Meaning at the Margin

Hermeneutical Injustice and Conceptual Engineering

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Thesis presented for the degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY
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Spring 2019
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Abstract

According to Miranda Fricker, hermeneutical injustices are instances of conceptual absences where these absences create a significant difficulty for a knower in making herself intelligible either to herself or to another. These absences are the product of structural inequalities in our society, which shape what epistemic resources we have available to us. This in turn shapes who we are and what the world is like. The story of hermeneutical injustices is a story of conceptual change, yet Fricker’s commitments about conceptual change are often implicit and occasionally incompatible with her claims about hermeneutical injustice. This thesis aims to make Fricker’s commitments explicit in conceptual engineering terms, in order to evaluate her account, the criticisms it has drawn and the approaches to hermeneutical justice it has inspired. Fricker is committed to specific accounts of conceptual change on four different fronts: conceptual control; ignorance; conceptual absences and conceptual virtue. After making her commitments explicit, I evaluate their implications for the criticism against Fricker’s account. These are divided into three clusters: criticism regarding the scope of her definition, those that question the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice, and those that reject it as not properly epistemic. Finally, I discuss three suggested approaches to hermeneutical injustice: one virtue-based, one based on structural change and one attitude-based approach.

Based on the evaluation of Fricker’s commitments and the criticisms just outlined, I argue that Fricker’s approach to conceptual engineering is best read as externalist and function-oriented. Moreover, I argue that Fricker is a social constructivist about concepts. Applying this modified version of Fricker to the criticisms highlights an explanatory gap. I suggest two ways that an explanation using function-oriented conceptual engineering could begin to fill in this gap. After surveying three approaches to hermeneutical justice, I conclude that the externalist function-oriented social constructivist version of Fricker suggests a better way to conceptually engineer hermeneutical justice than the approaches available in the literature so far.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to thank my supervisor, Rachel Katharine Sterken. Without her faith in and patience with my ability to do philosophy, there would be no thesis; without her ideas and advice, there would be a very bad one. She has expanded my concept of philosophy, and I am immensely grateful for her encouragement in this process and for the inspiration to continue this work if I can.

Secondly, I want to thank everyone who has helped me by engaging with the ideas in thesis, either in conversation or in written form: Sigbjørn André Pilskog, Ingebrigt Dale, Marius Hirstad, Markus Sanden, Erica Colman-Denstad, Mariona Miyata-Sturm and Ainar Miyata-Sturm. The most enjoyable moments of this project have been the ones that I have shared with you.

Finally, I want to thank my parents and my brothers. They are the source of the curiosity that draws me to philosophy, and have been my most dependable sources of support and distraction in equal measure throughout the writing of this thesis.
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Introduction

What features of our world determine what can and cannot be said? In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Miranda Fricker develops an answer to this question. She argues that what concepts we have available to us is a reflection of the different patterns of exclusion in our social world. What can and cannot be said depends on whether you are dominantly or marginally situated: if you are a knower on the margins, there will be some experiences for which an appropriate concept does not exist. When a marginally situated knower finds herself in want of a concept that does not yet exist, Fricker argues that she suffers a hermeneutical injustice.

Hermeneutical injustices arise because our epistemic resources, like almost all resources, are inequitably distributed: there is an abundance of concepts available to suit the needs of dominantly situated knowers, and a corresponding scarcity for the marginally situated ones. Fricker argues that this inequality is a product of structural marginalization: groups that are structurally marginalized will not have access to the kinds of social positions that confer high epistemic influence. They are therefore unable to make their contributions to the pool of epistemic resources everyone relies on for interpreting the world, and so their experiences remain unintelligible.

Fricker succeeds in showing that we ought to care about the concepts we rely on in our interactions with the world. What does it mean, however, to care about these things? Are concepts the kind of thing it makes sense to care about, and if so, in what way? Fricker’s story makes several normative and descriptive claims about conceptual change: where it is needed, why it is needed and what mechanisms produce it. Yet her account’s commitments in this area are often left implicit and occasionally contradictory. Several questions that are important for understanding Fricker’s position are therefore left unanswered. Some of these are: What does it mean for a concept to be absent? To what extent do concepts determine our experience? How much influence do we have over the meanings of our terms? When and how should we try to change them, if at all?

These and related questions are the subject matter of a rapidly growing field in philosophy called conceptual engineering. This field deals with the mechanisms that drive conceptual change, conceptual evaluation, conceptual revision and conceptual replacement. The tools developed in this literature are therefore well suited to answer the questions raised but not answered in Fricker’s account. This thesis aims to make Fricker’s commitments explicit.
in conceptual engineering terms, in order to evaluate both her account and the criticisms it has drawn. In addition, I hope to show that conceptual engineering gives us reason to be optimistic about the possibility of approaching hermeneutical justice.

This thesis is divided into four chapters, which are structured as follows. The first chapter is an introduction of Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice, and a presentation of three kinds of objections it has drawn. The first category criticizes the scope of the definition; the second criticizes Fricker for mischaracterizing the mechanisms at work in producing and upholding hermeneutical injustices, and the third is a cluster of objections that question whether hermeneutical injustice is really epistemic in kind. In Chapter Two, I make explicit and then evaluate four clusters of commitments Fricker makes with respect to conceptual change. These are commitments regarding 1) conceptual control, 2) ignorance or concept non-possession, 3) conceptual absences and 4) conceptual virtue. The evaluation of her commitments sheds light on a few ways Fricker’s account could be strengthened. I therefore argue that she should be read as an externalist function-oriented conceptual engineer. In Chapter Three, I revisit the categories of criticisms outlined in Chapter 1, and discuss whether they still apply to the strengthened version of Fricker’s account that was developed in Chapter 2. In Chapter Four, I discuss what conceptual engineering can tell us about the relative promise of three kinds of approaches to hermeneutical justice in the literature: Fricker’s own virtue approach, a structural change solution and a solution that targets individual attitudes. In conclusion, I argue that Fricker is best read as an externalist with a function-oriented approach to conceptual engineering. On this reading, she can answer those of the criticisms that are not rendered irrelevant by the strengthened version of her account. Moreover, on this version of her view, hermeneutical justice is something we can work towards with a combination of structural and individual level changes.

Finally, two brief notes on the terminology used in this thesis. Firstly, conceptual engineering is a quickly developing field, and there is not yet a definite consensus on what terms are best suited to do what work. I will therefore follow the different authors in using whatever terms they have employed as far as possible, and offer clarification when necessary. Secondly, much has been said – and more could most certainly be said – about what a concept is and is not. I have tried to stay neutral as far as possible what concepts are, and believe the discussion and arguments offered here will be relevant regardless of what kinds of entities concepts are.
1 Hermeneutical Injustice

Hermeneutical injustice describes cases where an individual is prevented from making sense of her experience either to herself or in communication with others due to a lack of epistemic resources. The concept was first developed by Miranda Fricker in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Since the book came out in 2007, it has garnered significant discussion, praise and criticism. This chapter is an attempt to systematize some of the main criticisms and to present these within a conceptual engineering framework. This framework is the result of a recent focus in philosophy on the mechanisms that drive conceptual change, conceptual evaluation, conceptual revision and conceptual replacement. This area of inquiry has been labelled conceptual engineering, and notable contributions to the field include Haslanger (1999, 2000, 2012), Scharp (2013), Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b) and Cappelen (2018). Since epistemic injustices and its remedies can be understood as instances of conceptual engineering, it is worthwhile to precisify, tease apart and access some of the claims in the literature on epistemic injustice in terms of the more general accounts of conceptual engineering.

This chapter has three sections: the first is a summary of Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice, the second is a summary of three categories of criticisms. In the third section, I offer a few reasons to think that it is worthwhile to examine the challenges presented in light of our best theories of conceptual engineering.

1.1 Fricker’s Hermeneutical Injustice

“The dominated live in a world structured by others for their purposes,” writes Fricker, citing Nancy Hardstock (Hardstock 1998, 241). The meaning of ‘structured’ in this sentence is threefold. It can refer to the material structuring of the world, meaning that social institutions are geared to the interests of the dominant. Secondly, it can be given an ontological interpretation, to mean that the dominant constitute the social world. Thirdly, it can be taken to mean ‘structured’ in an epistemic sense, implying that the powerful have a disproportionate influence over social meanings (148). The third alternative is of greatest interest to the question of hermeneutical injustice, but Fricker remarks that the three interpretations are interlinked to various degrees. As she says, it is “obvious that certain material advantages will generate the envisaged epistemological advantage”(148).
To see what Fricker means, we can think of our shared social understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different groups. If we then grant that relations of unequal power can cause an imbalance of the perspectives that make up the collections of social meanings we use to interpret the social world, Fricker’s claim seems plausible. What she calls the shared hermeneutical resource makes it easy for powerful groups to find an accurate representation of their experiences, while the powerless are more likely to have “some social experiences through a glass darkly” (148). She offers the example of a woman suffering from postpartum depression, who finds that both she and her loved ones struggle to understand her experience and therefore end up blaming her for being a bad mother (149). When she finally meets other women who share her experience and she begins to understand that it is a medical condition and that she is not to blame, it can be as Fricker describes it, both “astonishing and life-changing” (149).

This example fuels an intuition for Fricker: overcoming the obstacles to understanding postpartum depression is not just a hermeneutical breakthrough, but also the overcoming of an epistemic injustice. The “hermeneutical darkness” that women were in with regards to their own experience before employing the concept of postpartum depression was unjust because it prevented them from understanding “a significant area of their social experience,” thereby depriving them of what Fricker calls a “patch of self-understanding” (149). This constitutes a wrong done to the women in their capacities as knowers, and this is the kind of wrong Fricker calls a hermeneutical injustice.

To further substantiate this intuition and the conclusions that follow, Fricker offers another example of a hermeneutical injustice being overcome. The example comes from Susan Brownmiller’s memoir, where she tells the story of a woman named Carmita Wood (Brownmiller 1999). Wood was subject to sexual harassment from a male superior at work, and began to experience both psychological and physical manifestations of the stress his behavior caused her. She applied for a transfer to a different department, and when it was denied, she quit her job. When applying for unemployment benefits, Wood discovered that she didn’t know what she should state as the reason for leaving her job, and she was denied benefits. Fortunately, she was put in touch with a group of women who had similar experiences, and they ended up organizing a speak-out to call attention to this problem that they share. After what is described as an intense search for the right label, they landed on ‘sexual harassment’ (150). Fricker describes this as a story about how “extant collective hermeneutical resources can have a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (150-151). In Wood’s case, the
epistemic resources shared by her community did not include a term to describe the experience of being sexually harassed: there was a lacuna where this label should be.

It is clear that being unable to articulate her experience of sexual harassment was harmful for Wood; that she suffered “an acute cognitive disadvantage” (151) because the concept was not available. This cognitive disadvantage consists in being unable to understand what is happening to her, and to make others understand the same, because the concepts she would employ to make sense of the experience are unavailable.

The concept, however, was unavailable to the male superior as well. Something in addition to a cognitive disadvantage is therefore needed in order to claim that Wood suffers a different epistemic injustice than her male superior. To achieve the asymmetry that makes the harassed woman a victim of hermeneutical injustice and her harasser not, Fricker claims that in addition to being harmful, the effect must also be wrongful, “whether because discriminatory or because otherwise unfair” (151). In this example, then, the asymmetry obtains because the hermeneutical lacuna affects the two parties very differently: the male superior is enabled to behave as he likes (although he may have liked to behave differently had the right concepts and corresponding understanding of the harm he was causing been available), while Woods suffers the harm of being prevented from understanding something about herself for which it is “strongly in her interest to understand,” and without which she is “deeply troubled, confused and isolated” (151).

An asymmetric disadvantage is therefore necessary, but not sufficient, for something to qualify as an epistemic injustice. It is not sufficient because we can imagine hermeneutical disadvantages that have very serious consequences for the individuals affected, but which still would not qualify as injustices. Fricker points to an as-yetundiagnosed medical disorder as an example (152). She suggests that while this can clearly be a serious disadvantage to the affected individual, it does not qualify as an injustice because it is an accident of history that this particular diagnosis has not yet received the scientific attention necessary to name it. It is hermeneutical bad luck, and not an injustice, seeing as it is not a product of a “marked social powerlessness” that entails little to no participation in meaning-generating practices and professions such as “journalism, politics, academia and law” (152). This is contrasted with the position of women as a social group, which was indeed marked by little participation, and which

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1 This example seems to only work for a small number of diseases: it should be uncontroversial to say that the way resources and attention is allocated in the medical field is heavily influenced by factors that are clearly not strictly luck-based, such as gender, race, geopolitics and potential profit. Fricker seems to be aware of this, seeing as she uses postpartum depression as an example of a hermeneutical injustice.
therefore gives rise to hermeneutical injustices in a way that accidents of history do not. The powerlessness that women experienced at the time of Carmita Wood meant that “their social position was one of unequal hermeneutic participation,” and these kinds of background social conditions are a necessary component of hermeneutical injustice (152). If there had been women in positions of power in the meaning-generating professions at the time Carmita Wood experiences sexual harassment, it is likely that the concept would’ve already been present, because these women would themselves have been aware of this facet of women’s experience. Seeing as women were marginalized socially, economically and politically, however, not enough of them were able to gain access to these positions and therefore were not able to affect the collective hermeneutical resource.

What can be said of these background social conditions that give rise to hermeneutical injustice? Fricker terms these conditions hermeneutical marginalization. This marginalization shows up in “in a localized manner” where the powerful have little to no interest in “achieving a proper interpretation” (152) of the victim’s experience. Often, there will be existing meanings in place that disguise the hermeneutical lacuna, such as the idea that sexual harassment is just “flirting” (153), and it is not an accident that this meaning persists. Rather, “the whole engine of collective social meaning” works to keep these experiences “out of sight” (153). The unequal hermeneutical participation, then, is the reason why Wood incurs an injustice whereas her harasser does not. His perspectives have always found ready expression, whereas hers have been systematically overlooked due to women’s position of relative epistemic powerlessness.

Hermeneutical marginalization is a moral-political notion that entails “subordination and exclusion from some practice that would have value for the participant” (153). Cases of hermeneutical marginalization can be more or less persistent and wide-ranging, from one-off instances relating to a highly localized patch of an individual’s social experience, to more structurally consistent kinds of marginalization. It does not, however, apply to instances of choice, where individuals have voluntarily opted out of participating in the creation of social meaning – hermeneutical marginalization is always a form of powerlessness (153). To continue with the example, it is easy to see the difference between not having access to equal epistemic participation and Wood therefore lacking the concept ‘sexual harassment’, and groups that opt out of participating in collective meaning-making, like for example the Amish (Hostetler 1984).

As a function of social identities, hermeneutical marginalization can apply to individuals in some situations and not in others. One can for example imagine a woman being hermeneutically marginalized with respect to her gender, but not with respect to socio-
economic status. Fricker divides the powers that result in marginalization into two: material power and identity power. Material power can put the jobs that “make for full hermeneutical participation” out of reach, and identity power functions by preventing access because stereotypes represent individuals with certain identities as unsuitable for these kinds of jobs. Often hermeneutical marginalization will be the result of a combination of the two (154). In the case of Carmita Wood, it likely was a combination: prevalent identity stereotypes represented and continue to represent women as unsuitable for relevant positions in politics and law (Vasu and Vasu 1991; Hernson, Lay and Stokes 2003). We can imagine that material considerations such as the viability of a single-income household meant that few women were pursuing careers, and even fewer were pursuing those jobs that require a long education, long working hours and so on. These are, of course, the very jobs that Fricker believes confer hermeneutical influence. Thus, both material and identity power worked together to keep women out of the arenas of hermeneutical influence, and this lead to the lacuna where Wood would have needed the concept ‘sexual harassment’.

1.1.1 Defining hermeneutical injustice

Having established the meanings of a hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical marginalization, Fricker now offers a preliminary definition of hermeneutical injustice:

The injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization (154).

This definition does not make explicit why it must be persistent and wide-ranging to be an injustice. However, when hermeneutical marginalization is persistent and wide-ranging, it creates or is more likely to create a structurally prejudiced collective hermeneutical resource. This is bad for two reasons: From an epistemic point of view, this is bad because the collective hermeneutical resource will issue interpretations that are biased. This is due to the resource being insufficiently influenced by the marginalized groups and unduly influenced by the more powerful groups (155). From a moral point of view, a structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource is bad because it is discriminatory – it affects people in virtue of their social identity. Fricker calls this structural identity prejudice. With these terms on hand, Fricker offers an improved definition of hermeneutical injustice:
The injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.

This captures the central or systematic case of hermeneutical injustice, according to Fricker, which is also the most relevant case for social justice purposes.

A hermeneutical injustice is systematic if the marginalization that causes it “tracks the subject through a range of social activities besides the hermeneutical” (156). It stems from structural inequalities of power. In contrast to the structural cases, there are also incidental cases of hermeneutical injustice, which involve an individual being subject to an injustice either fleetingly or only with respect to a highly localized patch of social experience. The powerlessness that lies at the root here is just momentary, and not a persistent feature of the subject’s social experience (157). An incidental hermeneutical injustice is a product of a hermeneutical lacuna, and prevents the subject from communicating something it is very much in his interest to communicate. This harm does not befall him because of his social identity, but rather in spite of it (158). This phenomenon motivates a generic definition for Fricker, which omits what is particular about the structural case of hermeneutical injustice:

The injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.

Systematic and incidental hermeneutical injustices have in common that there is no culprit to speak of in either case, since hermeneutical injustice is a purely structural notion, and therefore is not perpetrated by any agent (159). The structures can be both material and social, manifesting themselves in inequalities of material and identity power. Although these inequalities are always present, the hermeneutical injustice itself does not arise before an attempt is made to “render an experience intelligible, either to herself or to an interlocutor”(159). Such an attempt can be unsuccessful either because there is a “blank where there should be the name for an experience”(160), so that the subject does not have the concepts she needs to make herself intelligible, or because the form of what is said falls outside what is socially understood to be contextually appropriate (161).

1.1.2 The harm of hermeneutical injustice

The previous section outlined the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice, as understood by Fricker, but what is the nature of the harm hermeneutical injustice inflicts? We have already seen that collective hermeneutical impoverishment impact subjects differently,
based on their social identities. In this way it functions like structural discrimination of any other kind: there is a formal equality, in that the same concepts are available to everyone, but for some they are not sufficient, and this creates a situated inequality (161). This, then, is the primary harm that results from a hermeneutical injustice: a situated hermeneutical inequality. When a subject with a particular social identity, in a particular situation is “rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible” something she wants or needs to communicate but cannot due to a shortcoming of the collective hermeneutical resource, she is effectively “prejudicially excluded” from the pooling and spreading of knowledge (162). From this primary harm proceeds various secondary harms of a more practical kind, like the ones suffered by Carmita Wood in the example of Fricker’s, outlined. She developed symptoms of stress, lost her job and was unable to collect unemployment insurance.

In addition to the practical secondary harms, Fricker describes a different set of consequences that have to do with the subject’s epistemic confidence. When you experience “dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience,” this can challenge your faith in your ability to “make sense of the world” (163). This can prevent a subject from gaining knowledge, and is also likely to prevent the development of epistemic virtues, for instance intellectual courage (163). By extension, Fricker notes, it may even influence a subject’s very construction of a social self, if adequate meanings for their experience are not available. Gay teens growing up in very heteronormative environments may, for example, find that their own experience of reciprocated desire for the same sex is not “an option when it comes to available subject positions for [them] to occupy” (164). When the collective understandings are too powerful, writes Fricker, and the “personal experiential promise of an alternate understanding so lonely and inarticulate,” this can have a significant impact not only on the subject’s social experience but also on the construction of the self (164). The collective hermeneutical resource can, in some cases where the adequate concepts are lacking, have the power to “constitute [our] social beings” where no alternative interpretations suggest themselves (166).

The harms of hermeneutical injustice are therefore twofold: the primary harms are epistemic in nature, and include loss of epistemic confidence and agency, which can extend in its utmost consequence to a cramped version of the self or one’s social identity. The secondary harms are the practical consequences of primary harms, such as loss of a job, mental and physical strain, inability to access spaces and resources it would be in your interest to access and the like.
1.1.3 Hermeneutical justice

What can be done to avoid the primary and secondary harms of hermeneutical injustice? As Fricker has already noted, hermeneutical injustice is a structural notion, and is a product of structural inequalities of power. In order to counteract it, therefore, it is clear that structural changes would not be amiss. Still, Fricker suggests that individuals could develop hermeneutical virtue, that is “an alertness or sensitivity” to the fact that a speaker’s intelligibility may be hampered by a lacuna in the hermeneutical resource rather than her message “being a nonsense or her being a fool” (169). This sensitivity requires a reflexive awareness of one’s own and the speaker’s social identities, so that an “upwards adjustment of credibility” can be made in cases where hermeneutical marginalization might be at play (170). If done correctly, a hermeneutically virtuous listener will succeed in creating a hermeneutically just microclimate for the particular interaction (171). An example of such an interaction may be in a therapist’s office, where a hermeneutically marginalized patient may feel that her tentative articulations of a yet-to-be-named experience are welcome and appreciated, even if they are not understood. However, this will not always be possible, as some social identities will preclude the listener from being sufficiently sensitive. Compare the hermeneutical micro-climate created in a successful therapy session with the interactions Black mothers have with their health care providers in the United States: birth-related mortality rates are disproportionately high for this demographic, and countless Black women have stories of not being taken seriously when describing their postpartum symptoms, leading to life-threatening conditions and sometimes death (Roeder 2019). It seems that something about the context prevents medical professionals from attending to what the Black mothers are communicating in a good way.

