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Epistemic Oppression and Affective Exclusion: A Pragmatist Approach

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Abstract

Epistemic oppression is the systematic exclusion of oppressed groups from knowledge-making practices. One of the goals of feminist epistemology is to understand the nature of the barriers preventing oppressed individuals from realising their epistemic agency and contributing to knowledge production. Feminist epistemologists have taken monumental strides in theorising the different forms of exclusions that constitute epistemic oppression (e.g., Fricker 2007; Dotson 2014; Bailey 2014). But more needs to be done by way of understanding what makes an oppressive epistemic landscape resilient and resistant to change. In this paper, I develop a pragmatist account of the affective mechanisms in place that protect the epistemic landscape from critical reflection and produce what I refer to as *affective exclusion*. I argue that, since the mechanism that protects the epistemic landscape from critical reflection is affective by nature, we cannot reason ourselves out of affective exclusion. Instead, I propose that, although they often prevent us from realising our epistemic agency, our co-occurring emotions and feelings, such as grief, anxiety, and other epistemic feelings, can be catalysts for reflection about the skewed nature of the epistemic landscape. I conclude with a discussion of the role that narrative fiction might play in helping us resist affective exclusion and ending epistemic oppression.

Keywords: Co-occurring emotions; affective exclusion; epistemic oppression; self-knowledge; grief

1. Introduction

Epistemic oppression is the systematic exclusion of oppressed groups from knowledge-making practices. One of the goals of feminist epistemology is to understand the nature of the barriers preventing oppressed individuals from realising their epistemic agency and contributing to knowledge production. Feminist epistemologists have taken monumental strides in theorising the different forms of exclusions that constitute epistemic oppression (e.g., Fricker 2007; Dotson 2014; Bailey 2014). But more needs to be done to understand what makes an oppressive epistemic landscape resilient and resistant to change in the first place. In this paper, I propose that what makes oppressive epistemic landscapes resilient and resistant to change are the affective

habits of individuals from dominant groups, whose emotional responses function to protect the epistemic landscape from critical reflection by way of *affective exclusion*. In this paper, I develop an account of epistemic oppression that specifies what affective exclusion is, how it is generated, how it is experienced, and how it can be resisted.

My argument will proceed as follows. I begin by introducing the concept of affective exclusion and the way it interacts with other forms of exclusions to produce epistemic oppression. Then, I offer a pragmatist account of co-occurring emotions to shed light on the affective processes involved in generating affective exclusions. Here, we will see that the affective practices of privileged individuals function as the safety valves of the epistemic landscape, insofar as they protect it from critical reflection. We will also see that we cannot reason ourselves out of affective exclusion, and that precisely that which prevents us from recognising ourselves as epistemic agents can enable us to become critics of the epistemic landscape: our emotions and feelings. An analysis of a short story by Joy Williams called “Shepherd” (2015) follows, which dramatises the role that grief and other emotions and feelings can play in initiating resistance to affective exclusion. There I argue that, although emotions can and frequently do distort our understanding of the world (Goldie 2004), they can also bring into focus what matters to us the most, and, in doing so, serve as catalysts for new ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us. I conclude with some preliminary thoughts on the significant challenges we face in stimulating critical reflection about the skewed nature of the epistemic landscape more generally, so as to enable oppressed individuals to become knowers and critics of the epistemic terrain.

2. Affective Exclusion

We know epistemic oppression exists and that to combat it we need to include individuals from marginalized communities in our knowledge-making practices; we need to take them seriously as epistemic agents and give them the conceptual tools to realise their epistemic agency. I shall refer to these types of exclusions as *standing exclusion* and *conceptual exclusion*.¹ Standing exclusion involves calling into question the credibility, status, or *standing* of oppressed epistemic agents as knowledge producers. Examples of standing exclusion include testimonial injustice, which occurs when the credibility of an oppressed individual is undermined, and when epistemic authority is automatically conferred on members of privileged groups (Fricker 2007). Standing exclusion relies on implicit bias and stereotyping. Conceptual exclusion, by contrast, involves making unavailable the conceptual resources necessary for oppressed epistemic agents to participate in knowledge-making practices. An example of conceptual exclusion is hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when individuals lack the hermeneutic skills, concepts, and language to *interpret* and *understand* their experiences and produce knowledge about themselves and the world (Fricker 2007).

Yet there is another type of exclusion more fundamental than either standing or conceptual exclusion—what Dotson (2014) refers to as “third-order” exclusion. Dotson first introduced this concept to address an undertheorised problem within the epistemic injustice literature concerning the resistance an epistemic agent might face from the epistemic landscape itself. This resistance can be described as follows: even when oppressed agents have access to the shared epistemic resources, the epistemic resources present a barrier to the agent, insofar as, in order for the agent to make her position legible—that is, in order for her position to

¹ These types of exclusions roughly correspond to Dotson’s first- and second-order exclusions. I do not stick with Dotson’s terminology here because her typology of epistemic exclusions implies that these exclusions are hierarchical, and that they can occur in isolation from one another.

receive uptake—either the existing epistemic resources must be revised or new epistemic resources must be added to the epistemic landscape. According to Dotson, without adequate epistemic resources, “[the agent’s] testimony . . . may be rejected as nonsensical; they [dominant knowers] may designate her as a deceiver with dangerous ideas; or the conclusions she draws might even invoke ridicule or laughter” (130). Dotson further claims that third-order exclusions are not reducible to social or economic forces, which suggests that the only way to resist them is by marshalling imaginative and affective resources and taking up *a bird’s eye point of view*, as Alison Bailey claims.

