

ALLIES BEHAVING BADLY

Gaslighting as epistemic injustice

Rachel McKinnon

1. Trans* epistemology and “allies”

There isn't a great deal of work that we might call “trans* epistemology,” although there is certainly increasing attention being given to epistemological insights to be gained by considering trans* perspectives.¹ Taking trans* perspectives seriously allows us to shed light on some problems, particularly with how “allies” behave towards those they claim to support. Talk of “allies” is everywhere in queer politics and activism.² There are “safe spaces” and “ally” training programs at most universities and colleges. In many cases, one can acquire a sticker, sign, or plaque to display, maybe even a button, badge, or pin that denotes one as an “ally.” However, the concept of an “ally” and how this concept has translated into what we might call “ally culture” has started receiving increasing attention and criticism, mostly by the very people it's meant to support. One prominent example is Mia McKenzie's 2013 blog post (reprinted in McKenzie 2014) “No More ‘Allies,’” where she discusses some problems endemic to the behavior of allies. In many cases, allies have been behaving badly. In some cases, “allies” are further harming victims.

My focus in this chapter is the bad *epistemic* behaviors of “allies,” approached from a trans* perspective. One common form of bad behavior is that when “allies” are confronted with their bad behavior, they use their identity as an “ally” as a defense; other times, people will do so on an “ally's” behalf: “Dave couldn't have behaved that badly, he's an ally!” Another bad behavior I will focus on is known as *gaslighting*. I'll argue that we can best understand gaslighting as an instance of epistemic injustice – more specifically, as an instance of testimonial injustice. I'll discuss this through the lens of trans women's experiences with “allies,” since a common form of epistemic injustice that trans* people face is gaslighting at the hands of “allies.”³ I'll close with some considerations on what this means going forward for “allies” and “ally culture.” In short, I'll argue that we should abandon “allyship” and replace it with a focus on cultivating active bystanders.

For the purposes of this chapter, I should briefly comment on what I mean by “allies.” I take it as given that “[e]ach person has a complicated intersectional identity, composed of various socially and biologically constructed factors.”⁴ These factors include race, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, religious affiliation, nationality, and so on” (McKinnon 2015a: 428). Following Brown and Ostrove (2013), “[a]cross these various settings and identities, allies are generally conceived as dominant group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred

by their group status through their support of nondominant groups” (2013: 2211). On this view of “allies,” a cisgender person may act as an “ally” to a trans* person, a white person can act as an “ally” to a person of color, a man can act as an “ally” to a woman, and so on.⁵

2. Gaslighting as epistemic injustice

There’s been a recent resurgence in interest in a kind of behavior called *gaslighting*.⁶ It generally takes one of two forms: a psychological abuse form and a more subtle epistemic form. The term originates from a 1938 Patrick Hamilton play and subsequent 1944 film called *Gaslight*. In it, the protagonist engages in psychological warfare on his wife with the aim of having her hospitalized for mental instability. He does this by trying to convince his wife that she’s crazy and suffering delusions.⁷ He wants her to doubt her memory and sense perceptions. And it works. However, this isn’t the form of gaslighting that I’m interested in for the purposes of this chapter. Instead, I’m interested in the more subtle form, often unintentional, where a listener doesn’t believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker’s testimony. In this epistemic form of gaslighting, the listener of testimony raises doubts about the speaker’s reliability at perceiving events accurately. Directly, or indirectly, then, gaslighting involves expressing doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claims.

Here’s the sort of case I want to focus on.⁸ Let’s say that a trans woman, Victoria, is at a department holiday party. Victoria uses the feminine pronouns she/her/hers. It’s the end of a long semester, and a long week for everyone. So people are looking forward to cutting loose a little. After a couple drinks, she’s in conversation with a few people, when one of her colleagues, James, begins telling an amusing anecdote about her. The story is about how she didn’t notice a particular feature about his house at a previous department party. James continues the story: when Victoria gets into an involved conversation about her field of work, she gets a sort of tunnel-vision focus. He then says, “So of course *he* wouldn’t notice something like that. When *he* gets talking epistemology, *he* doesn’t notice anything about *his* surroundings. *He*. . .” In rapid-fire fashion, James mispronouns Victoria five times. Mispronouncing is a serious offence for trans people: it’s one of the most common forms of harassment that they face. In many jurisdictions where gender identity is included as a protected class with respect to harassment, mispronouncing counts as gender harassment.⁹

