Abstract: In discourse about social concepts, it is treated as “common sense” to appeal to science; one just is a woman, or “rational”, or “athletic”, it is claimed, in virtue of some empirically discoverable facts about one’s physical or psychological makeup. This move is used to silence protests against oppressive uses of a concept. Many such appeals rest on false information. However, sometimes the empirical facts are as described, but there is normative content “smuggled in”. Assuming that many social concepts are thick—containing both normative and descriptive content—I note that the descriptive content of some concept can be correct, while the normative content may be warped. Prying apart the descriptive and normative content of thick social concepts can help us understand and evaluate how normative claims are embedded in appeals to “mere science”, so that such claims, regardless of their empirical accuracy, may function to reify oppression.

Some social concepts, such as gender, masquerade as natural or empirical, when in fact they are constructed and normative. There has been much excellent work on “debunking” these naturalistic assumptions about social reality (see, for example, Butler 1990/1993, Haslanger 2012, Ásta 2018). But sometimes, uncovering accurate empirical facts is not enough to undermine oppression. This can occur when some operative concept in our collective understanding has accurate descriptive content, but inaccurate or distorted normative content. In this paper, I articulate and defend a notion of hermeneutical distortion. Hermeneutical distortion occurs when the concepts available to describe one’s experience are misleading, inaccurate, or otherwise normatively flawed. When those flaws serve to systematically disadvantage marginalized individuals for the benefit of the privileged, hermeneutical distortion functions as hermeneutical injustice. If the concepts in play are empirically accurate in their
descriptive content, but include warped normative content, they may reinforce warped ideas about marginalized people while masquerading as “mere” empirical fact.

In §I, I briefly articulate the concept of hermeneutical distortion as a kind of hermeneutical injustice. Sometimes hermeneutical resources are flawed; they represent the descriptive content of one’s experience accurately, but contain warped normative content. In §II, I employ an understanding of “thick concepts” to elaborate on how hermeneutical distortion can be particularly effective at invisibly perpetuating epistemic injustice. In §III, I argue that some scientific concepts are affected by hermeneutical distortion, so that they can “smuggle in” normative content. This makes aggressive or anti-liberatory uses of these concepts difficult to criticize; since the concepts can masquerade as purely descriptive, concept users can appeal to their empirical accuracy as grounds for their continued use.

I. Hermeneutical Distortion

According to Miranda Fricker, hermeneutical injustice occurs when shared understanding lacks crucial concepts to describe the experiences of marginalized people, placing them at a disadvantage with respect to understanding and communicating those experiences. (Fricker 2007) Consider the concept of sexual harassment. Prior to the introduction of this concept to the general understanding, people (women) who were sexually harassed were unable to articulate the experience in a way that enabled general uptake. This produced what Fricker calls a “hermeneutical lacuna”; a gap in collective understandings which systematically disadvantages marginalized individuals while benefitting their oppressors. In their inability to articulate what is happening to them in a way that enables general uptake, marginalized people lack the power to make their experiences intelligible to others. This robs them of the ability to be understood; to spread awareness; to pursue recompense; and, Fricker argues, to make sense of their own experiences, leaving them “deeply troubled, confused, and isolated” (151).

Medina (2012) argues that this last point is too quick. Just because some concept is not available to the dominant understanding, or to those who are privileged with respect to it, does
not mean that it is not intelligible to those who experience it. Oppressed subjects are very practiced at navigating hermeneutically unfriendly territory, and “often find ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations are available” (208-9). Although such expressions are often “embryonic and inchoate”, it is crucial that we develop a “hermeneutic sensibility” with respect to them—that is, to respect communicative attempts that are not always intelligible in dominant contexts, but that may make sense to those who share a particular experience (209). Medina also points out that the formulation of concepts takes time; nascent and emerging concepts need to be honed among receptive listeners in friendly contexts in order to develop into something widely understandable (208).

Medina’s analysis sheds light on an important facet of this phenomenon: Concepts can be more or less apt to describe our experiences, and we can hone them in ways that are useful for us. If this is true, that suggests that power differentials can affect these phenomena, too. Most concepts are likely shaped in ways that are useful for those in power, and that are specifically inapt to describe the experiences of marginalized people. Quite generally, our understanding of the concepts we use to describe our experience tends to be imperfect; our understanding is hampered by subtle variations in experience among individuals, by linguistic and other communicative barriers, by general human cognitive limitations, etc. I identify a distinctive kind of injustice I call hermeneutical distortion; there are available conceptual resources to describe one’s experiences, but the aptness of those concepts is affected by privilege and power.