There is a problem, however, with the way that the problem is formulated: to the extent that dominant epistemic landscapes reflect the habits of thought and practices of dominant knowers, it is not clear that third-order exclusions are irreducible to social or economic forces. Moreover, as standpoint feminists have argued, it is impossible to occupy an agent-independent perspective,² which suggests that, to specify the nature of this type of exclusion, and to resist it, we need to excavate the epistemic landscape itself from *within*, rather than from without, as only then will we have better tools at our disposal for combatting epistemic inertia and bringing about “new ways of knowing” (Bailey, 2014: 67). In other words, we need to draw lessons from our lived, affective experiences to understand what makes the epistemic landscape robust, resilient, and inert. This is because, even when the conceptual resources that enable oppressed individuals to acquire standing and become epistemic authorities are available, there is no guarantee that these resources will be used without the adequate *affective* tools. When an individual is unable to realise their epistemic agency due to self-undermining affective habits, for example, they are coming up against epistemic barriers that are affective in nature. Similarly, when an oppressed individual is not taken seriously by privileged epistemic agents because they haven’t yet acquired the right language to articulate their knowledge, they can regress back to self-doubt. This is an affective barrier that can be unwittingly reinforced by privileged epistemic agents. I refer to this type of exclusion as *affective exclusion*.

Affective exclusion is a type of injustice that is reducible to social and economic forces, insofar as oppressed individuals acquire affective habits that undermine their confidence in their capacities as knowledge producers. It is also widespread and difficult to address, as it concerns the overall affective habits of the community of knowers. anxiety and guilt, I propose, generate self-doubt and are among the affective habits that function as safety valves that kick in when the epistemic landscape is under threat. Since privileged individuals are the beneficiaries of the unlevel playing field, their tendency to respond with anger when challenged or called out serves the function of protecting their standing, which in turn influences how conceptual resources are shared. Their affective habits also play an unwitting, critical role in preventing critical reflection about the skewed nature of the epistemic landscape, insofar as there’s no reason—beyond the appeal of justice—for privileged epistemic agents to question their standing, and hence, to reflect on their privileged status. And, while it is in the interests of oppressed individuals to question the skewed nature of the epistemic landscape, without the right affective tools, oppressed individuals can remain locked in self-undermining affective loops which prevent them from seeking out the conceptual tools to articulate knowledge. We will see next that these affective loops are involved in a process I refer to as emotional foregrounding—a concept grounded in a pragmatist understanding of the inseparability of the mind and the body.

² See Harding 1986 and Toole 2019. Dotson (2014) also discusses the importance of Standpoint Theory for conceptualising epistemic exclusions. Rogers (2021) critiques the notion that some forms of epistemic oppression are reducible to political power.

3. Emotional Foregrounding and Affective Exclusion

In this section, I develop an account of affective exclusion, anchored in the philosophy of William James and Charles Sanders Peirce, to (1) develop the concept of emotional foregrounding, a process in which co-occurring emotions come to the foreground from the flux of felt experience as discrete entities, and (2) argue that, while it is the selective mechanism that generates affective exclusions, emotional foregrounding can be co-opted to enable an agent to realise her epistemic agency. I do so by specifying the function of attending to and then abstracting emotions from the flux of felt experience: to help us evaluate the aptness of our emotional responses and change our affective habits. I also offer a pragmatist take on how we come to feel confident or certain about our attitudes toward a particular situation or problem, and end by enumerating the important ways that our emotions and feelings serve as important sources for envisaging new ways of knowing and inhabiting our worlds.

When William James famously wrote that “*bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*” (James 1884: 189–90), critics were quick to dismiss him. Many objected to what they understood to be the main claim: that emotions reduce to bodily symptoms, and hence, that they are divorced from reason.³ In an influential, alternative interpretation of James that seeks to set the record straight, Phoebe Ellsworth (1994) argues that, for James, an emotion is an awareness or a feeling of bodily changes, and that bodily changes follow one’s perception of an *exciting fact*—the event, situation, or object perceived.⁴ From this she concludes that (1) emotions are not the perception of one’s bodily changes; (2) the perception of an exciting fact is an interpretation; (3) emotions are not discreet entities but rather processes that flow below the threshold of conscious experience; and (4) by the time we *catch* or perceive bodily changes, we are detecting that we are having an emotional experience that cannot be fully grasped or reproduced in its full complexity and totality.⁵ On this reading of James, although emotions are co-occurring, we are not consciously *aware* of experiencing more than one emotion at a time, which suggests that our emotions are not always accessible to us through introspection. Even so, some emotions will eventually become the focus of our attention as we work out how best to feel about a situation. One might argue that emotions become the focus of our attention as the exciting facts come to the foreground. I propose, however, that we select emotions out of the flux of our felt experience using our epistemic feelings as guides.⁶ The epistemic feelings I believe are involved in the process of emotional foregrounding are as follows.

3 For an in-depth look at the reception of William James’s theory of emotions, see Ellsworth (1994), who gives a much fuller account of James’s theory, which does not reduce it to the claim that emotions are perceptions of bodily changes, or worse yet, that they are the bodily changes themselves.

