Self-compassion and Epistemic Injustice

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There is a fundamental tension when philosophers occupy themselves with epistemic injustice and violence in philosophy. Where does this tension come from? Reading and writing about epistemic injustice and violence in philosophy, philosophers are in a constant state of self-reflection and critique of their own profession. What makes the difference here to meta philosophical questions is that they are also impacted to varying degrees by the injustice and violence that is inflicted by this profession.

One strategy to release this tension is pretending to retreat to the place of an independent observer who miraculously philosophizes without being part of the profession philosophy, and who certainly is not a common member of the society that is confronted with power structures. Besides the question whether this is even possible, it should be clear in this book, luckily, that this is not the path we are taking. Instead, we move in a field of tension between concern, criticism, analysis and rebellion. In order not to burst under this tension, it might do philosophers, working on epistemic injustice in philosophy, good to deliberately deal with challenging feelings at certain points. I believe that self-compassion – and I will explain how I understand this term – can help, to some extent, to deal with the recognition of one's own ignorance or experience of discrimination. Moreover, this might even represent an important step towards reducing epistemic violence in academic philosophy. Let me sketch how firstly ignorance and secondly the experience of discrimination can play out when studying epistemic injustice.

Whether we are philosophers in academia or not, we need to deal with our own ignorance.[1] Again and again we will encounter perspectives that we have so far blanked out. As most of the chapters in this book demonstrate, this ignorance has enormous effects on our environment. This ignorance can be a defense mechanism in order not to deal with systems of domination or internalized mechanisms of oppression, and is in itself a fatiguing matter in the long run. But unless we learn

1 I retrieved this term from Mills, Charles: White ignorance, in: Sullivan, Shannon/Tuana, Nancy (eds.): Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance, New York 2007, 11–38.

other ways to dismantle and work with our own ignorance, we tend to believe that there is no alternative.

Furthermore, academic philosophers as well as non-academic scholars are faced with racist[2] and sexist[3] texts, mechanisms of exclusion in academia and blunt as well as subtler discriminating behavior in everyday life. Since philosophers are not independent observers, but also marked by societies' categorizations, discriminating texts at times target their readers. As a BIPoC philosopher[4], it may have an impact on your mood, thinking capacity, and motivation if you (have to) read racist passages like those from Kant.[5] Similarly, as a queer person it might be an extra effort to translate heteronormative, gendered theories so that it fits your lived experience.

In the following, I want to (1) make some general remarks about epistemic injustice in the field of philosophy of compassion before I explain (2) how I use the term self-compassion in this text. I will (3) argue that facing epistemic injustice in philosophy can be emotionally and physically demanding in different ways. Subsequently, I will (4) discuss how self-compassion can be a strategy to cope with such challenges; all the while keeping in mind that self-compassion does not do away with epistemic injustices. Finally, I (5) offer two examples of how this approach could be implemented in practice before I (6) conclude.

In this paper, I consider both positions: people who contribute to injustice and violence within philosophy (e.g. through ignorance) as well as people who suffer from these forms of epistemic injustice and violence. Because, firstly, we can find ourselves in both roles simultaneously. And secondly, both roles activate emotional and cognitive responses that can be detected and cared for on an embodied level.

1. Discourse on compassion in academic philosophy

When studying the philosophy of compassion, or related phenomena like sympathy and empathy, we quickly come across well-known Western philosophers like Augustinus, Schopenhauer, Hume etc.[6] Increasingly, we also find philosophers who engage in non-Western approaches, e.g. Ohashi's phenomenology of compassion. However, whether so-called non-Western approaches are vividly discussed depends

2 See e.g. Abundez-Guerra, Victor Fabian: How to deal with Kant's Racism – in and out of classroom, in: Teaching Philosophy 41 (2) 2018, 117–135.

3 See e.g. Mercer, Christia: The Philosophical Roots of Misogyny, in Philosophical Topics 46 (2) 2018, 183–208.

4 BIPoC is an abbreviation for Black and Indigenous People and People of Color.

5 See e.g. Kant, Immanuel: On the Different Human Races, in: Mikkelsen, Jon M. (trans. and ed.): Kant and the Concept of Race: Late 18th Century Writings, New York 2013, 55–72.

