

Imposters, Tricksters, and Trustworthiness as an Epistemic Virtue

KAREN FROST-ARNOLD

Preprint: Please cite final version published in Hypatia

This paper argues that trustworthiness is an epistemic virtue that promotes objectivity. I show that untrustworthy imposture can be an arrogant act of privilege that silences marginalized voices. But, as epistemologists of ignorance have shown, sometimes trickery and the betrayal of epistemic norms are important resistance strategies. This raises the question: when is betrayal of trust epistemically virtuous? After establishing that trust is central to objectivity, I argue for the following answer: a betrayal is epistemically vicious when it strengthens or promotes oppressive, exclusive networks of trust, and a betrayal is epistemically virtuous when it expands trust networks to involve the oppressed. These criteria correctly account for both the epistemic vice of a recent case of Internet imposture and the epistemic virtue of resistant tricksters.

On February 2, 2011, Amina Abdullah Arraf started a blog titled *A Gay Girl in Damascus*. For four months, Amina posted about her life as an openly lesbian Syrian-American living in Damascus during the Syrian uprising. Amina's blog was widely read in the West. On June 6, a blog post from Amina's cousin claimed that Amina had been kidnapped by armed men. A campaign sprung up to support Amina. A Facebook group demanding her release gained 14,000 followers, and the American embassy investigated her disappearance (Bell and Flock 2011). But after Syrian activists raised doubts about the accuracy of Amina's blog, an investigation began into the identity of the blogger (Henry 2011; Nassar 2011). On June 13, Tom MacMaster, a white American living in Edinburgh, acknowledged sole authorship of the blog ("A gay girl . . ." 2011). MacMaster was an imposter, and Amina was an elaborate deception.

MacMaster's imposture betrayed the trust of many people in ways that damaged Western understandings of Syrian activism. MacMaster betrayed expectations of authenticity central to the production and dissemination of knowledge through social media. I use this case to argue for the importance of trustworthiness as an epistemic virtue.

That said, in epistemic communities structured by oppression, betrayal of epistemic norms is sometimes virtuous. I define *imposters* as those who betray expectations of authenticity in ways that risk damage to epistemic communities, and *tricksters* as those who intentionally betray such expectations in epistemically virtuous acts of resistance. Given these distinctions, a feminist account of trustworthiness must recognize that situatedness and positionality matter. It matters who is being trusted, by whom, to do what, for what reasons, and in what environment. But I want to go beyond simply acknowledging that situatedness matters. An account of the virtue of trustworthiness should guide epistemic agents about which features of the situation matter. So my central question is: *under what circumstances does the epistemically virtuous agent betray trust?* I answer that *a betrayal is epistemically vicious when it strengthens or promotes oppressive,*

exclusive networks of trust, and a betrayal is epistemically virtuous when it expands trust networks to involve the oppressed. This account, I argue, correctly identifies the epistemic vice of MacMaster's imposture and the epistemic virtue of resistant tricksters.

First, I draw on feminist accounts of objectivity to show that objectivity depends on inclusive networks of trust. Next, I demonstrate that imposture can undermine the trust necessary for objectivity. Given this threat to objectivity, I argue that trustworthiness is a core epistemic virtue. I focus on trustworthiness with regard to a particular subset of expectations: normative expectations of authenticity. Next, I complicate this account by discussing trickery as a resistance strategy. Finally, I argue that betrayal is epistemically virtuous when it undermines exclusive networks of trust that damage objectivity.