4 Jake Spinella (2020) has recently argued that Ellsworth omits instances where James appears to suggest that cognitive appraisals are not necessary for us to have an emotional experience. He also argues that James (1984; 1894) is a proto-functional theorist about emotions.

5 “We may catch,” James writes, “the trick with the involuntary muscles, but fail with the skin, glands, heart, and other viscera” (James 1884: 192). Moreover, when we “fancy some strong emotion,” we *abstract* “from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its characteristic bodily symptoms,” leaving nothing behind but “a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception” (James 1884: 193). In other words, as soon as we catch ourselves becoming cognisant of or perceiving some bodily change, we are interrupting an emotional process and abstracting emotions as if they were discrete entities experienced in isolation from one another and from other mental states. For James, emotions are embodied, and thereby inextricable from our felt experience of bodily disturbances, and “without bodily sensations there could be no feeling of emotion” (Ellsworth 1994: 233).

6 See for example Nagel 2010 for an account of the central role epistemic anxiety plays in evidence gathering; and Vazard 2021 for the role epistemic anxiety plays in motivating us to reassess our epistemic states. See Kurth 2018a for a book length study of the intentional object of anxiety, which he conceives as an emotion.

Feelings of Doubt or Epistemic Anxiety: According to Christopher Hookway (2008), these feelings come up when we are contemplating beliefs we have already formed. They motivate inquiry by directing us to reassess our beliefs and to look for more evidence, and hence, they differ from Cartesian doubt, where we merely evaluate a belief as “unsafe” and become motivated to suspend it.

Feelings of Searching as a Species of Feelings of Knowing: According to Ronald de Sousa (2009), feelings of knowing are metacognitive feelings that indicate to us we know something before we can *retrieve* it from memory. In this paper, I conceive of the feeling that we are close to knowing something, or that we’re on to something before we are able to articulate it, as a special kind of feeling of knowing, what I refer to as a *feeling of searching*. The concept of a feeling of searching was first articulated by Charles Sanders Peirce, who defined it as “a peculiar sensation belonging to the act of thinking that each of these predicates inheres in the subject. In hypothetic inference this complicated feeling so produced is replaced by a single feeling of greater intensity, that belonging to the act of thinking the hypothetic conclusion” (1878: 482).⁷ Feelings of searching guide us through the process of inquiry by becoming “hot” or more intense when we are close to solving a problem. Feelings of searching in the sense I am developing here interact with epistemic anxiety and induce affective loops that are productive when they are rooted in feelings of self-trust. Affective loops are useful mechanisms for quickly solving problems, as we can cycle through various felt evaluations.

Feelings of Confidence or Certainty: According to de Sousa (2009), feelings of certainty end inquiry, as they indicate to us that we have solved the problem or have arrived at the answer we were looking for. Feelings of certainty are interlinked with the emotion of trust towards other persons whom we perceive as epistemic authorities. I would like to add that feelings of certainty about our beliefs require *self-trust* and regarding oneself as an epistemic authority.

To elucidate the role that epistemic feelings play in helping us navigate our epistemic landscapes, let me lead with an example. Suppose I am out all day and rushing to get back to my dog who desperately needs to go outside. When I get home, I see garbage all over the floor and experience a rush of feelings. I might react in anger because my dog broke the rules and rummaged through the trash. But I might also feel uncertain as to what to do next. I experience epistemic anxiety, in other words, which motivates inquiry not only into what happened and why it keeps happening, but also into the appropriate emotional response. I might find myself feeling that my anger is misplaced, and my guilt warranted, for I suspect that I have been leaving my dog alone for too long lately. It is because my attention oscillates between “Not again!” and “I shouldn’t be leaving him home for so long,” and “Poor boy, he is bored and perhaps even anxious” that it appears as if I were experiencing anger separately from guilt and other emotions.

What is in fact happening is that, in trying to make sense of my felt experience, I co-experience felt evaluations of the evidence. These felt evaluations form the basis of possible interpretations, which I navigate using my

7 According to Charles Sanders Peirce, “Hypothesis substitutes, for a complicated tangle of predicates attached to one subject, a single conception. Now, there is a peculiar sensation belonging to the act of thinking that each of these predicates inheres in the subject. In hypothetic inference this complicated feeling so produced is replaced by a single feeling of greater intensity, that belonging to the act of thinking the hypothetic conclusion. Now, when our nervous system is excited in a complicated way, there being a relation between the elements of the excitation, the result is a single harmonious disturbance which I call an emotion. Thus, the various sounds made by the instruments of an orchestra strike upon the ear, and the result is a peculiar musical emotion, quite distinct from the sounds themselves. This emotion is essentially the same thing as a hypothetic inference, and every hypothetic inference involves the formation of such an emotion” (1878: 482; 1931–5: 2.643; quoted in Trajkovski and Williamson 2021).

feelings of searching. One of the functions of feelings of searching is to foreground the emotions that best fit the working hypothesis. Thus, epistemic anxiety engages us in a process of affective looping, in which we cycle from one felt evaluation to another until we reach a feeling of confidence or certainty. In other words, epistemic anxiety, which is the engine of the affective looping process, interacts with feelings of searching until eventually we make up our minds and come to feel confident that we have understood the situation. When the process of inquiry ends and we feel certain that we understand the situation, our epistemic anxiety calms and other co-occurring emotions fade to the background. Epistemic anxiety is thereby an epistemic virtue, as it motivates the agent to look for more evidence, quickly formulate many working hypotheses at a time, and assess them using their feelings of searching as guides.⁸ Good knowers trust themselves as epistemic authorities and become proficient at navigating epistemic anxiety.