We don’t yet have our case of gaslighting, though. Suppose that Victoria goes to a mutual colleague, Susan, to complain about James’s mispronouncing her at the party and to raise worries about the workplace climate given that this isn’t the first time James has done this. And suppose that they have this conversational exchange:

Susan: “I’m sure you just misheard him: you’re on edge and expect to hear mispronouncing. I just don’t believe that James would do that. He won a university diversity award for his supporting queer issues, after all. Besides, he’s been a supporter of yours in the past too. He really is your ally.”

Victoria: “Well, he’s done it a bunch of times in the past few months. The last time was two weeks ago in his office.”

Susan: “You say that he’s done it before, and maybe he has, but *I’ve* never heard him do it before.”

At first, many cases of gaslighting don’t seem clearly to arise from a speaker identity prejudice or stereotype. And in order to properly count as testimonial injustice – following Fricker’s (2007) framework – the credibility deficit that Victoria suffers would have to be due to an identity prejudice.¹⁰

Two things are happening in Victoria's case when Susan discounts Victoria's testimony. First, one common stereotype of trans women is that they're overly emotional, perhaps particularly if they're on estrogen-based hormone replacement therapy.¹¹ And since it's also a common view, particularly in many Western patriarchal societies, that emotionality is at odds with rationality, a common way of discounting a woman's testimony (whether cis or trans*) is to point to her being emotional.¹² This is at play when Susan responds by doubting Victoria's perceptual reliability: Victoria is probably hearing things she expects to hear because she expects mispronouncing and discriminatory behavior, for example. Victoria suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity stereotype or prejudice: (trans) women are emotional, and emotionality undermines rationality and perceptual reliability. This is classic testimonial injustice, then.

As a short detour, though, one pattern that I notice is what I often refer to as the "epistemic injustice circle (of hell)." This happens when something such as an identity prejudice based on emotion is treated as a reason to discount a speaker's testimony, whereby a normal response to this testimonial injustice is to become *more* emotional (e.g., angry, frustrated, etc.). But this subsequent emotionality is treated as a *further* reason to discount the speaker's testimony. And so on: it's a positive feedback loop. Testimonial injustice tends to cause victims to become emotional, which is often used as a reason to further victimize them. Drawing on one of Fricker's examples, observe Marge Sherwood's behavior in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, particularly the last scene where we see Marge. She has an emotional outburst, crying (while hitting Tom Ripley), "I *know* it was you! I know it was *you!*!" But Herbert Greenleaf shuttles her away: she's just another distraught woman lashing out. "Allies" also engage in this with those they purport to support: their gaslighting of victims tends to cause the victims to become more upset, which the "allies" take as further reason to discount the victim's testimony. In more extreme cases, it leads to writing off the victim as worthy of any credibility at claims of harassment or harm. In Dotson's (2011) terms, this constitutes *testimonial quieting*: the speaker suffers such a severe credibility deficit that it's as if they never spoke at all.

Second, Susan doubts Victoria's testimony – that James mispronounced Victoria repeatedly at a recent party – by appealing to James' "identity" as an "ally."¹³ Susan thus lends inappropriate weight to her background knowledge¹⁴ of James, particularly in relation to her observation of James's past behavior with respect to Victoria, and thus produces a credibility deficit for Victoria's testimony. And yet it's entirely consistent that James's past behavior has been good with respect to Victoria in other contexts. When Susan says, "You say that he's done it before, and maybe he has, but *I've* never heard him do it before," she is at least expressing the implicature that she doubts Victoria's testimony of James's previous bad acts.¹⁵ But why should the listener privilege her own perceptions, rather than trust Victoria's testimony? I suggest that this is another site of subtle, but deeply troubling epistemic injustice.

In many cases, "allies," when listening to a person's testimony, privilege their own first-hand experience over the testimony of the person they're supposed to be supporting.¹⁶ Probably, the "ally" suspects that the affected person isn't properly epistemically situated – perhaps they're not suitably objective – to properly assess the situation. Maybe the "ally" thinks the person is expecting to see harassment, so they perceive harassment when it's not really there (but, of course, this is used to doubt accurate claims of harassment).