My argument adds another dimension to the growing social epistemology literature on trustworthiness. John Hardwig and Lorraine Code laid the foundations by showing that the reliability of testimony depends on trustworthiness and epistemic responsibility (Code 1987; Hardwig 1991). Like Hardwig and Code, I maintain that epistemology and ethics are not separate—what is known in a community, and whether beliefs meet epistemic criteria, depend on moral relations between community members. However, rather than Hardwig and Code's standards for *reliability* and the prevention of *deception*, the epistemic criteria I am interested in are criteria for *objectivity* and the prevention of *bias*. Naomi Scheman argues, as I do, that objectivity depends on trustworthy knowledge-producing agents and institutions (Scheman 2001). But Scheman does not identify objectivity with absence of bias, as I do. Instead, Scheman explains objectivity as trustworthiness to diverse publics and argues that it is rational for diverse publics to distrust unjust scientific institutions. I agree that injustice undermines objectivity, but I focus on how the epistemic vice of untrustworthiness unjustly excludes diverse agents from networks of trust, thereby increasing bias. Nancy Daukas also claims trustworthiness is an epistemic virtue of agents (Daukas 2006; 2011). But to focus on the distinctively epistemic dispositions needed for proper trust, she assumes that the epistemic agents are morally trustworthy (Daukas 2011, 50). Thus, she does not investigate the damage done to epistemic communities by morally untrustworthy agents. I address this question and show that such moral trustworthiness is needed for objectivity.

Whereas these social epistemologists note the epistemic value of trustworthiness, other feminists and critical race theorists, especially those concerned with epistemologies of ignorance, laud duplicity, trickery, and other betrayals of epistemic norms as important resistance strategies (Hoagland 1988; Lugones 2003; Bailey 2007; Hoagland 2007). Following María Lugones's arguments against oppression theories that ignore the agency of oppressed people who resist (Lugones 2003, 53–63), these theorists maintain that trickery can be strategically useful (Bailey 2007) and should be endorsed as part of what Hoagland calls "an ethics of survival" (Hoagland 2007, 106). Although the strategic, political, and survival benefits of betrayal are often emphasized, I argue for the *epistemic* value of betrayal in promoting objectivity. This is not to say that the epistemic benefits of trickery exceed its political benefits, or that increasing objectivity is the only epistemic good. But without an epistemology to evaluate this epistemic work done by tricksters, we fail to give due credit to the epistemic agency of those resisting oppression.

OBJECTIVITY

OBJECTIVITY IN FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

In the sense under consideration here, objectivity is epistemic (how much bias shapes the beliefs held within a community), rather than metaphysical (whether the objects of our beliefs exist independently of us). Objectivity comes in degrees (Longino 1990, 76), and the objectivity in a community increases (or decreases) exactly when the knowledge claims circulating in the community are evaluated in an increasingly (or decreasingly) unprejudiced manner (63). I will not rehearse the feminist arguments that objectivity is valuable,<1> but will instead briefly summarize the two leading feminist accounts of what promotes objectivity. Kristen Intemann argues that in the past twenty-five years, feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemology have developed two similarities (Intemann 2010). First, both approaches are social epistemologies, because they maintain that objectivity arises from community interactions (Intemann 2010, 786). For feminist empiricists (for example, Longino 1990; 2002; Anderson 2006; Solomon 2006), an epistemic community's objectivity increases to the extent it enables and responds to public, transformative criticism from a diversity of values and interests. For feminist standpoint epistemologists (for example, Collins 1986; Harding 1991; Wylie 2003; Rolin 2006), objectivity requires that research start from the standpoint of the oppressed, where standpoints are achieved through critical reflection in which the "criticisms of 'insider-outsiders' are taken seriously" (Intemann 2010, 789). Thus, both epistemologies hold that objectivity arises from critical interactions between community members.

Second, both approaches value diversity within epistemic communities, though they value different kinds of diversity (Intemann 2010, 779). For feminist empiricists, objectivity requires a diversity of values and interests, because it provides checks and balances on idiosyncratic biases and widely held assumptions. Standpoint epistemologists maintain that diversity of social position is necessary for objectivity. Following Harding, standpoint epistemologists value strong objectivity, which not only requires systematic study of the ways in which embodied social location shapes background assumptions, but also directs epistemic agents to "value the Other's perspective and to pass over in thought into the social condition that creates it—not in order to stay there, to 'go native' or merge the self with the Other, but in order to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location" (Harding 1991, 151).<2> In sum, for both branches of feminist epistemology, objectivity requires critical dialogue within diverse epistemic communities.