Bad knowers, by contrast, avoid epistemic anxiety altogether and arrive at feelings of certainty very quickly. For example, although an entitled individual might feel certain about the aptness of their anger, their anger may be reinforcing their biases and perceptions about their standing. This is because their epistemic landscape is skewed in their favour, and initiates emotional responses that protect them from the epistemic anxiety and self-doubt that would inevitably arise, were they to engage in critical reflection about their privileged standing. Skewed epistemic landscapes thrive on the affective habits of bad knowers. An individual from an oppressed group experiences a higher level of uncertainty in similar situations, however, as they must grapple with conflicting ways of responding to a complex situation. In certain situations, an oppressed individual possesses epistemic virtues lacking in their more privileged counterparts, such as the tendency to doubt the rightness of their interpretations and the aptness of their emotional responses. The problem emerges when oppressed individuals neither trust themselves nor regard themselves as epistemic authorities. A lack of self-trust locks these individuals in self-undermining anxiety.⁹

For example, suppose that Hanna (1) has the hermeneutical resources, which in principle could enable her to produce knowledge, but (2) she does not regard herself as an epistemic authority. Hanna has a hard time producing knowledge because, although she is quite good at generating possible interpretations, her anxiety prevents her from trusting her searching feelings. Her anxiety is thereby not productive, as it is rooted in self-doubt. By contrast, suppose that another oppressed individual, Annie, (1) regards herself as an epistemic authority and (2) has the hermeneutical resources which enable her to produce knowledge. Annie frequently experiences epistemic anxiety, but is at the same time more resilient than her friend, Hanna, who does not view herself as an epistemic authority. Annie's feelings of searching interact productively with epistemic anxiety until she reaches the feeling of confidence or certainty about how to best understand her situation. Annie's emotional responses are bound to be more apt, where Hanna's will be skewed, due to the biases and false narratives that she has internalised, much like her privileged counterparts, which affect her perception of her own standing. Annie is thereby better equipped to cope with affective exclusion, but not because Hanna does not have the capacity to form better interpretations of her situations and engage in inquiry. Rather, what makes Annie resilient and a reliable epistemic authority is that her affective looping mechanism is rooted in self-trust. Hanna, on the other hand, remains locked in disabling anxiety, and comes to feel certain—if she ever does!—only when she accepts the false narratives endorsed by her privileged counterparts.

8 See Cabrera 2021 for an account of epistemic anxiety as an intellectual virtue.

9 See Kurth 2018b, Levy 2016, Maibom 2005, and Roskies 2003 for analyses of cases of anxiety in which individuals' ruminations and questioning of their beliefs are unreasonable and unproductive.

Peter Goldie argues, in “Emotion, Feeling, and Knowledge of the World,” that sometimes “one’s emotional feelings tend to *skew the epistemic landscape* to make it cohere with the emotional experience” (2004: 171), such that “when new evidence does emerge, one tends not only to be insensitive to the evidence but also for the sake of internal coherence, to doubt the reliability of the source of that evidence” (172). Significantly, Goldie claims that being in the middle of an emotional episode prevents us from taking a “dispassionate” perspective and evaluating the evidence more objectively (174), such as when I feel despair with my new job and fail to take seriously my friend’s evaluation that work is not all that bad. Even more worryingly, he argues that sometimes we have no introspective access to our emotions, and so have no way of judging their appropriateness or how they might be distorting our interpretations of the evidence (175). For example, when I am unaware that my understandable but inappropriate anger at my colleague for missing an important meeting (I later find out her child was very ill) influences the letter of reference they have asked me to write after the incident, I fail to realise that my emotions are distorting my judgements about their personal qualities.

Now assuming that, in the first example, my friend’s evaluation that my work is not as bad as it seems is not distorted by some other external factor, such as implicit bias, and that in the second example, it is my lingering anger and not some other additional factor such as sexism that is influencing how I approach the letter, I agree with Goldie that emotions can distort our beliefs and how we evaluate a situation. But these examples are set up in highly idealised conditions which do not adequately account for the reality that external factors, such as sexism and racism, do in fact influence our felt evaluations of the world, often unconsciously. I am not sure, in other words, that the mechanism that skews our epistemic landscapes is purely internally derived. If I am an entitled man, for example, I will look for reasons to justify my inappropriate burst of anger at work in response to a request by my woman colleague to involve more women in committee work. My reasons will also likely cohere with my pre-existing sexist beliefs and attitudes, which are lurking in the background, such as when I conclude that my female co-worker was wrong to have challenged me in front of my other colleagues, either because she did so inappropriately (in a confrontational, aggressive manner that does not correspond to my belief that women should be docile, fragile, and gentle) or because she must be wrong that not enough women are assigned committee work, since *she* has a committee assignment (thereby failing to take her seriously as an epistemic agent).