But why would this be a readily observable pattern, one that I know many trans* people have experienced with their "allies"? I suspect that the listener (the "ally") thinks that the speaker is misperceiving events, or maybe that they're reading into situations things that just aren't there. These are taken as good reasons to doubt the speaker's testimony. They may not be taken as reasons to think that the speaker is wrong in what they say, per se, but they'll be taken as reasons not to believe. But this gets things exactly backwards. The affected person is particularly *well*

epistemically situated to perceive events properly. In the following section, I turn to some discussions about why.

3. Trans* epistemology and first person authority

As I noted at the outset, there isn't a great deal of work that we might call "trans* epistemology," although there is certainly increasing attention being given to epistemological insights to be gained by considering trans* perspectives. Two contributions I want to focus on here involve arguments for taking the assertions of trans persons as *prima facie* reasons for believing what they say. Part of my view is to fail to do this constitutes testimonial injustice. Building on what I argue in McKinnon (2015a), we have strong *prima facie* reason to believe what someone tells us with respect to harassment and discrimination. And combining that with what Bettcher (2009) argues, we have a *moral* responsibility to afford speakers with disadvantaged identities first person authority. My argument is that gaslighting, particularly by "allies," constitutes a failure to afford the first person (epistemic) authority of disadvantaged speakers their appropriate epistemic weight.

Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) nicely captures the behavior that I'm highlighting in "allies," which she describes as *willful hermeneutical ignorance*. In short, willful hermeneutical ignorance happens when "marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers, while dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world."¹⁷ Key to this phenomenon is taking seriously the idea that *who* knowers are, and their social situatedness, matters to their epistemic positions with respect to themselves, the world, and others. As Pohlhaus Jr. notes:

[T]he situations resulting from one's social positioning create "common challenges" that constitute part of the knower's lived experience and so contribute to the context from which she approaches the world (Alcoff 2000, 2006; Collins 2008). Repeated over time, these challenges can lead to habits of expectation, attention, and concern, thereby contributing to what one is more or less likely to notice and pursue as an object of knowledge in the experienced world (Alcoff 2006, 91).

(2012: 716–717)

The key here is that one's social situatedness – which involves various social identity features such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability status, and so on – impacts *how* and *what we perceive* in the world.

The point is that one's situatedness impacts whether one is sufficiently well epistemically positioned to even properly perceive the world – whether one, *e.g.*, is likely to perceive harassment *as* harassment. Applying this to Victoria's case, Victoria, on account of her being a trans woman and marginally situated, is both far better epistemically positioned than her cis "ally" Susan to perceive mispronouncing (and to perceive it *as* mispronouncing) and to understand the depth of the harm of being mispronounced. Those who don't personally experience a category of harms are likely to underestimate its severity. There is thus an important epistemic asymmetry between those with marginalized situatednesses and their "allies." The marginalized people tend to be better epistemically situated to *perceive* harassment as harassment.

Willful hermeneutical ignorance, then, is how those with dominant situatednesses fail to develop their epistemic resources in order to better perceive the world and others. I suspect that one mechanism for this is that these people – such as "allies" – fail to give the testimony of marginalized persons' testimony adequate epistemic weight. The "allies" place too much weight on their own first-hand experiences and perceptions of events. And when their perception of

things conflicts with the testimony of the marginalized person's, this is taken as a reason to doubt (or reject) the testimony.

There are both epistemic and moral upshots of this. The epistemic upshot is that dominantly situated knowers – *i.e.*, “allies” – ought to place more epistemic weight, credibility, and *trust* in the first person reports of marginalized situated knowers. It was epistemically inappropriate for Susan to treat her perceptions and experiences of James as equally credible or with equal weight as Victoria's testimony that James has mispronounced her in the past, and on more than one occasion.¹⁸ “Allies” ought to put their own perceptions largely aside and *trust* the testimony of the marginalized person. Trusting testimony means believing what's said.¹⁹ However, “allies” are far too often unwilling to simply trust and accept a marginalized person's testimony at face value: they need to see the harm for themselves.

