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ARTICLE

Hermeneutical Injustice and Bisexuality: Toward New Conceptual Tools

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Abstract

The starting point of this paper is a clarification of the forms that hermeneutical injustice takes for bisexual individuals. While it is often thought that bisexuals do not need special protections or politics because they easily "pass" for straight and thus enjoy so-called hetero privilege, this precise situation is a source of oppression, silencing, erasure, and discrimination for many of them within both straight and gay environments. Bi-invisibility, bi-erasure, and persistent negative stereotypes contribute to specific forms of hermeneutical injustice for this segment of the population. Reflection on these forms, however, as well as reflection on bisexual identity, highlights some problematic aspects connected to the metaphor of hermeneutical "gaps" and the underlying theoretical model that are often used or assumed in research on epistemic injustice. With the aim of clarifying and responding to such difficulties, I introduce Wittgenstein's notion of hinges as a conceptual tool to better understand these phenomena. The case of bisexuality shows that seeing hermeneutical injustice in the light of the metaphor of hinges, instead of that of gaps, helps better grasp its features, its causes, and the forms that it can assume.

Introduction

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when persistent prejudice results in the marginalization of specific communities and individuals with certain social identities and prevents them from contributing to the production of shared concepts and meanings; as a result, these individuals struggle to make sense of relevant portions of their life and to communicate about them with others, because they lack the concepts with which to do so (Fricker 2007, 154–55). Language indeed shapes understanding, and the denial of personal and social identities is intertwined with conceptual and terminological difficulties and conflicts. The starting point of this paper is a clarification of the forms that hermeneutical injustice takes for bisexual individuals, where the term "bisexual" is intended in a broad sense (more on this below). While it is often thought that bisexuals do not need special protections or politics because they easily "pass" for straight and thus enjoy so-called hetero privilege, this precise situation is a source of oppression, silencing,

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erasure, and discrimination for many of them within both straight and gay environments. In a world broadly dominated by the heteronormative paradigm and the straight–gay binarism, bisexual individuals often struggle to fully understand their own experiences, to find their own voice and to make themselves intelligible to others. Bi-invisibility, bi-erasure, and persistent negative stereotypes contribute to specific forms of hermeneutical injustice for this segment of the population. Reflection on these forms, however, as well as reflection on bisexual identity, highlights some problematic aspects connected to the metaphor of hermeneutical "gaps" and the underlying theoretical models that are often used or assumed in research on epistemic injustice. With the aim of clarifying and attempting to respond to such difficulties, I introduce Wittgenstein's notion of hinges as a conceptual tool to help better understand hermeneutical injustice, bisexuality, and sexual identities more generally, including the changes in recent years to the practices, terminologies, concepts, and common perceptions involving sexual identities.

Bisexuality and bi-invisibility

The term bisexual is generally defined in dictionaries as either someone who is sexually or romantically attracted to both men and women or, more inclusively, someone who is sexually or romantically attracted to people of more than one gender. The new development of the Merriam-Webster definition is instructive. Until recently, the definition read: "Of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to both men and women" (Ring 2020). In 2020, it changed to the following: "Of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same sex and of the opposite sex; *also*, of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's own gender identity and of other gender identities" (Ring 2020). In the section on word usage, Merriam-Webster (2022) explains:

> While educational and advocacy groups tend to define bisexual broadly as applying to sexual or romantic attraction to members of one's own gender identity as well as to members of other gender identities, the older, narrower application describing attraction to male and female people persists among English speakers, aided, no doubt, by the word's morphology: the prefix bi- means "two." Note that while the broader meaning of bisexual can be understood as occupying the same semantic territory as pansexual, there are people who identify as one but not the other, as well as people who identify as both.

The recent update to this definition was prompted by bi activists, including Robyn Ochs, who authored another definition that is widely accepted and cited in the bisexual and LGBTQ communities: "I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge my potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree" (Ochs and Rowley 2009, 9). This phrasing, as we shall see, makes explicit some points that have often been of concern for bisexual individuals.

In this paper, I use the broad definition for the term bisexual, which includes pansexual and omnisexual orientations and overlaps with plurisexuality.[1]

According to a global survey conducted by Ipsos in 2021 that covered 27 countries worldwide, people identifying as bisexual comprise 5 percent of the population (Ipsos 2021). Additionally, among people who identify as heterosexual (80 percent) or as gay/

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lesbian (3 percent), there are those who acknowledge being attracted *not exclusively* to one sex; if we add them to those who explicitly identify as bi, then the percentage becomes 22 percent. Self-identification as bisexual has significantly increased over time. Among Generation Z, representing the youngest respondents in the survey (born between 1997 and 2005), 9 percent of the people identify as bi, and 34 percent acknowledge being attracted to more than one sex.

This trend has been confirmed in a 2021 Gallup survey focusing on the United States; 15 percent of those interviewees born between 1997 and 2003 identify as bi, while 6 percent of millennials identify as bi (born 1981 to 1996), 1.7 percent of Generation X (born 1965–80), and under 0.7 percent of those born before 1965 (Jones 2021).

Note that both studies report that there are a greater number of people identifying as bisexual than as gay or lesbian. According to the Ipsos survey, bisexual individuals comprise 5 percent of the interviewed world population, while gay and lesbian individuals make up 3 percent. According to the Gallup survey, within the LGBTQ community (which represents 7.1 percent of the US population), 56.8 percent of its members identify as bi.[2] However, the *visibility* of this segment of the population does not reflect these statistics: bisexuals remain largely invisible, and there is generally no awareness, either in the straight world or among LGBTQ people, that they actually constitute the majority of the LGBTQ population. Why is this so?

Generally, at least in the contemporary Western context, heteronormative and binary-normative assumptions guide our immediate social perception of people. Unless we notice specific "markers" of a gay identity, when we see a person by themselves, we assume that they are straight. If we do notice such markers, then we assume or surmise that the individual is gay. If we see a person with a partner, then we assume that they are either straight or gay *depending on the gender of the partner*. A bisexual person is normally not *seen* as a bisexual person in either circumstance.[3] This lack of perception of bisexuality, despite its spread, is a cultural, historical, and context-dependent phenomenon that has its roots in the development of sexual identities and of the vocabulary, conceptual possibilities and conceptual limitations that is connected to that development.