If, by contrast, I am a woman who has an angry outburst at work, I might be more likely to have difficulty feeling confident that my anger is apt. Suppose that I felt ignored and not taken seriously by my boss, and that, even after getting angry and pointing out to him my reasons for believing that I have been mistreated, he accuses me of being unreasonable and aggressive. I thus come to feel guilty and ashamed, and justifiably so—or so I believe—since I should have controlled my anger. Significantly, the reasons with which I justify my guilt and shame ultimately cohere with the false and oppressive narrative that I have internalised, and which caused me to feel guilty and ashamed in the first place: that women are not supposed to be aggressive. Here we see that an external factor (the stereotypes and implicit biases that I have internalised) distorts the way that I evaluate the evidence, such that I come to believe that I was wrong to respond to my boss’s actions with anger, and hence come to feel guilt and shame. In contrast to the entitled male, whose anger coheres with his background sexist beliefs, the angry woman’s internalised sexism does not cohere with her anger, which is why her emotional response shifts to guilt and shame. In both instances, it is the internalised oppressive norms that skew the respective interpretations of the evidence; however, because the entitled man experiences his anger as apt, his anger coheres with and reinforces the other attitudes and beliefs he holds. But the anger is not the distorting factor in this case; rather, it is an index of an already skewed epistemic landscape.

What I am suggesting is that, in these more complex kinds of social situation, it is not emotions that are misleading, but the implicit oppressive social norms that have conditioned us to feel the way we do. If I have been conditioned to believe that I should have more privileges than women because I am a man, I am bound to react with anger when a woman challenges the norms and practices that give men unearned privileges.¹⁰ These beliefs are influenced by factors external to the agent, such as the entitled man's internalised structural sexism. His anger is thereby working as it should, insofar as it reliably tracks a transgression within the context of the structural sexism encoded in the epistemic landscape. What makes the emotion a reliable index of the nature of the epistemic landscape are the norms and practices that shape the sexist man's beliefs and attitudes.

Things get more complicated, however, when we are forced to grapple with an interpretation of events that does not cohere with the implicit biases we have internalised. Thus, suppose that (1) my friend witnessed my boss's sexist behaviour, that she insists that he is not taking me seriously, and that I take her judgement seriously and come to understand that I was a victim of sexism, but also that (2) a part of me still believes my boss in saying that I may have over-reacted. This causes me anxiety and distress, and has the effect of backgrounding my apt anger and of foregrounding my unjustified feelings of guilt and shame. Unlike the entitled man, whose anger indicates a skewed epistemic landscape, and unlike the angry woman, whose internalised false narrative distorts her evaluations of her behaviour, and causes her to perceive her anger as inapt, I co-experience emotions that correspond to two conflicting interpretations of the evidence: a true one, in which I am a victim of sexism and thereby justified in feeling angry, and a false one, in which I feel guilty and ashamed for not controlling my apt anger.

Although at first glance it might seem that dispassionate deliberation should settle the matter—that, all things considered, my friend must be right, and that eventually I will come to the right conclusion—we cannot ignore one aspect of my felt experience which explains why I oscillate between feeling anger and feeling guilt and shame: my epistemic anxiety. Whereas my entitled counterpart is bound to ignore the evidence because his sexist beliefs cohere with his anger, I am anxious to grapple with multiple interpretations of the evidence and solve the problem—it matters to me that I get this right! Yet some of these interpretations do not cohere with the feeling that he is right. This is because my anger was apt and because a part of me suspects that I was justified in expressing it; yet, my feeling that my anger was apt is at odds with my belief that I should have controlled my anger—a belief shaped by the stereotypes and implicit biases that I have internalised. Consequently, I experience epistemic anxiety as I try to work out whether to trust the feeling that I should have controlled my anger, or my feeling that my anger was justified—and no amount of dispassionate deliberation will guarantee that my emotions will align with the facts.

This brings me to Williams' story, which in many ways parallels the story of the anxious woman who struggles with the feeling that she over-reacted, and her feeling that her anger was apt. But there is one additional layer that complicates my analysis: the woman in this story is grieving the death of her dog. Throughout the story, the protagonist has flashbacks of the past, intermingled with her impressions of the present, as she tries to understand what happened. Grief, in this case, is a catalyst for inquiry into the events leading up to the death of her non-human companion. But grief also presents her with an occasion to assess her relationship with her fiancé; it gives her clarity of mind by crystallising what really matters to her, and it will remain the aim of the next section to lay out the mechanism by which grief can initiate critical reflection.

¹⁰ See Bailey 1998 for an analysis of male privilege and Manne 2017 for an analysis of how sexism reinforces traditional gender norms

4. Grief as a Catalyst for Inquiry and Critical Reflection

According to Michael Cholbi (2022: 79), grief is “a privileged epistemic route to our pasts” and an occasion for inquiry into the nature of the loss of a relationship that formed part of our practical identities. When we lose someone that matters to us, we are perplexed, confused, and disoriented, and in grappling with that inner turmoil, we come to see ourselves and our relationship with the person we have lost in a different light. The loss of someone we care about also initiates a change in focus, through which we are forced to determine how we will relate to them in the future, since we can no longer depend on that relationship for support, for accomplishing certain goals, for future planning, etc. For these reasons, grief is an important source of knowledge, insofar as it disrupts our self-narratives and our sense of self (81). In Cholbi’s words: “Grief catalyzes what Quassim Cassam has called ‘substantial self-knowledge,’ knowledge of our ‘values, emotions, abilities, and of what makes one happy.’ As animals that live in community with other humans, our self-understandings and practical identities depend in large measure on the social world we share with others” (2022: 84–85).