In these kinds of cases, Fricker writes that a hermeneutically virtuous hearer will be obliged to seek out further evidence to support a claim the speaker is making. If corroborating evidence cannot be found, the virtuous listener will take it upon herself to simply reserve judgment, given the possibility that hermeneutical marginalization is affecting the communication (172). Although hermeneutical injustice is a structural notion, Fricker holds that exercising hermeneutical virtues will be conducive to generation of new social meanings, and that this will contribute to a decrease, though never eradication, of hermeneutical injustice (173).

1.2 Criticisms of Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice
Fricker’s book has been called an “elegant and groundbreaking work,” and has received serious consideration across the board (Langton, 2010). As groundbreaking work, it has naturally garnered its share of constructive criticism. In this section, I present some relevant objections grouped into three categories: (1) those that deal with the scope of Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice, (2) those that concern the mechanism of hermeneutical marginalization, and (3) those that concern the classification of the injustice as it stands. While all of these criticisms are related, it will be useful for further discussion to have them separated.

1.2.1 Criticisms of scope

Several criticisms have been made about the scope of Fricker’s definition. Generally speaking, those who make claims about the scope either believe that it is too broad (Maitra 2011; Mason 2012); that too many things will count as injustices on Fricker’s definition, or that it is too narrow (Maitra 2011; Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus 2012), in the sense that hermeneutical injustice really is more pervasive than it is rendered by Fricker’s account.

Mason criticizes Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice for being too broad, because it forces us to construe “two kinds of unknowing” as the same, when they are in fact distinct phenomena. The first is the unknowing of the marginalized, who lack a term to describe their own experience, and the second is the unknowing of the dominantly situated, who lack a term which has no special personal relevance for them (2012, 295). The first kind of unknowing may be an injustice, but the second kind should rather be thought of as ethically blameworthy (297). In many cases, a marginalized group will have a well-developed sense of their own experiences and also have a vocabulary to describe these - they have developed resistant epistemic practices (295). The only thing that is missing in these cases is the uptake into what Fricker calls the collective hermeneutical resource.² Such a case is quite different from one in which everyone, both the marginalized and the dominant, are completely in the dark when it comes to describing an experience. Mason suggests that Fricker’s failure to consider “resistant epistemic and communicative practices” of marginalized communities leads her to confuse the two kinds of unknowing (298). Indeed, according to Mason, Fricker’s paradigm case of Carmita Woods is

² Fricker has responded to this worry in a more recent paper where she clarifies what she intends by ‘collective’: “[the collective hermeneutical resource] contains only meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else. [It] contains those concepts and conceptualizations that are held in common” (2016, 163). It is not the case, then, that Fricker is committed to a concept existing in the collective hermeneutical resource or not at all - there is room in her account for Mason’s resistant interpretive practices. Mason’s criticism is, however, still worth mentioning as it provides nuance that will help elucidate Fricker’s conceptual change commitments in later sections of this paper.
an example of the former and not the latter kind of hermeneutical injustice. The steps that Wood and the other women who participated in the dubbing of ‘sexual harassment’ are not “the actions of a woman mystified by her experiences of a yet-to-be-named phenomenon” (297). Rather, these actions are indicative of a lot of processing and work towards intelligibility that has happened before the term was coined.

On the opposite side, some have argued that Fricker is far too narrow in her definition of a near-ubiquitous phenomenon. In her paper ‘Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice’, Pohlhaus makes the argument that there are aspects of a hermeneutical injustice that are not accounted for in Fricker’s explanation. Like Mason, she draws attention to the fact that “marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination” (2012, 716) but still the resources that they develop are not propagated in the collective hermeneutical resource due to what she calls willful hermeneutical ignorance. This willful ignorance describes a resistance to understanding and using concepts developed at the margins despite their ready availability, and contributes to continued hermeneutical marginalization. That this is missing from Fricker’s account means that we miss an important reason why concepts like sexual harassment continue to be conveniently misunderstood so many years after their nominal uptake in the collective hermeneutical resource.

Like Pohlhaus, Kristie Dotson (2012) criticizes Fricker for making her definition too narrow. According to Dotson, this amounts to Fricker’s perpetrating the very same hermeneutical injustice she is trying to name and eradicate. This is because the conceptual structure utilized in Fricker’s analysis forecloses the possibility of adding or building on the nascent vocabulary available to address these and related issues. As an example, Dotson uses Fricker’s division between hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical bad luck. For Fricker, as we have seen, a person with an as-yet-undiagnosed medical ailment suffers epistemic bad luck and not a hermeneutical injustice because he is unable to establish a precedent of marginalization that has resulted in his ailment being continually unprioritized or unattended in medical circles. Consequently, he is in the dark about his problem and the rest of the world is as well, but no structure is to blame, and we have no injustice. Dotson finds the idea that the ill person in Fricker’s example “remains in the same state of unawareness as general society” absurd (40). Like Mason, Dotson argues that it is precisely in these cases that we can expect alternative hermeneutical resources to develop, and that failing to attend to the ways that such a person tries to communicate about his experience amounts to a form of epistemic injustice she calls contributory injustice (41). She attributes Fricker’s narrow definition to a wish to not
cast hermeneutical injustice “so it becomes too easy to commit,” which has lead her to employ a closed conceptual structure. By a closed conceptual structure, Dotson means a structure that relies on an unrealistic simplification of epistemic harm, in which any case of epistemic harm is either epistemic injustice or epistemic bad luck (2012, 41). An open conceptual structure, in contrast, would be one that remains “sensitive to the inevitability of damaging oversights” (2014, 42). One way to do this in Fricker’s case is to move from using definite articles (‘the injustice’) to indefinite ones (‘an injustice’) (42). “An indefinite article and the conceptual structures required to make its deployment appropriate can offer positions that signify without absolute foreclosure,” and makes us aware that the account has its strengths and weaknesses, and may need to be expanded, amended or replaced as we learn more (Dotson 2012, 42). If our theoretical tools, and we as knowers, do not remain open to the possibility that there are perspectives we have not yet taken into account, we risk becoming perpetrators of epistemic injustice (Dotson 2012, 41).

The scope objections therefore hold that Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice is faulty. On the too-broad criticism, she has lumped together two kinds of ignorance that are ethically and qualitatively distinct, and on the too-narrow criticism she has made the definition artificially restrictive in order not to have the injustice seem ubiquitous, when in fact it is.

1.2.2 Criticisms of mechanism

Several philosophers have found that Fricker takes a rather naive stance on how hermeneutical lacunae come to exist in the collective hermeneutical resource. Fricker relies on background social conditions to explain why marginalized groups have limited sway over which concepts gain uptake and which do not. These background social conditions include material obstacles such as wage inequality or the cost of a good education, as well as identity-specific obstacles such as stereotypes and prejudices that work to keep an individual out of the professions with considerable influence over the collective hermeneutical resource. As several authors note, however, dominantly situated knowers do not automatically adopt and start applying conceptual innovations from the margins. Even when marginalized knowers are in a position to contribute hermeneutical tools to the collective resource, there are mechanisms that prevent these from gaining uptake (Pohlhaus 2012, Dotson 2012).

Pohlhaus (2012) describes several reasons why dominantly situated knowers may be reluctant to adopt hermeneutical innovations from the margins right away. Firstly, as Fricker also notes in passing, it is not in the interest of the dominant to attend to epistemic resources
developed at the margins because doing so “moves epistemic power away from dominant situatedness” (2012, 721). Secondly, epistemic resources developed at the margins may appear to the dominant to “attend to nothing at all, or to make something out of nothing” precisely because what they apply to has not been salient enough from a dominant perspective for it to have a name at all (2012, 722). Describing hermeneutical lacunae as purely products of structural marginalization glosses over the resistance of the powerful to attend to what is being said by the marginalized, and this resistance is also a part of the mechanism that upholds hermeneutical injustice, according to Pohlhaus. Mason (2011) makes a similar point when she argues that what Pohlhaus labels willful hermeneutical ignorance constitutes an ethically blameworthy knowledge practice. Dotson (2012) argues the same, and carves out the space for contributory injustice, the result of precisely the defective knowledge practices Pohlhaus discusses. These criticisms, therefore, address the role that individuals or communities of knowers play in perpetrating hermeneutical injustice.

Maitra makes a different of criticism of how the supposed mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice in her paper “New Words for Old Wrongs” (2018). Here, she discusses three different ways to understand what is meant by a gap in the hermeneutical resource: that a concept is missing; that there is a widespread false belief about the relevant areas of experience, or finally that there is a missing label of a particular kind (2018, 7). From Fricker’s presentation, one might think she would be disposed to agree with the first alternative, that a hermeneutical injustice is a case of a missing concept. For instance, she describes what happened to Carmita Wood as a case of “a hermeneutical lacuna where the name of a social distinctive social experience should be” (Fricker 2007, 150-1). There are several reasons not to accept this characterization of the problem, however, as Maitra and others have noted. Firstly, it is not the case that there were no concepts for what Wood’s superior was subjecting her to at work - the concept “flirting” was employed to describe such behavior at the time - but they were ill suited to Wood’s purposes (Beeby 2011, 480; Maitra 2018: 7). In addition, as the first reason shows, not just any label will do when it comes to fixing hermeneutical injustice, and so it seems insufficient to claim that the problem is the lack of just a concept, not a good or a suitable one (Maitra 2018, 10). What is missing, on Maitra’s view, is a concept with the right normative properties (2018: 350). Furthermore, innovating a concept that has these relevant properties is complicated both by the competing interpretations already available, and by the inevitability of distortion when attempting to acquire the right normative properties (2018, 350). On Maitra’s view, then, the mechanism isn’t simply that material conditions prevent certain groups from
adding their interpretive resources to the collective hermeneutical resource, but also that the competing understandings make it hard to find a concept that communicates the right properties of an experience – most crucially the normative ones.

This section has outlined two main kinds of mechanism criticisms. The first kind finds Fricker too forgiving when it comes to individual responsibility, and holds that by focusing only on the social structures that prevent equal hermeneutical participation she is overlooking the magnitude of individual contributions to hermeneutical injustice. The second holds that Fricker mischaracterizes the lacuna as lack of a concept, and in doing so obscures the mechanisms that make hermeneutical injustices hard to overcome, namely the presence of competing interpretations and the inevitability of distortion.

1.2.3 Criticisms of epistemic nature

The final category of criticisms concerns itself with the nature of hermeneutical injustice - is it really epistemic in kind, or does it reduce to a different kind of social harm? This worry is addressed by Beeby in her paper “A Critique of Hermeneutical Injustice” (2011). Beeby examines Fricker’s paradigm case and concludes that the epistemic situation is equal for both Wood and her harasser: “it is not that the harasser knows something that Carmita cannot or does not know about sexual harassment” (482). The asymmetry that Fricker relies on to obtain an injustice for Wood and not for her harasser comes from the background social conditions, rather than something epistemic in kind. Instead, Beeby makes a case for the claim that both agents are harmed by the same deficiency (484). This deficiency is the lack of the concept, which means that in terms of what they know, there is no asymmetry. The harms that Carmita Wood suffers are significant and it is an injustice that she is subjected to them, but for Beeby these are directly linked to a variety of background social conditions and not related to her epistemic disadvantages. In other words: “Why lean on social conditions like sexism or racism, when the important thing is that individuals in this scenario do not understand their experiences?” Beeby claims that we ought to separate the injustice women suffer due to sexism, and the injustice agents suffer when they lack the epistemic tools to make sense of their experiences (485).

The second reason one might problematize the extent to which Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice is truly epistemic in the way she intends has been noted by several philosophers who write on epistemic injustice (Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2012; Maitra 2012). In her definitions and examples, Fricker puts emphasis on the ways that marginalized communities are prevented from understanding and gaining knowledge about their own experiences; the way they are
forced to “see through a glass darkly” (2007: 151). This conception of a marginalized knower rests on two assumptions. The first one is that marginalized knowers do not develop alternate hermeneutical resources for their own use, an assumption that has already been discussed above. The second and perhaps less obvious assumption is that it is epistemically preferable to be dominantly situated, a claim that philosophers of race and feminist philosophers have taken issue with in extensive writings on the topic. Fricker builds on some of this theorizing when she writes that marginalized knowers will be aware of experiences that dominant knowers will not, but does not follow this reasoning to completion. Pohlhaus, however, spells it out clearly: “being marginalized leads not to different knowledge but more objective knowledge” (2012: 720). This does not mean that the secondary epistemic harms Fricker discusses do not apply, but at the very least gives us reason to consider again what components of the injustice are necessarily epistemic and which may be better explained in different terms.

1.2.4 Summary

The three categories of criticisms discussed target different aspects of hermeneutical injustice. The scope criticisms argue that Fricker has made her definition either too constrained, failing to capture all the relevant cases, or else too relaxed, capturing several different kinds of ignorance that ought to be distinguished from each other. The mechanism criticisms focus on the description of how hermeneutical injustices arise, and claim that Fricker underestimates the role of individuals in creating and sustaining hermeneutical lacunae. Moreover, on another mechanism criticism offered by Maitra (2018), it is not clear that what these mechanisms produce are lacunae at all. Instead, she suggests they are presences of concepts with the wrong normative properties. The final category of criticisms question whether hermeneutical injustice is indeed an epistemic injustice on two grounds. The first is that what separates an injustice from bad luck is not epistemic, but material, namely background social conditions. The second is that if this were a question of epistemic position only, then surely the dominantly situated knower would be the victim, seeing as he possesses less or worse knowledge than the marginalized.

These clusters of criticisms point to several areas of Fricker’s account that could be worked out in greater detail. All of these questions deal either implicitly or explicitly with conceptual change. The scope criticisms do so by asking where we should draw the line between unethical concept use and plainly regular concept use. The mechanism criticisms do so in asking what conceptual change ought to look like in comparison to what it does look like in cases of
hermeneutical injustice. Finally, the criticisms of the epistemic are about conceptual change because they ask what role concepts play, and ought to play, in obtaining knowledge. The following section will spell out these and related questions in greater detail.

1.3  Hermeneutical Injustice and Conceptual Engineering

Fricker’s account is a story about concept change, and it makes several claims about what concept change is, how it happens and how it should happen. The three categories of criticisms show that some of these claims give rise to tensions and contradictions in Fricker’s account. If we agree that hermeneutical injustice is a plausible phenomenon with undesirable consequences, we should be interested in understanding it as well as possible in order to prevent new instances if possible, and to remedy present instances if not. In subsequent chapters, I hope to show that the conceptual engineering perspective is helpful in three ways. The first is that clarifying Fricker’s various conceptual commitments brings out inconsistencies that if resolved would strengthen the account. The second is that understanding which of Fricker’s commitments do the heavy lifting makes it easier to see which of the criticisms are powerful and which ones miss the mark. Finally, what our best theories of conceptual change tell us about hermeneutical injustice will hopefully provide some guidance on how to approach hermeneutical justice.

Although Fricker does not commit herself to any one theory of concepts, concept possession and conceptual introduction and change, several of the features of her account have implicit in them at least some theoretical commitments about conceptual change. These are claims about what concepts are, what it takes to possess a concept, who is in control of their meanings and usage, and what it takes for concepts to be introduced or changed. Perhaps most importantly, Fricker relies heavily on the idea that some concepts are better than others and that we should choose to use some concepts over others, but she does not say much about the criteria we should rely on when making these evaluations. These and related issues are all central topics being explored in the fast-developing literature on conceptual engineering. The four most salient commitments of this kind that Fricker makes are: first, a commitment to a straightforward relationship between material power and conceptual control. Second, the possibility of a subject being completely ignorant of her own experience prior to acquiring the concepts need to communicate about the experience. Third, that a concept is either present in the collective hermeneutical resource or missing entirely, and fourth, that a good concept is one
that allows subjects to make sense of their own experience. The remainder of this section will list expand briefly on each of these commitments and their relation to conceptual engineering.

Fricker seems to take the relationship between material power and conceptual power for granted when she attributes the lack of marginalized influence to the lack of people in professions that make for significant hermeneutical impact, such as “journalism, politics, academia and law” (2007, 152). It is far from universally agreed, however, that there is such a relationship between material power and conceptual control, and there are many reasons to question whether social and material dominance either map neatly onto or is responsible for conceptual influence or control.

The second feature of interest to the question of concept change is Fricker’s portrayal of the subject of hermeneutical injustice as fully ignorant as to her own experience. When describing Carmita Wood’s predicament, Fricker writes that she is in the dark about what she is experiencing. Does this amount to something like strong externalism about the content of thought (mental content), in the sense that is supposedly impossible for Wood to begin to understand her experience without having a concept that fits?

The third aspect is the many ways one could interpret the “lack of a concept” that is at the core of hermeneutical injustice. Maitra (2018) suggests three ways: that a concept really is missing, that a wrong belief is prevalent, or that a concept with the right properties are missing, but these are not the only possible interpretations of a hermeneutical lacuna. Could it also be that all the necessary concepts are in the collective hermeneutical resource, but that the dominant group has a tendency to misapply or misuse them, without holding what Maitra classifies as wrong beliefs? There seem to be many kinds of concept wielding and stages of concept change that Fricker does not consider - should we take this as indicative of an all or nothing position on concept change? Most likely not. Goetze has suggested that although Fricker does not elaborate on the different stages of a concept coming into being and into common usage, her account does not commit her to the claim that hermeneutical injustice is all-or-nothing, so to speak (2018, 74). In addition, when describing cases where a hermeneutical injustice has been overcome, Fricker comes across as quite the optimist with regards to conceptual engineering: she seems to believe that we ought to engineer concepts, and that we can indeed do so through adequate influence in meaning-generating jobs (lawyers, professors and the like).

The fourth and final aspect of Fricker’s account that merits closer inspection from a conceptual engineering perspective is, as mentioned, her assumptions about what makes a
concept good. Fricker seems to take for granted that the primary function of our concepts is to enable understanding, both of ourselves and our experiences and of others. A subsidiary goal of this seems to be that concepts shouldn’t contribute to marginalization, as it hampers understanding. These are far from the only parameters with which to assess concept goodness, however, and without argument it is not clear that we should accept them as the most apt ones for Fricker’s project. One candidate that offers strong competition is judging concepts by how well they represent reality; another is judging them by their ability to help us promote our moral or political goals. Taking a closer look at Fricker’s conception of concept goodness is therefore necessary.

1.4 Moving forward

Having briefly outlined Fricker’s commitments and their relation to conceptual engineering, I hope to have shown that clarifying these further and situating Fricker’s view of conceptual change in the framework of conceptual engineering will be both interesting and worthwhile. Spelling out Fricker’s commitments and possible alternative understandings of hermeneutical injustice will hopefully contribute to a more refined story of how conceptual engineering can and should contribute to reducing epistemic marginalization. This is the goal of the remainder of this thesis, which proceeds in three parts. The first part, in the next chapter, continues to explore Fricker’s commitments in the four areas of conceptual engineering outlined in section 1.3, and discusses how insights from conceptual engineering might refine and strengthen Fricker’s account. The following chapter revisits the criticisms outlined in Chapter One to see whether they still apply to Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice bolstered by conceptual engineering, and to what degree. Finally, Chapter Four draws on the understanding of Fricker’s claims within conceptual engineering developed in Chapters Two and Three to evaluate three potential solutions to hermeneutical injustice.
2 Hermeneutical Injustice in Conceptual Engineering Terms

Although Fricker is not explicit about her commitments vis-a-vis matters of central importance in the literature on conceptual engineering, her account of hermeneutical injustice does entail several commitments that cluster around four central topics in conceptual engineering: conceptual control, ignorance (or non-possession), conceptual absences and concept virtue. For example, concerning the nature of conceptual control, her account entails a commitment to the claim that that affecting conceptual change is easier if you work in journalism, politics or law. A further example from the cluster of commitments on concept virtue is that we ought to develop concepts that make it easier to communicate our experiences to others. This chapter will attempt to make explicit what conceptual engineering claims Fricker’s account is committed to, and which ones she might take on instead in order to strengthen her account.

The first cluster deals with questions of conceptual control. Fricker’s account minimally commits her to the view that social dominance equals conceptual dominance. How does this hold up on a conceptual engineering perspective - do we have control over the concepts we use? If yes, how is this control exercised and by whom? How much power does this control give us? Answers to some of these questions are implicit in Fricker’s account, but only by making them explicit can we begin to ask whether they are the right answers, or the best available answers for Fricker’s purposes.

The second cluster of commitments centers on ignorance or concept non-possession. Fricker’s account relies heavily on the sharp divide between the unintelligibility prior to having a concept, and the moment when knowers obtain a concept to fit their experience. Understanding how ignorance, unintelligibility and concept possession relate is therefore important for understanding the account as a whole. Some of the questions that need to be answered in order for her view to form a consistent position with respect to conceptual engineering are the following: What kinds of knowledge can you have of an experience prior to acquiring the relevant concepts? How much non-conceptual knowledge can you have and still be ignorant, or in other words still count as not possessing a concept? Can concepts be private, or are there only public concepts?