Indeed, as Foucault famously argued, the very idea of a sexual identity in the Western world emerged in the context of the medicalization of sex that characterized the Victorian era (Foucault 1978). "The homosexual" came into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was immediately charged with sin, perversion, and deviance; while "the heterosexual" was born contextually, representing the healthy and normal as defined by the contrast with its disordered and obscure side. Not that there weren't homosexuals and heterosexuals before then, of course; but the use of these labels to describe people before that time is somewhat inadequate, as the interest in what we now call sexual orientation as a fundamental trait of a person's identity, and the very idea of sexuality as an identity category, is a product of this specific time and form of life (cf. Hacking 1986). An implicit binary hetero/homo metric has therefore accompanied the formation of a homosexual identity from the outset.

Bisexual identity, on the other hand, largely escaped medicalization and, more generally, public attention (Breetveld 2020). True, some sexologists at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century did make room for a classification that included people with attraction to both women and men, and some authors, including occasionally Freud, even argued that there is potential bisexuality in all human beings (Monro 2015, 14 ff.). In the mid-twentieth century, Alfred Kinsey

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developed his influential scale of sexual orientations and suggested that a large part of the population is neither exclusively heterosexual nor exclusively homosexual (Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953; Fritz Klein later developed this into his "Sexual Orientation Grid" [Klein 1978]). With few exceptions, however (see for instance Blumstein and Schwartz 1977 and Wolff 1979), bisexuality remained very marginal as a subject of study until the 1990s. It was not until 1987 indeed that homosexuality was eliminated as a disease from the *DSM* (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*), and for scholars interested in the de-pathologization and de-criminalization of homosexuality it was more important to keep the focus on the gay/lesbian identity rather than blurring the contours (Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2012, 3). Starting from the 1990s a plurality of studies on bisexuality have appeared in multiple fields, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, as well as multidisciplinary perspectives.[4] However, even if there was a body of literature growing within academia, and even if the acronym "LGBT," in use since the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s, included the "B," the common-sense perception of sexual identities continued to heavily rely on an implicit binary that kept bisexuality out of the spotlight. This had positive and negative effects. On the one hand, bisexual individuals were less medicalized, criminalized, and targeted with labels and stereotypes; on the other hand, a bisexual community espousing bisexual "pride" only recently emerged. In the 1980s and early 1990s, bi individuals began to vindicate their identity. This was prompted by the dramatic rise of AIDS, when bi men in particular were accused of being "stealth killers" who brought the virus from the gay world into the straight world. Vindicating bisexuality as an identity was instrumental to the acknowledgment of certain injustices and the defense of certain rights. However, the essentialist picture that was sometimes strategically used by other LGBTQ groups for the sake of social acceptance was and is more difficult for bi individuals and groups to successfully employ. While on the one hand the concept of a bisexual essence or nature, as represented by the "being born this way" narrative, has in fact been important both at the individual level (for instance for one's psychological self-acceptance) and at the collective level (chiefly, for identity politics), bisexuality seems to *defy* essentialism on the other, in that it encapsulates mutability and hybridity, and having one's identity defined by mutability or hybridity is somewhat self-undermining, or at least it is easily perceived to be such.[5]

Difficulties with identity labels, of course, do not help with visibility. One might wonder, however, why invisibility should be a problem. After all, by remaining unseen, bisexual individuals also remain free. However, the price for such freedom—granted that it even is a kind of freedom—is a lack of social acknowledgment that negatively impacts various aspects of one's life, both psychologically and materially. An invisible bisexual person easily and often involuntarily "passes" for straight in the straight community and for gay in the gay community but does not *belong* in either.[6] They are, in fact, unless they explicitly come out, double closeted, and this process of coming out is continuous for them, as it requires them to constantly manifest their difference within both communities. Manifesting one's bi identity is indeed almost contradictory: while in the case of gay/lesbian identities clothing, gesture, and one's voice can be used to vehiculate one's sexual orientation and there is a sort of code that allows for recognition, in the case of bi individuals when such coded expressions are used because one does not want to be misidentified as straight, the person is usually misidentified as gay/lesbian, rather than seen as bi (Nelson 2020 talks of a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dynamic in this respect).

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The lack of a bi-community and of specific role models is also often mentioned as a cause of stress and isolation, especially in contexts where the awareness of LGBTQ issues is itself limited. Additionally, bi-invisibility has material, practical, and broadly political consequences, as it also impacts individuals' rights and their capacity to defend those rights. Take the case of asylum claims as an example. LGBTQ individuals can seek asylum in several countries based on their belonging to what is called a particular social group (PSG). Providing evidence of their belonging to a PSG is often complicated for gay and lesbian individuals, especially if they had to hide their sexual orientation in their countries of origin. Basically, in seeking asylum, they must openly exhibit what they previously needed to keep hidden, sometimes offering precisely the kind of evidence that they had learned to hide or destroy through such hardship. However, bisexual individuals face their own challenges. Rather than the issue of having an identity or sexual orientation that needs acknowledgment, bisexual individuals face the issue of being perceived (by asylum adjudicators) as confused, undecided, or simply untruthful. Even when their sexuality is acknowledged, the fact that they can pass for straight means, for some adjudicators, that they do not need special protections; they can simply *choose* to live a heterosexual life. Sometimes, bisexuals who are in a relationship with a person of the opposite gender (especially if married) are seen as being "not gay enough" to deserve protection on the basis of the LGBTQ identity they claim to have (this is also true of gay and lesbian individuals who had previously been in relationships or a marriage with a partner of the opposite gender).[7] In short, to be politically defended, an oppressed identity often needs to be visible, and bi-invisibility is a major obstacle to this (cf. Alcoff 2006, 7).