Williams’ “Shepherd” captures precisely what Cholbi has in mind when he argues that “the good in grief . . . is self knowledge” (2022: 83). Told from the perspective of a woman grieving the loss of her companion animal, the story presents fragments of her memories, intertwined with a whirl of co-occurring emotions and feelings, including happiness, love, regret, sadness, depression, anxiety, guilt, and shame. The dog, who was left alone out on the porch, breaks the screen, runs out, falls over a cliff, and then drowns. The woman’s grief is thereby stalled by her feelings of guilt and shame for having left her German Shepherd alone many times over the course of her relationship with her fiancé, Chester—feelings that are amplified by the fact that he blames her for what happened and dismisses her grief. Over the course of their exchanges after the death of the Shepherd, it becomes very clear that her fiancé does not care about her dog, and hence, does not take on her cares in the way that a truly loving partner would. He thereby does not care for his fiancé as a person, where to care about someone as a person is to care about the things that matter to them (Helm 2010). The woman’s German Shepherd is the exciting fact that stimulates her co-experienced emotions throughout the story. At the same time, she cares about her relationship with Chester, and it is one of the interesting aspects of the story that we are encouraged to piece together how the protagonist feels about him before and after the Shepherd’s death.¹¹

Unsurprisingly, the woman does not appear to have introspective access to her emotions—or at the very least, she does not reflect on them—leaving it up to readers to infer how she might be feeling, based on her flashbacks as well as her actions and reported thoughts. What we can infer for sure is that she was much happier with the Shepherd before she met her fiancé, and that she became acutely aware of this fact after she lost her dog. She says, for example, that she felt “light,” and as if she had no other cares in the world when she first got him. She describes her relationship with her dog as mutually rewarding:

When the girl and the shepherd had first begun their life together, they had lived around Mile 47 in the Florida Keys. The girl worked in a small marine laboratory there. Her life was purely her own and the

11 According to Helm (2009), emotions are structured by matters of import, or the things that we care about and on whose behalf we are prepared to act. Helm refers to the matter of import of an emotion as the *focus* of the emotion. For example, suppose that I care about my tomato plant and that there is a seventy percent chance of frost. When I hear the weather report predicting a seventy percent chance of frost tomorrow, the frost becomes salient as a potential threat. Helm would argue that if the tomato plant truly matters to me, I am rationally required to feel afraid that the frost will destroy it, angry at myself the next morning for forgetting to bring them inside, and sad that they have been killed by the frost. If, however, the frost does not arrive, I am rationally required to feel delight and a sense of relief when I wake up and my tomato plant is unharmed.

dog's. Life seemed slow and joyous and remembering those days, the girl felt that she had been on the brink of something extraordinary. She remembered the shepherd, his exuberance, energy, dignity. She remembered the shepherd and remembered being, herself, good. She had been capable of living another life then. She lived aware of happiness. (72)

When the fiancé entered her life, however, it seems that he put a lot of pressure on her to spend time with him. And the girl heeded the pressure. Moreover, because he didn't care about her dog, he put her in a situation of having to choose between looking after her Shepherd and spending time with him. This is a classic example of what Marilyn Frye (1983) refers to as a double bind. A double bind, according to Frye, is a situation where one faces a restrictive set of choices, all of which lead to a bad outcome for the agent. Say, for example, that I am habitually harassed at work by my boss. The next time this happens, I can (1) confront him (as the angry and anxious women discussed above does); (2) report his behaviour to a supervisor; or (3) do nothing. If I say nothing, the behaviour is bound to continue. If I confront my boss, he may gaslight me by insisting that I am unreasonable and misinterpreting his intentions. In the worst-case scenario, he finds a way to fire me, or makes my life at work very difficult. And finally, if I report the incident, I may face misogynistic backlash. I may not be believed; or, if I am believed, my contract may not be renewed next year, as I may be perceived as a troublemaker who could potentially contribute to a bad working atmosphere.

Similarly, we can say that the woman is in a double bind, as she cares both about her dog and her fiancé, and prioritising one over the other will mean losing one or the other. In her case, she prioritised her relationship with her fiancé, with the consequence that her dog developed behavioural problems and died tragically one night while she was out with her fiancé and his friends. Her relationship with her fiancé thereby prevented her from pursuing one of the things that she most cared about: taking care of her dog. Over the course of the story, she starts to see that her fiancé's entitlement and his demands for attention indirectly contributed to the bad situation. Instead of recognizing the dog as an intelligent, sentient being in need of care and attention, for instance, Chester perceived the dog as an annoying obstacle to having full emotional access to his fiancé, and he did everything in his power to arrange his life so as to minimise contact with the dog, including buying another house. Her life completely revolved around Chester—they socialised with his friends, and spent most of the time, it seems, at his house, as if she had no life apart from him. But—and this is key—losing her beloved Shepherd put things in perspective and initiated an epistemic shift:

The sky was red, the water a dull silver. "I can't bear to see the Tynans again," the girl said. "I can't bear to go to another restaurant and see the sneeze guard over the salad bar."