6 See e.g. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (31/3/2008) https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/#HisInt, (04/04/2024).

on structural systems of knowledge that are imprinted by epistemic hierarchies (see chapters before).

We can ask ourselves what theories of compassion are disregarded within academic philosophy and why? The concept of Ubuntu[7] for example, has, in the last years, gained popularity in European and US-American (intercultural) philosophical discourses. However, it is always referred to as African philosophy or ethnophilosophy, marking the "otherness" of this approach. Ethnophilosophy is not just another discipline within academic philosophy. Once marked as the "other" it receives a negative connotation.[8]

Similarly, but different, we can witness an interest in the Buddhist concept of compassion (Sanskrit: karuṇa). While many Western blogs are filled with references to these ideas[9], philosophers – if at all – usually refer to Western canonical thinkers when talking about compassion. We can see a gap between the discourse of non-Western concepts of compassion and Western concepts which can be crystallized at the dualistic distinction between embodied or practical on the one hand and theoretical on the other.

Apart from asking which theories of compassion are discussed and cited, I come across another striking question when reading philosophical texts on compassion. Do the authors that I consult have to show compassionate behavior in order for their theories to be legitimate? Does their lifestyle say something about the validity of their theory? If so, what does that say about the concurrence of sexist notions in an opus on compassion? Can we rely on philosopher's theories on compassion when they also managed to construct a theory of race? These questions exceed the scope of this paper and will be discussed elsewhere.

This small digression has shown that philosophizing about compassion is itself bequeathed and would lend itself to a deeper analysis from the perspective of epistemic violence. Questions of interpretive authority, positioning, and integrity play a crucial role in thinking about compassion. Nevertheless, in the following, we will focus on the question to what extent self-compassion can support us in dealing with our own ignorance or experiences of discrimination within philosophy. For this, we gradually approach an understanding of self-compassion.

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7 A philosophical concept and Bantu term, that can be translated as "humanity", see Mugumbate, Jacob Rugare/Chereni, Admire: Now, the theory of Ubuntu has its space in social work, in: AJSW 10 (2020) 1, vi.

8 See Spivak, Gayatri: Can the subaltern speak?, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, London 2007, 271–313; Kresse, Kai: Zur afrikanischen Philosophiedebatte, in: Polylog 2 (2000), https://lit.polylog.org/2/ekk-de.htm (03/11/2023).

9 See e.g. https://karunaintegratedwellness.com (03/11/2023).

1.1 What is compassion?

So, what do I mean when I talk about compassion? The most obvious translation would be "to suffer with somebody." Although this is a common interpretation of compassion, I think that the notion that compassion is simply sharing the suffering of another is misleading. Despite the etymological root, "[compassion] is feeling *for* and not feeling *with* the other."[10] Compared to compassion, empathy is rather limited to the "vicarious psychological reaction to the situation or psychological state of another,"[11] while compassion can be understood as an attitude that can be trained.[12] A model of compassion that convinces me the most is the ReSource Model by Tania Singer *et al.* from social neuroscience. Here, compassion is described as an "attitude to life, a way of relation to the 'self', others and the world" [13] which can be trained. It consists of three elements: presence, affect (emotional-motivational capacities), and perspective. The capacities of all three elements complement each other in such a way that they promote a compassionate attitude toward life. Therefore, one can firstly train the capacity to recognize what is happening within oneself and in the environment. Secondly, training emotional components such as the intention to release suffering, the capacity to accept difficult emotions, and open-heartedness as of care and gratitude, is necessary to attain a compassionate attitude. Lastly, the capacity to empathize with oneself and others while seeing the impermanence of the current situation constitutes the third crucial element for a compassionate attitude.[14] Compassion is thus not a spontaneous emotion, nor is it a solely emotional *or* mental capacity. Rather, it is an attitude that can be trained on multiple levels. This embodied training exceeds purely theoretical pondering and is a crucial part of engaged or transformative philosophy.

In a nutshell, compassion is an attitude that is rooted in presence, heart qualities, and perspective taking. In its complexity it helps us relate to self, others, and the world with care and concern while maintaining a certain distance that prevents us from overidentification.