There are, however, circumstances in which bi individuals are visible as bi, beyond that in which they intentionally come out of their (two) closet(s). This is when they appear simultaneously as having two (or more) partners of two (or more) different genders. In other words, they are visible as bisexual when they happen to conform to the stereotype of the bisexual as promiscuous and/or polyamorous, often connected with disparaging attributes such as being untrustworthy, greedy, unstable, and unfaithful. As Ochs put it in an interview:

> [T]he only time bisexual people are visible is when we are loudly and openly promiscuous or polyamorous. As a result, people are left with two misassumptions: that there aren't that many bisexual people, and that all bisexual people, are, by definition, polyamorous. Now, of course *some* are, but so, too, are *some* straight people, *some* lesbians, and *some* gay men. I simply challenge the idea that that polyamory is a definitional characteristic of bisexuality. But because of this, bisexual people who are single or monogamous are erased. (Zane 2016)[8]

Other stereotypes that affect bi individuals are that they are passing through a phase and will soon come to "pick a side," that they are just acting out and seeking attention, that they are immature, or that they are unable or unwilling to overcome their internalized homophobia and tell the whole truth about themselves (the whole truth being that they are gay).

As an effect of these common assumptions, bi individuals themselves often feel somewhat misdescribed by the bisexual label. This adds to the dissatisfaction with the implicit binarism that the "bi" tends to suggest. The term bisexuality for a bi person, therefore, can be liberating on the one hand (as it reveals that there *is* such thing as bisexuality and that such individuals are not alone), while it can still convey limiting

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or misleading meanings on the other. Testimonies from bi individuals offer plenty of examples (see, for instance, Hutchins and Kaahumanu 1991, 65, 330). This ambivalent relationship with the word bisexual is also a reason that some bi individuals use other labels for themselves ("gay" or "lesbian," "queer," "fluid"). Additionally, bisexuality is lived and understood in different ways by different people who identify as bi, which also results in a multiplicity of nuances regarding meaning (Breetveld 2020, 156).

Bi individuals, therefore, have reasons for embracing the label and reasons for rejecting it, and indeed some embrace it and some reject it straightforwardly, while many remain ambiguous or dissatisfied.[9]

Bi-erasure and hermeneutical injustice

Even if the word bisexual is limiting and misleading for some bi and queer individuals, it has been important for many. The concept of hermeneutical injustice is useful in grasping the significance of words and concepts to one's understanding of one's own experience. In this section, I describe the specific features that hermeneutical injustice assumes for bi individuals.

Hermeneutical injustice is, in Fricker's words, "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization, that is, owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources" (2007, 154–55). When a social group or a social identity is marginalized from a hermeneutical perspective, its participation in epistemic practices that contribute to knowledge production and exchange becomes limited or nonexistent. This results in a lack of concepts and words available in what Fricker calls the "collective hermeneutical resource," that is, the conceptual repertoire of ideas that are publicly available and shared. Marginalized communities and subjects could experience situations and feelings that they are unable to make sense of or to communicate to others due to a lack of conceptual resources.

Fricker's classic example of hermeneutical marginalization concerns a situation in which a woman suffered from sexual harassment *before* the concept of sexual harassment was available in the public domain. As a result of repeated harassment by a male professor in her working environment and of being unable to properly understand or articulate what was happening (which was considered to be a mere case of flirting by the harasser and the dominant culture), she ended up quitting her job; she had to reference "personal reasons" as the cause and was denied unemployment benefits. It was only later, while participating in consciousness-raising meetings with other women who suffered from the same situation, that she was able to understand her situation and to feel understood. In those meetings, participants, collectively, coined the expression "sexual harassment" to describe their experiences. Once one woman in the group had proposed this name, the others instantly had an "a-ha" moment and felt that this word was the right one. They could finally name it.[10]

In the testimonies of bi people, especially those from some decades ago, the discovery of the word "bisexual" conveyed the same "a-ha" liberatory effect.[11] A couple of examples follow.

> In college, I first met a woman who considered herself to be bisexual. I had never heard the term before, but the sense of discovery I felt was immediate and powerful. Upon hearing her description of what being bisexual meant to her, I experienced a profound sense of relief, excitement, and self-recognition. I now had a

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> way to understand all of me.
>
> After a few years of marriage, I happened across a classified ad for a rap group at the bisexual Center in San Francisco. Bisexual? My vocabulary had never included that word. Not knowing what bisexual was, I put the ad aside for several months. When I happened to notice the ad again, something told me to check it out. My life was changed forever—I finally found a description for those old feelings deep down inside me. (Hutchins and Kaahumanu 1991, 33, 65)

These individuals were suffering from a gap in the publicly available hermeneutical resource; they did not have a word for themselves or for the sexual and romantic attractions they were experiencing. Neither the categories of straight nor gay/lesbian applied, or perhaps, strangely, they both seemed to apply, but they were not supposed to apply at the same time. Rather than questioning the vocabulary, however, these individuals felt like there was something wrong *with them*, especially because they had no other examples of people who felt or behaved like them. Once they discovered the word bisexual, most likely from contact with others, their hermeneutical horizon expanded, and they became able to properly understand and communicate their feelings and experiences. The availability of the word enabled them to perceive themselves differently, and crucially, to perceive themselves as legitimate.

Note that the problem of hermeneutical injustice is exacerbated by the systematic *testimonial* injustice (Fricker 2007, ch. 1) that interacts with it, each reinforcing the other. Testimonial injustice is the injustice of not being believed or considered credible due to prejudices connected to one's social identity. For instance, when a woman is not believed because "women are emotional," she is suffering from testimonial injustice. Bisexual individuals are typically at risk of testimonial injustice because they are commonly associated with confusion and untrustworthiness (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014; Breetveld 2020). They are constantly told or "reminded" that they do not even know who they truly are or that they do not want to admit who they truly are, and they are constantly suspected of cheating. Systematic testimonial injustice worsens invisibility and hermeneutical marginalization in such a way that bi individuals are prevented from contributing to the production of collective meanings (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014, 494–95).