OBJECTIVITY AND TRUST

For objectivity-promoting social practices to flourish, members of oppressed groups must be involved in the trust networks of epistemic communities. This requires three types of trust:<3> (1) *self-trust*—members of oppressed groups must trust themselves (Mills 1997, 119; Daukas 2011; Jones 2012a), (2) *trust in others*—they must be trusted by fellow community members (Daukas 2006; Fricker 2007; Daukas 2011), and (3) *trust in practices*—community members must trust the practices, institutions, and social structures that create avenues for critical discourse (Scheman 2001). Trust is a complex affective, cognitive, and conative state that involves dispositions to rely upon the trusted with an attitude of confidence that the trusted will act as expected (Jones 2012a, 245). Why does objectivity require these three types of trust? First, if members of oppressed groups lack self-trust, they are unlikely to proffer criticisms or have

confidence in the insights gained from their standpoint. Second, if the criticisms of the oppressed are not heard as authoritative and taken up, objectivity fails to flourish. Transformative criticism does not result, nor do community members succeed in adopting the standpoint of the oppressed through critical engagement. Finally, if community members lose faith in the public avenues for critical discussion, then they are less likely to participate in critical dialogue.

One major mechanism of oppression is the exclusion of oppressed groups from trust networks. As recent work on epistemic injustice has shown, stereotypes that cast oppressed people as untrustworthy constrict trust networks and preclude the oppressed from having their knowledge claims trusted by others and themselves (Daukas 2006; Fricker 2007; Daukas 2011). Such exclusive, oppressive networks of trust impede critical community interactions from a diversity of values and social locations. For instance, it damages objectivity when agents diminish trust in oppressed groups and the public avenues through which such groups voice potentially transformative criticisms. And strong objectivity is hindered when an oppressed group loses the self-trust necessary to construct separate “worlds” of meaning, or others lose confidence in the value of traveling to these “worlds.”⁴ I now argue that imposture can strengthen exclusive, oppressive networks of trust in these ways. My argument proceeds through a detailed, ecological⁵ analysis of the MacMaster/Amina imposture.

IMPOSTERS: UNDERMINING OBJECTIVITY

MacMaster’s imposture⁶ illustrates two ways imposters undermine objectivity. First, imposters impede objectivity-enhancing transformative criticism. Second, imposters undermine confidence in the social practices that generate objectivity. I address each in turn.

MacMaster undermined objectivity by decreasing the diversity of voices in multiple communities’ critical dialogue. MacMaster excused the imposture by positioning the fake blog as an act of advocacy for marginalized people (MacMaster 2011; Read 2011⁷). Advocacy can have many epistemic benefits, including giving the claims of silenced testifiers a hearing (Code 2006, 179). However, the practice of speaking for others can also do significant moral and epistemic harm when advocates speak “in place of” marginalized others (Alcoff 1991/1992, 9). Not only can advocacy on behalf of marginalized others buttress the social standing and epistemic credibility of privileged advocates at the expense of those with less privilege, but it can further silence the marginalized by occupying space in trust networks. The advocate runs the risk that her speech will be attended to in place of the speech of the marginalized others on whose behalf she is advocating. Middle Eastern LGBT activists raised this concern. As Daniel Nassar⁸ writes, “You took away my voice, Mr. MacMaster, and the voices of many people who I know. To bring attention to yourself and blog; you managed to bring the LGBT movement in the Middle East years back” (Hamwi and Nassar 2011).

MacMaster’s entrance into the public dialogue took the place of marginalized voices. Western audiences interested in the Syrian uprising or LGBT life in the Middle East spent time reading Amina’s blog instead of the blogs, tweets, or Facebook posts of nonfictional Syrians. Journalists covered Amina when they could have interviewed others. That said, it is also possible that had Amina’s blog never appeared, Western audiences would not have given attention to other, authentic Syrian voices—part of Amina’s appeal was surely the Western tendency to find the Other erotic and exotic.⁹ So although we cannot be certain that Syrian activists would have received more attention in Amina’s absence, it is likely that MacMaster’s speech took some space from

others who could have contributed more diversity to the discussion. The imposture was central to MacMaster gaining access to the space—in fact, MacMaster admitted that one reason for pretending to be Amina was the lack of attention MacMaster’s views on the Middle East received when writing under a Western male name (BBC News 2011). By illegitimately gaining access to the critical dialogue, MacMaster decreased the diversity of the trust networks that comprised that epistemic space. Thus, MacMaster’s imposture undermined the diversity needed for objectivity-enhancing dialogue about the Arab Spring.