"Don't scream at me, darling. Doesn't any of that stuff you take ever calm you down? I'm not the dog that you can scream at."

"What?" the girl said.

Chester sat down on the glider. He put his hand on her knee. "I love you," he said. "I think you're wonderful, but I think a little self-knowledge, a little *realism* is in order here. You would stand and scream at that dog, darling."

The girl looked at his hand, patting her knee. It seemed an impossibly large, ruddy hand.

“I wasn’t screaming,” she said. The dog had a famous trick. The girl would ask, “Do you love me?” and he would leap up, all fours, into her arms. Everyone had been amazed.

“The night it happened, you looked at the screen and you said you’d kill him when he got back.”

The girl stared at the hand stroking and rubbing her knee. She felt numb. “I never said that.”

“It was a justifiable annoyance, darling. You must have repaired that screen half a dozen times. He was becoming a discipline problem. He was adopting ways that made people feel uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable?” the girl said. She stood up. The hand dropped away.

“We cannot change any of this,” Chester said. “God knows if it were in my power, I would. I would do anything for you.”

“You didn’t stay with me that night, you didn’t lie down beside me!” The girl walked in small troubled circles around the room.

“I stayed for hours, darling. But nobody could sleep on that bed. The sheets were always sandy and covered with dog hairs. That’s why I bought a house, for the beds.” Chester smiled and reached out to her. She turned and walked through the house, opening the door, tripping the buzzer. “Oh you’ve got to stop this!” Chester shouted.

(74-5)

Several aspects of the exchange are worthy of attention. First, Chester’s lack of empathy is inappropriate given how distressed the woman is. Even if everything he said is true—that she would scream at the dog, and that ultimately it was her fault that he developed separation anxiety—this is not the right time to bring it up. Rather than offering *real* support, he is condescending and dismissive of her feelings, insisting that she “stop this.” Moreover, the woman’s somatic experience and demeanour is notable: not only does she feel numb and detached when he places his hand on her knee, but she stands up and puts distance between herself and Chester, as if repelled by his touch. She then walks anxiously, in “small, troubled circles,” as if trying to make sense of the situation. Then, when he claims he would do anything to change the situation if he could, she bursts in anger, seemingly aware of his lack of empathy, which she implicitly contrasts with her dog’s gestures of concern and affection in similar types of situations in the past. Whereas Chester did not lie down beside her because the bed was covered in dog hair, the Shepherd would have been by her side supporting her through this difficult time. As if feeling confident about the aptness of the anger, the scene ends with her exiting the house and leaving Chester.

What happens next is up for interpretation: does she then imagine the death of her shepherd leaping on all fours over the edge of the cliff? Does she dream about falling over the cliff? Does she commit suicide? Ultimately, it really doesn’t matter how we interpret the ending of the story, however. What matters is that we understand the relationship dynamic between the protagonist and Chester as toxic and unhealthy, and that we appreciate the complexity of the events that led to the accident. Although it is fair to conclude that the woman bears some of the blame, Chester’s actions and words, and her response to his callous lack of concern, suggest

that Chester might be deflecting his share of the blame onto her rather than taking some of the responsibility. But even more significant are the other clues scattered throughout the story about the degree to which he pressured her to neglect her dog. Perhaps he did so unaware that a dog needs company and stimulation and shouldn't be left alone for hours on end; more likely, however, he did not care. A classic entitled man, he doesn't need to care because all that matters to him is what's most convenient for him, even if it means calling into question his fiancé's credibility by gaslighting her.

Walking away is therefore a powerful moment in the story, since it signals to readers her awareness—even if it only manifests as a fleeting feeling—of her epistemic oppression. She comes to trust herself enough to walk away, even if she doesn't yet have the conceptual tools with which to put this new understanding into words. Readers thereby come to appreciate that she is trapped in a bird cage, and that she is starting to see the bars, to invoke Fry's metaphor of oppression. Moreover, it is also by reading about the woman's experience that Williams's readers may come away with a sense that they are not the only ones who are trapped in unhealthy relationships that compromise their epistemic agency. Williams' story is intended to be a form of consciousness raising. Finally, and most significantly, is the woman's not only leaving Chester's house, but also going to her own house after the heated exchange. Chester's house can be interpreted as symbolising the unlevel playing field on which the protagonist must recover whatever epistemic agency she has. But it is in her house where she finally begins to process the death of her Shepherd, free of Chester—a new playing field where she might come to understand the events that led to the Shepherd's death more fully or even in a new light. It is on this new playing field that we readers come to realise that the odds were always in favour of Chester and against the woman, and that even after the tragic events for which they both share the blame, Chester seems unharmed and even a little too self-confident about his blamelessness—so much so that the only thing that matters to him in that moment is that they are going to be late for dinner. The epistemic landscape, in other words, is skewed such that Chester is protected from having to examine his own culpability. By contrast, the woman struggles not only to foreground her apt anger, which crystallises through a contrast between what her dog would have done—lie by her side when she is sad or distressed—and what Chester did—leave her alone because the bed is covered in dog hair.