The case described above regarding the lack of available concepts, or the gap in hermeneutical resources, represents the simplest case of hermeneutical injustice, and one in which, ideally, the lacuna can be filled and the injustice remedied once new conceptual resources become available and accepted by the collectivity.[12] Regarding bisexuality, the hypothesis that a hermeneutical lacuna could affect *some* individuals for whom the term bisexual is not available seems correct. However, for other individuals, a term is in fact available ("bisexual"); the problem is that it carries misleading or inadequate meanings and stereotypes that are generated and maintained by power relations, heteronormativity, and binarism. This is another kind of hermeneutical injustice, and it arises when meanings are inadequate, misleading, or disparaging (Falbo 2022; Coliva forthcoming a). In fact, even assuming the availability of the term bisexual in the collective conceptual repertoire, the understanding of bisexuality and of the bisexual's world and experiences is still consistently jeopardized and put in question by stereotypes and the everyday practices of dismissal, denial, hostility, exclusion, and ridicule. Bisexual individuals are typically subject to this kind of hermeneutical injustice in the form of microaggressions, which are also often experienced in LGBTQ environments (Bostwick and

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Hequembourg 2014). This situation is also what prompts bi and queer individuals to expose the implicit stereotypes associated with the label "bisexual," to possibly reappropriate and modify it, and to perform it in unexpected ways. Qualifying the term bisexual is a way of acknowledging hermeneutical injustice, challenging the hegemonic culture, and bringing it into a dialog with the vocabularies of marginalized cultures (cf. Hutchins and Kaahumanu 1991, 148).

I made a distinction between the default case of hermeneutical injustice, which is problematic due to the gap in the collective hermeneutical resources, and a second case in which the injustice is not produced by such a gap but rather by the existence of a misleading or inadequate meaning. Bi individuals suffer from both types. A third variant of hermeneutical injustice occurs when adequate concepts are actually present and available to individuals, but an expressively open and free environment in which they can be employed is either missing or inadequate. Taboo concepts, in particular, might be completely available and adequate, but their tentative employment in conversations and epistemic exchanges might be met with awkward reactions that produce a sense of puzzlement and discomfort to the point that the public use of these concepts is systematically discouraged. Crerar (2016) used the example of menstruation to illustrate this case. The concept might be completely clear and available to an individual, but its use in certain contexts might still be deemed inappropriate. When employed, it might be met with negativity, embarrassment, and nervous reactions. Bisexuality, as well as homosexuality, transsexuality, and several other concepts related to sexuality, can elicit similar reactions, resulting in an uneasiness and unwillingness to employ them on the part of those individuals who *need* to employ them. For example, a bi person might refrain from coming out and explaining to their parents that they are sexually attracted to both men and women, even if their parents would perfectly understand the meanings that are communicated; this conceptual understanding in fact would not prevent reactions of discomfort, embarrassment, dismissal, denial, and maybe ridicule, that might preemptively silence the speaker. The result is a kind of hermeneutical injustice produced by neither the lack nor the inadequacy of concepts but rather by the unavailability of free and open communicative environments.

Finally, hermeneutical injustice (of all three types described above) can result from the active and intentional ignoring, effacing, or rejecting of the conceptual repertoire of certain individuals or communities, *despite* comprehension. This is what Pohlhaus (2012) calls "willful hermeneutical ignorance," which is a term that is also meant to emphasize individual responsibility, contrary to Fricker's characterization of hermeneutical injustice as merely a structural phenomenon (see also Medina 2013, ch. 1). The boundary between the involuntary and the voluntary is, of course, blurred, with injustice most often resulting from both an incapacity and an unwillingness to acknowledge certain concepts. In the case of bisexuality, willful hermeneutical ignorance not only explains bi-invisibility but also explains bi-erasure, or the active cancellation or denial of a certain conceptual repertoire and of the very existence of bisexuality as a result of biphobia. As Yoshino (2000, 364) explains, bi-invisibility s*tems from* bi-erasure: it is, in fact, a product of it.

Notably, biphobia does not only reside in the straight world, where it is coupled with homophobia, but also within the LGBTQ world, where it can be explained (at least in part) as the effect of the fear of losing the strong sense of identity that gay and lesbian individuals achieved after decades of struggle. Bisexual individuals can be perceived (consciously or not) as a danger to this achievement because they dilute this sense of identity; indeed, typically, a bi person is considered to be either "in actuality" a gay

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or lesbian in the process of completely recognizing their true self or a sort of straight tourist in search of sexual novelty. In other words, bisexual individuals are erased and ostracized because they are not perceived as pure enough to be part of the group. Microaggressions that typically take place within LGBTQ communities include identity dismissals or denials, pressures to change one's self-identification, and dating exclusion (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014; Formby 2017; Iacono 2017). In addition to the historical reasons that are linked to the formation of the gay identity, political reasons that are linked to identity politics also contribute to the marginalization and erasure of experiences that seem to complicate the picture and hinder the battles over the acknowledgment of a clearly defined gay identity. As Yoshino famously argued not long ago, both heterosexuals and gays have interests in bi-erasure, so much so that the situation has been characterized as "the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure" (2000, 388–400); such interests include the stabilization of sexual orientation categories, the retention of sex as a diacritical axis, and the protection of the norms of monogamy.[13]

The trouble with gaps

We have seen that bi individuals suffer from hermeneutical injustices in multiple ways, and the examination prompted us to reconsider and extend the original description of hermeneutical injustice as a result of a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource. To elaborate on this, I would like to suggest that the metaphor of the gap reveals an implicit theoretical framework that seems to be at least partly in contrast to the results of the reflection on bisexuality. Such a framework emerges, for instance, when Fricker introduces the example from Susan Brownmiller's *Memoir* (1990) by recounting the story of the "click-aha moment" shared by a group of women who realized that they all had experienced the same "something," although this "something" still needed a name. She explains: "Here is a story about how extant collective hermeneutical resources can have a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be" (Fricker 2007, 150–51).