The third cluster is a collection of commitments that concern what it means for a concept to be missing. Fricker’s account separates the missing from the merely non-existent concepts.
by the level of difficulty its lack creates for a would-be user of that concept. Her account therefore leaves much to be desired in terms of justifying which conceptual gaps, or hermeneutical lacunae are consequential and which are not. What makes it the case that the lack of a concept constitutes a ‘gap’ in the collective hermeneutical resource? Can a concept be missing if nobody is aware that it is needed? What distinguishes as-yet-non-existent missing concepts from non-existent concepts that aren’t missing?

The fourth cluster regards concept virtue. What makes a concept good; what makes it better than other similar concepts; what do we want our concepts to do for us and how do we know if they are doing just that? On this topic, Fricker is committed to intelligibility as concept virtue: a good concept should make experiences intelligible and shareable. This virtue is far from the only option available: conceptual engineering considers a range of factors that make concepts good, including their semantic functions, political consequences or explanatory power. It is worthwhile to have a look at these and other alternatives, either in order to confirm that Fricker has landed on the right virtue to prioritize in overcoming hermeneutical injustice, or else in order to suggest that other or more parameters of concept goodness should play a role in her account.

This chapter has four sections: the first deals with the commitments on conceptual control, the second treats the commitments on ignorance, the third is conceptual absences, and the fourth is conceptual virtue. In each section, I make the commitments of Fricker’s account explicit and then evaluate them by the standards set by the current literature in conceptual engineering. These evaluations make visible a few tensions and inconsistencies in her account. I end this chapter by making the case for an externalist, function-oriented and social constructivist reading of Fricker’s account, which I argue would resolve these difficulties.

2.1 Conceptual control

Several of the central questions in conceptual engineering concern, directly or indirectly, the question of control. Can anyone intentionally affect the conceptual resource, and if so, who can and how? Any account of concept change will need to have answers to these questions, and the answers will serve to determine how pervasive, how frequent and how achievable any ameliorative effort can be. This section will first discuss Fricker’s answers to these questions by making her commitments clear, and then attempt to fit the commitments that arise from her answers to a position in conceptual engineering. After comparing Fricker with competing
accounts of concept control, the section ends with a short discussion of the implications of Fricker’s commitments.

2.1.1 Fricker’s commitments on conceptual control

For Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is the result of a group having less than their share of power over the collective hermeneutical resource. The powerful have “an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understanding” because the collective hermeneutical resources are responsive to their interpretive needs (2007, 147). “Social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understanding” writes Fricker, because “relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources” (148). This skewing occurs because the less powerful groups are prevented from participating “in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated” (152). Those practices to which Fricker refers are those that take place “most obviously” in arenas such as “journalism, politics, academia and law” (152). This is Fricker’s first commitment on conceptual change with respect to control: that collective social meanings are generated by a set of practices that are exclusive to, or most influential, when practiced in a given set of professions.

The exclusion from these kinds of relevant practices is what Fricker labels hermeneutical marginalization: “when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are hermeneutically marginalized” (2007, 153). An example of unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to a highly significant area of social experience is abortion regulation in the United States, which continues to be made by majority male legislative bodies and which quite clearly is not sufficiently informed by the perspectives of those who seek abortions (Durkin and Benwell 2019). We can think of present and potential members of this group, the abortion-seekers, as hermeneutically marginalized with respect to this particular social experience. This lays bare the second salient commitment on control in Fricker’s account, namely that social power is responsible for conceptual power or influence.

The unequal participation in meaning-generating practices is due to differences in social power, as we have seen above, two distinct mechanisms determine social power on Fricker’s account. The first is material power: an individual’s socio-economic background can put the relevant jobs in journalism, politics and academia “largely out of their reach” (Fricker 2007, 154). The second mechanism is identity power, where “prejudicial stereotypes in the social atmosphere” will represent some individuals as unsuitable for the relevant kinds of jobs (154).
Often, both mechanisms will interact, resulting in some social group having less opportunity to affect the social meanings available than do others. The collective hermeneutical resource therefore ends up being “insufficiently influenced” by some groups, and “unduly influenced” by others (155).

For Fricker, the ways we influence our conceptual resources is quite straightforward. The generation of (social) meaning happens where the gatekeeping of public discourse also happens: in the media, academia, law and politics. The individuals that hold positions in these realms decide what is important, these decisions will reflect their situatedness in the social context, and because the diversity of these individuals in most cases leaves much to be desired, so does the resulting collective hermeneutical resource.

How exclusively meaning-generative these privileged arenas are supposed to be in comparison to other sites of conceptual innovations is not clear. On a strong reading of the above claim, Fricker’s suggestion is something like this: that hermeneutical innovations that happen outside of the relevant professions or arenas do not or cannot, for whatever reason, amount to actual concept change. There are plausible cases of concept change happening in Fricker’s envisioned way: Think, for instance, of a concept like white privilege. The knowledge that white people have it easier than people of color given institutional racism is presumably, for people of color, old as time (or old as colonialism) (Margo 2006). Still, this concept that begins to describe this pervasive inequality has only recently begun to be propagated beyond academic circles. A plausible Fricker-style explanation would be that before people of color came to hold positions of power in academia, media and politics, there was nobody to enter such a concept into circulation, since they could not know it was needed. On this view, however, it is hard to see how conceptual innovations from “the margins” could exist: after all, these arenas of meaning-generation are squarely in the center as opposed to on the margins. There is a sense in which we might say that once a group has sufficient presence in these realms to affect it, they are no longer marginalized in the way Fricker needs for her account to work. This of course glosses over complexities of intersecting marginal identities, but the point still stands: if what it takes to change the collective hermeneutical resource is move from a marginal to a central position in terms of epistemic power, we would not have examples of conceptual innovation from the margins. There are, however, many such terms that have entered our collective hermeneutical resource in a bottom-up fashion and remained in the control of those

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3 For a related topic that is still at the pre-propagation stages in almost all but academic arenas, see Charles Mills’ introduction of the term “white ignorance” (Mills 2007).
that introduced them. Many of these are terms for social kinds, for example re-appropriated slurs like “queer”, or new inventions like “agender” (Goetze 2018; Sterken 2019).

On a weaker reading of the claim, we can imagine Fricker to mean that innovations from the margins can and do occur, but that the only mechanism by which they can enter the collective hermeneutical resource is to be picked up by someone with greater hermeneutical influence than the marginal innovator. This would have to be someone in one of the hermeneutically powerful professions. In this way, although conceptual innovations may originate elsewhere, there is some threshold level of use or acceptance or possession that concepts must pass in order to count as part of the collective hermeneutical resource. Only when the given concept passes this threshold are we disposed to say that it is part of the collective hermeneutical resource. Moreover, concepts can only pass this threshold by passing through “journalism, politics, academia and law” (Fricker 2007: 152) or by way of top-down processes more broadly construed. On this understanding of Fricker’s claim, a number of examples are readily available. Simion and Kelp call pop culture a “classical source of fresh conceptual apparatus” and mention the word “bling” (or “bling-bling”) as one example of a 90s innovation (forthcoming, 11). Another and newer such expression is “on fleek,” which originated somewhere on social media and recently made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford Dictionaries 2019).

Although this weaker reading allows for conceptual innovations from outside the sphere of hermeneutically privileged positions, it is hard to see why we should think that the particular kind of formalization or authority afforded by academia or law is a necessary condition for something to qualify as being part of the collective hermeneutical resource. As a further example, take Cappelen’s (2018) discussion of the United States Supreme Court and the definition of ‘person’. In a highly publicized case, the Supreme Court decided that corporations fall into the extension of ‘person’. After this decision, we would not say that the meaning of person has been changed (2018, 78). Instead, the supreme court has “forced certain people to misinterpret sentences containing ‘person’ in a certain way” (78). This is another reason why we might not want to equate legislation change with meaning change. The difference between the supreme court and an individual or (marginal) collective, writes Cappelen, is that the supreme court has the means to force people to act as if the meaning of the term has changed, but this is not the same as changing the actual meaning (78). The same argument seems applicable to the other professional realms that Fricker mentions. For example, when politicians grant a new concession to drill for oil and argue that it will not be harmful to nature in the
relevant area, we are not disposed to accept that a correct understanding of ‘harm’ now excludes the obvious negative consequences of oil drilling for both flora and fauna. Rather, we will disagree with the claim that it will not cause harm. The idea that the “higher professions” Fricker mentions play the kind of gatekeeping role that this weaker account relies on therefore seems implausible.

Even on a weak reading of Fricker’s claim, therefore, there are several kinds of meaning change that cannot be accounted for: not all meaning change is top-down in the way she describes, moreover, it is not even clear that most of it is. The idea of a threshold level of concept uptake which conceptual innovations from the margins must pass in order to be considered part of the collective hermeneutical resource seems plausible, since that resource reflects the meanings that most or all people can rely on. What is not plausible, however, is that the only way for concepts to cross this threshold is to be endorsed by people who work in hermeneutically influential professions.

This section has discussed the two most salient commitments present in Fricker’s account with respect to conceptual control. The first is that collective social meanings are generated by a set of practices, and that these practices are exclusive to, or matter most when practiced in a given set of professions. The second is that social power and conceptual power correspond and are causally related. The next subsection will evaluate these commitments from the viewpoint of conceptual engineering.

2.1.2 Externalism and function-oriented conceptual engineering

Are there some positions, social or otherwise, that make it more likely that an innovator’s conceptual innovations will catch on? If yes, are these positions related to socioeconomic status in general and professions or positions of social power, in particular, in anything like the way Fricker suggests? Or indeed, if the answer is no, what factors do make it likely that innovations catch on? In this subsection, I begin by comparing Fricker’s commitments with those of a general semantic externalist accounts. Fricker and semantic externalists both hold that features of the world determine the meaning of our words, but differ on what features these are and

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Social power can of course mean that you are in a position to force people to interpret a concept in accordance with your own beliefs about what that concept should mean, as the United States Supreme Court does in Cappelen’s example above. It is unclear whether this would suffice for Fricker: if forcing people to act as though they possess a concept is possible without them having an understanding of this concept, then yes. It seems, however, that in cases of overcoming hermeneutical injustice, forcing someone to act as though they possessed a concept would be no different from making the concept available – at which point the hermeneutical injustice would in one sense already have been overcome.
therefore what positions confer conceptual control. This discussion makes it clear that social
power is a poor candidate for conferring conceptual control. I therefore move on to discuss
function as a potential factor in who, if anyone, holds sway over the conceptual resource.

Semantic externalism, in its most general form, is the view that the meanings of our
terms depend to some extent on what the world is like. A common position amongst externalists
about meaning is that one such meaning-determining feature of the world are experts in a
relevant field (Burge 1979, Putnam 1975). Such views usually also take other factors in the
world to be of significance, such as the original introduction of a concept (Kripke 1980; Evans
1982), what the world is really like, and use patterns across time (Lewis 1984; Williamson
2000). While opinions differ on what constitutes an expert in some realms, it should be fairly
uncontroversial to assume that in certain areas, the expert view would align with Fricker’s
assessment of who holds conceptual sway - medicine suggests itself as one such example.
Another example is Haslanger, who holds that in the social domain “we should rely on social
theorists, including feminist and antiracist theorists, to help explicate the meanings of our
terms.” (Haslanger 2012, 15). The metasemantic mechanism here is, then, some version of the
experts lending legitimacy to some interpretations and uses over others, and the remaining
speakers in the linguistic community deferring to these experts. There is, then, some agreement
with Fricker’s idea that advantageous positioning gives you a higher influence over the
conceptual resource. The expert view, however, would likely not hold that material power
correlates with influence in all relevant realms. For example, the experts on low-income single
motherhood likely will not be anyone in politics or law, but rather the low-income single
mothers themselves. There is therefore a significant element of the expert view that does not
lend support to Fricker’s account. Having established that no social position can give the kind
of influence Fricker ascribes to certain professions, we now move on to look at whether function
can account for the level of control she needs.

On function-oriented views in conceptual engineering, concepts fulfill different
functions for concept users. What confers control, or conceptual power, would in this case be
the ability to place demands on the conceptual resource that would lead to the conceptual
change. One version of this view is function-first conceptual engineering, as described by
Simion and Kelp (forthcoming). On their account, concept change is the product of a function-
driven adaption process (forthcoming, 3). They claim that “what explains our influence in the
adaption process […] is our influence on the environment” (Simion and Kelp: 6). This means
that by altering the environment, for example, we can change the demands placed on a concept
that is responsive to the given feature of the environment, and thereby encourage a shift in the intentions and extensions of a term. In an example that gives great cause for optimism, they suggest moving all the cows in the world to the North Pole, with the result that after a few years “cow” will come to mean an animal with long rather than short hair (forthcoming, 12). This would be a very active way of altering the environment to influence a term. Another example of a less intentional function-oriented change is the way the word “salad” has evolved, from meaning a combination of leafy greens to meaning “various warm leaf-free concoctions” (Dorr and Hawthorne 2014: 284). This, they argue, was a result of an adaptive change in response to a change in the demands on the salad concept: a focus on ‘eating healthy’ made people start having only salads for lunch, and so salads had to be more filling (Simion and Kelp forthcoming: 4). Similarly, the concept of marriage changed “due to changes in social environment” (5). In these cases, there was an opening up of a new functional role for ‘salad’ and ‘marriage’ to play (forthcoming, 4). In still other cases, the environment can be stable but we aim to change concepts so as to “improve function fulfilment” (5).

On this view, the conceptual resource is somewhat responsive to efforts to change it, and so we can account for some of the control that Fricker attributes to certain social positions in her account. Note, however, that the conceptual resource will not always respond to changes in the ways that we expect. Although we can intend to change the conceptual resource, if the changes that we introduce fail to “deliver the relevant benefit” they will not acquire a function and therefore not succeed in becoming adaptations (page 6). This means that the amount of control ascribed to groups or individuals on function-oriented views is markedly less than on Fricker’s, because there is no necessary causal relationship between attempts to make change and the outcomes of these attempts. Conceptual power depends on whether you are able to change the demands placed on concepts, and this in turn depends on several factors and facts about the environment. We therefore can try to engineer change, but cannot guarantee its success. Fricker’s second commitment, that there is a causal relationship between social power and conceptual power, therefore does not hold up well on this view.

It is still possible to tell Fricker’s story of conceptual change using the function-oriented framework. Indeed, she might be perfectly happy to say that being in a position that gives you “undue influence” over the resource means something like having your required adaptations of concepts matter more than the adaptations other people may have had use for. Take, for example, the variety of concepts available to understand the medical problems suffered by white men compared to those tailored to women and people of color (Johnson et al. 2014; The Lancet
On a fusion of Function-First and Fricker, we would say that the hermeneutical resource has been more responsive to the adaptations this demographic needed in the realm of medical concepts than it has to the needs of other groups. This would require a lot of additional work to explain how functions are individuated, which may or may not be possible. Still, the idea that function determines conceptual change is compatible the idea that material or identity power determine your level of influence. In the case of the white men in medicine, their outsize presence in relevant arenas of hermeneutical influence (academic medicine which decides what is researched and what isn’t, the politics of research funding) could lead to the hermeneutical tools being more responsive to their needs (Johnson et al. 2014). Fricker’s story can be told on the function-first view of conceptual engineering, therefore, if she is willing to let go of the straightforward relationship between social power and conceptual influence on which an intent to change necessarily leads to conceptual change.

On the function-first view of conceptual engineering, conceptual control can be a product of intentions to effect change, but as they note, we cannot predict the effects of our efforts. It follows that we will also end up affecting the conceptual resource without intending to, or in ways we did not expect. Thomasson notes that function-oriented views do not have to include talk of intention at all; that function does not have to coincide with what anyone “intends it to be” (forthcoming, 7). She offers Millikan’s view as an example. On this view, function is equivalent to a reproductively established family, where reproductive success explains the existence of any member of that family (Millikan 1984, 28). Fricker’s account could also be told as a story of reproductive success: some social structures, for example the stratification of society by income-level, can shape the linguistic environment in ways that will make certain socially important types of concepts systematically less likely to take hold. There is no place in this account for intentions to effect change, since reproductive success is determined by factors beyond our control. On some function views, therefore, we can retain some of the control that Fricker is committed to, whereas on others we ought to reject her second commitment entirely. In both cases, however, function-oriented views give us a way to talk about hermeneutical injustice that is compatible with the externalist reading of Fricker. I therefore suggest that the function-oriented reading is an improvement of her account.

It is also worth mentioning here that there are views that do not posit anything in particular as a driving force behind conceptual change. Cappelen (2018) has developed what he calls the Austerity Framework of conceptual engineering, in which we have neither control nor insight into the mechanisms that produce conceptual change. The lack of control follows from
a set of “vague externalist assumptions” he takes as starting points for the account. These assumptions are 1) that the environment to some extent determines extensions and intensions, 2) that there can be widespread mistakes and confusions about semantic values, and 3) that a conceptual practice can be held together by a “complex web of interactions and dependencies” so that a common commitment among all those who possess a concept is not a requirement (Cappelen 2018, 65). Cappelen takes conceptual change to be cases of reference shift, but holds that we have no knowledge (and plausibly no way of obtaining knowledge) about how these reference shifts happen (70-71). Seeing as we do not know how references shift, any intention we have of making such shifts happen will be pointless. Even if we were to try to influence facts that we take to be relevant in fixing reference, such as other speakers and experts, this would “hardly amount to more than a drop in the ocean” (Cappelen 2018, 76).

On this view, both of Fricker’s commitments are just wrong, since we cannot say anything about what determines meaning change at all.

2.1.3 Summary

This section started by making explicit Fricker’s two most salient commitments in the area of conceptual control: that collective social meanings are generated by a set of practices, and that these practices are exclusive to, or matter most when practiced in a given set of professions, and that social power and conceptual power correspond and are causally linked. We have seen that on the expert view, Fricker is at best only partially right: we can easily grant that some fields have hermeneutical resources that are more responsive to the innovations of those in positions of material power, but in others, this seems far-fetched. Either Fricker has to deny innovations from the margins, of which we have several good examples, or she has to ascribe to the “higher professions” a gatekeeping role, which seems overly pessimistic as attributions towards the motives of those occupying those roles, or else empirically false.

I have argued that views that posit function as the driving factor in conceptual change can account for the level of control Fricker ascribes to some social institutions such as a set of professions. This requires letting go of the claim that social power is what causes conceptual

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5 Note that although experts figure in Cappelen’s account, their role is quite different from that of the experts in Haslanger and other views that I suggested were aligned to some extent with that of Fricker. Haslanger, for example, believes that the experts will play a role in ameliorating our concepts - to “help explicate the meaning of our terms” in ways that make them better suited to further our social justice aims (Haslanger 2012: 15). Cappelen, in contrast, grants that experts play some role in fixing the references of our terms, but neither us ordinary folks nor the experts know how it is that they play this role, and therefore they can no more intentionally bring about any conceptual change than can the rest of us.
influence. Letting this claim go allows Fricker to keep both her externalist commitments and the commitment to the idea that some social groups have outsize hermeneutical influence. I believe this strengthens her account.

2.2 Ignorance

The second cluster of commitments centers around ignorance, or non-possession of concepts. What role do concepts play in mediating our acquisition and transmission of knowledge about our experiences? Fricker leaves it somewhat unclear what qualifies as ignorance on her view. There can be several interpretations, for example, of the levels of concept possession in the case of Carmita Wood. At first, Wood has an experience of being made to feel uncomfortable by her boss, but cannot seem to explain on her application for unemployment why this experience made her quit her job. On Fricker’s reading of this story, Wood is “unable to understand a significant patch of her own experience” (151), but what exactly does this inability mean? Is she at loss because she does not understand her experience, and if yes, is her inability to understand a direct consequence of there not being a concept for this type of experience? Fricker would respond yes to both questions: because this sort of experience “was not collectively understood, [it] remained barely intelligible, even to her” (2007: 162). It seems that for Fricker there is a threshold level of intelligibility above which you have epistemic access to your experiences, and that this threshold is determined either in part or fully by the concepts you possess. This gives rise to two questions that pertain to conceptual engineering. Firstly, what is the content of an experience: does a concept figure in its content? And secondly, what knowledge or awareness can a subject have of her experience without access to the relevant concept?

2.2.1 Fricker’s ignorance

Mason (2012) raises a worry that Fricker has mischaracterized the experience of lacking a concept. Surely some awareness and ability to relate to the experience one is having is needed to motivate a search for meaning or understanding that can result in the invention of a concept: someone “mystified by their own experience” would not take the necessary steps to overcome the injustice by the innovation of a concept (297). Mason’s worry can be read in two ways. On a general reading, the worry is that surely we would still call it an injustice even if Wood was able to understand her own experience and even communicate intelligibly about relevant parts of it - that she was made to feel uncomfortable; or that she felt like she couldn’t go to work
anymore. It cannot be the case, the worry goes, that the subject and the community of knowers have to be equally in the dark about an experience for it to constitute an injustice that the subject cannot make herself understood (Mason 2012, 300). This worry has been addressed by Fricker (2016) and Goetze (2017), and is taken up briefly in the next subsection. On a more specifically conceptual reading, however, we can take Mason to point out a puzzle for Fricker: what is the epistemic status of a subject who is not mystified by her experience, but at the same time lacks the concepts needed communicate intelligibly about it?