10 Singer, Tania/Klimecki, Olga: Empathy and compassion, in: Current Biology 24 (2014) 18, R875-R878.

11 See Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/empathy/v-1 (10/11/2023).

12 Singer, Tania et al.: The ReSource Project. Background, design, samples, and measurements, Leipzig 2016^2, 17.

13 Ibid.

14 See ibid., 24.

1.2 Does compassion help overcome epistemic injustice?

Following Anupam Yadav's and Baiju P. Anthony's presentation in Munich 2022, compassion practices might be effective in reducing epistemic injustices. Stereotypes or biases are a causal element of testimonial injustice. They inform whose testimony is regarded as truth bearing and whose voices are ignored. According to Yadav and Anthony, the "[virtue] of compassion helps the hearer to step back from the prejudicial exclusions prompted by him."[15] In this regard, compassion helps to reflect upon internalized biases that are responsible for testimonial injustices.

In a collaborative writing project with Lieke Asma (also author of this book), we are exploring the extent to which compassion can reduce implicit bias. Studies with the keywords "compassion" or "empathy" and "implicit bias" are examined, carrying promising titles that point into that direction. However, it has not yet been proven whether compassion or empathy really reduce implicit bias. One of the main difficulties is that empathy and implicit bias are closely intertwined. Therefore, it does not make sense to say that one causes or reduces the other, but rather that empathy may be the predisposition of reduced biases.

However, there is a more foundational level on which we can address compassion and epistemic injustice. That is, as compassion towards ourselves, when facing epistemic injustice and violence in philosophy. This does not resolve any injustice nor does it do away with violence that happens on a daily basis. Rather, it shifts the perspective from seeking outward solutions to an inward emotional inventory and more resilience.

2. Self-compassion

Self-compassion is a specific expression of compassion directed towards ourselves. It is a caring attention of what moves oneself without falling into the trap of self-pity. Kristin Neff is one of the most popular scholars in the field of self-compassion. In her book *Fierce self-compassion. How women can harness kindness to speak up, claim their power and thrive* (2021), she takes up the cudgels for the powerful, angry side of compassion. Often, compassion is understood as a gentle attitude, which glosses over any effort to resist. However, compassion can also give rise to a fierce reaction that

15 Yadav, Anupam/Anthony, Baiju: Indian & Western Approaches to Epistemic Liberation: A Comparative Study, Munich (2/12/2022).

draws healthy[16] boundaries. Kristin Neff uses the image of mama bear. Mama bear is very kind and sweet towards her cubs as long as what is dear to her is safe. Yet, when her little one is in danger she will react with a loud roar and bared teeth. I don't want to take this metaphor too far since I don't agree with the gender binary she reproduces in her book (she addresses cis women only and in combination with this the metaphor of mothering appears in a very gendered context)[17]. What we can take away is Neff's notion of fierceness that can accompany a self-compassionate attitude.

Sitting alone at my desk and practicing the above-mentioned elements of compassion is a great step towards a compassionate attitude towards oneself. Valarie Kaur states that "for those of us whose bodies were denigrated by society, breathing [. . .] is a revolutionary act."[18] Individual practices of self-compassion can be important tools for people who experience discrimination on their own bodies. But there is more to self-compassion than dealing with challenging situations individually. Valarie Kaur talks very convincingly about how self-love would be better replaced by the term "loving ourselves." This would translate to self-compassion as "being compassionate towards ourselves." I would like to expand on this term a little more, because we can learn from this notion of self-love about self-compassion.

Loving ourselves expresses collective awareness and action that stand against individualistic thinking. Loving ourselves means supporting or claiming structures of care for oneself *and* others. While self-compassion might translate to individual meditation exercises, loving ourselves means making these exercises available to others, practicing it with each other, and, as a consequence, freeing each other from the pressure to get this "sorted out" on our own.

Loving ourselves also means setting boundaries when necessary. bell hooks makes a strong case that setting boundaries can also be loving.[19] It is precisely out of appreciation for a colleague(s) that we are committed to set boundaries or point out misconduct. This is not just about how we ourselves feel in their presence, but about what impact their behavior might have on others. Of course, this work can only be done if there are enough inner and outer resources, such as a supportive network.

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16 Setting "healthy boundaries" is a problematic notion in itself. What is healthy, what is unhealthy? What we usually mean when talking about healthy boundaries is that the boundaries are in line with our own well-being and feel appropriate. What for one can be a healthy boundary can be harmful for others.