Additionally, MacMaster undermined the quality of transformative criticism by promoting Western prejudices. For example, in an online interview with CBS, MacMaster used Amina to call on LGBT Syrians to come out of the closet. In response to a query about what Amina had to say to closeted Syrians “afraid to share their sexuality,” Amina said:

Don’t be: The worst thing we face is our own fear. If we want to be free, we must first overcome our own worst enemy, which is the one within us. It is that fear that has allowed the dictators to rule; it is that fear that keeps us as Arabs, as Muslims, as women and as lesbians trapped. If we stop being afraid within ourselves, we can achieve freedom. The prison of our own minds is the darkest place. (quoted in Lazar 2011; “A lesbian blogger . . .” 2011)

An American chastising Syrian lesbians for living in the closet is morally appalling, but it is also epistemically harmful. MacMaster’s intervention undermines objectivity in the dialogue about the Middle Eastern LGBT community because Amina’s perpetuation of Western stereotypes prevents transformative criticism of Western bias. Amina criticizes Syrian lesbians for passively living in fear. In doing so, she feeds into a long-standing Western narrative presenting non-Western marginalized groups as unempowered, passive, and in need of Western help in their liberation (for example, the help of an enlightened Syrian-American like Amina) (see Mohanty 2003). News of Middle Eastern uprisings had the potential to challenge Western assumptions about Middle Eastern women, but Amina reinforces those stereotypes (Bady 2011). Thus, MacMaster’s imposture gave undue attention to pernicious online content—when MacMaster spoke under a Western male identity, the speech received less credibility.

This contributes to exclusive, oppressive networks of trust. First, by taking the place of marginalized others, MacMaster excluded them from the networks producing knowledge about Syrian activism. Second, the stereotypes of marginalized groups (in this case non-Western women) as passive and unempowered diminish trust in the abilities of the oppressed. Both the self-trust of the oppressed and the trust others place in them are damaged by stereotypes that construct them as less authoritative and autonomous than the privileged. Thus MacMaster’s imposture threatened the first two types of trust necessary for objective international understanding of Syrian activism.<10>

The second way imposters threaten objectivity is by undermining the third type of trust mentioned earlier: trust in the social practices that promote objectivity. MacMaster’s imposture raised suspicions about practices that both feminist empiricists and standpoint epistemologists can endorse as objectivity-enhancing, if done properly. Blogs and other social media can generate community-level transformative criticism and opportunities to start inquiry from the standpoint of the oppressed. For example, social media have been used to critique and provide alternatives to dominant conceptions of the Arab Spring (Khondker 2011). In addition, blogs can create smaller epistemic communities by hosting active comment threads. Commenters often engage in a critical

dialogue with one another, another potential objectivity-enhancing practice.<11> But for these practices to play any positive role, community members must think it worthwhile to engage with social media. If I want a from-the-ground perspective of the Syrian uprising instead of the mainstream media's coverage, then I will not subscribe to a purportedly Syrian blog if I have no confidence that a Syrian actually wrote it. Thus, MacMaster's imposture undermines trust in the avenues for public dialogue that activists often use to disseminate alternative messages. In sum, this case study shows that imposture has the potential to undermine the trust necessary for diverse networks of trust that promote objectivity.

THE NEED FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

Recall that objectivity is sustained by social practices (for example, critical dialogue, transformative criticism, and starting from the oppressed's standpoint). Inquirers who hold objectivity as an ideal rely on one another to engage in these practices. But unless inquirers live in a panopticon of complete surveillance, they must take it on some degree of trust that others are upholding their end of the social practices. Distrust is poison; it spreads throughout the body of epistemic communities, destroying members' faith in one another and their confidence in the social practices that support knowledge-production. Therefore, epistemic social practices depend on members' trustworthiness.

