

Response to Erin Kidd, “Seeking Epistemic Justice in the Work of Theology”

I begin by thanking Erin Kidd for her challenging analysis and creative synthesis. She has given us a remarkable paper.

As some of you know, I worked my way through college and graduate school for over a decade as a nursing orderly at Mercy Hospitals in Phoenix and San Francisco—at a time when “non-professionals” did real nursing (before hospitals became Taylorized).¹ I have thought long and hard about that time. While I remember incidents of gay-bashing and racial bias, I cannot remember any incidents of sexual harassment. Perhaps an institution where women—nurses—had great power (and not only subaltern power) or where religious women were head nurses and administrators made a difference. Or perhaps that I almost never socialized with doctors (almost all male) explains it. Or, more likely, the fact that the concept of “sexual harassment” simply didn’t exist yet is the explanation. I cannot remember such incidents not because they didn’t happen, but because I didn’t have the concept that would make it possible to properly name and remember the incidents. I suspect I was epistemically incapable of identifying such incidents.²

This recollection leads to my first question. How do we distinguish between epistemic incapacity and epistemic injustice? I was then epistemically dysfunctional, but, I think, not unjust—after leaving hospital work and entering academia, I came to understand the concept of “sexual harassment” and tried to make sure that I didn’t engage in such activity and even occasionally confronted people who did. Both incapacity and injustice are dysfunctional. But each requires different strategies for repairing different problems. So we need to know how to discern the difference.

I am not going to quibble with Erin’s exegesis of Rahner, except to say that I agree that Rahner has been misinterpreted individualistically.³ Her conclusion to the second section raises another question. She writes, “While we cannot separate each other from the love of God, we can frustrate each other’s ability to bear witness in the here-and-now. Fricker’s point is that epistemic injustice harms someone in their capacity as a knower. Rahner’s understanding of witness allows us to add to this—it harms them as a lover of God and disciple of Christ.” I think this is exactly right: we can seriously harm our and others’ ability to bear witness to the love of God. But does this not involve a further point: that insofar as we harm another’s witness, do we not *obstruct* persons’ and communities’ ability to recognize and respond to God’s gift of grace? Is “frustration” not too tame a word here? I do not want to suggest that God’s primary graciousness, God’s giving of God’s very self, is thwarted. But can we be so disabled as to be unable to live together as God’s beloved creatures, to be unable not only to witness to, but to actualize created grace in response to uncreated grace? And is this not merely an individual evil, but a social evil?

¹With my tongue in cheek, I have said that we did everything R.N.s did, except puncture skin legally. That ignores the supervisory tasks central to an R.N.’s work, but the Taylorization of hospital work has reduced non-professionals’ roles immensely. Taylorization is “a set of principles governing the design of jobs which entail the separation of mental from manual labour, subdivision of tasks, deskilling, close managerial control of work effort and incentive wage payments” originated in the 1890s by F. W. Taylor. See “scientific management,” <<https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Taylorization>>; accessed 5 May 2021.

²Outside the hospital setting, a very close friend complained to me about an incident that we would now label sexual harassment by a male in a position of power over her and her husband in academia. We strategized on how to handle the insulting incident without confrontation. I would hope that we could now find a better approach.

³I also note that I find that reading Rahner as Karen Kilby has done to be a reasonable and creative way to preserve his insights while decoupling them from his sometimes ponderous prose and problematical philosophical foundations.

Not all social evils are *structural*. Some evils are, for the lack of a better term, also *cultural*.⁴ Not all the laws mandating equal opportunity and even-handed, even restorative, structures regarding race, for example, can expunge the cultural evil of racism—a fact increasingly clear in the United States. There are political solutions for *institutionalized* structural racism. In general, explicitly political work has to be done to reform or replace social structures with ones more just with regard to race (or gender, religious preference, sexual orientation, or other factors). But these political solutions fail to counteract the *cultural* social evils of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, etc., which lead to backlashes.

The importance, I think, of this distinction becomes clear when considering Erin’s final section, on theological harm. This harm is both structural and cultural. Structurally, the unconscionable increase in the percentage of students taught by contingent faculty in higher education is a form of the Taylorization of academic labor. While this is a structural problem in institutions, there is also a cultural problem in communities.⁵ Culturally, we have deified the Market so that every institution must conform to Market principles unless an institution can conclusively demonstrate that it should be exempt. This applies in academia, especially as the bachelor’s degree has become the portal for entering the market for white-collar work. Culturally, contingent faculty, especially adjuncts without other financial resources, lose their voices or can never develop them properly. Epistemic harm in academia is personal, cultural, and structural.

When it comes to the church, however, the theological harm has been huge. One serious social evil that has emerged over the last fifty years or so is the diminished communication between the whole body of theologians and the bishops. As Catholic theology has become much less clerical, more ethnically diverse, more university-centered, and less closeted, an effect of this progress is that bishops have ignored or dismissed theologians with whom they disagree, and theologians have become increasingly concerned with the academy and society, rather than the Church. And when theologians are consulted, their conclusions, though rigorously argued, are often rejected by ecclesial authorities.⁶ It is not only bearing witness that is diminished, but theological analysis and argument goes unheard when it is most needed.

Hence, I heartily endorse Erin’s claim that “focusing on epistemic dysfunction in theology, and the loss of testimony, allows us to see this not just as a problem within the academy but within the church—this is a problem for the people of God.” But it is not only a problem for contingent faculty, but even for the exclusion from ecclesial discussions of accomplished, tenured faculty. I just think the problem is even greater and more complex than Erin has described in her paper—that is to say, there is more work to be done on this issue, and I would she and others continue to work on these issues.

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⁴I have made this distinction in “Reply to Gleason,” *Eight Conversations on the Problem of Evil*, ed. N. Trakakis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 199-201 and “Gott und das Übel,” *Logische Brillanz - Ruchlose Denkungsart? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Diskussion des Problems des Übels in der analytischen Religionsphilosophie* (STEP 20), trans. Felician Gilgenbach, ed. Oliver Wiertz (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 447.

⁵I distinguished institutions from communities in “The Institutional Element in Religious Experience,” *Modern Theology* 10/2 (April, 1994) 185-212. Roughly, I see institutions as diachronic, communities as synchronic. Institutionalization makes it possible for charismatic and other synchronic communities to live beyond the time of the original participants (an insight originated, I believe, by Max Weber).

⁶For example, see M. Therese Lysaught, “Moral Analysis of Procedure at Phoenix Hospital,” *Origins* 40/33 (January 2011), 537-548, an analysis rejected by Bishop Thomas Olmstead in his sanctioning of St. Joseph Hospital.