Although the explanation of the effect of discovering a new word or a new expression for something that previously had no name is fascinating and resonates with the reports of various subjects, the idea of a lacuna or a gap where a name should be that is detected because there is a "something" beneath it suggests a picture of reality that is independent of interpretation and of language as its mirror, which is, upon reflection, unconvincing, especially regarding phenomena that are intrinsically social. As Alcoff notes, what seems to be operating here is an unproblematized account of meaning "as reference to already existing, fully formed objects" (Alcoff 2010, 136) that does not fully take into consideration the way that language contributes to shaping our very experience, especially in regard to social categories. In Alcoff's words, what Fricker overlooks is that

> [th]ere is a rather sensitive relationship between the way life appears and feels, and the conceptual repertoire we have available to us to describe it. And changes in the terms by which we bring experiences under a description can affect the actual things themselves — especially in so far as these are experiences — that are referred to by the terms.

The same commitment to an unproblematized picture of the relationship between language and reality appears in Fricker's description of identities, particularly when she

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discusses the relevance that credibility in testimonial exchanges has for the formation and steadiness of one's true self. Stereotype threat, she explains, shows how sometimes a certain social and cultural environment can *cause* individuals to resemble the prejudiced stereotype that works against them. In such cases, she continues, one might be tempted to talk, as does Foucault, of power working *productively*, but one ought to resist such temptation, however suggestive such terminology may sound; indeed, "it is crucial … that identity power constructs and *distorts* who the subject really is, and this is an idea which finds no home in the Foucauldian conception" (Fricker 2007, 55, emphasis in the original).[14]

Ideas concerning "who the subject really is" unveil a conception in which one's identity is existent and distinct, whether or not language and concepts are used to capture it. However, especially in regard to aspects of one's identity that are so strongly dependent on categories, such as sexuality, the point is that not only concepts but *people* themselves are, to use Hacking's famous expression, "made up" (Hacking 1986). One's sexual identity is not "a natural kind awaiting detection" (Yoshino 2000, 359); rather, identities emerge as results and components of complex dynamics that involve entire cultural and normative systems.

Tirrell's work on derogatory terms helps to illustrate this point, even if it addresses a different issue (Tirrell 2012). During the Rwanda genocide, she observes, by calling people belonging to the Tutsi ethnic group "snakes" and "cockroaches" and making such naming habitual, the Hutu started a language game whose effect was not confined to language. Such categorization involved images that licenced certain kinds of inferences since snakes and cockroaches are considered dangerous, insidious, and creepy. Inferences such as these extend outside of language and licence certain kinds of actions as well as certain kinds of thinking (cf. McGowan 2018 and 2019); snakes and cockroaches must be eliminated, and they must be eliminated in a certain way (it is indeed macabrely astonishing that Tutsi were killed with the same methods that are generally employed for snakes; Tirrell 2012, 205). Linguistic practices are embedded in and intertwined with ways of living and acting (what Wittgenstein calls forms of life), and these two levels shape each other. What Tirrell says about derogatory terms, in particular, shows how words, images, and labels that are connected to identities affect how such identities are perceived and treated rather than simply representing (truly or falsely) a distinct underlying reality. This holds, in my view, not only for derogatory terms but more generally for all the ways that we use to name ourselves and others: identity labels have consequences that impact perception, self-perception, and the connected praxes and forms of life.[15]

We can pinpoint what is missing in the framework of epistemic injustice by focusing on the relationship between evidence, perception, and belief. Let us take the case of self-perception first. On what basis does a person form a particular belief concerning their sexual identity? Presumably, as in the case of other kinds of belief, people do this on the basis of certain pieces of evidence. What constitutes evidence in this case? Presumably, one's own experiences and feelings. However, experiences and feelings are far from being self-evident, basic, and immediately accessible. In contrast, a large part of what we think makes us *us* remains opaque, and certain experiences are what they are by virtue of an entire conceptual apparatus that is shaped by and interlaced with complex normative practices. For instance, a gay person's experience of falling in love with someone of their same sex *is qualitatively different* depending on the conceptual apparatus that permeates their world; it can be more or less clear, nuanced, articulated, expressible; and it can come with different degrees and combinations of guilt, unexpectedness,

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normality, confusion, liberation, fear, pride, etc. It is not that the experience is there in any case, objectively the same for everyone, and language allows us to label and capture it fully, to a certain degree (containing "gaps"), or not at all. Rather, experience and language are interwoven and work to shape each other. The *quality* of experience (evidence) changes depending on the categories and concepts being used.

Similarly, the manner in which we form beliefs about others' sexual identity depends on the evidence we have at our disposal: that is, people's appearance, behavior, and words, and also on the conceptual apparatus that characterizes our world, and these two elements are more intertwined than we generally acknowledge. We judge that someone is straight, gay, or bi on the basis of what we perceive, but our perception is not independent from our conceptual categories. This interdependence is *not* captured by the metaphor of the gap, which suggests that evidence is available "out there," but only in the best scenario is it covered by the right word.[16] This point will become clearer as we proceed toward a possible alternative metaphor and conceptual tool that, in my view, is better suited to account for hermeneutical injustice as well as for other aspects related to sexual identity.