A trustworthy person is someone who can be counted on to avoid unduly violating the normative expectations that others rely upon her to meet. This rough<12> definition of trustworthiness is based on two features of trust. First, trust involves reliance. Reliance on another involves making plans based on the assumption that the trusted will perform a particular action. This makes one vulnerable. If I rely on you to tell the truth, then I am vulnerable to forming a false belief if you lie. Blind trust is the exception, rather than the rule. We usually rely on people because we have some evidence that they will act as we expect. Second, trust involves normative expectations. Trust involves vulnerability to feeling betrayed when the relied-upon party fails to act as expected (Baier 1994, 99). These feelings of betrayal are reactive attitudes that link trust to practices of holding people responsible for their actions (Walker 2006, 80). Thus, when I trust someone to do something, I make plans based on the assumption that they will do it, and I do so with normative expectations.

The trustworthy person cultivates habits to avoid unduly betraying the trust others place in them. The "unduly" here is important because, as my final section argues, trustworthiness sometimes demands betrayal of trust. Part of the virtue of trustworthiness involves determining whose trust should be betrayed and under what circumstances. But without some disposition to avoid betraying others' trust, one does not have the character trait of trustworthiness. Note that I follow Annette Baier in using "betrayal" to refer to failure to uphold the expectations someone trusts one to fulfill (Baier 1994, 16). This use has a neutral moral valence—some betrayals (for example, betrayal of an exploiter's trust) can be virtuous, whereas others are not.

In cases of imposture, the truster's normative expectations of authenticity are violated. We often rely on one another to signal truth from pretense. In trusting others to be authentic, we trust them to avoid deceptive self-presentation. Thus, communities have prescriptive norms of authenticity. These norms specify how we ought to signal when our self-presentation is genuine and when it is pretend. Norms of authenticity are deployed to hold us accountable for failures to signal accurately.<13> For example, many online communities have norms that hold bloggers

accountable for accurately signaling whether a blog is written in a fictional voice or a pseudonym is being used.

Additionally, norms of authenticity hold people responsible for conforming to socially constructed boundaries of identities. The reason for this is that we take some signals that a person belongs to a social group as evidence that they are likely to have other characteristics or behave in certain ways. Thus, our trust in others to maintain stable social identities within expected boundaries grounds our inductive inferences and practical reasoning. Of course, these expectations of authenticity can either protect the vulnerable or oppress individuals who do not conform to dominant social boundaries. For instance, expectations of authentic medical practice hold doctors accountable for conforming to expectations of safe, expert treatment of vulnerable patients. But oppressive expectations of authentic gender presentation or racial identity hold people morally blameworthy if their behaviors transgress boundaries and are taken as deceptive signals (Bettcher 2007; Lee 2011). Such oppressive expectations also coerce individuals into conforming to traditional boundaries.

Although particular norms of authenticity are context-dependent, if community members trust one another to engage in joint epistemic projects, the community usually has norms of authenticity. This is because knowing a person's identity carries significant weight in assessing their epistemic authority. Information about someone's identity is relevant to judging whether their testimony is competent and sincere. Thus, members of epistemic communities often trust one another to uphold norms of authenticity.

That said, sometimes we expect others to deceive us and pretend to be something other than they are. Imagine a dinner theater murder-mystery play in which audience members know that actors are scattered throughout the audience. The actors are intentionally pretending to be someone else, but this is unobjectionable because the audience is not relying on them to do otherwise. Now, an objector to my case study might advocate a similar attitude to people's online self-presentation. Knowing that some blogs are fake, one might take a playful attitude to blogs. Like a dinner theater audience member, one might have no normative expectations of truth-telling. In fact, this is one view of the Internet that MacMaster used to defend the blog. Post-exposure, the following subtitle appeared under the blog's heading: "The Image is not the Real; When you realize that you were reading a story, rather than the news, who should you be angry at? The teller of tales that moved you?" (MacMaster 2011). On this view, the Internet is a space for moving stories, rather than a community bound together by trust in members' authenticity.