I elaborate through Fricker’s example of Edmund White. White grew up gay in 1950’s America. As such, he did not have accurate concepts of his sexuality with which to describe himself. In his memoir, White describes the culturally available constructions of “homosexual” as odious and pathological, and articulates his desire to distance himself from them:

I never doubted that homosexuality was a sickness; in fact, I took it as a measure of how unsparingly objective I was that I could contemplate this very sickness. But in some other part of my mind I couldn’t believe that the Lysol smell must bathe me, too, that its smell of stale coal fumes must penetrate my love for Tom. Perhaps I became so vague, so exhilarated with
vagueness, precisely in order to forestall a recognition of the final term of the syllogism that begins: If one man loves another he is a homosexual; I love a man… (White 1983, quoted in Fricker 2007, 164)

I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual. ... Nor did I want to study the face beneath my mask, lest it turn out to have the pursed lips, dead pallor and shaped eyebrows by which one can always recognize the Homosexual. What I required was a sleight of hand, an alibi or a convincing act of bad faith to persuade myself I was not that vampire. (ibid. 165)

Fricker uses White’s case to flesh out her account of hermeneutical injustice. She calls White’s vampiric images of homosexuality “powerful bogeymen” (164), and contends that they help to render White’s experience “inarticulable” (165).

But not fully inarticulable. White at least knows that other gay people exist, as evidenced by his expression of the syllogism. He has concepts which can describe him in some way. Unlike many victims of sexual harassment, White did not lack concepts of homosexuality; he lacked accurate concepts of homosexuality. Fricker describes White as someone who “wrestles these bullying would-be selves with courage and wit, now giving in to their bid to claim his identity, now resisting.” (2007, 165) In having some concept, he had open to him the possibility of resisting it, reshaping it, or even adopting it “ironically” (166). This is different from the challenge faced by someone who lacks all hermeneutical resources to describe their experience.

Consider, by contrast, Hannah Gadsby’s experience of growing up gay in a homophobic environment:

But in all the debate about homosexuality, no one ever really talked about the lesbians. You know? It was all the gay men. They’re the problem! ... For a long time, I knew more facts about unicorns than I did about lesbians.¹

Gadsby was in quite a different position from White with respect to self-construction. It was not open to her to negotiate the terms of her interpretation. She could not wrestle, resist, reshape, or ironically adopt a lesbian identity if there was no such coherent concept in her social reality. She faced a true hermeneutical lacuna—an inability to communicate crucial, important facts about herself at all; perhaps an inability to understand them herself. Where Gadsby faced the

¹ Hannah Gadsby, Nanette, 2018, Netflix
challenge of defining, White faced the challenge of redefining. These are distinct hermeneutical challenges, and the concept of hermeneutical distortion can help us pull them apart.

II. Thick Normative Concepts and Hermeneutical Distortion

“Thick” concepts contain both normative and descriptive content. Understanding thick concepts can help us make sense of the difference between the empirical accuracy of some concept, and its normative power. This distinction can also be deployed to help us understand morally loaded concepts which purport to be merely descriptive. Ecklund (2017) investigates thick concepts like “chaste”. This concept has the descriptive content “sexually inactive for reasons of principle”, but also has positive normative content (“good/laudable in virtue of…”). Terms like “chaste” may be descriptively accurate, in that there are some individuals who are sexually inactive for reasons of principle. But there is no one who is morally good merely in virtue of her sexual inactivity. Questions about whether terms like “chaste” have any extension will depend on one’s view about how thick concepts work. That inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper. I am here interested in the hermeneutic effects of the deployment of normatively inaccurate terms whose descriptive accuracy is not in question.

Many thick concepts are relevant to the collective understanding. Take, for example, “sexual harassment”. I take this word to have descriptive as well as normative content. Suppose, then, that we had a concept of “sexual harassment”, with the same descriptive content that we currently have; but instead of being understood as primarily morally and legally prohibited, it is understood as primarily desirable or erotic. Instances of, say, quid pro quo for sexual favors in the workplace are understood to follow a general (gendered) pattern, but they are not interpreted as problematic. Call this concept “sexy harassment”. Individuals who are subject to “sexy harassment” therefore have a way to articulate the descriptive content of their experiences, but those articulations still misfire in an important way. They can say what has happened to them, but not why it matters.
This is not an outlandish example. Feminist scholars have argued that attempts by women to resist sexual harassment and abuse have been systematically eroticized by pornographic representations, so that it is possible to communicate what has happened, but impossible to protest against it. (MacKinnon 1989, Langton 1993) Further real-life examples are easy enough to find. As an updated version of the Edmund White case, consider pejorative middle-school-style uses of concepts like “gay”. Gay adolescents have only this concept to match their experience. They can communicate important facts about their sexuality, but they cannot do so without importing the warped normative content. Such concepts therefore tie faulty evaluations to accurate non-normative features of the world.