Changing the metaphor: from gaps to hinges

The notion that I present here as such a tool is the Wittgensteinian notion of hinges. As in the case of gaps, the concept of hinges is also a metaphor. Wittgenstein used this concept, along with other images, to illustrate how our epistemic practices are grounded on or rotate around certain presuppositions that are taken for granted. These basic presuppositions, such as "there is an external world," "the earth existed for a very long time," and "I am a human being," are the hinges of our epistemic practices. In contrast to ordinary empirical propositions, they cannot be proven or disproven because they provide the very framework through which proof and disproof are practiced. The growing literature in "hinge epistemology," upon which I cannot expand here, shows how productively this notion can be employed for a variety of purposes, from the rebuttal of the skeptical challenge to the study of social phenomena such as testimonial justification, disagreement, or trust.[17]

In social epistemology, I recently suggested that this notion helps to demonstrate how prejudice works in testimonial injustice (Boncompagni 2021a). I want to argue that it can also be applied to the study of hermeneutical injustice, especially in the context of identities. I use sexual identities as an example and then narrow the focus to bisexuality.[18]

In the context of identities, the notion of hinges can be employed at both the collective and personal levels. At the collective level, this notion can usefully illustrate the fundamentality and simultaneous ungroundedness of a society's implicit assumptions regarding sexual orientation. In particular, it can illustrate the existence of a "default" presupposition according to which men are attracted to women and women to men. Embedded in this hinge is also an implicit binarism: one is either a man or a woman, and sexual attraction is to the opposite gender/sex than one's own.[19] This is in many societies and cultural contexts the default, the obvious, the normal, *and the norm*. Let us call this the heteronormative hinge. At the individual level, one's conviction about one's own sexual orientation can also be seen in terms of hinges. In this case, it would serve as a personal hinge of the same kind as "My name is so-and-so," "I am a woman," and the like.[20] This personal hinge regulates an individual's interpersonal and social behavior and their beliefs regarding their feelings toward others. This type of

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hinge is a given that is tacitly and practically presupposed in innumerable aspects of one's life. The interplay between collective and personal hinges relative to sexual orientation shapes one's epistemic and nonepistemic practices relative to sexuality. What I am most interested in investigating is the role played by these hinges in an individual's beliefs and knowledge claims regarding their feelings toward others and the feelings of others.

How do I *know* that I am sexually or romantically attracted to someone? What is the evidence at the basis of my belief or my knowledge claim? Arguably, in trying to understand my own feelings, I pay attention to bodily sensations (blushing, accelerated heartbeat, sexual arousal, sweat, excitement, etc.), desires, and thoughts that I have about the relevant person, and possibly to aspects of my own behavior. In a traditional context in which the heteronormative hinge is tacitly presupposed, certain bodily sensations and emotions toward individuals of the opposite gender are perceived as the natural signs (evidence) of one's sexual or romantic attraction. Given the hinges that are in place and given what I am feeling, I come to believe that I am attracted to a certain person. However, the same bodily sensations and emotions arising toward people of the same gender, *in a traditional heteronormative context*, are often ignored, denied, or repressed. They might, for instance, be channeled toward another more "appropriate" conceptual box (friendship, admiration, etc.). Alternatively, they might be taken as evidence for something else, such as a disturbance, illness, or pathology. To simplify, if I am a woman and I feel *this* toward another woman, then either "this" is a somewhat excessive manifestation of (say) my friendship or admiration for her, or it is a sign that there is something wrong *with me*. To clarify, I am not claiming that a person in a heteronormative context necessarily fails to acknowledge their feelings toward an individual of their same gender. This would certainly be an oversimplification. However, I am claiming that, within a traditional context in which heteronormativity is never openly challenged and does in fact work as a tacit social hinge, such acknowledgment, if it occurs, is *typically* loaded with repression, guilt, and doubts concerning one's own integrity and mental health.

Similarly, what is the evidence that I'm inclined to consider when making judgments or guesses about the feelings of others? Their behavior, facial expressions, gestures, bodily movements, and often their words are generally the evidence that I have at my disposal.[21] However, whether all this counts as evidence or not, and, crucially, *for what* it counts as evidence, depends on the social and personal hinges that are in place. Under the context of a heteronormative social hinge, such behavior, combined with what one knows about that person's character and way of life, forms the basis of one's judgment about that person's feelings toward others. However, while this works unproblematically in instances of heterosexual attraction, it might be difficult for an observer to see evidence of a person's attraction toward someone of their own gender; and if the observer does see it, then they tend to take it as evidence of the person's pathological status, rather than recognizing it as constituting genuine feelings.

This description details the situation of a very traditional heteronormative society in which deviations from norms are deemed pathological. However, in other contexts, including that of contemporary Western society, even with a heteronormative hinge working in the background as a sort of default, there is room for other sexual orientations that do not need to be considered pathological. The interplay here between personal and collective hinges allows one to hold, acknowledge, and vindicate a nonheterosexual identity even within a generally heteronormative framework. Hence, on the one hand, at the collective level, the heteronormative hinge has somehow shifted

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("*Usually*, men are attracted to women and women to men"), while, on the other hand, at the personal level, other possibilities become conceptually available ("I am gay," "I am queer," …). In this situation, one's physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts about a person of one's own gender *can* be taken as evidence for attraction or love when the personal hinge of "I am gay" or "I am bi" is in place.

Additionally, there is a case in which one's personal hinge concerning one's sexual identity, whether initially inherited or swallowed, so to speak, from the heteronormative social context, is put in doubt precisely by sensations arising toward a person of the same gender. In this case, the evidence is, at least to a certain extent, *allowed in* by the shifted heteronormative hinge, which has made room for nonheterosexual orientations and enabled the possibility of one not being straight, which is indeed a possibility that would *make sense* of the experiences one has. Hence, in this case, the evidence contributes to the very formation of one's convictions about one's sexual orientation, which might begin as simple doubt about their heterosexuality, then develop into a hypothesis, then an empirical belief, and finally become a hinge. What we have here is a case in which empirical beliefs become "hardened" (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, # 96) and slowly turn into hinges. One's fledgling sexual identity slowly becomes a certainty, a *given* for that individual, and a presupposition that they come to take for granted and stop questioning.[22]

A potential objection arises here. If the heteronormative hinge can shift, and one's sexual identity can be, at least at some stages, an open question or a hypothesis, does it truly make sense to refer to one's sexual identity as a personal hinge? Even if it does, is this theoretically helpful? The case of bisexual individuals pushes the issue even further. As mentioned earlier, bisexual individuals have historically had difficulties with identity labels, and their dissatisfaction points toward a way of conceiving of one's own sexual identity that seems to lack some of the fundamentality and centrality that characterizes personal hinges.[23] Bisexual activists and scholars also often see bisexuality as positively challenging the essentialism that seems implicitly present in at least part of the LGBTQ movement (Däumer 1992; Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009), vehiculating the idea that sexual identities are not so fixed and immutable, as queer theory has also emphasized (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993; cf. Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2012).

