolodny, Niko. "Love As Valuing a Relationship." *Philosophical Review* 112, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 135–89.

Marsh, Gerald. "Trust, Testimony, and Prejudice in the Credibility Economy." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 280-93.

Mcgeer, Victoria. "Trust, Hope and Empowerment." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 2 (2008): 237-54.

Murris, Karin. "The Epistemic Challenge of Hearing Child's Voice." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 3 (2013): 245-59.

Passmore, John. *The Philosophy of Teaching*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Pettit, Philip. "The Cunning of Trust." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 3 (1995): 202-25.

Scanlon, T. M. "Interpreting Blame" in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates & Neal. A. Tognazzini (Oxford University Press, 2012).