4. No more “allies”²⁰

I haven't yet said much about what's particularly wrong with gaslighting, above and beyond the harms that Fricker (2007) herself notes as the wrong of testimonial injustice. Fricker argues that the wrong of testimonial injustice is that a central feature of being human is being a knower, and testimonial injustice disrespects people *qua* knower. Thus, testimonial injustice disrespects people *qua* persons. One way to cash this out is that listeners fail to appropriately trust speakers.

However, I find that gaslighting produces possibly unique moral and epistemic harms. First, gaslighting, as a sub-species of testimonial injustice, creates all the same harms as the more generic forms of testimonial injustice. Second, consider the context in which gaslighting occurs: a disadvantaged person (say, a trans woman) reports an injustice to someone she considers an “ally,” but the “ally” doesn't afford her testimony appropriate epistemic weight. But more than that, the “ally” responds by raising doubts *viz.* the speaker's perceptual (and perhaps reasoning) abilities. The claim of being harmed is dismissed or explicitly doubted. In an important sense, the speaker's moral trust of turning to an “ally” has been *betrayed* via the gaslighting. While generic testimonial injustice involves a listener's not appropriately trusting a speaker, gaslighting involves further betraying of a particular moral and epistemic trust of the speaker. This is particularly acute if the “ally” positively identifies themselves as an ally (perhaps by proudly posting a “Safe Space” sign or some such on their office door).

This betrayal has a variety of consequences. The trans woman, in our case, will likely decrease her trust in the “ally” who gaslit her. One primary function of “allies” is to provide support, in a variety of forms. But if we don't trust our “allies,” then we lose a critical source of epistemic and moral support. This can isolate those who are already vulnerable in our societies. Isolation can lead to a variety of harms, including mental health concerns such as depression, but also social harms of exclusion. For example, suppose that Victoria tends to eat lunch in a common room where both James and Susan frequent. If Victoria doesn't feel that she can sufficiently trust Susan to help her out when James, for example, mispronouns her, then Victoria may simply cease to eat lunch with her colleagues. She may even begin to avoid coming into the office when she can, which leads to missing out on important interpersonal interactions with colleagues. In a way, the workplace becomes increasingly toxic for Victoria merely through the betrayal of trust by her “ally,” Susan. And these harms can be exacerbated if Victoria is structurally vulnerable by, for example, James and Susan being more senior and thus having institutional power over Victoria's career and economic well-being.²¹

But what should we make, epistemically speaking, of a speaker's claim that, for example, someone has harassed or mispronounced the speaker? While I advocate a default position of epistemic trust for such claims, I'm by no means arguing that one is epistemically required to believe the

speaker. While one is epistemically positioned to form a justified belief or, in the case of true assertions, knowledge on the basis of the speaker's say-so, one is free to withhold belief. However, I do think that one ought not respond immediately by expressing doubt or doubt-raiser's of the speaker's testimony. Moreover, one ought not to respond by asking questions about details of events in a way that makes it seem like an interrogation of the victim.²²

The epistemic and emotional harm of "allies," the people we ostensibly turn to in times of most need, responding to claims of harm by first expressing doubt or, worse, gaslighting can often be worse than the original harm that the person wishes to share. Simply put, those who aim to be a "good ally" ought both to afford appropriate epistemic weight to the testimony of the people for whom one wants to be an "ally" and to be responsive to criticism. I consistently and repeatedly find that "allies" fall far short in both respects. In recent empirical work on "allies," Brown and Ostrove (2013) found that "allies" tend to overestimate how good a job they're doing at being an "ally." Relatedly, I have noticed that "allies" are often insensitive to constructive criticism and, moreover, often react negatively (often going on the attack) to such criticism.

In the space that remains, I want to turn some attention to how we can move forward from many of the problems that I see with "allies" and "ally culture." In short, I argue that we should abandon the concept of "ally" and replace it with a focus on cultivating active bystanders. Active bystander training has been gaining steady momentum in recent years.²³ The idea is that if one develops strategies for how to respond to discrimination and harassment when one sees it happen, one will be more likely to (hopefully) appropriately intercede and assist the disadvantaged person. Importantly, active bystanders can be in-group or fellow out-group members of the disadvantaged person. A trans woman can thus act as an active bystander to another trans woman.