However, what the shifting of heteronormativity and the case of bisexuality show is not, I want to argue, the uselessness of the notion of hinges in this context, but rather its *usefulness*, namely, its compatibility with the idea of *mutability*. Hinges themselves (at least some of them) can alter through time and can even cease to be hinges. In this sense, the hinge perspective allows us to capture a fundamental feature of the certainties that constitute our conceptual framework, that is, the idea that their fundamentality does not preclude change.

Another image that Wittgenstein uses in *On certainty* can help shed light on this. While the metaphor of hinges shows that normally our taken-for-granted presuppositions stand fast and are not subject to doubt, this other metaphor shows how sometimes, albeit rarely and slowly, some of them shift and alter through time. It also shows that not all certainties have the same hardness. It is the metaphor of the river-bed of thoughts (cf. Lobo 2022, 18):

> It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.
> The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may

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> shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. …
> And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (Wittgenstein 1969, ## 96, 97, 99)

There is a distinction in kind, and not merely in degree, between river-bed propositions and ordinary empirical ones, but this fact does not preclude the possibility of change, and history shows that many of our bedrock convictions have changed through time or have even been abandoned. Note that the two metaphors (hinges and river-bed) are not incompatible; in fact, they illuminate two different aspects of the same phenomenon, and their interaction is theoretically fruitful. While hinges such as "there is an external world" and "my sense organs are normally reliable" are arguably part of the "hard rock," the social and personal hinges that relate, for instance, to gender identity and sexual orientation ("There are two genders," "I am a woman," "Homosexuality is an illness," "I am gay") are more like the sand in that they can slowly shift through time and even dissolve. The theoretical framework of hinge epistemology in other words makes room both for foundational convictions or presuppositions that have a normative hinge role and for social and personal change, including changes to these very convictions.

The difference in kind, and not merely in degree, between hinges and ordinary empirical beliefs maintains the distinction between rule and practice that otherwise would be lost. Even if a rule is established through repeated practice, it comes to have a normative power upon practices, and changing a rule is not something that can be decided upon and arbitrarily performed (as opposed to altering a practice within a given rule). Variations in the way that the water flows do not change the course of the river, although they might contribute, through time, repetition, and erosion, to slowly shifting it.[24]

To return to the case of sexual orientation and bisexuality, what the hinge framework demonstrates is that heteronormativity has been working as a social hinge, that is, regulating practices and expectations and dictating the rules of evidential significance for experiences; however, it also shows that this hinge role has slowly been put in question and eroded, at least within certain communities and contexts, thus creating room for other possibilities. Similarly, at the individual level, this shows that one's sexual identity is a fundamental hinge, but that it can also shift as a result of a complex interplay involving personal convictions, social practices, and social normative hinges.

Conclusion

The notion of hinges, in conclusion, solves some perplexities that the standard metaphor of the gap generated. It helps see better the different forms that hermeneutical injustice can take: not only a lack of concepts, but also the existence of misleading concepts or the absence of a free hermeneutical and communicative environment. Indeed, when a dominant hinge is in place and it is not challenged, it frames individuals' self-perception and interpersonal relationships by normatively regulating epistemic and discursive practices. This includes keeping in place oppressive and distortive practices that might preclude one's capacity to freely express one's experiences and identity, even when fully fledged and adequate concepts and words are in fact available.

In the case of bisexuality, the dominant heteronormative and binary-normative hinges contribute to bi-invisibility and erasure not only because of a lack of concepts

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or labels (such as "bisexual"), but also because of distorting images and meanings attached to them. Such hinges affect what individuals can take as evidence of sexual and romantic attraction, and result in the experience and perception of pathologies, guilt, shame, and disorientation. Even when adequate concepts and terms related to bisexuality are publicly available, social hinges can affect communicative environments by defining the norms of what it is appropriate to say in which context (e.g., norms about taboo topics, or about what must be kept private). For instance, foreseeing the typical conversational reactions that a topic like bisexuality would engender in certain contexts, bi persons might just refrain from addressing it and from coming out, with the negative consequences that this produces. While the first and simplest kind of hermeneutical injustice is nicely captured by the metaphor of the gap, the more complex cases resulting from misleading dominant concepts and from the lack of free communicative environments are not (as other commentators have noticed). The metaphor of hinges conversely helps frame these cases as well.

Additionally, the notion of hinges, in the light of Wittgenstein's image of the river-bed, also allows us to account for change, both at the individual level of one's fundamental convictions about oneself, and at the social level of normative hinges about social identities. This is a point that the case of bisexuality is particularly helpful in highlighting, because the social perception of sexual identities and of bisexuality itself is shifting, as the surveys mentioned at the beginning of this paper show. The growing number of persons who identify as bi especially among the younger generations testify that people are now more likely to challenge and weaken the dominant heteronormative and binary-normative hinges. The rock of the river-bed somewhat crumbles away into a sandy ground that is more sensitive to the flow of the water.

Accounting for change with the standard metaphor of the hermeneutical gap, conversely, is harder. In fact, the gap suggests a picture according to which reality is reflected in language, and sometimes a phenomenon can somewhat lack its proper linguistic coverage, like some portions of the earth lack the ozone above them (Fricker herself refers to the ozone: 2007, 161). The intertwining of reality and language, which is so relevant especially when it comes to social identities, and the way in which reality and language evolve together, seem to be missing in a picture in which the two layers—the earth and the ozone—are parallel and remain independent from one another. To clarify, I am not claiming that the notion of hermeneutical injustice itself is mistaken or defective but that the metaphor of the gap that is often used to explain it suggests a misleading and oversimplified picture of the relationship between reality and language that is evidently operating in Fricker's framework. Such a picture, paradoxically, is in tension with the results of research on hermeneutical injustice itself, which speaks to the complexity of this relationship and highlights how words, meanings, and conceptual resources become interlaced with normative practices that have historical as well as political dimensions.