17 Many thanks to Cara-Julie Kather who nudged me towards feminist notions of mothering that exceed the gender binary: e.g. "Revolutionary Mothering – Love on the Front Lines" by Gumbs/Martens/Williams (eds.).

18 Kaur, Valarie: See no Stranger. A Manifesto for Revolutionary Love, London 2020, 216.

19 hooks, bell: All about love. New visions, New York 2001.

If there is no inner capacity to address grievances, it still remains that to love, or in German, "Zu Lieben" can mean setting boundaries. A notion that can also be found in Hornscheidts book *Zu Lieben als politisches Handeln* (2018).

3. Can we move through epistemic injustice with self-compassion?[20]

As stated above, it is energy-intensive to deal with discriminating texts, especially when you yourself have been marginalized by society on the basis of these discriminatory systems. The feelings and physical reactions that arise while reading require brain capacity, influence the ability to concentrate, and discourage free, visionary thinking. Of course, there are other cases where reading racist or sexist theories motivates people to write better texts and to stand up for their own values. Here, however, I am interested in the moments when the subject matter of a philosopher's work claims mental capacities that hamper their performance. In advance, I am afraid I can offer no redemption for this. Philosophical texts are challenging, not only because they may contain inhumane theory or are exclusive in nature. They might also challenge us in our world view, let us at best question the given. This does not pass us by without leaving a trace. To a certain degree, philosophical texts are meant to be disruptive and challenging. However, when philosophical texts are e.g. misogynistic, i.e. unjust or violent, we need strategies to acknowledge these difficulties and react constructively.

In her lecture "Moving through racism with love," Huaping Lu-Adler talked among other things about her coping strategies as a Kant scholar. In a very personal and philosophically strong narrative, she lets us participate in an understanding of love inspired by Charles Mills, bell hooks, Thich Nhat Hanh and Valarie Kaur that can support philosophers in dealing with racism in philosophy. She affirms that non-judgement and self-love can help philosophers deal with (their own) ignorance and discrimination. Besides acknowledging the epistemically and emotionally demanding effort to unveil epistemic injustices, Lu-Adler motivates philosophers to make use of one's own positional power and practice "active hope."[21] Dina Mendonça claims that self-pity is a strategy to gain resilience against injustices.[22] Mendonça distinguishes self-compassion from self-pity and posits that self-pity, though so

20 This headline is inspired by Huaping Lu-Adler's talk "Moving though racism with love", (08/01/2023) online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJwoYIWnhCA (28/10/2023). Thank you, Huaping, for your important work and inspiring exchange.

21 I assume she referred to Joanna Macy's work that is displayed in Chris Jonestones and Macy's book
Active Hope (2012).

22 Mendonça, Dina: Self-Pity as Resilience against Injustice, in: Philosophies 105 (2022) 7.

frowned upon, has a transformative power. Self-compassion, according to Mendonca, is the state to strive for when responding to powerlessness in the face of injustice. Along the way, however, it is helpful not to exclude self-pity.

> The pain that accompanies self-pity is uncomfortable and makes people move in the directions of change as to transform the conditions of the overall experience.[23]

Let's not be too flowery: all self-compassion practices combined do not do away with the injustices we are facing in the world. Self-compassion is not the solution for the injustices and violence mentioned in this book. Rather, it might be a path through which we are able to continue questioning, critiquing and changing the systems of oppression we face.

4. Reading this book with self-compassion

Even while reading this book, it might be overwhelming to read about injustice and violence or to even find elements of one's own oppression biography depicted in some chapters. In this section, I want to decipher what it would mean to read this anthology with an attitude of self-compassion.

First of all, it would mean to feel your own body while reading or during reading breaks.

- What body sensations and feelings come up?
- Do I feel the impulse to distract myself?
- With which topics do stronger feelings arise?
- At which points do I feel "nothing"?

Thoughts and judgments can also be noticed and noted. What situations am I reminded of? Which people, voices, stories suddenly appear?

Secondly, at any time, it is very legitimate to *take a break*. Books sometimes seem neutral or factual, but reading about violent structures and oppression can be emotionally challenging. Take a break to call a trusted person or to rest. A practice of self-love, according to Kaur, might also be to read and discuss this book together from the beginning. In a group setting, critical points can be discussed, one's own experiences shared, and emotions witnessed and held.