As noted above, one way that "allies" respond poorly to constructive criticism – particularly pointing out gaslighting or cases where they failed to adequately support the disadvantaged person – is by referencing their status as "really" an "ally." One relatively recent high profile instance was Piers Morgan's misgendering Janet Mock (referring to her on his television show and in tweets as "formerly a man," which is often an offensive way to refer to trans women). In response to being called out, instead of contritely apologizing, Morgan went on the attack, demanding that *Mock* be the one to apologize to Morgan. To many, the identity of being an "ally" – whether or not one actually ever appropriately acts as an "ally" – is central to their overall identity.

One way to avoid the ability to point to one's identity as an "ally" as a defense from criticism is to focus on cultivating concrete actions in people, removing the label and – in a sense – *certification* as being an "ally." One cannot claim to be an active bystander unless one is actually appropriately active when one observes discrimination or harassment. Moreover, whether one has been an active bystander in the past isn't a laurel on which one can rest: in the context of a harm, did you act or not? When we observe harm, we're all bystanders (unless we're the one harmed). If you didn't act, then you were a passive bystander; if you did, then you were an active bystander. Active bystanders, by not being so explicitly an identity (no badges or signs), may well be more open to criticism on how to perform better in future instances.

I don't pretend to offer a fully fleshed-out argument for why we would do better with "active bystanders" than with "allies," partly due to space constraints. In an important sense, this is an empirical claim: one could conceivably measure whether people tend to act better with respect to a disadvantaged group as an "ally" or as an "active bystander." I conjecture that abandoning "ally" concepts and terminology – especially badges and certifications – and replacing it with "active bystander" would have better results. However, in this chapter I have identified a number of persistent and seriously harmful aspects of "allies" and their behavior. I suggest that this behavior is partially caused by the appeal to "ally" as an identity. When our identities – ones we

strongly identify with – are under attack, it's predictable that we'll respond by counter-attacking. And "allies" tend to hit back with gaslighting and isolating the affected, disadvantaged person.

Related chapters: 2, 3, 4, 6, 11

Notes

- 1 Some examples include Stone 1987; Namaste 2000 and 2009; Koyama 2003; Spade 2006; Stryker 2006; Hale 2007 and 2015; Serano 2007 and 2013; Bettcher 2009 and 2014; McKinnon 2014, 2015a, and 2016a; McKenzie 2014.
- 2 You'll note that I consistently use quotation marks for "ally" and its cognates. This is deliberate, for part of the purpose of this chapter is to argue for rejecting the concept and particularly its implementation as "ally culture" and its many attendant problems.
- 3 As I note in McKinnon 2014 and 2015a, I will generally use the language of "trans women" to refer only to transsexual women ("transsexual" is now strongly dispreferred by many trans people, though) and "trans* women," which is the current convention, to be the more inclusive term that refers to all forms of transgender women, including genderqueer, genderfuckers, bi-gender, and so on. The generic "trans*" denotes maximal inclusivity, including trans masculine people, agender people, and so on. The primary focus of this chapter, though, is on trans women's experiences. What I have to say will apply, in varying degrees, to other trans* identities.
- 4 However, I am of the view that any biological feature, such as race, sex/gender, and so on is also inherently socially constructed. For some of my thoughts on this, see McKinnon (forthcoming). What it means for someone to be black, mixed race, a man, or a woman (or neither!) inherently depends on social decisions, almost always implicit and undisclosed. For some useful discussions of Intersectionality, see Crenshaw (1991) and Garry (2008, 2012).
- 5 For some criticism of this view, though, and for a discussion of allies, see my blog post: www.metamorpho-sis.com/blog/2013/10/50-empirical-research-on-allies.html Last accessed February 23, 2015.
- 6 For example, see Abramson (2014) and Ruiz (2014).
- 7 I recognize that "crazy" is an ableist term, but I use it purposefully because the protagonist aims to have all the negative stigma of "crazy" attach to his wife.
- 8 This is based on a real case, but the names and some of the details have been changed.
- 9 For example, here is the Ontario Human Rights Commission 2000 "Policy on Discrimination and Harassment Because of Gender Identity": www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/Policy_on_discrimination_and_harassment_because_of_gender_identity.pdf
- 10 For a review of recent developments in epistemic injustice, see McKinnon 2016b.
- 11 For a discussion of trans women stereotypes, see McKinnon (2014).
- 12 Indeed, this is at the heart of Fricker's discussion of Marge Sherwood in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.
- 13 Another way to explain what's going on is that James is enjoying a credibility *excess*, if only implicitly based on Susan's perceptions of James's identity as an "ally." See Medina (2011).
- 14 I almost put "knowledge" in quotation marks, since it's likely that the hearer has some false beliefs about James.
- 15 Implicatures are things that are communicated, though not explicitly said. For the canonical view, see Grice (1989).
- 16 I raise this phenomenon in McKinnon 2012 and in Chapter 10 of McKinnon 2015b.
- 17 Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012, p. 716.
- 18 I hesitate to say that Susan has *mis*perceived things. She may well have never seen James mispronounce Victoria. She's simply giving her past experiences of James too much epistemic weight: she should be giving Victoria's testimony much more weight than she is. Moreover, Susan might be privileging her own perceptions of James *over* Victoria's testimony, which would be doubly bad.
- 19 For a detailed treatment of the nature and implications of epistemic trust, see Zagzebski (2012).
- 20 This is the title of Mia McKenzie's blog post (and the associated chapter in her 2014 collection of blog posts and essays).
- 21 And the stress and harms that this creates can arise even if James and Susan never adversely affect Victoria's career (other than the harm created by the effects of the stress, of course). As I argue in McKinnon (2014), the mere *possibility* of the harm can create harm.