According to Michael Cholbi, "Grief is a path towards *freedom*." But, he adds that "the freedom in question is not the sociopolitical freedom associated with political movements" (Cholbi 2022: 187). One consequence of Williams's story, contrary to Cholbi, is that grief is as an important affective resource for accomplishing sociopolitical freedom. This is because, although it is true that grief initiates processes of inquiry which lead to self-knowledge, self-knowledge can only be achieved on a level epistemic playing field where individuals are taken seriously as epistemic agents and have the affective resources to exercise epistemic autonomy and narrate their own lives. As Sarah Ahmed (2017) writes, the home is political, and it is precisely because it is political that Williams transports readers from Chester's to the woman's home, where in hindsight we can reflect on Chester's perceptions of himself as an epistemic authority and on the woman's perception of herself as lacking credibility and not trusting her feelings of searching. Whenever I read this story, I am always struck by how easy it is to side with Chester. This is because we supposedly do not see things from his perspective. What I always conclude, however, is that we do not need to, because the protagonist's perspective is completely immersed in his.

Although reading the story can become an unconscious exercise in defending the epistemic landscape from critical reflection, when we feel ourselves siding with Chester, we are afforded the opportunity to learn about the *resilience* of the unlevel playing field. This is because the playing field is protected by the *affective*

practices of the community of knowers—*affective habits* that reinforce standing exclusion, which, as discussed above, involves calling into question the credibility, status, or *standing* of oppressed epistemic agents as knowledge producers. The reinforcement mechanism built into the epistemic landscape makes it so that it becomes resistant to critical reflection. Chester's actions gain traction and become salient within the context of practices that automatically confer authority onto men and give them the affective tools to realise their epistemic agency. These practices make it so that Chester can deflect moral responsibility onto his fiancé, which has the effect of reinforcing her uncertainty about the aptness of her anger, indicated by the way she walks in small, troubled circles. The protagonist's anger, however, registers awareness that Chester is not completely blameless. Her anger comes to the foreground when she realises that some of the blame for the dog's death falls on Chester. This too is indicated by the small, troubled circles, insofar as she is anxious to make sense of her feeling uncertain about whether she is fully to blame or whether Chester is also to blame. In other words, the protagonist is anxious to *understand* why her dog died and who is to blame, and appears to settle on an interpretation when she leaves Chester's house. She does not need her feelings of confidence to be confirmed by an admission of guilt from Chester, which she likely will never get.

Appropriate blame attribution can only happen when the epistemic landscape is not skewed to benefit dominant groups. This is because, before we assign blame and moral responsibility to ourselves and others, we must be able to use epistemic resources to *understand/interpret* the situation correctly, and to regard ourselves as epistemic authorities. If the epistemic landscape is skewed, the attribution of moral blameworthiness will not be apt. For example, Chester is certain he is blameless, but, rather than reflecting on the degree to which he put his fiancé in a double bind situation, participates in a blame attribution practice that shields him from holding himself accountable, not merely for the death of the dog, but also for enforcing epistemic norms that oppress women. Chester's epistemic landscape shields him from critical reflection, as critical reflection would reveal to him that he is benefitting from a system that accords him "unearned advantages" (Bailey 1998). The protagonist also, inevitably, participates in the same blame attribution practice, which is why she feels overwhelming guilt and shame. In her case, however, grief crystallises for her that her dog mattered to her deeply, and enables her to trust the feeling that she is not the only one to blame. It is the small, troubled circles prompted by grief, then, that expose the edges of the unlevel playing field and unleash the potential for new ways of knowing.

5. Conclusion: Resisting Epistemic Oppression

So far, we have looked within for traces of the biases that are encoded in the epistemic landscape and that inform our interpretations of the evidence and shape our emotional responses, which in the case of the protagonist of the story constitute knowledge about why her dog died and who is to blame. Her feeling of certainty indicates that she has arrived at a more accurate understanding of her situation, which is reflected in her foregrounded (and apt) anger. Anger, in turn, motivates her to leave her fiancé's house, and possibly to end her relationship with him. We have also seen that attending to the grieving, aching body can be a path towards sociopolitical freedom, as it focuses our attention on that which really matters to us. The process of inquiry it catalyses also enables us to respond to wrongdoing by attributing blame and holding others accountable for moral wrongdoing. This is because losing something that we care deeply about disrupts not only our practical identities but also our habitual ways of interacting with the epistemic landscape. Grief disrupts the workings of the affective mechanisms of the unlevel playing field, which typically function to reinforce and protect the epistemic landscape from critical reflection. Finally, we have seen the important epistemic work anxiety plays

in helping us arrive at feeling certain about how to understand a situation correctly and how to emotionally respond to it in a way that is fitting to the facts.

Although Williams's story functions as a resource for helping us to cope with affective exclusions, I hope that I have been successful at arguing that the story also tells us something about the nature of the epistemic landscape and what sustains and makes it resilient. The epistemic landscape is fuelled by affective practices which function as defence mechanisms against critical reflection. When grappling with epistemic inertia, what we are in fact dealing with are habitual ways of *feeling*, which all but guarantee that groups who benefit will be resistant to change. After all, no one wants to live in a state of anxiety and emotional discomfort. To fully address epistemic oppression, we must not only learn how to resist epistemic inertia, but also figure out how to disrupt the workings of the affective mechanisms of the epistemic landscape in dominant groups. Only then will we be able to shift the epistemic landscape and bring about new, liberatory ways of knowing.

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