Fricker refers to her subject seeing “through a glass darkly,” so it seems clear that the hermeneutically marginalized subject has some awareness of undergoing the experience in question, even if she cannot conceptualize it (2007, 148). It is therefore not the case that we can only have experiences that find their expression in the collective hermeneutical resource. Still, it seems like we cannot come to have appropriate or satisfactory knowledge about the experience without fitting conceptual resources, or else it would not constitute an injustice in the first place. Goetze (2017) has developed a model of Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice that distinguishes between different levels of hermeneutical marginalization and therefore also levels of concept availability. On this model, he distinguishes between the presence of a concept in the conceptual resource used by the individual; the individual’s social group; a social group other than the individual’s own, and the collective, meaning the intersection of all the community-specific resources (2017, 77). Two of Goetze’s categories of concepts are especially relevant when discussing ignorance, or non-possession of a concept - namely, those concepts in which the relevant interpretive tools are possessed by no one, or those concepts that are only possessed by the marginalized subject. The first, where no one has the relevant interpretive tools available, Goetze calls hermeneutical effacement, and the second he calls hermeneutical isolation.

In hermeneutical effacement, the lack of a concept is global -- the interpretive tool does not exist in any of the hermeneutical resources used by the different social groups. Goetze locates the Wood case in this category: there are no interpretive tools that “fully capture” the experience of sexual harassment (2017: 81). There also is no opportunity to come together with relevant others “in a supportive environment that would have enabled them to develop the needed interpretive tools” (81). Consequently, Wood and other women who have been sexually harassed are “prevent[ed] from acquiring knowledge” about their experience (2017: 81). Two features bear noting about this state of global lack. The first is the ‘fully’ that precedes ‘capture’ in Goetze’s account. This suggests that the partial understanding that Mason gestures at is not
relevant because it does not combine all the relevant features of an experience, or perhaps even just fails to combine them in the right way. The second is that the way out of this predicament would be to bring together people who have had the same experience in a supportive environment, and that this would result in the invention of a suitable concept. This seems to mean that the relevant kind of experience cannot be known - and therefore potentially cannot be accessed in a way that enables the subject to deal with it constructively – if the right social circumstances do not obtain. What features of the social circumstances therefore must be said to determine the content of your experience, which plausibly makes Goetze’s Fricker an externalist about concepts.

Goetze’s second category, hermeneutical isolation, complicates this picture somewhat. This category is supposed to capture the cases where the subject herself has come to understand her experience and has developed the necessary interpretive tools all on her own. Given the implications of the characterizations from the first category, however, it is difficult to see how this would happen, and Goetze agrees that “we might be skeptical about whether such cases can occur” as the result of only the individual’s own ruminations (2017: 82). As Wittgenstein pointed out in his discussions of private language, notes Goetze, a subject who invents a term for her own experience cannot be sure that this concept consistently tracks the same thing. On Wittgenstein’s view, a concept cannot “acquire a determinate meaning” until a community of users have applied it consistently and reached an agreement on what the concept applies to (Wittgenstein 1953, §§243-7). Before this has happened, what the subject has are only “inchoate hermeneutical innovations” that cannot amount to knowledge (Goetze 2017: 82). This, too, suggests that Fricker sides with the externalists.

2.2.2 Deferential concepts

The challenge to this interpretation of Fricker would be that the “awareness” that she, Mason and Goetze all take for granted as the manifestation of an experience lived but not yet named. What is the epistemic status of this awareness, since it does not amount to propositional knowledge? One possible way to interpret the suggested awareness is as a phenomenal concept. A phenomenal concept is a concept that can be formed only by “introspection of phenomenal experiences” (Ball 2009: 3). Philosophers of mind have traditionally held that what Mary, the brilliant neuroscientist in a colorless environment, learns when she exits the room and sees red is a case of acquiring a phenomenal concept. Not new knowledge per say, but something new all the same. Could Fricker rely on phenomenal concepts to explain what is going on for a
subject prior to a relevant hermeneutical breakthrough? Ball (2009) discusses the issue of whether externalist forms of deference to those that possess phenomenal concepts already is possible, and this could be read as a partial solution to the Wittgenstein-worry introduced by Goetze. A concept is possessed deferentially if a speaker is willing to make adjustments with respect to the extension of their concept upon interacting with other competent speakers. Fricker-style ignorance could then be explained as deferential phenomenal concept-possession prior to the necessary public reference-fixing process for the corresponding non-phenomenal concept. For example, the phenomenal concept obtained by undergoing Carmita Wood’s experience in the workplace could figure in her thinking about the ordeal as a phenomenal concept up until she encountered other people who had similar phenomenal concepts and were able to innovate a public concept to fit the bill. In this sense, the idea of phenomenal concepts could fill in the blank in Fricker between not having an experience and not knowing you had an experience. Ball, however, points out that if phenomenal concepts are deferential, then they can be expressed and acquired linguistically, and so you can come to possess the concept without having had the experience - and consequently it would no longer be a phenomenal concept (2009, 21). However, if it is required that phenomenal concepts be non-deferential, then Ball replies: stipulation is a widely accepted form of concept introduction, and if you can stipulate, then you can possess a concept without having undergone the phenomenal experience (2009, 22). Ball uses these arguments as part of a bigger attack on the incoherence of phenomenal concepts, but the deferential aspect alone is sufficient illustration of the inconsistency Fricker invites when she relies on both externalist commitments and a pre-epistemic “awareness” in her account. Since the phenomenal concepts seem not to be a promising escape for Fricker from this problem after all, the best option is perhaps to take Fricker’s externalist commitments seriously and work from there.

2.2.3 Summary

If Fricker is an externalist about concepts, this gives rise to a new set of challenges. Her account is among other things an attempt to identify the areas where we ought to conceptually engineer better (or more) concepts, that is to say, areas where crafting or at least promoting certain kind of conceptual change is an ethical imperative of sorts. This makes little sense as a project, however, if meaning is determined by the world to the extent that we cannot change it. The topic of concept non-possession, or ignorance, is salient in this regard because it makes clear the extent to which we rely on the shared interpretive tools to give meaning to what we
experience on Fricker’s account. Phenomenal concepts are one way to account for a private meaning-making process, but these will not do for Fricker, because of her externalist commitments.

Theorists differ on whether externalism is compatible with advocating concept change (Cappelen and Plunkett 2013: 9). On the one hand, you might think that if what concepts exist is determined fully or in part by what exists in the world, then you might think our influence over them would be correspondingly limited, and that we would have little reason to try to change them Cappelen 2018, 55). On the other hand, advocates of concept change such as Haslanger and Thomasson argue that we can change social reality by changing the concepts we use (Haslanger 2012; Thomasson 2017). On this view, because language is “constitutive of reality”, externalism is no excuse to refrain from what Haslanger calls ameliorative projects (Simion and Kelp forthcoming). The question for Fricker, therefore, is whether she is open to taking on the ontological commitments of an externalism like Haslanger’s.

Fricker’s account is concerned with uncovering the areas of social reality where our current pool of interpretive resources falls short. One of the reasons why this matters is that the interpretive resources at our disposal to some extent determine what experiences can be had for Fricker. If the right concepts aren’t available, subjects have their experiences as if looking “through a glass darkly” (2007, 148). In this section, I have argued that this commitment is yet another reason to read Fricker as an externalist about concepts. While some views in conceptual engineering hold that externalism makes crafting conceptual change hard or impossible, others hold that because concepts are part of our social reality, what we are doing when conceptually engineering is in fact changing the world. Seeing as Fricker believes absences of concepts can in the worst case scenario prevent individuals from becoming the selves they ought to have been, I suggest that her view of concepts as constitutive of social reality aligns with those of for example Haslanger (2012) and Thomasson (forthcoming), making her a social constructivist about concepts. The social constructivist reading adds strength to Fricker’s account for two reasons. Firstly because it makes advocating conceptual change compatible with externalism, and secondly because it is makes sense of a project that advocates conceptual change as an approach to injustice.

2.3 Conceptual absences

The literature on conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics is not exactly bursting with discussion about missing concepts. Rather, it treats the concepts that already are; the ways they
work and whether they ought to work differently, and if so, how to achieve this (Cappelen 2018). There are many possible reasons why missing concepts aren’t all the rage. The most obvious of these is perhaps that if you deal with missing concepts, you have to provide an account of which missing concepts are interesting and which ones are not – presumably there are many concepts that just don’t exist because they do not apply to anything interesting (cf. natural properties see: Lewis 1983, 1984, 1986; Sider 2009, 2011). Another reason is that they do not fulfill an important function. In addition, it is not clear what discussing a “missing” concept should entail: can we conceptualize the space where the concept should be if it truly is missing? What can “missing” mean such that it still makes sense to speak of introduction of a concept or improvement of the resource from which the “missing” concept is lacking? These are some of the questions that make it interesting to try to spell out what a hermeneutical lacuna is in in conceptual engineering terms.

What does Fricker mean when she describes a hermeneutical injustice as a “lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be?” (2007: 150-151). As discussed in the section on ignorance, it is somewhat unclear how we should understand the epistemic status of the subject that finds herself in need of an as-yet-uncoined concept or phrase. This is a different question, however, from how the gap or lacuna itself should be understood. While the subject of the previous section treats the consequences of a conceptual absence, this section is an attempt at clarifying the nature of the absence itself. When there is a gap, Fricker writes, the thing that wants to be expressed is “obscured, even unspeakable” (150). What needs to be communicated is “scantly understood” (150): the gap is described as “an absence of proper understanding” (151). Moreover, when there is a lacuna, the relevant experience is “out of sight” (153). With these descriptions from Fricker in mind, let us move to look at how a gap is characterized in conceptual engineering terms.

### 2.3.1 Absences as defective concepts

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, there is much talk of fixing and improving concepts in conceptual engineering, and not as much about inventing or creating new ones to fill gaps. The first question to answer, therefore, about what “missing” means for Fricker, is whether it is a case of actual absence or is better described as a defect? Maitra (2018) argues that “missing” understood as actually absent clearly fails because there are clear cases of already existing labels where these do not aid intelligibility, but rather serve to cloud or prevent a correct understanding (350). In Fricker’s paradigm case, the sexual harassment story of Carmita Wood,
Laura Beeby (2011) has identified several terms that do cover the way Wood’s boss acted towards her, including “flirting” and “chasing around the desk” (2011, 480). These terms did not help Wood make her experience intelligible, however: if anything, they obscured the suffering it caused her and may lead us to believe she was overreacting (Maitra 2018, 350). I find this argument persuasive because it suggests a better way to understand how you can have a “scantly understood” experience that you see “through a glass darkly” than those discussed in the previous section (Fricker 2017, 148). It seems to make more sense that this is a state of being dissatisfied, explicitly or implicitly, with the concept you are attempting to apply, rather than being “mystified” as Mason aptly notes (2011, 297). This is perhaps helpful in understanding other cases as well, including the re-appropriating of slurs, where a concept has been in existence, so that it was not the absence of a concept or term per se, but rather something about that concept that made it a suboptimal one.

Having established the usefulness of talking about the lacuna in terms of defects, we can begin to look at the kinds of deficiencies Fricker outlines. Cappelen (2018) has created a useful taxonomy of conceptual defects. At the highest level, the defects are divided into problems with the semantic value itself, and problems with the effects of the semantic value (34). The semantic value itself can be defective if it is too vague, inconsistent, incoherent or just nonsense. The effects of the semantic value are further divided into three categories: the moral, political or social effects, cognitive effects, and finally, effects on theorizing. Where in this taxonomy do Fricker-type defects land? I will go through each category to see in what ways they can each be a helpful lens for Fricker’s account.

**Dysfunctional or unsatisfactory semantic value.** The first category concerns dysfunctional or unsatisfactory semantic value that makes a concept unable to do what it should do. An example of this view is found in Carnap, who suggests that improving a concept consists in “transforming a given more or less inexact concept into an exact one” (Carnap 1950: 3 in Cappelen 2018: 11). The issue, then, is with semantic function. Cappelen gives us Quine’s take:

“*we fix on the particular functions of the unclear expression that make it worth troubling about and then devise a substitute, clear and couched in terms to our liking, that fills those functions*” (Quine 1960: 258-9)

Maitra (2018) has developed an interpretation of Fricker’s lacunae that fall under this category. On her reading of the lacunas, what is missing is a label that lays bare the relevant normative properties of an experience (350). Normative properties are defined instrumentally in Maitra’s account as that which makes an experience communicatively intelligible (348). Even though
someone might be able to communicate about her experience of postpartum depression, for instance, it will not amount to communicative intelligibility before she is able to lay bare its normative properties, such as why it is not her fault that she was tired, unable to care for her child and so on (347). This proposal helps us understand why there can be descriptions of an experience available that just do not seem to do the trick (353). Maitra suggests that the easiest way to lay bare the “crucial normative properties” (351) of a new experience, to render it communicatively intelligible, is “to assimilate it to another whose relevant normative properties are already sufficiently familiar” (352-3). This can be done in three different ways: 1) by “co-opting an already normatively familiar label, and extending it”; 2) by modifying a familiar label with the right normative properties, or 3) by coining a new label and “taking as its paradigmatic instance some normatively familiar experience” in order to extend the interpretation of this paradigmatic instance to a further range of experiences (Maitra 2018: 353). These all seem to fall under improvement on semantic value and are well characterized, again, by Quine: what is going on is not an attempt to make clear “what the users of the unclear expression had in mind all along” but rather to “supply lacks” (Quine 1960: 258-9, emphasis in original). It seems to me that depending on the nature of the relevant normative properties, which according to Maitra (2018: 347) will vary from case to case, the assimilations she describes can be taken to remedy any one of the semantic defects Cappelen lists: nonsense, incoherence, inconsistency or vagueness (Cappelen 2018: 34). For example, co-opting the normatively familiar label ‘harassment’ to do the normative work in the innovated concept of ‘sexual harassment’ could remedy vagueness about the ethical properties of such behavior.

Objectionable consequences of semantic value. The second category encompasses all the negative consequences that can result from a concept with an intact semantic value. Cappelen divides these into social, moral and political ones (these are one category), cognitive ones and effects on theorizing (Cappelen 2018, 34). Let us first look at the social, moral and political category. A prominent view in this camp is that of Haslanger’s ameliorative projects about race and gender terms. She suggests that we start using ‘woman’ as a term that per definition denotes an individual who is subordinated in a gender hierarchy (233). By analyzing an ordinary term in this way, and suggesting we alter our use to fit the new analysis, Haslanger takes herself to be furthering a set of political goals (with moral implications). The altered understanding of our terms is an invitation to “understand ourselves and those around us as deeply molded by injustice” (242) and will ultimately “provide a framework for envisioning the sorts of constructive changes needed to create a more just world” (243). For Haslanger then,
the concept of ‘woman’ that would most effectively promote social justice was “missing” and so she suggested one way to ameliorate the concept so that it would better further the relevant goals.

Having reframed Fricker’s absences as presences of defective concepts, it is not difficult to reframe the conceptual shortcomings in terms of social, moral or political effects. Recall that Fricker herself divides the harms that result from hermeneutical injustice into primary and secondary ones. The primary harm is “exclusion from the pooling of knowledge” (162), and the secondary harms include epistemic harms such as loss of epistemic confidence and intellectual curiosity, as well as practical harms. The exclusion from the pooling of knowledge, as we have seen, results in a structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resource, which in itself seems to fit neatly into the category of improvements justified by social, moral or political goals. In addition, the practical harms that Fricker discusses all seem to warrant the same placement: The concepts available for interpretation of sexualized behavior in the office prior to the birth of the term ‘sexual harassment’ had detrimental moral, social and political effects. To hash this example out: women were unfairly disadvantaged in their place of work because of their gender, and as this is discriminatory, it has moral valence. The social effects center around the difficult situation women faced whether deciding to remain in their positions or resign, as Carmita Wood. Lost wages, declines in mental health, loss of stability - these are all social consequences with repercussions not only for the woman in question but also her family and society at large. In terms of negative political effects, Wood and the others were able to set in motion a machinery of advocacy, rights work and finally legislation to protect women (and more recently gender minorities, though to a lesser extent) in the workplace. The original concept was implicated in a host of negative political consequences that thanks to conceptual engineering were improved and are still improving.

**Objectionable cognitive effects of semantic value.** We now move on to look at the cognitive effects of defective concepts. What is a cognitive defect and might we interpret Fricker’s “missing” concept as falling into this category? Cappelen uses Leslie’s work on generics as an example of terms that are defective because they lead us to make cognitive mistakes. Leslie argues that the use of generics for social kinds, such as Muslim or Black, makes us more likely to commit the cognitive mistake of essentializing a social kind:

“We essentialize a kind if we form the (tacit) belief that there is some hidden, non-obvious, and persistent property or underlying nature shared by members of that kind, which causally grounds their common properties and dispositions” (Leslie 2017, 405).
She supports this claim with research in cognitive psychology showing that statements that avoid using generics reduce participants’ expectations that an individual will conform to a stereotype. Changing our concepts, on this account, will allow us to think better. Fricker, too, seems to claim at various points that the benefits of remedying a conceptual lack will be cognitive. She writes that it is a life-changing “cognitive achievement” to finally obtain the communicative tools needed to make yourself understood (2007, 148); that the “cognitive disadvantage” grounds the injustice and that not being in possession of the right concept is a “cognitive disablement” (151). Since Fricker uses cognitive disadvantage to describe both Wood and her harasser in the example, the ‘cognitive’ seems to refer to the limit the conceptual absence places on the possible cognitions a subject could have. For both Wood and her harasser, for example, lacking the right concept means being unable to think about what the right course of action would be: as Fricker notes, the harasser may have acted differently had he known that he was in the wrong (Fricker 2017, 149). In addition, lacking the concept prevents Wood from forming thoughts that would be essential to her self-understanding (151).

It is not entirely clear, however, that overcoming a hermeneutical injustice necessarily constitutes a cognitive achievement. Maitra (2018) takes Fricker to suggest that what is missing is a concept with the right normative properties, and that coming to have an appropriate concept means assimilating or borrowing from concepts that are normatively familiar in the relevant sense. However, this method of obtaining the right normative properties to make an experience communicatively intelligible will often necessitate distortion of the relevant experience (360). In the case of sexual harassment, for example, several kinds of behavior are grouped together, suggesting a normative commonality that “is in fact illusory” (358). The point here is that although a term with the right normative properties allows a subject to overcome a hermeneutical injustice, it is necessary to relinquish other goods, in this case fine-grainedness, clarity or correctness and that this muddling suggests that whatever is gained, it is not cognitive advantage (361). I take this argument to apply, similarly, to any attempt to frame the defects in terms of negative impacts on theorizing, and will therefore not discuss this category any further here.

2.3.2 Absences as defective resource

The above attempts to put Fricker-style lacunas in terms of defects of individual concepts, but there is also the possibility of something being wrong not with particular concepts but rather with the hermeneutical resource as a whole. I want to comment on, briefly, what such a
shortcoming could consist in before closing this section. Several authors have suggested that even if there are terms available, some significant number of the relevant members of a community refrain from using them or use them incorrectly (Pohlhaus 2012; Dotson 2012). On this reading, a concept is missing in the sense that it has not gained sufficient uptake for it to play the role in communication that Fricker’s marginalized subject needs it to in order to make her experience intelligible. Alternatively, the concept may have the necessary uptake, meaning that people do possess it and could use it adequately, but choose not to. On these suggestions, the lack of a concept refers not to a defect with the concept itself, but to the many ways that understanding can fail to follow from the presence of the concept in the collective hermeneutical resource (though whether we would call it present in the collective hermeneutical resource if there is resistance to using it is an open question). Yet another option is to think that “missing” need not necessarily be the case of any single concepts absence or presence, but that it could also be a case of the dominant ways of combining the different tools available in the resource that obscure certain other possible combinations that would be more hermeneutically just.

I have argued that Fricker’s description of the problem of missing concepts in the collective hermeneutical resource, then, should be read as one or several deficiencies in the resource as a whole or in the concepts that make up the collective resource. The relevant work on conceptual engineering opens up many possibilities for thinking about what’s missing in terms of defects that concern indisposition to apply a concept correctly; failure to fulfill a relevant function, be it moral, social or cognitive, or inexactness resulting in a need for refinement. I hope to have shown that what Fricker describes is not necessarily best understood as an actual gap “where the name for an experience should be” (Fricker 2007: 156). Instead, concepts can be thought of as falling anywhere on continuum of inadequacy. There is a threshold below which we would be disposed to agree with Fricker that a concept is missing in the relevant sense because it is not adequate for meeting the subject’s chosen end. This has two consequences: first, it likely matters for the kind of remedies we would consider adequate, and second, this raises the question of what the threshold is – when is a concept not good enough, and what constitutes a good concept for Fricker? This is the subject of the next section.