In conclusion, seeing hermeneutical injustice in the light of the metaphor of hinges, instead of that of gaps, helps better grasp its features, its causes, and the forms that it can assume.

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Notes

1 Similarly, I will use LGBTQ as the most inclusive umbrella acronym. On bisexuality as an umbrella term see Flanders (2018). On plurisexuality see Nelson (2020).

2 The Ipsos Survey, Présentation PowerPoint (ipsos.com), was accessed on July 25, 2022. The Gallup study (Jones 2021) was accessed at gallup.com on July 26, 2022. Note that these data about the prevalence of the bi component of the LGBTQ community are not new; see, for instance, Yoshino (2000, 361, 380).

3 The only situation in which a bi person is seen as such is when they openly manifest their simultaneous attraction to people of more than one gender, for instance when one introduces both a man and a woman as one's partners. In other words, when they conform to a still widely held stereotype of the bisexual as promiscuous, which is discussed shortly.

4 See the introductory chapter of Monro (2015) for an overview.

5 In this respect, the case of bisexuality has something in common with that of mixed race: both are at the odds with "the valorization of purity over dilution, of the authentic voice over the voice of collusion," and both suggest the question: "what would a concept of the self look like if it did not valorize purity and coherence?" (Alcoff 1995, 263; see also Prabhudas 1996 and Yoshino 2000, 392–93). On bisexuality and borderland theory see Callis (2014). On labels and essentializing language see also Ritchie (2021), who suggests that nouns can elicit pernicious inferences connected with stereotypes, especially when belonging to a certain social kind is perceived as biological, non-voluntary, and not depending on social factors (with exceptions).

6 Again, the case is similar to that of mixed-race individuals (cf. Alcoff 1995, 259), and in both cases this non-belonging can also result from an active erasure on the part of more dominant communities. Another parallel can be drawn with the case of trans individuals, in particular on passing (see Stone 1991) and erasure (Monro 2015, 47–50). Callis (2014) makes comparisons with both trans and borderlands identities.

7 On LGBTQ identities and asylum see Vogler (2016), Boncompagni (2021b); on bi identities and asylum in particular see also Peyghambarzadeh (2020); on bi identities and legal discourse in the context of LGBTQ rights see Marcus (2015).

8 On this see also Hutchins and Kaahumanu (1991, 226).

9 Such ambivalence is perhaps captured by Muñoz's concept of disidentification, a third strategy for dealing with the dominant ideology that differs from both identification (assimilation) and counteridentification (the utopian rebellion against a symbolic system) (Muñoz 1999: 11). See also Medina (2003) and Grant and Nash (2020).

10 Fricker (2007, ch. 7) is here referring to the story of Carmita Wood as told in Brownmiller (1990).

11 Although, of course, in this case the object named is not a negative and impactful social experience as in the case of sexual harassment. I take it that it is not a defining feature of hermeneutical injustice that the experience itself must be damaging or unjust, but that the hermeneutical gap obscuring such experience from collective understanding must be damaging or unjust.

12 It is important at this stage to note that Fricker's initial proposal was criticized for its reliance on a monolithic conception of the hermeneutical "resource," in the singular, while the multiplicity of communities with their languages and conceptual worlds and the complex dynamics between dominant and subaltern cultures were not fully accounted for. See, for instance, Mason (2011) and Medina (2012). Fricker seems to acknowledge these aspects in Fricker and Jenkins (2017), which, not coincidentally in my opinion, is about trans experiences and meanings.

13 Biphobia and bi-erasure are also issues in academia, where bisexuality not only receives generally less attention but also, at least until recently, was subsumed within gay and lesbian studies, and hence erased as a topic of autonomous research and scholarship. Cf. Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) and for the case of social work research Iacono (2017); on the relationship between bisexuality and queer and trans theory, see Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell (2009), Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2012), and Monro (2015, ch. 2).

14 Fricker has constantly criticized postmodernism for its alleged conflation of social power and rational authority; see for instance Fricker (1998, 160; 2000, 149; 2007, 3).

15 On Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life see Boncompagni (2022).

16 Another issue with the metaphor of the gap is that it betrays a neutral conception of reason, neglecting the role of the affective predispositions that ground the very possibility of perceiving the gap itself; see Lobo 2022 for more on this.

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17 On hinge epistemology in general, see Coliva (2015), Pritchard (2016), and Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock (2016). For some applications, see Pritchard (2021), Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis (2022), Coliva (forthcoming b).
18 See Coliva (forthcoming c) and Moyal-Sharrock and Sandis (forthcoming) for applications to gender identity.
19 The idea that biological sex univocally determines gender can, in turn, be seen as a hinge. There is not room to expand on this here.
20 See Wittgenstein's own examples in Wittgenstein (1969, ## 79, 328, 569–79) and, on the features of personal hinges, Moyal-Sharrock (2004, ch. 6).
21 "Imponderable evidence," Wittgenstein would say; Cf. Wittgenstein (2009, part II, ## 358–60).
22 There are also contexts in which heteronormativity is not the default situation. Consider, for instance, gay families and queer communities in which a child is aware from a very young age of the existence of same-sex feelings and relationships. In this case, the grip of the social heteronormative hinge is much weaker, if it is existent at all. However, arguably, at the personal level, in this case too one progressively develops one's identity and convictions or awareness about one's identity, in such a way that what initially is a question ("Am I straight? Am I queer?") turns into a hypothesis, then a belief, and then a taken-for-granted hinge.
23 Grant and Nash (2020) argue that this is also a consequence of a broadly neoliberal ideology that emphasized the individual over the collective.
24 This way of interpreting the dialectic between rule and practice is inspired by Naomi Scheman's "shifting ground" perspective; cf. Scheman (2011), esp. ch. 8. See also Boncompagni (2016, 175–76, 200–09).

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