When hermeneutically distorted concepts litter the collective imagination, the task of hermeneutical justice becomes significantly more fraught. Normative content may be harder to evaluate than descriptive content; and thick concepts can masquerade as merely descriptive. Consider the concept of “slut”. Someone who is criticized for calling a promiscuous woman a “slut” might respond “Well, isn’t she?” This response attempts to focus the conversation on the descriptive content of the concept, when what is at issue is its normative content. Call this “descriptive misdirection”.

Descriptive misdirection is often rhetorically successful. In what follows, I will show how scientific concepts are especially vulnerable to this shift, in virtue of the assumption that they are somehow “purely descriptive”, or immune to normative stain.

III. Science and Normative Concepts

Science aims to accurately understand the world as it is. As a result, scientific concepts are sometimes taken to be descriptively “pure”, or free of normative content. This rests on a kind of is/ought problem: since its methods are purely empirical (“is”), science cannot by itself give normative conclusions (“ought”). But science’s inability to produce normative conclusions does not by itself make scientific concepts non-normative. That is, the fact that some concept is primarily deployed in an empirical methodology, or purports to describe features of the natural
world, does not mean that concept cannot gain normative content—whether within the sciences or in popular discourse. The belief that scientific concepts are, or can be, descriptively pure, complicates hermeneutical injustice.

Consider, for example, discourse on gender. Conversations about gender can descend into appeals to “mere science”. Sometimes, of course, these claims are straightforwardly false; “science” is not monolithic, and scientific views about gender are much more complex than such claims tend to make them out to be. But not all “mere science” claims are false. Consider the claim that most humans are either estrogen-dominant or testosterone-dominant. What kind of a claim is this? Obviously there is a clear descriptive component here, and a mere appeal to this descriptive component does not by itself solve anything about gender classifications, let alone our normative prescriptions about them. But when these concepts are deployed in common discourse, they sneak in something more. The standard argument goes something like this:

1. Most humans are either estrogen-dominant or testosterone-dominant.
2. Estrogen is the female hormone and testosterone is the male hormone.
3. Most humans are either male or female.

..and, one might well add, “that’s just science.” The second premise here is of course weak at best; it trades on some unspoken assumptions about what counts as “male” and “female”, which is often precisely what is at issue. But my point is somewhat different. In this argument, the terms “male” and “female” are not functioning as mere descriptors. They are normatively loaded; they suggest normative standards on which individuals may be judged. Importantly, they are normatively warped. “Male” and “female” here (and perhaps elsewhere) are hermeneutically distorted concepts; they contain both descriptive content and problematic normative content. But in this argument they are masquerading as mere descriptors. This argument is not deployed to make an uncontroversial point about the division of sex hormones in the human population. This would be an uninteresting thing to say. Rather, it is deployed to settle a normative argument; how ought we to classify individuals according to their sex? And
rather than engaging in this normative argument, the interlocutor makes a flat-footed appeal to apparently descriptive concepts; “male”, “female”. In this way, the appeal to “mere science” smuggles in warped normative content.

Something similar occurs with a concept like “intelligent” or “rational”. These concepts clearly have normative content. In some (perhaps all) contexts, that content is deeply warped. Only certain measures of intelligence (e.g. IQ) or rationality (e.g. masculine, Eurocentric, emotionless, abstract) are accepted; these standards serve to distinguish between those who have the right class, culture, or education, and those who don’t. Yet there is a “merely descriptive” extension of some of these concepts, and the concept may be accurately deployed according to that extension. The IQ test, for example, has remarkably high scientific reliability and validity; that is, it tests what it is trying to test, and individual scores generally agree across time. There are real facts which a hermeneutically warped concept of “intelligence” is picking out. What is at issue is the normative content associated those facts: whether those are the facts we are interested in, and whether having a higher IQ means that you are smarter, better, or otherwise importantly superior. This is why the appeal to “mere science” is so misleading. Descriptive misdirection frames the conversation as an evaluation of some concept’s descriptive accuracy. That is not the conversation that anti-oppressive efforts need to have. The issue is not whether our concept of “intelligence” or “rationality” or “sexual harassment” or “woman” or “man” is descriptively accurate, but whether it is useful, or whether its use is normatively correct.

Descriptive misdirection can function to silence liberatory efforts. The given ground for evaluating scientific concepts is descriptive accuracy; and naturalistic commitments may push us to defer to science when we think science has something to say. But when those concepts have normative content, their deployment under the guise of “mere science” effectively smuggles it in, thereby invoking that normative content while also foreclosing possibilities for its evaluation. When some concept is subject to oppressive hermeneutical distortion, this descriptive
misdirection serves to reify oppression in a particularly deceptive way. One task, then, is to show how many (if not all) scientific concepts are not “mere science”, but operate as thick normative concepts within an unjust power matrix. Much excellent work has already been done on this within anti-oppressive (feminist, anti-racist) philosophies of science. My task here has been to show one way in which appeals to “mere science” can trade on hermeneutical distortion to redirect these attempts to criticize problematic thick concepts.
Works Cited