2.4 Conceptual virtue

The final cluster of commitments in Fricker poses the question of what is a good concept for Fricker. Since she primarily flags the issue of missing concepts, this is not an explicit feature of Fricker’s account. However, as I argued in the previous section, it may in many cases be
more appropriate to read Fricker’s absences as presences of defective concepts. I ended the previous section by suggesting a threshold level model for understanding when a concept is missing in the relevant sense. In order for a threshold model to function it is necessary to understand not only what constitutes defect, but also what makes a concept good or at least satisfactory for Fricker’s purposes. This section will briefly recap the goods or conceptual virtues corresponding to the defects discussed in the previous chapter, before moving on to discuss two features of concept virtue I take to be implicit in Fricker’s account.

Cappelen and Plunkett (forthcoming) have outlined several goods that parallel the later classification of defects in Cappelen (2018): a concept can produce epistemic, social, moral or political benefits. Thomasson mentions metaphysical accuracy as one dimension of evaluation: we sometimes think a good concept is one that carves the world at its joints (Thomasson forthcoming, 4). Haslanger’s political goals for amelioration would also fall into the social and moral categories. In the previous section, I discussed how different features of Fricker’s account suggest that she has some stake in all of these dimensions of virtues and defects: cognitive, epistemic, social and political. On the function view of conceptual engineering, all of these different goals can be accommodated by referring to the varying functions of our different conceptual resources. These, then, are the ways to talk about the immediate benefits generated by a concept which may qualify it as good or at least above the mentioned threshold level.

In addition to these immediate benefits on the conceptual level, there is also a level of change postulated to follow from changes in our concepts. In a superficial division of the two, we can say that these concern what the world can become, and what individuals in the world can become. Fricker is most explicitly concerned with the latter. In her account, the absence of concepts not only complicates interpersonal relations but can also hamper an individual’s relationship with herself: hermeneutical injustice is sometimes “so damaging that it cramps the very development of self” (163). To illustrate, she draws on an autobiographical novel by Edmund White, in which the main character struggles, as a young boy, to come to terms with his same-sex attraction. The existing interpretations of this experience in the hermeneutical resource are those of homosexuality as a “sickness” or a passing stage in adolescence (163). Although these interpretations are “crucially dissonant with [his] actual experience of his own desire,” Fricker describe them as constructions that nevertheless “partly condition” the protagonist’s experience (163). The collective understandings are much stronger than the “lonely and inarticulate” promise of an “alternative understanding” that they not only affect.

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6 See Sider (2011) or Van Inwagen (2016) for versions of this view.
what he is able to experience, as in the case of Carmita Wood, but also what he is able to become, or as Fricker writes: “his very self” (164). She is not alone in according this kind of power to hermeneutical resources. As Burgess and Plunkett observe: “our conceptual repertoire determines not only what we can think and say but also, as a result, what we can do and who we can be.” (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 1091).

Beyond the creation of the self, many conceptual engineers also take our conceptual resources to determine the content of our social world. Haslanger, for example, writes that the world “cannot tell us what gender is, or what race is” (224). This does not mean that there is no such thing as race or gender, but rather that how we use these terms will directly affect the roles the concepts can and cannot play, and therefore also what they are. In Haslanger’s words, “it is up to us to decide what in the world, if anything, they are” (224). A good concept, on this account, will be one that plays the roles we want it to, and therefore shapes reality to suit our (political) preferences. A less political but still worldly view of the impact of conceptual engineering is found in Cappelen (2018). According to Cappelen, the extension and intension of a concept can change between two points in time due to the difference between semantic content and speech act content. In his example, what it takes to be a family can change between times t and t* because we can express many different propositions with our utterances. The idea is that family as a topic is more coarse-grained than the semantic values of any utterance using the term ‘family’, and this makes it possible to claim that two people are talking about the same thing even if one is using the meaning ‘family’ had at t and the other the meaning of ‘family’ at t* (141). The semantic value of ‘family’ will gradually change, and we can say that families have changed - not the word or the concept, but families themselves (142).

In Fricker, what concepts we have and do not have access to determine both what we can experience, how we understand those experiences and what we can become. This idea is prominent in conceptual engineering as well, not only on the individual level, but also on a structural level: what concepts we have determines what social kinds there are, for example. In addition to the requirements on a good concept mentioned above, it is therefore fair to claim that a good concept for Fricker is one that enables not only communication about the experiences of the self but also the creation of the self and society. For example, before the invention of the term ‘sexual harassment’ there could not be victims of sexual harassment (or at least anyone recognized as such), but now there are, and this constitutes an improvement. Haslanger has described ameliorative projects about social kinds as deciding what these things ought to be (Haslanger 1999). This seems to hold true for Fricker as well: when we aim to
remedy hermeneutical injustices, we are deciding what it is to have a given kind of experience, with all the individual and structural changes that entails.

On Fricker’s account, a good concept is one that enables understanding of the self and communication of this understanding to others. Moreover, lack of a good concept has the potential to prevent someone from becoming the right kind of social self. It therefore seems fair to say that beyond enabling intelligibility, a good concept for Fricker is one that can be constitutive of the kind of social reality we want to create. This is yet another reason (in addition to the one given in section 2.3 on ignorance) to read Fricker as a social constructivist about concepts.

2.5 Taking stock

This chapter has discussed four clusters of explicit or implicit conceptual engineering commitments in Fricker: conceptual control, ignorance, conceptual absences and conceptual virtue. In the area of conceptual control, Fricker’s position ascribes an outsize conceptual influence to a few professions. This understanding of meaning change is not compatible with any current position on what conceptual engineering is. I have argued that Fricker’s account is strongest on an externalist, function-oriented reading of her commitments. This reading has to let go of the causal relationship between social power and conceptual control, but retains the idea that some groups have an outsize influence over the collective hermeneutical resource.

On the topic of ignorance, I argued that Fricker’s description of a knower pre-concept acquisition suggests that she is an externalist about meaning. This is closely related to the discussion of what it means for a concept to be missing, or for there to be a hermeneutical lacuna, in Fricker’s terms. I suggested that by following Maitra’s (2018) discussion and the tools provided by function-oriented conceptual engineering, Fricker’s missing concepts should be understood as falling at the extreme lower end of a scale of inadequacy. On such a scale, there would likely be a threshold level to adequacy, above which we would consider concepts to be present and sufficiently functional for our purposes. Finally, at the opposite end of this scale we find Fricker’s view of concept virtue. Fricker is most concerned with the individual harms caused by defective concepts, and therefore also the individual effects of concept virtue: that they should aid individuals in achieving self-understanding, thereby enabling them to make themselves intelligible to the world, and ultimately making it possible to become the right kind of social self. This last claim about conceptual virtue suggests that Fricker is a social constructivist about concepts, and that beyond securing intelligibility, she is committed to a
view of concept virtue similar to that of Sally Haslanger and others who take our concepts to be good if they further our moral and political goals.

In this chapter, I have spelled out, clarified and evaluated Fricker’s commitments in conceptual engineering terms. I have argued that her views on concept non-possession and conceptual control make Fricker an externalist. I have also argued that a function-oriented reading of Fricker is a better way to explain how some groups come to have disproportionate amounts of conceptual control than Fricker’s reliance on social power. Finally, I have argued that we should take Fricker to be a social constructivist, because this makes sense of her externalism, and makes externalism compatible with the idea that conceptual change is constitutive of social change on the arc towards justice.
3 Criticisms of Hermeneutical Injustice Revisited

The previous chapter investigated the various commitments that are both implicit and explicit in Fricker’s account, to see whether these form a coherent position on several key issues in conceptual engineering. I argued that we should read Fricker as an externalist, function-oriented social constructivist conceptual engineer, because this strengthens its explanatory power by avoiding inconsistencies and commitments to oversimplified descriptions of conceptual change. In this chapter, I hope to show that this reading also enables Fricker to answer the three categories of criticisms outlined in Chapter One.

The three groups of challenges or criticisms were 1) those that deal with scope, 2) those that deal with the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice and 3) those that question whether the injustice really is epistemic in nature. I begin with a brief summary of the criticisms in question, before moving on to show how the exploration of conceptual engineering in relation to Fricker helps us to get clearer on which challenges to her account are important and which ones miss the mark. I argue that the externalist reading renders the two first categories of criticisms moot because they rely on implausible internalist assumptions. I then show that the last two categories of criticisms point to two ways in which the function-oriented reading of Fricker can improve our understanding of hermeneutical injustice. Firstly, it can do so by telling the story of how some groups come to have their epistemic functions take priority, and second, by showing how the injustice is properly epistemic without the claim that there is a difference in what dominantly and marginally situated knowers know.

3.1 Scope criticisms and the problem of externalism

The first of the three categories of criticisms relates to the scope of hermeneutical injustice. Some believe that the scope of hermeneutical injustice as Fricker sets it up is too broad, in that it captures several distinct ways of lacking knowledge under the same term. Though the notion of hermeneutical injustice as Fricker has developed it applies, as we have seen, to cases involving concepts like ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘postpartum depression’, the worry is that it is not suitable for cases involving concepts such as ‘white privilege’. These latter cases differ from the former in that the experience is fully understood by the marginalized themselves, who have developed what Mason (2011) calls ‘resistant interpretive practices’ to meet their communicative needs. The ignorance of the dominantly situated in this case, where the knowledge they are lacking is available but not accessed, is distinct from the ignorance...
marginalized knowers experience when no interpretation is available whatsoever. Mason believes that these are two different kinds of unknowing (2011, 294). Others believe that the definition of hermeneutical injustice is too narrow, because it renders hermeneutical injustice much less pervasive than it really is. Pohlhaus (2012) argues that what she calls willful hermeneutical ignorance, the resistance to adopting new concepts into the collective hermeneutical resource, is not accounted for in Fricker’s story of how hermeneutical injustices arise. Along the same lines, Dotson (2012) claims that Fricker closes the door to potential new formulations of experiences of being unable to make oneself intelligible, and that ultimately, her account constitutes yet another instance of the injustice she advocates against. In this section, I begin by discussing whether it makes sense to speak of different kinds of concept non-possession in conceptual engineering, and argue that Mason’s scope criticism does not hold up to scrutiny. I then move on to the narrow version of the criticism, and attempt to show that this criticism mischaracterizes what goes on in individual exchanges because of its strong internalist commitments. This criticism therefore misses the mark, seeing as Fricker’s account is best understood as committed to externalism about meaning.

3.1.1 Different ignorances

Mason (2011) points out that the unknowing of the marginalized is different from the unknowing of the dominant because the marginalized are the ones having the experience, and also the ones first alerted to the lack of a concept to describe it. Clearly, one must have some grasp of one’s wanting to express something, or else the idea that it is “strongly in [your] interest” (Fricker 2007, 151) to be able to say it will not carry much weight. Before a knower becomes aware that she is having or has had an experience, it does not make sense to attribute to her a desire, wish or need to make that experience intelligible. As Mason notes, however, there seems to be some level beyond which you do not really struggle to make an experience intelligible to yourself anymore, but still struggle to make it intelligible to relevant others. Mason takes this to highlight a flaw in Fricker’s account: namely, that her conception of hermeneutical injustice lumps together the unknowing of marginalized subjects with that of dominant subjects, when in fact these kinds of unknowing are qualitatively different (Mason

7 I am not claiming that things we do not know cannot be in our interest – clearly it can be very much in my interest to lower my consumption of certain conservative news media, even before I realize that they are having detrimental effects on my critical thinking. Fricker’s account, however, deals with experiences from the point at which we begin to either think, feel or intuit in some other way that this experience ought to be made intelligible. What point this is exactly is an important and interesting discussion that this thesis unfortunately mentions only in passing.
In conceptual terms: for Mason, all cases of concept non-possession were not created equal. In an attempt to answer this worry, we can look to Goetze’s (2017) characterization of the different levels of concept possession and the corresponding kinds of injustice a subject can experience. Goetze’s characterization allows for a differentiation between different experiences that he argues all still merit the label ‘hermeneutical injustice’. This argument is based on Fricker’s characterization of the harms of hermeneutical injustice, where both the primary epistemic harms and secondary practical harms can follow from cases where a subject possesses an understanding of her own experience that she is not successful in communicating to others (Goetze 2018, 76).

While Goetze aptly illustrates the possible consequences of different combinations of concept possession between different groups, he only partially answers Mason’s worry that Fricker should separate the unknowing of the marginalized from the unknowing of the dominant. Fricker (2016) argues that her account already provides a distinction between these kinds of unknowing by distinguishing localized interpretive practices from the collective hermeneutical resource, which is to be understood as the intersection of “various community-specific resources” (167). Hermeneutical dissent, or Mason’s “resistant interpretive practices” are thus accounted for. From a conceptual engineering perspective, however, Mason’s criticism can also be read as a suggestion that not all ignorances were created equal. Is it possible that the concept non-poseessions in question are qualitatively different? It seems that in order to argue for a qualitative difference between the two that is purely epistemic in kind, rather than some kind of a secondary practical harm that affects the two differently, you would need to rely on something like a phenomenal concept possessed by the marginalized but not by the dominant knower. Since they cannot differ at the level of what they know, it must be a difference either in the way that they do not know, or in a phenomenal awareness of something that is not yet known propositionally – the phenomenal concept – which only the marginally situated knower would possess. This is because the dominantly situated knower will not be alerted to the existence of something to be aware of before the marginalized knower attempts to communicate about it. As was discussed in the previous chapter, however, phenomenal concepts are not suited to explain the pre-epistemic awareness that Mason points to. We are therefore left with two options. The first is to agree with Beeby that the epistemic state of both knowers with respect to the particular experience is equal, and that the asymmetry derives from other social or material factors. The second is to argue that the two kinds of unknowing differ in the degree to which the epistemic agent has the power, by way of their position in the socio-epistemic
hierarchy (or otherwise), to escape the state of ignorance and to promote a more balanced hermeneutical resource. We could call it a difference in potential, perhaps, or a difference in flexibility. The varying degrees to which epistemic agents have the power to alter meaning and affect the collective hermeneutical resource is the subject of the narrow scope criticism, which I now move on to discuss.

3.1.2 Externalism and the narrow scope criticism

Dotson (2012) and Pohlhaus (2012) both find Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice too narrow. They believe her account fails to address what they take to be a significant part of the reason hermeneutical injustices arise - that the dominantly situated are reluctant to expand the hermeneutical resource over which they have control. In order for this criticism to work, it has to be the case that the dominant have implicit or explicit attitudes towards new meanings and that they have the ability to affect the collective hermeneutical resource. I will argue that both of these conditions fail to obtain on the externalist reading of Fricker’s account argued for in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two showed that there are competing pulls between internalist and externalist commitments in Fricker. The idea that what we can know about ourselves, and what kind of selves we can be, is determined in part by what concepts are available is an externalist claim. The same goes for the idea that groups of people, experts or otherwise, can determine the meaning of our terms. There are also claims that point in the internalist direction, however. The most obvious one is that what individuals do, for example whether or not they attend actively to what a marginalized subject is trying to say, can affect the meaning of what is being communicated. In Chapter Two, sections 2.2 and 2.3, I argued that the best reading of Fricker is the externalist one. What implications does this have for the too-narrow version of the scope criticism?

At the core of both Pohlhaus and Dotson’s complaints is the worry that Fricker doesn’t appreciate the extent to which individuals in a dominant position actively contribute to hermeneutical marginalization. Failure to attend in cases where a person is trying to articulate something, or what Dotson calls contributory injustice, is far more pervasive than Fricker makes it seem, according to Dotson (2012, 25). If meaning depends on facts about the world and not facts about our mental states, however, what any one individual can do to affect the collective hermeneutical resource seems to be negligible at best. Even attending meticulously to what is being said cannot alter the meaning of a concept on an externalist account. Neither can it alter
a concept’s role in the collective hermeneutical resource in the least. What such attending can achieve, of course, is to make for a more pleasant interaction, especially for the marginalized knower. In many cases this is valuable in itself, but not for epistemic reasons. It may also, in some instances, lead to improved understanding between the interlocutors, in the cases where the dominantly situated knower succeeds in attending to the right features and in the right way to what the marginalized knower is saying. This is indeed an epistemic achievement, but it seems to occur despite the hermeneutical obstacles, and not because it succeeds in changing any meaning-grounding facts so that the hermeneutical injustice is reduced.

The same goes for Pohlhaus’ story about willful hermeneutical ignorance: even if dominantly situated epistemic agents are willfully ignorant, it is not clear that this makes or breaks a change in anything but the individual interactions. This does little to remedy a structurally prejudiced collective hermeneutical resource. For willful hermeneutical ignorance to matter, individual interactions would need to have the potential to affect the meaning of concepts, but on even a mildly externalist account, they do not. One way to see this is to look briefly at what commitments or assumptions one would have to have about meanings, concepts, or language for willful hermeneutical ignorance or contributory injustice to have more than a negligible impact.

### 3.1.3 An internalist alternative

One view on which individuals have the kind of power required for willful hermeneutical ignorance to have an impact is Peter Ludlow’s account of the dynamic lexicon. Ludlow holds that meaning negotiation is a feature of any conversation or exchange: “if our conversational partners are willing to go along with us, we can modulate meanings as we see fit” (2014, 83). Some of the grounding assumptions of this view also seem necessary on views that give rise to Dotson and Pohlhaus’ criticisms of Fricker.

The first such assumption is the idea that we have control over local meanings. On Ludlow’s view, the meaning of terms used is up to the conversational partners: any exchange is characterized by what he calls negotiation over meaning. In what he calls the “micro-language” created in any interaction, the speakers are in control of what their words mean. Cappelen notes this may not amount to very much, seeing as the micro-language will cease to exist at the end of the conversation (2018, 166). Even so, however, this amount of control would still be something. Whether you believe such limited control is possible should affect whether you think phenomena like willful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice are
possible, and if yes, whether they are important or interesting. Willful hermeneutical injustice can be given expression in Ludlow’s framework as refusing to go along with a given meaning modulation offered by your conversational partner, and contributory injustice could perhaps be read as the cumulative effects of these refusals over time. The control that a dominantly situated conversation partner has in any particular interaction with a marginally situated knower is on this view an opportunity to either affirm or deny the attempt at intelligibility being made by the marginalized party. A question worth posing here, however, is whether the reluctance to go along with suggested meaning really does affect the meaning of what is being said, or if it is not more accurately described as a reluctance to act in accordance with what has been communicated. At the point where willful hermeneutical ignorance is a possibility, there are already nascent possible interpretations of what is being said, so that rejecting the meaning they carry seems to be more a refusal to act on the information received than a refusal to receive the information at all.

Cappelen argues that even if it is true that you can modulate meaning on a conversation-to-conversation basis, this does not amount to control over meaning in any interesting sense (2018, 169). On Ludlow’s account, the kind of control people aspire to is control over the particular micro-language in question at any given time. Cappelen objects that few people, if any, take themselves to be speaking a series of micro-languages. Instead, most of us think we speak English or another natural language, and that we intend our terms to have something more than “temporary meaning” (2018, 170). In the instances where speakers do care, according to Cappelen, they do so because they think meaning persists beyond single exchanges. Speakers just don’t have intentions towards micro-languages at all, and they are right not to, seeing as any change they could make would accomplish very little (171).

One possible response on behalf of fans of willful hermeneutical ignorance is that these phenomena illustrate precisely why one ought to care about meaning control even if it does not extend beyond a single conversation. This would be because it has the potential to instantiate what Fricker calls a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate (2007, 171). An inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate is one where meanings that allow for intelligibility can be agreed upon, even if these are not yet common currency in the collective hermeneutical resource. So if there is an argument against Cappelen’s dismissal of micro-languages, this would, I think, be it. It gives us good reason to think that some meaning-modulation in micro-language can be meaningful and of interest to us because they allow the development of nascent interpretations. There is also a drawback to this position, however: there are several possible descriptions of
this activity that make it not about the meaning of terms, but about deference because of social roles, or empathy, or something similarly not about semantic content. This holds as much for the positive version sketched above as for the negative scenario in which someone refuses to go along with a suggested meaning. Cappelen writes that describing what happens in a Ludlow scenario as meaning negotiation is to make something like a category mistake, because meanings are not things to be negotiated between two (or more) people (2018, 175). They are “things we can think about or discuss, but they can’t be negotiated” (175). I would like to suggest that a similar argument applies to the ideas of resistance, reluctance or “willful ignorance” of meaning. In order to resist a meaning, you must already be familiar with the meaning, and so this is perhaps better described as an attitude towards a fact about the world, namely that there is such a meaning, rather than an attitude towards the meaning itself.

I have argued that it is not impossible or unreasonable to care about the meaning modulation in what Ludlow calls micro-languages, even though we have little reason to think that any of its effects are lasting. Precisely because the effects are not lasting, however, we also have reason to question whether this ought to count as reaching an agreement about meaning and not about something non-epistemic, such as agreeing about who has greater social power and therefore who ought to defer to whom in the given situation. Furthermore, the goal of Fricker’s project is a lasting change in the collective hermeneutical resource. Therefore, although Ludlow’s view offers one way of thinking about what happens in interactions where meaning may be partially undetermined, it does not give us a reason to think that willful hermeneutical injustice or contributory injustice have more than a transitory and tangential significance for the project of hermeneutical injustice.