Thirdly, perspective taking adds a more cognitive level: perspective taking on self and others. Since in this book you come across several authors, editors, artists, and characters, there are many ways to sharpen the perspective on others. Since this

23 Ibid., 11.

is one important purpose of this book, I assume that taking perspective on others needs no further explanation. Perspective taking on self, in turn, is not a common attitude in academic philosophy. It becomes relevant, for example, if you can identify with the position of an unfairly treated group in one of the articles. You are confronted with your own societal positioning. Subsequently, unease, anger, or other emotions may arise. Perspective-taking on self in this context means remembering the complexity of one's self. One does not only inhabit one single position in society, either marginalized or privileged. The complexity can be reflected in experiencing multiple forms of discrimination and simultaneous privilege. For example, as a woman in the philosophical academic context, I am disadvantaged because of discriminatory structures. At the same time, however, as an editor and research assistant, I have interpretive power through the system of classism, among other things. Looking at myself through this lens evokes agency.

5. Bringing this practice to shared academic spaces

Reading violent texts or texts that deal with violence is one thing. As a person, involved in academic philosophy, it also occurs that we find ourselves in spaces where we are witnessing such forms of violence and where topics are discussed that are physically and emotionally challenging. On the one hand, some people will find it helpful to cultivate inner awareness and compassion in these moments. Taking a break, doing a quick body scan, or calling a friend after the session are part of individual coping strategies. On the other hand, the facilitator or professor can support a self-compassionate atmosphere by different means.

To give an example, let me come back to our workshop on epistemic injustice in philosophy that laid the basis for this anthology:

Almost every discussion session started with the question of how the people in the room are doing right now – physically and emotionally. Even if the answers were not extensively formulated and shared, it seemed to me that the mood in the room changed significantly. Inviting movement (short stretching or standing up, if possible) also supported the discussion that followed in a way that people shared questions and concerns that came from a more honest and humbler place. Different people participated in the discussion, uncertainties were shared and otherwise quieter voices were heard.

Attempts like these should not be romanticized. Of course, it was still not a setting where all bodies and all emotions had space to express themselves. We were still in the Munich School of Philosophy, that is: in an academic, Catholic institution. This is historically significant, because marginalized people have been excluded from such spaces for a long time and still are. E.g., people with mental disabilities

have little or very difficult access, women were not allowed to study, study fees keep the academic privilege to a few, etc.

It can also be discussed whether it is not encroaching to ask about feelings and emotions in a potentially unsafe space like this. What if people shared more deeply about their woundedness? Have we as a team been able to respond adequately at all? Certainly not. In fact, the discussion time was short, the schedule was set and we were limited in terms of personnel and resources. However, the feeling that stuck from that moment is one of more shared responsibility for the needs in the room. This was also reflected back to me by individual participants. I felt that by asking open questions about feelings and body sensations, all participants were able to take more responsibility for their own needs and the needs of others.

Loving ourselves in the philosophical academic context means, for example, creating shared spaces where difficulties can be talked through. Often these spaces arise far from any institutionalization. However, spaces within academic institutions that are explicitly established for BIPoC and/or queer scholars, for example, can at least provide a place for networking that then can lead to more intimate exchange.

6. Conclusion

This text started with an acknowledgement of the emotional labor that can arise from dealing with epistemic violence and injustice. Philosophers who engage in epistemic injustice and violence are confronted with their own ignorance on the one hand, and with structures of discrimination against them on the other. The same is true, of course, for non-academic scholars; plus, they have to face disciplinary barriers manifesting in language, access barriers and more. In response to this, I propose to cultivate self-compassion.

Self-compassion is a particular kind of compassion that can be directed toward an individual as well as a community. Inspired by Kaur, the "self" in "self-compassion" shifts towards "ourselves" and the egocentric floor is left behind. A compassionate attitude towards ourselves can show in many different ways, e.g. listening, sharing, setting boundaries.

Adopting a self-compassionate stance while engaging in epistemic violence may not lead to its abolition directly. Chances are, however, that dealing with challenging emotions in such a way will be more successful, leaving more energy to do the much-needed work of addressing epistemic injustice in philosophy and beyond.