22 My thanks to Luke Barker for raising this point.

23 Here is one good resource: <http://web.mit.edu/bystanders/strategies/> Last accessed March 2, 2015.

24 I note that “transgendered” is now a dispreferred term. “Transgender” is far better.

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16

KNOWING DISABILITY, DIFFERENTLY¹

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Knowing the apparatus of disability, conceptually

Rare exceptions notwithstanding, the apparatus (*dispositif*) of disability continues to be left out of feminist and other critical philosophical analyses produced across the sub-disciplines of ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of language, aesthetics, political philosophy, cognitive science, and epistemology (Tremain 2013a). Even feminist epistemologists and other philosophers who use the relatively recent and philosophically and politically important notions of epistemic injustice and epistemological ignorance do not consider how the apparatus of disability conditions their examination of phenomena, that is, do not consider how disability conditions what they examine, how they examine what they examine, nor why they examine what they examine. The failure of feminist and other philosophers to incorporate insights and arguments from philosophy of disability and disability studies into their work on epistemic injustice and epistemological ignorance is starkly evident in the abundance of ableist metaphors – such as “epistemic blindness,” “epistemic deafness,” “meta-blindness,” “gender-blind,” and “silenced” – that they invoke to bolster their claims, an abundance that attests to their lack of familiarity with or disregard for the arguments that feminist and other philosophers and theorists of disability have articulated in opposition to the use of these metaphors (for instance, see, Tremain 2011a, 2011b; Schalk 2013). In other words, discussions of epistemological ignorance themselves seem to (re)produce a form of epistemological ignorance. Indeed, perhaps the time has come to scrutinize the metaphorical role that the concept of ignorance *itself* plays in feminist and other critical philosophy and epistemology. Is the concept of epistemological ignorance itself a paradoxical and self-contradicting ableist metaphor? Do feminist and other philosophers inadvertently contribute to the harms perpetrated against certain groups of disabled people when they invoke the concept of epistemological ignorance in their work?

The hypothesis that the concept of epistemological ignorance itself is an ableist metaphor suggests a number of ambitious avenues of inquiry to pursue in (feminist) philosophy and epistemology of disability. I set aside this hypothesis in what follows, however, in order to substantiate my earlier claims that feminist and other philosophers have consistently failed to incorporate critical understanding of the apparatus of disability into their philosophical analyses. I want to show that the failure of philosophers to attend to both (the apparatus of) disability and theoretical insights advanced about it comprises a form of epistemic injustice that distorts the ways in which