3.1.4 Concept metacognition

I have argued that individual power to change meaning is negligible, and therefore that willful hermeneutical ignorance cannot have a significant impact on the collective hermeneutical resource. I also questioned whether willful hermeneutical ignorance is an intelligible notion, given that one would have to have some grasp of the meaning of a concept in order to have an attitude towards applying it. A further question to ask in the evaluation of the narrow scope criticism is therefore whether we have attitudes towards our concepts, not just their meanings, and if yes, what form these attitudes take.

There are examples of interactions where we contest the meaning of a term, for instance when we engage in arguments about whether or not a given instance of concept use is correct.
One example is Plunkett and Sundell’s discussion of waterboarding, where two speakers are taken to contest the meaning of torture when they utter ‘waterboarding is torture’ and ‘waterboarding is not torture’ respectively (2013, 19). This is an instance of speakers express attitudes about a concept’s meaning, and is a good example of how I suggest we should understand willful hermeneutical injustice in the previous section. In the cases where such open contestation does not happen, however, do we consciously or unconsciously moderate and evaluate our concept use? And if so, do we do it in the way that would be necessary for it to make sense to speak of willful hermeneutical ignorance? Findings from psychological research on metacognition suggest that there may be metacognitive processes directed at concepts, that is to say, that concept users explicitly or implicitly appreciate “that concepts vary in dependability” (Shea 2019, 1). Metacognition is defined as “the set of capacities through which an operating subsystem is evaluated or represented by another subsystem in a context-sensitive way” (Proust 2013, 4 in Shea 2019, 4). Applied to concepts, these are thoughts, feelings or “a non-conceptual representation of some other kind” that concern the dependability and utility of the concepts we possess (Shea 2019, 4). Shea outlines three sources of variation in the dependability of our concepts: how much information we encode about a concept X; how accurately it enables us to categorize instances of X, and how dependable it is for forming expectations (2019, 11). These might provide an aggregate sense of dependability, or they may figure separately, for instance with respect to religious concepts, where Sperber has suggested that people often have a feeling of low understanding but high dependability of a concept like ‘God’ (Sperber 2010, 587).

One possible way to explain willful hermeneutical ignorance in these terms is that a dominantly situated knower will feel she encodes too little information in her concept of being agender, and as a consequence is unable to categorize instances of genderlessness and also unable to use this concept to form helpful expectations about the world. This will influence her willingness to rely on the concept both in her own thinking and in communication with others. Shea writes that “a low metacognitive rating might make a speaker reluctant to rely on a concept” at all (2019, 12). There are two things to note, however, about this way of hashing out willful hermeneutical ignorance. The first is that Shea distinguishes between analytic and procedural metacognition, where analytic entails forming a metacognitive judgement by drawing on background beliefs (2019, 4), and procedural means the metacognitions instead consists in “a sense, feeling or nonconceptual representation” (2019, 18). An example of the latter is a feeling that utilizing the concept is effortless or easy, and research has shown that
manipulating experienced conceptual fluency in experiments “creates an illusion of familiarity” (Shea 2019, 9). This is to say that factors that have nothing to do with the actual dependability of a concept can nevertheless have a great influence on the metacognitive rating it receives. The first feature of note for willful hermeneutical injustice, therefore, is that unsuccessful attempts at intelligibility between two speakers who possess the same concept need not be due to willful ignorance. In the previous section, I suggested that in order for willful rejection of an offered meaning to be possible, ignorance cannot possibly be the point of departure, since there would be no need for rejecting a meaning of a concept one did not already possess. Now we are in a position to see that in addition to ignorance being a poor description of the state, ‘willful’ is potentially also a poor description, this time of the attitude that causes the hampered intelligibility in cases of willful hermeneutical ignorance.

This dismisses the procedural concept-metacognition as a candidate for willful hermeneutical ignorance, but what about the analytic kind? In analytic metacognition, explicit beliefs guide the decisions we make or the beliefs we form about a given subsystem: Shea offers the belief that if you read a text twice retention will be better than if you read it once (2019, 4). In the realm of concept-metacognition, this can correspond to beliefs about which concepts are conducive to good theorizing; which ones are bad because they fail to refer and so on (2019, 5). Some concepts can be useful even if they are empty, however, and this makes it necessary to distinguish between object-level cognitions and metacognitions about concepts. The fact that witches don’t exist is taken to be “an argument against relying on that concept,” but this does not make it a metacognitive judgement about that concept. This and related judgements are judgments at the object level, and although “answers are still likely to have global effects on how we use the concept of X,” they are not metacognitive (2019, 5). How is this relevant for willful hermeneutical ignorance? We already know that the kinds of cases that give rise to hermeneutical injustice are the kinds of cases where a concept is missing: there something in the world that needs to be referred to, but the interpretive tool with which to refer does not yet exist. Moreover, the reason why this tool is missing is that the something that needs to be referred to is invisible to the group of people who generate the tools. This makes it very likely that apparent cases of willful hermeneutical ignorance as analytic metacognition are really just object-level judgments and beliefs, because the dominantly situated knower is bound to think that new concepts fail to refer. These are not epistemic battles over meaning, therefore, and so not willful hermeneutical ignorance, but rather cases of ignorance proper.
I have argued that both of the scope criticisms have lost some of their force after Fricker’s account was hashed out in conceptual engineering terms. The broad scope criticism fails because we cannot show that the availability of a concept differs for the marginally and dominantly situated, and a narrowing of the scope is therefore not merited. The narrow version of the scope criticism, on the other hand, relies on individual ability to modulate meaning, and fails because on a mildly externalist reading of Fricker, these modulations are arguably not about meaning at all.

3.2 Mechanism criticisms and function-oriented conceptual engineering

The criticisms of Fricker’s account that deal with the mechanism she posits as the cause of hermeneutical injustice make two main points. First, that individuals and their actions play a bigger part in upholding and promoting the structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource than Fricker allows, and second, that the injustice is not created by a missing term, but rather the application of ill-fitting terms.

In the previous section, I argued that the strengthened reading of Fricker presented in Chapter Two renders the scope criticisms moot. This argument from externalism also applies to the first of the mechanism criticisms. If, as was posited, there is little that any one individual can do to effect conceptual change, then criticizing Fricker’s account for ascribing too little influence is not going to be very effective. There is, however, a good reason to focus on which epistemic agents have what role in upholding the status quo when it comes to the collective hermeneutical resource. While I have argued that there isn’t grounds for claiming that each individual interaction has the potential to change the collective hermeneutical resource, the corresponding claim on a group level is more promising. It is uncontroversial in feminist and social epistemology that position in social hierarchy affects the kinds of knowledge we acquire. Similarly, it is beyond question that some kinds of knowledge are esteemed more highly than others. What the criticisms of her mechanism as letting individuals off the hook reveals is that Fricker needs to tell a better story of how it is that some people come to have undue influence that does not rely on big assumptions about the power of single individuals (as her critics suggest) or an unsubstantiated claim that conceptual influence is straightforwardly connected to social influence (as Fricker herself claims).

One way to begin telling such a story outlined in Thomasson’s paper (forthcoming). On Thomasson’s view of conceptual engineering, as was discussed in the previous chapter, the way
to understand conceptual change is to look at what functions our different concepts fulfill. She notes that “some concepts, or ranges of concepts, may serve a function not for us, but rather for some” (forthcoming, 9, emphasis in original). Explaining through what mechanisms, social or otherwise, the functions that serve some groups of people take precedence over others is a more interesting challenge to put to Fricker. It also has the advantage of suggesting a method for change: Simion and Kelp (forthcoming) argue that on a function-account of conceptual engineering, it follows that we can engineer our environment or the demands placed upon our conceptual resource so as to elicit the changes we desire. Of course, not all changes we implement will lead to lasting changes in the conceptual resource, because not all changes will “deliver the relevant benefit” (forthcoming, 6). For instance, we can ask whether changing the environment on college campuses (Title IX) lead to the relevant conceptual benefits. Title IX of the US Education Amendment of 1972 was introduced to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions that receive government funding (Strauss 2014). Conceptual benefits we could expect to attach to such a change in the environment may include greater awareness of what constitutes discrimination as a result of institutions having to actively work against it; increase in people’s ability to discern between and speak productively about different kinds of discrimination on the basis of sex; gradual changes in the meaning of acceptable and unacceptable conduct and so on. Several trends on US college campuses and in popular culture give us reason to question whether such benefits have manifested, however. To take but one example, the establishment of Title IX offices that handle complaints of sexual assault on campus have resulted in pervasive mishandling of alleged sexual assault cases, misleading reports of incidence levels, and what many consider to be extremely lenient punishments for those found guilty through the Title IX process on their campus (Strauss 2014). It seems as though this particular change in the environment may well have muddied the conceptual waters instead of delivering the relevant benefits: colleges across the US still find it necessary to educate their students on what constitutes consent, and what constitutes sexual violence.

Even if an environmental change does not always deliver the desired benefits, the function approach still allows us to think about ways to change the collective hermeneutical resource that do not rely on the same structures of power that have lead to the structural prejudiced nature in the first place. When Fricker posits lack of diversity in gatekeeping jobs as the main obstacle to a less prejudiced collective hermeneutical resource, she in one sense affirms the legitimacy of these institutions as gatekeepers. Her account therefore relies on the structures of power that gave rise to the hermeneutical injustices in the first place, such as the
legal system, to persist in playing the same role in our meaning-generation, with some minor alterations. This is what you might call targeting a symptom and not the root cause of a structural injustice: it is easy to imagine that some marginalized group whose participation is not increased by wholesale diversity-and-inclusion measures, who will continue to be hermeneutically marginalized by their non-participation in the relevant jobs. This is why the function approach to conceptual engineering is promising: it allows us to imagine what we might wish our collective hermeneutical resource were responsive to instead of the established or endorsed practices. In Chapter Two, I suggested that while we may be very happy to let the current structures of meaning-generation guide concept use in a practice like medicine, we may be less satisfied with the way these same structures cater to the experience of low-income motherhood. In the language of function-first conceptual engineering, we might wish to alter environments where this experience is central (kindergartens, schools, social services) so that the conceptual resource will respond to the interpretive and communicative functions these mothers, rather than the institutions involved, need fulfilled. We know, for instance, that income level is related to parenting strategies in various ways (Calik et al. 2015). It is likely that allowing low-income mothers to communicate effectively about the unique stressors and limitations that low-income puts on their childrearing practice with the various institutions they come into contact with could make a positive difference for all parties involved.

I have now suggested that asking Fricker to account for the undue influence of some groups in something beyond individualized terms is a more fruitful criticism than is a push towards placing more responsibility on individuals. If conceptual engineering makes a case for not relying on individuals to bring about a change in the conceptual pool, does this mean that conceptual engineering approaches lend support to structural approaches to remedying hermeneutical injustice? Yes and no. As was discussed above, both Thomasson (forthcoming) and Simion and Kelp (forthcoming) believe that we can and should engineer changes in our concepts (Thomasson forthcoming, 14; Simion and Kelp forthcoming, 1). Simion and Kelp list moths, countries and cars as examples of changes humans have brought about that have subsequently changed the corresponding concepts, and argue that engineering conceptual change is “as easy as any other human induced evolutionary intervention” (11). Cappelen, on the other hand, disputes this. Even if we agree that concepts have changed, that is no reason to assume that we know why or how this change came about. Neither is there any reason to assume that we can intentionally bring about a similar change with respect to a different concept (75-76). I argued in Chapter Two that Fricker is best read as having externalist metasemantic
commitments. According to Cappelen, these commitments have two implications: that the conditions for reference change are inscrutable, and that we fundamentally lack control over the process (75). By inscrutable, Cappelen means that we are necessarily ignorant about introductory events, communicative chains and other events of the past that on an externalist account are thought to determine reference -- “we don’t have this information and never will” (76). In addition, the mechanisms of reference change are likely to be highly complex and “might in effect be unknowable.” Therefore, given that we do not know the facts about what fixes references, nor the mechanisms that change reference, thinking that we can implement conceptual change amounts to nothing more than an illusion on Cappelen’s view. Furthermore, even if we were to obtain this information, we would be only marginally better positioned to make change. This is because the information would likely tell us that reference depends on factors outside our control, for example introductory events in the past that we cannot hope to change in any way (76). This is not to say that we will not try to affect the conceptual resource, indeed Cappelen thinks we might have no choice but to try. However, we should not think that our efforts will have a predictable effect: “intentions, wishes and decisions could play a significant role but in an unpredictable way” (76).

It seems, then, that the group of criticisms that focus on the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice miss the mark somewhat in suggesting that individual contributions ought to be more central. I have suggested that a more promising ask to make of Fricker’s account would be that she explain how some groups come to have disproportionate influence over the collective hermeneutical resource. Even if she could account for this on a group level, however, it is not a given that doing so would paint a brighter picture for the possibility of changing the conceptual resource, as this depends on your metasemantic commitments. In Chapter Two, I argued that among Fricker’s various metasemantic commitments, we should take the externalist ones most seriously because she accords some social positions with greater influence than others. Moreover, a view on which we come to invent concepts for features of our social world only makes sense if meaning is determined at the very least partly by what exists in the world. This can be contrasted with views such as Ludlow’s, who takes meaning to be up for grabs by the conversation partner who is most able to convince his interlocutor to go along (2014, 83). If this were the case, all it would take to eliminate hermeneutical injustice is for the marginalized in Fricker’s account to exercise their powers of persuasion. I have argued that there is a much better story to be told about how epistemic marginalization arises, and that this story should be told using function-oriented conceptual engineering.
3.3 Hermeneutical injustice as epistemic injustice

The third group of criticisms concern the extent to which the injustices Fricker describes can be called ‘epistemic’. This question takes two forms. The first, which is voiced by Beeby, is that it seems to be background social conditions, and not epistemic factors themselves, that generate the asymmetry Fricker relies on to obtain the injustice. The second, given expression by Medina, is that if it is indeed properly epistemic, Fricker might be committed to a position on which the knowledge generated at the margins is less valuable than that generated or prioritized in knowing at the center. This section will explore what implications this has of the function-oriented reading of Fricker’s account developed in Chapter Two.

3.3.1 No epistemic asymmetry?

Recall that Fricker attributes the skewed nature of the collective hermeneutical resource to background social conditions. Social, economic and cultural marginalization make individuals unable to contribute to the pooling of interpretive tools on equal footing, resulting in the absence of these particular tools from the collective hermeneutical resource. When this absence manifests itself in a failed attempt at intelligibility, either in relation to self or to another, you have a hermeneutical injustice. As Beeby points out, however, the epistemic status of both agents at the time the injustice manifests itself seems to be identical (482). She contends that if their epistemic lack is the same, then it ought to be an injustice for both agents, not only the one who is marginalized in other, non-epistemic ways. Can the strengthened version of Fricker’s account go some way towards answering this objection? In what follows, I will attempt to argue the affirmative. There are two ways of meeting this objection. The first is to extend Fricker’s argument, and the second is to suggest a conceptual reading on which epistemic benefits supervene other conceptual functions. I develop each of these responses in turn.

The extension of Fricker’s argument could go something like this: Even though the epistemic lack is the same, the epistemic consequences are distinct. Fricker makes this argument primarily with regards to practical consequences – it is more harmful for Wood than her harasser to lack the concept, because she is stressed out, she loses her employment and so forth. This, of course, does not meet Beeby’s criticism, seeing as these are not epistemic consequences. It seems, however, that Fricker can make a more strictly epistemic claim, and say that nothing can ever be more “strongly in [ones] interest” than articulating that which is
the subject of your primary experience. In fact, the secondary non-practical harms that result from being the victim of a systematic hermeneutical injustice are all epistemic: loss of epistemic virtues like intellectual courage, curiosity and so on (163). Fricker could potentially modify her account to put these harms front and center. On this answer to Beeby, it would be an epistemic injustice because there is a hierarchy of epistemic need, in which the urgency of understanding your primary experience takes precedence. This could be in part due to the epistemic consequences of not being able to make intelligible your own experience. She would also need to say something about the primacy of first-person epistemic needs, however, because there are many non-epistemic injustices that also have these negative effects on the development epistemic virtues: for example, think of the well-documented effect of gender and race stereotypes on test performance, or other cases of stereotype threat (Inzlicht and Schmader 2012). In this way, then, Fricker could perhaps obtain the asymmetry without relying on background conditions, and still claim that the epistemic factors differ significantly between those marginalized and the dominant, even if it is the same resource that they lack.

Still, establishing that there is a purely epistemic primacy to speak of here would take a lot of work. Recall from the discussion in Chapter Two that I find Fricker leaves something to be desired in her discussion of pre-epistemic awareness. Some use phenomenal concepts to explain what such an inarticulate experience could be (Ball 2009), while others find reference to a feeling or intuition to be sufficient (Shea 2019). The phenomenal concepts are not much help to Fricker, however, because they would have to be deferential, and if they are deferential they can be obtained linguistically, without having an experience, making them not phenomenal in the right sense (Ball 2009: 22). This is just one reason to think that establishing priority for first-person epistemic needs will be difficult. In addition, this reply might run into problems with distortion (Maitra 2018): we are all forced to distort our experiences somewhat to give them expression in a public language, and yet we are not disposed to call most of these necessary distortions an injustice. How Fricker could answer this objection without referring to consequences that derive from epistemic factors, rather than the epistemic factors themselves, is a question that deserves more attention than it will be given here.

Since the first suggested way around Beeby’s worry generated a host of new philosophical problems, I now move on to explore the second potential solution. There are at least two main ways to answer the charge that hermeneutical injustice isn’t properly epistemic. The first, to say that indeed it is, on this or that understanding of the mechanism, was attempted above. The second is to deny that the only way for the injustice to count as epistemic is for there
to be an asymmetry in what the epistemic agents know. The latter is what I will attempt to argue for now.

Recall that on a function-oriented account of conceptual engineering, we can explain in part the existence of the concepts we use by referring to their function. I suggested above that Fricker’s notion of a structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resource is not far from the idea given expression in Thomasson that for some reason or other, certain concepts or groups of concepts exist, in part because they serve a function for some, and not for all of us. I also suggested that if Fricker could account for the privileging of some functions over others she would have a stronger account, and this is one reason why. Beeby is right that the advantages the harasser has over the harassed in the Carmita Wood example are not epistemic advantages (2011, 483) the way Fricker describes them: they are practical advantages, and psychological ones perhaps, but not epistemic in any primary sense. It might still be possible, however, to give an explanation of how the situation came about in epistemic terms, and in this way maintain that the injustice is epistemic even if the asymmetry is strictly not.

How can the origin of a symmetrical ignorance be explained as epistemically asymmetric? My suggestion is that it can be done in terms of epistemic functions. Simion and Kelp say of our representational devices that “their main function is an epistemic one,” and that other functions such as “social, moral, aesthetic ones” for example are secondary (forthcoming, 4). On this understanding of concepts, our collective hermeneutical resource is as it is because certain epistemic functions have taken priority over others. We know, for example, that some communities have interpretive resources for color that enable them to distinguish between an impressive variety of greens, but not between blue and green (Goldstein et al. 2009, 219). In Simion and Kelp’s terms, we would say that these communities developed their interpretive resources in an environment where it was epistemically beneficial to make distinctions between greens, and that this function took precedence over other less important functions, like telling blue apart from green. My suggestion is that we should understand Fricker’s hermeneutical lacunae as the products of the same process.

Recall that on Fricker’s account, the imbalance of represented perspectives in the collective hermeneutical resource is due to social and material marginalization: individuals belonging to certain identities do not get access to the positions that would allow them to add interpretive resources to the collective hermeneutical resource, so all knows are so much the poorer. Notice, however, that there are no epistemic forces at play in creating conceptual absences – the mechanisms are social and material, with epistemic results. The color terms
story, in contrast, presents the collective hermeneutical resource as explicitly the product of epistemic processes. Attending to some nuances of reality and passing over others is an active undertaking, not necessarily conscious (Shea 2019), but necessarily epistemic all the same. On the function view, we attend to the nuances we do because this is epistemically beneficial. Thomasson notes that it need not be epistemically beneficial for all of us, only for some who are in the right position to have their epistemic needs prioritized (forthcoming, 9). The composition of the collective hermeneutical resource therefore not only reflects which groups have not been materially positioned to make contributions, but also which groups have been positioned to have their epistemic functions take priority.

Although more needs to be said about how the epistemic functions of some groups gain priority, I hope to have illustrated that there is a possible reading of hermeneutical injustice on which hermeneutical lacunae have epistemic rather than material root causes. If this possibility is worked out in greater detail, perhaps we could retain “the sense that there’s something unfairly disadvantageous about Carmita’s [epistemic] situation” (Beeby 2011, 482) even if there is no asymmetry between the epistemic states of Carmita and her harasser at the time when the injustice manifests itself.

### 3.3.2 Preferability of marginal situation

The final criticism in the epistemic category is that Fricker tells a story in which it is preferable, strictly epistemically speaking, to be dominantly situated. In one sense, this is Beeby’s criticism taken a step further by Medina: where Beeby argues that there is no epistemic asymmetry between the harasser and the harassed, Medina holds that if there is an asymmetry, it is in favor of the marginally situated knower, who after all possesses more knowledge than the harasser (2013, 107). For Fricker, “the hermeneutical harms are wrongful for others, not for those upon whom the epistemic harms are directly inflicted” (Medina 2013, 107; emphasis in original).

The worry, then, is that describing the hermeneutical lacuna as an epistemic injustice towards the marginalized is to commit to the epistemic superiority of the dominant position, since the injustice consists in being distanced from it. This would be an unfortunate commitment for Fricker, who situates her project in the feminist epistemology tradition, where, as Pohlhaus notes, the point isn’t that the marginalized have different knowledge, but that they have “more objective” knowledge of the world as it is (2012, 720).

This seems to create a dilemma for Fricker’s account, where one of two claims will have to be let go. The first is the idea that the marginalized suffer an epistemic injustice, and the
second that Fricker’s project as an attempt to shift epistemic power towards away from the center and towards the margins? On Medina’s criticism, these two are incompatible. I would like to suggest that we can hold onto both, however. This is possible on the function-first approach to conceptual engineering discussed in response to Beeby’s criticism above. This approach enables us to distinguish between the different epistemic functions interpretive tools can have. In this way, we are also able to say something about the relative epistemic advantages and disadvantages of being dominantly versus marginally situated. I argued above that being dominantly situated entails having your desired epistemic benefits take priority, which seems to give some epistemic advantages: being able to explore the things that spark your curiosity, for example. Being marginally situated, in contrast, does not confer the epistemic benefit of having the functions you need fulfilled take precedence. It does, however, as standpoint epistemology and critical theory have demonstrated, make objective knowledge of social facts more easily accessible (Pohlhaus 2012, 720). On the function-first account, we can therefore claim that marginally situated knowers suffer a hermeneutical injustice because it is comparatively more difficult to have one’s epistemic function-fulfillment centered to a sufficient degree. We can also claim, with no contradiction, that this is the epistemically superior and preferable position, although it would be even better to also have access to the epistemic ease and flexibility enjoyed by the dominantly situated. Take the epistemic position of the Black mothers who struggle to make themselves intelligible to their medical care providers: in one sense they have both more and more accurate knowledge, since they are aware that something is wrong and that this needs to be addressed – a claim that is either not heard or actively disputed by their physicians. If the collective hermeneutical resource had been more responsive to their epistemic needs, however, they could have had both this superior knowledge and the benefits of being able to share it. This seems to be an even better epistemic position.

While a lot of fleshing out remains before the function-oriented conceptual engineering take on Fricker’s account has adequately answered the objections that question the epistemic nature of hermeneutical injustice, I hope to have shown in this section that such a fleshing out would be worth attempting, for Fricker or for other enthusiasts.

3.4 Taking stock

This chapter has explored what Fricker’s commitments in conceptual engineering have to say for the criticisms of her account. The criticisms were divided into three categories: scope, mechanism and nature of the injustice. With respect to scope, I argued that if we take Fricker
seriously on her externalist commitments, as I argue in Chapter Two that we should, both the
narrow and the broad version of this criticism fail. The broad version fails because there is no
consistent way to claim that the ignorance of the marginalized differs in kind from the ignorance
of the dominant without relying on internalist claims that are incompatible with the rest of
Fricker’s account. The narrow version of the criticism fails for much the same reason: given
even a mild externalism, the impact that any one individual can have on meaning change is
negligible at best.

The mechanism criticisms are also vulnerable to the externalist argument. I suggested
that a more interesting challenge to put to Fricker is to explain how the interpretive needs of
some groups take precedence over those of other groups when it comes to influencing the
hermeneutical resource. One way to begin such an explanation was suggested in section 3.3: on
the function-oriented reading of Fricker, we can claim that epistemic functions, and not material
marginalization, is responsible for the imbalance of perspectives in the collective hermeneutical
resource. This is also a way to defend the claim that hermeneutical injustice is epistemic in
nature, even if there is no asymmetry in concept possession between a knower who is a victim
and a knower who is not. Finally, I have suggested that the function-oriented reading may allow
Fricker to hold both that the marginalized suffer an epistemic injustice and that it is preferable
to be marginally situated. Both of these latter claims need to be fleshed out before they can
serve as full-fledged defenses of Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice, but I hope to have shown
that such a fleshing out could be both interesting and constructive.
4 Approaching Hermeneutical Justice

This thesis has aimed to apply the recently developed frameworks of conceptual engineering to hermeneutical injustice. The goal of this application was threefold: to see what the injustice amounts to in terms of meaning; to understand the mechanisms that govern the creation of hermeneutical injustices, and to develop a means of distinguishing between apt and less apt approaches to hermeneutical justice. The latter is the subject of this chapter.

The chapter has two main sections. The first section introduces three different kinds of solutions: a virtue-based approach; a structural change approach and one based on attitude change in individuals. Nevertheless, there are two challenges that any solution, whether structural or individual, will have to answer. The first is the practical problem of indeterminacy, which asks whether it is possible to target hermeneutical injustices at all, seeing as they are defined by our inability to know about them. The second asks whether, given that we are able to identify a site of injustice and to come up with a method to conceptually engineer meaning change, it will be legitimate to do so. These two challenges, one practical and one normative, are the subject of the second section of this chapter.

4.1 Three approaches to hermeneutical justice

Although each approach to hermeneutical injustice is apt in its own way, each approach also falls short due to a failure to take into account the variety of ways that meaning can change. The virtue solution relies on internalist assumptions that have been shown to be incompatible with other, more important claims in Fricker’s account. The argument for structural change describes a necessary relationship between change at the structural and individual levels that greatly overstates the causality we are prepared to claim on a conceptual engineering account. Conversely, the attitude change approach overstates the significance of individual mental states, particularly an endorsing attitude, for conceptual change. These shortcomings bring out the complex nature of meaning change, and perhaps point to the impossibility of prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution to hermeneutical injustice. I will argue that the externalist function-oriented reading of Fricker

4.1.1 Hermeneutical virtue
Fricker’s own suggested solution to hermeneutical injustice is that individuals work to develop what she calls hermeneutical virtue. This virtue takes the form of

“an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one's interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources.” (2007, 169).

Fricker wants this to represent a reflexive awareness of the relative social positions of hearer and speaker, and the ways that this may affect the intelligibility of what is said (170). This awareness will allow the hearer to make an upward adjustment of the credibility afforded the speaker, thus compensating for the communicative difficulties experienced as a result of working with a structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resource. Such a credibility adjustment will ideally reflect how the speaker’s communication “would make good sense if the attempt to articulate it were being made in a more inclusive hermeneutical climate” (170). A person wishing to practice hermeneutical virtue, then, will do the following, in order of preferability: 1) listen proactively; 2) seek corroborating evidence, and 3) reserve judgement.

To listen proactively is to listen in a way that is more socially aware than is required in more straightforward exchanges (171), where the goal is to attend “as much to what is not said as to what is said” (171-172). The extent to which such listening is possible depends on the context, and on how much of social positioning is shared between the interlocutors. If there are too many barriers to attentive listening, then Fricker suggests that the next best thing will be to assume the burden of seeking out corroborating evidence, and if none such is available, to reserve judgement about what is being communicated – to resist the pull to write it off as nonsense because it isn’t intelligible to the hearer at this time (172). In sum, then, the practice of hermeneutical virtue amounts to a listener operating on a social theory which “may often tell her little more than that she should be suspicious of her initial spontaneous credibility judgements when it comes to speakers like this on a subject matter like that” (172). Fricker acknowledges that this will be “an imprecise business,” but still argues that it is enough to guide our practice as hearers (171).

The reader will have noticed the absence of any measures aimed at changing the composition of the structurally prejudiced collective hermeneutical resource. For Fricker, hermeneutical virtue has two ultimate ends: the intellectual end of promoting understanding, and the ethical end of promoting justice. The mediate end to both of these is to “neutralize the impact of structural identity prejudice on one's credibility judgement” (173) in individual
interactions. When the virtue is exercised well, the result will be the generation of “a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate,” and if it the virtue is exercised collectively, it will be “conducive to the generation of new meanings to fill in the offending hermeneutical gaps” (174). To the extent that this happens in practice, hermeneutical virtue “ultimately aims at the actual elimination of the very injustice it is designed only to correct for” (174). Still, the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice are structural, and Fricker recognizes that shifting the skewed relations of social power that are responsible “takes more than virtuous individual conduct of any kind; it takes group political action for social change” (174). The function of the virtue is therefore only to mitigate the harmful effects of the injustice on an individual level.

The idea that modulation of meaning in micro-climates can generalize to meaning change outside a particular interaction should be familiar from the discussion of Ludlow’s micro-languages in Chapter Three, section two. The discussion of Ludlow yielded two reasons to think that instances of local meaning modulation cannot amount to actual meaning change. The first is that the meaning arrived at will cease to exist at the end of the conversation, and the second is that there is reason to question whether the understanding arrived at in a micro-climate can be said to be about meaning at all. The first point does not apply with great force to Fricker, since her argument is that a marginalized knower will be given an opportunity to attempt a formulation of her experience which will be intelligible. Presumably the opportunity to begin this process of formulating has value for the agent even if whatever she manages to communicate is lost at the end of the interaction: she will likely be able to carry the nascent understanding with her into subsequent interactions. The second point, however, is all the more relevant: is meaning really what is being shared or created in these interactions at all? As in the case of micro-languages, I suggest that the answer with respect to Fricker’s micro-climates is no. This is because at least one of the interlocutors in a given interaction lacks the concept, and is supposed to listen attentively to compensate. Listening attentively can only do so much, however, and it is doubtful that it can establish meaning. More likely, it can at best establish an understanding, where understanding means something like a shared intention to reach an agreement. Just as in Ludlow’s case, however, this is not an epistemic achievement, but rather a social one: the marginalized party is made to feel listened to, but this is different from her message being heard - and I argue that the latter cannot happen as the result of a single interaction alone, as it takes more than this to establish meaning.
Perhaps an answer on Fricker’s behalf could go something like this: the micro-climates she suggests developing aren’t hermeneutically friendly because they enable meaning change in the specific interaction, but only because they offer an escape from persistent misinterpretation. On this reading, the hermeneutical virtue becomes less interesting, but the tension is removed. In the bigger picture, however, this solution is not very effective, because it fails to provide anything more than a transitory comfort to the victim of hermeneutical injustice.

Once this tension is gone, we also have a plausible explanation why Fricker is not more ambitious in her suggested solution: on an unambiguously externalist reading of her account, all it takes for hermeneutical injustice to be counteracted is to implement the right social policies (whichever ones they might be) so that there is no more socio-economic marginalization, and therefore no more hermeneutical lacunas either. While awaiting these policy changes, however, it makes sense to try and make it as pleasant as possible for the marginalized among us by attempting to listen to them virtuously. As the previous chapters have attempted to show, however, the frameworks for understanding meaning change being developed in engineering give us reason to think there is more we can do to change the hermeneutical resource.

### 4.1.2 Structural change

Elizabeth Anderson (2012a) has argued directly against Fricker’s individual virtue solution in favor of taking a structural approach to hermeneutical justice. She begins by noting that a key insight from structural models of injustice is that the sum of many transactions that are individually just can still produce unjust results:

> “The cumulative effects of how our epistemic system elicits, evaluates and connects countless individual communicative acts can be unjust, even if no injustice has been committed in any particular epistemic transaction” (165).

This is just to say that remedying the individual interactions by promoting hermeneutical virtue cannot be assumed to ultimately contribute to a more just hermeneutical resource, the way Fricker seems to suggest when she says that the virtue “ultimately aims at the actual elimination” of hermeneutical injustice. Even if every individual were to practice hermeneutical virtue to an acceptable extent, we could and likely still would have unjust epistemic practices on a structural level.

In addition to the fact that addressing the injustice in transactions will not necessarily eliminate injustice at the structural level, Anderson also argues that there is reason to doubt
whether individual solutions can even be expected to remedy anything at the individual level. The reason is that Fricker’s proposed solution posits a degree of control over our psychology that we manifestly do not have. The mechanisms that guide our credibility judgements are forms of cognitive bias, and cognitive biases are “deeply entrenched in our minds, and operative automatically, unconsciously and more rapidly than conscious thought” (167). When Fricker suggests that we should cultivate an awareness of when we are under the influence of our cognitive biases, she is in effect asking us to do something that is impossible: research shows that cognitive biases “can even cause discriminatory conduct in people who consciously and sincerely reject them” (167). Furthermore, argues Anderson, even if we did find a way to attend to our own cognitions in a way that would enable us to suspect when we are being affected by prejudice, we wouldn’t know how much our prejudice was affecting us and therefore how much to correct for it (168).

For these reasons, Anderson argues that structural solutions need to be stressed for transactional and structural injustices alike. We should not think of the structural remedies as “competing with virtue-based remedies,” but rather acknowledge that structural solutions are a necessary complement and in many cases a prerequisite for the success of individual-level remedies (168). One example is in employment contexts, where structural measures such as blind review in hiring processes are implemented to give individual virtue “favorable conditions” (168). In addition, most structural remedies will according to Anderson bring about changes that make the individual remedies obsolete. For instance, integration will allow members of dominant and marginalized groups to participate in “inquiry together on terms of equality” which will lead to less prejudice (171), and therefore less need for individual epistemic agents to be virtuous. It is not wrong to promote individual remedies, but individual virtues play a role similar to that of “the practice of individual charity in the context of massive structural poverty” - it would be more effective to redesign our epistemic institutions to prevent the injustices from occurring in the first place (171).

Recall from Chapters Two and Three that on any reasonable reading of Fricker, conceptual change is out of individual control, and so even if individuals were to display what Pohlhaus calls willful hermeneutical ignorance, the impact of this ignorance on the collective hermeneutical resource is likely to be extremely limited. Anderson’s argument adds yet another reason to think this isn’t a productive avenue for inquiry, namely that the cognitions in question do not seem to be willful in the relevant sense, seeing as they are mediated by automatic mental processes outside of the subject’s control (167). This echoes an important insight from research
on concept metacognition, namely that even our metacognition about concepts, that is, the concepts at play in the cognitive biases Anderson discusses, are subject to easy influence by factors that have very little to do with actual reliability, such as ease of recall (Shea 2019). These insights from conceptual engineering seem to count in favor of structural solutions instead of Fricker’s individual virtue solution.

Anderson, however, also argues that one change inevitably leads to another: that structural changes cannot fail to bring about individual changes, whereas the same is not true the other way around. On this account, then, structural changes will inevitably lead to the desired changes in individual beliefs and dispositions. Even if changes on an individual level are required, therefore, Anderson finds it unnecessary to target these specifically. Instead, she believes that a measure like integration will inevitably produce less biased individuals, without the need for individual bias reduction programs. A conceptual engineering perspective complicates this picture somewhat. If the individual changes we are after either directly or indirectly involve changes in concepts, it may not be necessary to claim that individual changes automatically follow from the structural ones. Given the possibility of deferential possession of concepts, a structural remedy does not need to change individual dispositions: any individual can continue to encode wrong or inadequate information for a concept, so long as they would be disposed to incorporate new correcting information when they encounter it. On a conceptual engineering account, therefore, we can have a successful structural remedy that doesn’t entail changes in beliefs at the individual level. We would still want to say that the relevant structural changes had occurred, without having caused beliefs to change for all individuals, so long as the possibility of correcting deferentially possessed concepts is established structurally. On a conceptual engineering account of structural change, therefore, a solution can be successful without needing to entail changes at the individual level.

According to Anderson, structural change seems to be both a necessary and sufficient remedy for hermeneutical injustice. Recall, however, that on the function account of conceptual engineering, we can try to engineer changes in our concepts by altering the demands put on them; the features of the environment they respond to and so on. Whether or not these attempts at engineering succeed depend on the degree to which they end up producing the relevant benefit in the environment, and this is not something we can guarantee or even predict with any accuracy. This means that only in some cases will the structural level solutions produce the changes that lead to the relevant changes on the individual level, by way of adding concepts with the relevant functions to the collective hermeneutical resource. So on a conceptual
engineering-amendment to Anderson’s approach, one would have to content with the claim
that structural changes are in some cases necessary but not sufficient for conceptual change. In
other cases they may be neither - this will depend on facts about the environment, use patterns,
competing interpretations and a host of other factors. Conceptual engineering makes visible the
many different forms meaning change can take, and therefore also the many things we don’t
know about what forms it will take - and what factors serve to promote or deter it.

4.1.3 Attitude change

Madva (2016) takes issue with proponents of structural changes because their approach is too
simplistic. He argues that the push to prioritize structural solutions is based on a faulty
understanding of individual psychology, and that the only reasonable way to approach
processes of change is by looking at which structural and individual remedies that together will
produce the desired change (2016, 701).

Madva specifically takes issue laying out two claims that are central for those he calls
structural prioritizers, like Anderson and Haslanger. The first is that a focus on individual
remedies “occludes the primary causes of injustice, which are structural in nature.” (703), and
the second is that the individual attitudes that would be the targets of our individual remedies
are effects, not causes, of structural inequalities (705). It follows from this, on the structural
prioritizer’s view, that structural remedies are best suited to craft both individual and structural
change (705). Madva takes issue with this conclusion: it does not follow from the fact that a
problem is structural in origin that the best remedy is structural too, rather it is “an open-ended
question which specific interventions will be most conducive to which social changes” (706).

In the case of Anderson’s suggested integrating school districts to fix epistemic injustice,
Madva argues that it is not even possible to bring about such a structural change without at the
same time implementing individual level remedies: “bringing about integrationist reforms will
require, at a minimum, changes in the beliefs, motivations or actions of those individuals poised
to promote integration” (706). Furthermore, he argues that reforms are “more likely to succeed
if the affected people buy into them” (706). Madva’s argument, then, is that structural changes
depend on individual changes for their effectiveness: for example, if we believe that group
action on social issues is key, facilitating this will likely include “institutional, structural and
social factors,” but “also psychological factors, like the desire to effect change and belief that
marching and voting will be instrumental to doing so” (709). Moreover, among the phenomena
that structural prioritizers highlight as being conducive to social change, Madva finds “inter alia, claims about specific individual-psychological states to target” (709).

Not only can you not implement structural change without also implementing individual change - Madva also argues that contrary to what structural prioritizers claim, structural change is not a precondition for changing attitudes (712). In defense of this claim, he cites several examples of structural measures that have not lead to the change in attitudes that was expected. One example is the idea that affirmative action will produce debiasing agents which will change individual perceptions of marginalized groups, against which Madva cites evidence that shows debiasing agents to be effective mainly in reducing bias for members of the same ingroup (712). Furthermore, structural measures implemented without attending to individual attitudes can not only fail but also be counterproductive: the presence of anti-discrimination measures can produce an “illusory sense of fairness” which leads privileged individuals to be more discriminatory towards members of minorities (713). The effects of structural measures depend on “how specific individuals interpret and react to their social environment” (713), and we therefore cannot count on structural change to be effective on its own.

All of this is to say that for Madva structural prioritism cannot be effective, because all structural change depends on some willingness to participate; some endorsement of the changes or some amount of “buy-in” to the relevant solutions. In a later response to this argument, Anderson suggests that other factors not directly related to approval or disapproval of the structural changes can substitute for endorsement of the changes themselves - for example deference to an authority figure who does endorse the relevant change (Anderson 2012b, 15). What Madva takes this response to show is that structural prioritizers still depend on individual changes, in this case on establishing the requisite level of deference to authority as a proxy for enthusiasm for structural change (711). Consequently, structural changes cannot be effective without measures to promote individual endorsement (711). On this account, then, changes at both structural and individual levels are needed to produce the desired outcome. This combinative approach is more compatible with the complex accounts of meaning change offered in conceptual engineering, but Madva still relies heavily on the importance of individual attitudes. As was discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the role individuals play in meaning change is limited on externalist accounts. Moreover, as was argued in Chapter Three, section 3.1, it is not clear that it is possible to have an attitude towards a meaning at all. Madva’s discussion deals with attitudes towards structural changes, and not attitudes towards suggested meanings. Still, the argument is that a desired meaning change cannot take place without the
right attitudes towards a structural change. This makes the attitudes a necessary condition for meaning change.

Madva claims that part of the reason why structural solutions cannot succeed is that they depend on the endorsement of the individuals subjected to the changes. In the discussion of willful hermeneutical resistance, individual resistance to conceptual change was dismissed as insignificant on any reasonable understanding of hermeneutical injustice, because such an understanding must be externalist and therefore leaves little room for individuals to change meaning on their own. If meaning is not determined by what any person intends by the terms they use, the meaning change in itself is not dependent on the endorsement of a given speaker. It might still be the case, however, that the structural changes implemented depend on support in order to engender the meaning change hoped for, or more moderately, that the more support such changes have the more effective they will be (I take something like this to be Madva’s position).

On none of the accounts of conceptual change, however, is the process of meaning change so straightforward that one can make predictions about which kinds of endorsements of what kind of factors will be conducive to quicker, better or more lasting change. Even the most optimistic of the function-oriented views hold only that we can only speculate about which engineering efforts will produce which benefits (Thomasson forthcoming; Simion and Kelp forthcoming). Moreover, there seem to be good examples of concept propagation in a collective hermeneutical resource where disagreement appears to have aided the uptake rather than hindered it. Think of a phenomenon like gentrification and its related concepts (‘community displacement’, ‘rent hikes’, ‘alienation’ – to mention just a few). In response to any structural measures either for the preservation of diverse neighborhoods, or for unlimited financial development of increasingly valuable real estate, conversations will need to be had which will rely on use of some of these terms. Indeed, as Cappelen notes, the areas in which we find ourselves caring about meaning change will likely be precisely the ones that give rise to controversy or at least contestation (2018, 166). In these cases, both rejecting and endorsing a given structural change requires engagement with its central concepts. In general, therefore, what affective valence this engagement takes does not seem to be crucial in promoting or preventing uptake of a concept in the collective hermeneutical resource.

Are there cases of potential concept change where endorsing or rejecting a structural change does not minimally require engagement with some relevant concepts, and where endorsement might therefore be important? Madva (2016) points out that in order for structural
changes to happen, several individuals in positions of authority will have to endorse them (PAGE). Here, we are not talking about mere affective endorsement, but endorsement of the practical kind: voting in favor, developing action plans, allocating funds and perhaps even defending the plan against proponents of competing measures. At this level, before the structural change is implemented, it seems that attitudes may play a bigger role. If, for instance, there isn’t enough diversity of opinion in the board meeting where a structural change is to be debated, the conditions for contestation promoting propagation would not obtain. Something like this scenario is perhaps what Fricker imagines when she calls for greater diversity in professions of comparatively great hermeneutical influence. Even in this situation, however, it seems like whether the attitudes in question are decisive or not will depend on many factors: whether there are competing measures, financial incentives, whether the process conducted under scrutiny of the public or in private and so on.

Conceptual change takes place at many levels and across many arenas, and while endorsement is not likely to be decisive on any moderately externalist view, we can imagine cases where affective attitude towards a structural change will affect the ability of this structural change to lead to conceptual change, in combination with several other factors.

4.1.4 Summary

This section has discussed three approaches to hermeneutical justice: hermeneutical virtue, structural change and individual attitude change. The first is Fricker’s own suggestion, namely the development of a sensitivity to when an individual’s intelligibility may be hampered by a hermeneutical lacuna. Fricker calls this sensitivity hermeneutical virtue. The peculiar thing about this solution is that it only aims to remedy the effects of a hermeneutical injustice, namely the feelings caused by not achieving intelligibility in an interaction, and not the source of the injustice itself, namely the lack of a given concept. Hermeneutically virtuous hearers will allow for the creation of hermeneutically friendly micro-climates, where intelligibility is possible despite the lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resource. This solutions very optimistic about the potential of individual good intentions to enable local meaning modulation, which is incompatible with the externalist reading of Fricker argued for in Chapter Two.

The second solution is structural change, as argued for by Anderson (2016). Anderson argues that structural change is needed to counter hermeneutical injustice, because Fricker’s virtue solution posits a degree of control over our cognitions that we manifestly do not have. Anderson too ends up ascribing too much control, however, in her case to structural changes.
She argues that they cannot fail to produce changes in beliefs at the individual level, and therefore changes in our concepts as well. On most current accounts of conceptual engineering, however, we cannot say for certain which changes will end up producing what benefits, if any.

The third solution discussed in this section is Madva’s argument for attitude change. On this view, a structural change cannot work without attitude changes at the individual level. Madva therefore argues that any solution must combine changes at the structural and individual level. While this approach is the most compatible with the insight from conceptual engineering that the mechanisms governing meaning change are complex, Madva still holds that attitude change is a necessary condition for meaning change. I have that this claim holds up poorly on most views of conceptual engineering, and therefore also on the strengthened version of Fricker’s account argued for in Chapters Two and Three.

4.2 Indeterminacy: a practical problem?

We have now seen how the suggested solutions to hermeneutical injustice fail to take into account the complex nature of meaning change. One upshot of this is that we cannot know for certain what measures will lead to what changes, and another that every hermeneutical injustice will likely require a different solution. There are, however, two challenges that will apply to any solution, whether structural, individual or both. The first is the problem of indeterminacy.

How do we tell the difference between missing concepts that amount to cases of hermeneutical injustice and those that do not? Is there a sense in which you cannot possibly know until the concept has been discovered, and the injustice overcome? Christman argues that it is, and calls this the problem of indeterminacy. Until a hermeneutical injustice has been discovered as such, we cannot know whether someone is struggling for intelligibility because they have a legitimate marginalized perspective or are merely engaging in “special pleading” (Christman 2012, 4). Before this is ascertained, that is, before history has taken its course, “the content of the hermeneutic virtue here is under-determined” according to Christman (2012, 5). Hermeneutical virtue as sensitivity to “still unexpressed forms of hermeneutical injustice” are going to be without content, because this is precisely the nature of the injustice itself - we do not know what it is that we do not know (5). This is problematic for the individual level response, but even more so for the structural level. Before “the full dynamics of social discussion” have taken their course, we cannot know which perspectives are cases of unjust exclusion - we first need to “realize that they represent genuine interests” (5). By the time this realization happens, the injustice in its most pressing form will already be overcome.
Two responses are possible here. The first one is Anderson’s, which is that while this may be true, it need not discourage us (16). We should take Christman’s point in a pragmatist spirit, and be content to give structural remedies our best go and “seeing whether we appreciate the results” - that is, seeing whether they seem to contribute to a more representative collective hermeneutical resource, for example. This point is already familiar from the discussion of conceptual engineering and from anti-luminosity above: we need not and perhaps even cannot be sure that what we are trying to do will work, but as Cappelen puts it, maybe we have no choice but to keep trying; “there’s a sense in which we cannot give up” (2018, 75).

There second possible response here is that on at least some accounts of conceptual engineering, the indeterminacy here is not as great as Christman would have us believe. On Fricker’s framework, hermeneutical injustice does not admit of degrees or nuances, and so it makes sense to claim that we either know of something, in which case it isn’t an injustice, or we do not, in which case we cannot know that it needs fixing. What the conceptual engineering perspective shows, however, is that the phenomenon is more general and also more varied than Fricker’s account allows. One indication of this is the different degrees to which a concept can be missing, and another is the many complex mechanisms that combine to determine changes in meaning. Compare, for example, a concept like sexual harassment, which was not available to anyone, with the concept of being transgender, which despite its ready availability in the collective hermeneutical resource continues to encode wrong or inadequate information for many epistemic agents (Fricker 2016, 5). It seems clear that the indeterminacy in the two cases are not the same: in the first case, there was an inaddressable ill that couldn’t be classified as such before the relevant concept was coined, and we might be willing to grant that there was indeterminacy. The concept of being transgender, however, is a case where the concept possession in the general public leaves much to be desired, so much so that it may qualify as a hermeneutical injustice on the threshold view suggested in Chapter Two, section three. It would be strange to claim that it is still indeterminate, whether or not this represents a genuine interest.

The worry about indeterminacy still brings out a feature of hermeneutical injustice worth acknowledging, namely that try as we might, there is a risk we might not succeed in addressing it. This is due to the fact that a lacuna exists precisely because the conditions for filling it have not obtained, where among those conditions is an awareness (in addition to but not limited to diversity in positions of hermeneutical power, privileging a certain function or a combination of these). As has been argued throughout this thesis, however, our awareness and intentions are at most contributing factors in a complex web of interactions that determine
meaning change. Therefore, the strengthened function-oriented version of Fricker may enable us to begin to formulate a structural response. If we can implement structural changes that place higher demands on the context-sensitivity of our terms, for example, the function-first account predicts that we would see terms that fulfill this function more reliably than the terms we had before. Imagine a structural-level change that implemented the recommendations from Leslie (2017) that we move away from generics so as to decrease our tendency to essentialize social kinds (this could be bills on use of generics in policy; guidelines on teaching without generics; probably better examples here that I hope to come up with soon). The result would be that our collective hermeneutical resource would start to fill up with tools that responded to this new need for a change of emphasis in social categorization. This is of course not a complete sketch of what any such structural change would look like, but is merely meant to show that indeterminacy does not make the structural pursuit of hermeneutical justice impossible.

4.3 Legitimacy: a normative requirement?

Whether or not you can obtain endorsement for measures promoting meaning change concerns the feasibility of such changes. If we take feasibility for granted, however, there still remains the question of whether such changes are desirable and ought to be implemented. Christman (2012) argues that although such changes may be effective, they will not be legitimate unless they have the support of the people they affect. In order for “social rules [to] gain the support of those living under them” they must map “even if indirectly” onto the values and virtues that the individuals act on when they engage in local social transactions where the structural change will manifest itself (Christman 2012, 2). He writes that in recent developments of liberal theory, “political principles of justice must be seen as part of a package of goods the whole of which is broadly acceptable as part of a political consensus” (3). For this reason, he holds that a response to an injustice on the level of the collective that is “divorced completely from individual citizens’ senses of value and virtue,” their legitimacy will be “unclear” (3). In other words, even if we can engineer conceptual change without endorsement, it is not clear that we would be justified in doing so. Three kinds of responses are possible: that the kind of conceptual engineering aimed at fixing hermeneutical injustice aren’t subject to such a legitimacy-requirement; that the legitimacy can only be achieved with reference to the results of the change; or that legitimacy isn’t a relevant parameter for assessing conceptual engineering projects at all.
To which kinds of structural changes should the legitimacy requirement be taken to apply? To the ones that are ethically motivated, so that there is a relevant set of values and virtues for it to map on to? Do all structural changes have this kind of primary ethical goal, or if not, is it only the ones that do that are subject to the legitimacy requirement? This matters because on many views in conceptual engineering, meaning change is not a moral endeavor at all, and so the structural changes one could implement to engineer such change wouldn’t either.\(^8\) Christman is making this criticism in response to Anderson’s suggested integration of school districts, which is in fact a moral-political project. It is far from clear, however, that the same is true of all structural changes that aim to engineer meaning change. Simion and Kelp’s example of moving all the world’s cows to the North Pole so as to change the concept of these animals does not seem to have the same ethical import as integration of de facto segregated school districts.\(^9\) This is of course not a change that is implemented to remedy a hermeneutical injustice. One could object that because hermeneutical injustices are supposed to be discriminatory in nature, any change directed at filling a hermeneutical lacuna is automatically ethically significant and therefore subject to Christman’s objection. As we have seen, however, there are several different ways of justifying ameliorative projects within conceptual engineering, only some of which are ethically motivated in any primary sense.

The various kinds of conceptual defects and conceptual virtues that form the basis for justifications of ameliorative projects were outlined in Chapter Two, sections three and four. In Cappelen’s taxonomy of defects, there are two main categories: defects in semantic value and objectionable effects of a non-defective semantic value (2019, 34). The latter is further divided into different kinds of objectionable effects: moral, cognitive and theoretical. The question, then, is whether attempts at conceptual engineering to remedy hermeneutical injustices, such as implementing a structural change, will always fall into the category of remedying morally objectionable effects. One reason to think it will not is that it is not morally objectionable effects Fricker aims to remedy, but epistemic ones. As Pohlhaus argues, the perspectives of the marginalized are objectively better than those of the dominant, and so expanding the collective hermeneutical resource to include these is an epistemic improvement for everyone involved (2012, 297). This perspective on conceptual engineering by way of structural changes would fall into remediying cognitive defects in Cappelen’s taxonomy, and therefore would not be

\(^8\) Or at least they would not have this moral valence in virtue of being implemented to further a meaning change.

\(^9\) This is of course provided the cows won’t suffer in the cold, which we grant for the sake of the argument.
subject to the legitimacy objection. At least for some of conceptual engineering, it seems like the legitimacy requirement does not apply.

The second alternative response to Christman’s legitimacy requirement is to argue that endorsement for the change prior to its implementation is not the only way to achieve legitimacy. Anderson has responded to Christman’s challenge by claiming that the legitimacy of structural measures can be achieved after they have been implemented. She uses the example of integration, which people come to appreciate “from the inside, even if they initially resisted it” (15). This point is easy to appreciate: we do not always know how our preferences will change, and research shown that in the case of integration, people do come to appreciate it after having lived it (2012, 15). Anderson calls this an “epistemic growth that underwrites moral legitimacy” (16), because people come to appreciate that their previous opinions were “grounded in ignorance of the perspectives of the disadvantaged” (16). One way to argue for the legitimacy of ethically significant structural change when endorsement is lacking, then, is that people would have endorsed it had they been in a position to appreciate its effects - and this is legitimacy enough.10

A final possibility is to reject the idea that legitimacy is a useful parameter even for projects in conceptual engineering that are ethically motivated. On a function-oriented reading of Fricker’s argument for conceptual engineering, we can for instance claim that the changes we intend will only succeed if they do in fact produce a benefit, whether that benefit be moral, epistemic or metaphysical. Whether or not a structural change will produce the relevant conceptual change is therefore an open question, and since it will not do so if the conceptual change turns out not to be useful, there question of legitimacy becomes moot. This last point generalizes to other views in conceptual engineering as well. Much of conceptual engineering is not what Cappelen calls “luminous,” which is to say that we do not and perhaps cannot know when we are engaging in conceptual engineering or when it is working (2019 PAGE). In combination with the idea that meaning change to fix hermeneutical injustice is an epistemic rather than ethical project, and the idea that such measures can really only obtain legitimacy after their implementation, anti-luminosity gives us reason to think that questions of legitimacy are somewhat beside the point.

10 This kind of reasoning is not particular to hermeneutical injustice, but seems to be present to some extent in much social and public policy.
4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three approaches to hermeneutical justice and their shortcomings in light of what conceptual engineering tells us about meaning change. Fricker suggests that all individuals should develop hermeneutical virtue, which will achieve two goals. Firstly, it will create a friendly atmosphere in individual interactions, remedying some of the negative emotions marginalized subjects can experience when unable to make themselves intelligible. Secondly, the cumulative effect of these positive interactions in hermeneutically inclusive micro-climates has the potential to generate new meanings and thus to fill lacunas in the hermeneutical resource. As was argued in Chapter Three, however, even a mild externalism gives us reason to think that the latter is not a plausible way to introduce new concepts into the collective hermeneutical resource.

The second solution discussed was structural change as advocated by Anderson (2012a). Although structural change is a plausible way to engineer conceptual change on several of the views we have seen, there is no guarantee that a given structural measure will lead to a given change in concepts. Anderson is therefore a little too ambitious on behalf of structural changes, and fails to appreciate the many other factors that also affect meaning change. Madva (2016), in contrast, is a proponent of combined structural- and individual-level changes, but posits attitude change as a necessary condition for conceptual engineering to succeed. This suggestion is therefore subject to the same criticism that was levelled at willful hermeneutical injustice, namely that individual attitudes have little to say on any minimally externalist account of meaning. In addition, it is unlikely that any condition will be necessary or sufficient for all cases of hermeneutical injustice, given the many different variations of the injustice that exist on a conceptual engineering perspective.

Even though the hermeneutical injustices vary greatly and the solutions should too, there are nevertheless two challenges that any attempt at conceptual engineering for hermeneutical justice should answer. The first is to demonstrate that the injustice is indeed real and not illusory, or in other words, to overcome the indeterminacy attached to hermeneutical lacunas. I have argued that in many cases, given the nuance introduced by a conceptual engineering perspective, this challenge may be less pressing than Christman would have us believe. If we accept that both concept possession and propagation come in degrees, hermeneutical injustice ceases to be a binary phenomenon. When conceived of as a spectrum, it becomes evident that we will often be in a position to see that meaning change would improve intelligibility and thus constitute an improvement of a hermeneutically unjust situation. Moreover, even for cases of
complete indeterminacy, it nevertheless makes sense to implement conceptual engineering solutions. For example, placing greater requirements on the context sensitivity of our terms would on a functional account of conceptual engineering lead to less hermeneutical injustice, even when we cannot tell what the injustice is.

The final challenge is the question of when it is legitimate to engineer change in a conceptual resource. Conceptual engineers justify their ameliorative projects on a variety of grounds: that they constitute semantic improvements, metaphysical improvements or moral improvements. I have argued that in the cases of the first two, legitimacy is not a worry, since they constitute objective improvements of our representational devices. In the case of conceptual engineering for moral or political aims, I have further argued that on the strengthened reading of Fricker as a function-oriented conceptual engineer, the legitimacy worry loses its force. On a functional account, we can try to engineer many changes in our concepts, but only the ones that produce actual benefits will succeed. For ethical improvements, then, we can assume that if they catch on, it is because these concepts serve important ethical functions, thus in a sense legitimating themselves.
Conclusion

Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice does important work in showing that the composition of our epistemic resources is an ethical matter. The aim of this thesis has been to bolster this work by clarifying the how and why. I have attempted to do so by substantiating and evaluating Fricker’s commitments on conceptual change using the standards set by conceptual engineering.

In Chapter One, I introduced Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice and three clusters of criticisms to her account. These three clusters question Fricker’s characterization of the scope, mechanism and epistemic nature of hermeneutical injustice. This classification of the criticisms exposed four areas in which Fricker’s explanation is unsatisfactory on anything beyond a surface reading. These four areas were conceptual control, ignorance, conceptual absences and conceptual virtue.

In Chapter Two, I made the case for an externalist function-oriented reading of Fricker’s account of conceptual engineering. First, I made Fricker’s commitments within each of these areas explicit and evaluated them for consistency. This was done with reference to the best theories of conceptual change available in the field of conceptual engineering. On the topic of conceptual control, I argued that Fricker is both too optimistic and too simplistic in her description of what confers epistemic influence on subjects. With regards to ignorance, I argued that the tension between the awareness a subject has prior to obtaining a concept and the knowledge that follows immediately from obtaining this concept is best resolved if Fricker is taken to be an externalist about mental content. When it comes to conceptual absences, I presented an argument for considering the lacunae Fricker describes as presences of defective concepts rather than absences proper. This argument gains further support from the discussion of conceptual virtue, where I argue that Fricker is a social constructivist about concepts. Conceptual virtue, then, is determined not only by intelligibility, which Fricker commits to explicitly, but also by a concept’s ability to constitute the kind of social reality we want. In conclusion, I argue that the strengthened version of Fricker solves the inconsistencies in her account and increases its explanatory power.

Chapter Three reassesses the force of the criticisms against hermeneutical injustice on the strengthened version of Fricker’s account developed in Chapter Two. It turns out that the first category of criticisms, those that pertain to the scope of the definition, miss the mark on the modified account of hermeneutical injustice. They do so because these criticisms rely on
heavily internalist assumptions about meaning which lose their force when applied to an explicitly externalist version of Fricker’s account. The second category of criticisms concerned the mechanisms that Fricker credits with producing and upholding hermeneutical injustice. Here, I argue that Fricker could rely on a function-oriented view of conceptual engineering to explain how some groups come to have disproportional influence over our epistemic resources without relying on the internalist assumptions that were rejected in the first section of this chapter. Finally, in response to the criticisms that question whether Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice is really an epistemic injustice, I argued that the same function-oriented view allows us to describe the origin of the injustice as epistemic. This is a way of avoiding the charge that an injustice cannot be epistemic when the epistemic status of both parties are the same. Moreover, I argued that the modified version of Fricker’s account gives us several reasons to consider hermeneutical injustices as epistemic, even if the marginalized are in possession of objectively better knowledge.

In Chapter Four, I apply the arguments from Chapters Two and Three to three varieties of suggested approaches to hermeneutical injustice. The first is Fricker’s own account of hermeneutical justice, which I argue is vulnerable to the same arguments used against the criticisms of scope in Chapter Two. The second kind of solution is a structural change one, which is promising but for its positing of structural changes as sufficient for bringing about the conceptual change we seek. If there is one upshot of the discussions in this thesis, it is that the kind of conceptual change we intend are never guaranteed. The final suggested solution is attitude change, which again is vulnerable to the arguments from externalism. I end chapter four by briefly discussing a practical and a normative concern for conceptual engineering projects that aim to promote hermeneutical justice. The practical concern is that we may not be able to discern the areas of hermeneutical injustice until these have been overcome. In response to this, I argue that we can nevertheless engineer more context-sensitive concepts capable of introducing nuances and therefore preventing at least some forms of hermeneutical injustices from arising in the first place. I claim that this is reason enough to try. The normative concern is that we may not be justified in engineering conceptual changes that people do not desire or know that they need. Here, I argue that expansion of our conceptual resource is not necessarily an ethically charged undertaking and so can take exception to the legitimacy requirement. Moreover, given that the project of reducing hermeneutical injustice is an attempt to introduce terms that allow us to better describe our world, conceptual expansion is in everyone’s interest. Or so I argue.
I hope to have shown that hermeneutical injustice can be understood as a serious yet addressable issue on our best theories of conceptual change. I have argued that the mechanisms that produce hermeneutical injustice are more complex than Fricker allows, and that the conceptual lacunae and their effects find their best expression in conceptual engineering terms that complicate the familiar dichotomy between dominant and marginalized. Nevertheless, Fricker’s account gives us a starting point for thinking and talking about how structures of power permeate even the most rudimentary areas of our experience: both becoming what we are, and naming and sharing what that is like. This thesis has suggested a few ways in which this account could be developed to yield even better understandings of hermeneutical injustice, and tools with which to act on these.
Bibliography