But the reason MacMaster's subtitle is a gross evasion of responsibility is that people do not always take such a casual, playful attitude to what they read online. Nor should they, if the Internet is to have some epistemic value (beyond the value fiction has). Many readers of Amina's blog relied on it for news about Syrian activism. And their normative expectations of authenticity were reasonable given the social-epistemic environment of blogging on the Arab Spring. Why? Blogs and other forms of social media have taken a place among the social-epistemic practices by which various overlapping epistemic communities attempt to produce knowledge. This was especially true during the Arab Spring, when activists used social media to organize and spread their message in an environment of state censorship (Khondker 2011). Mainstream journalists bolstered the credibility of social media by citing them as sources and reporting on the ways activists used them. This made it reasonable for readers to read purportedly Syrian blogs with epistemic aims (to get an alternative take on the news).<14> In addition, given both the importance of the information conveyed and the risks to activists, it was reasonable to hold bloggers to norms of authenticity.<15>

Unable to check up on all blogs to determine whether every word written is true, readers are in a position of relative ignorance. If blog readers' attempts to engage in objectivity-enhancing practices are to be successful, readers have to trust the bloggers.<16> Deception is not the only cause of the moral and epistemic harm that imposters do to epistemic communities; further, they betray reasonable trust. Therefore, given my earlier argument that objectivity depends on networks of trust, the objectivity of a community depends on the trustworthiness of its members.

TRICKSTERS: RESISTING OPPRESSION

To simply argue that upholding expectations of authenticity is an epistemic and moral virtue ignores the fact that the proper degree of trustworthiness depends on the situation. This section focuses on trustworthiness as a complex virtue for tricksters who intentionally<17> betray expectations of authenticity in virtuous acts of resistance against oppression.

The trickster takes advantage of a privileged group or person's ignorant and oppressive expectations of the oppressed's behavior. Lugones describes her playful trickery as follows:

I can be stereotypically intense or be the real thing and, if you are Anglo, you do not know which one I am *because* I am Latin-American. . . . I can see that gringos see me as stereotypically intense because I am, as a Latin-American, constructed that way but I may or may not *intentionally* animate the stereotype or the real thing knowing that you may not see it in anything other than in the stereotypical construction. This ambiguity is funny and is not just funny, it is survival-rich. (Lugones 2003, 92)

Navigating "worlds" in which they are constructed according to stereotypes, oppressed people sometimes animate the stereotypes in order to get along with privileged others. But trickily playing off the ignorance of the privileged is not merely a survival tool; it can also be a means of challenging and educating the privileged. When telling the truth is dangerous, there are "truths that only the fool can speak and only the trickster can play out without harm" (Lugones 2003, 92). Hoagland notes that in lesbian communities, a working-class or black lesbian might pull the leg of a privileged lesbian who is in the grip of dominant values (Hoagland 1988, 245–46). Such tricksters' presence in the community prompts privileged lesbians to work to unlearn their ignorance to avoid being tricked. The privileged, if they do not take themselves too seriously, can laugh at themselves when a trickster pokes fun at their ignorance.

But often, the privileged react with anger at the betrayal of expectations involved in trickery. For example, when Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's counter-Columbus-quincentenary performance art piece titled "Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . ." was discovered as an act of trickery, it was condemned (Fusco 1995; Hoagland 2007, 104–05). The piece was staged at art and natural history museums and public squares in the US, UK, Australia, Spain, and Argentina. Fusco and Gómez-Peña lived in a cage and presented themselves as members of a newly discovered Amerindian tribe. Signs around the cage provided fake facts about the tribe, and visitors were allowed to interact with the caged Indians by having their photos taken with them or paying them to dance. Many audience members believed the fake signs and taunted or simply gazed at the supposed museum specimens. Fusco recalls, "As we assumed the stereotypical role of the domesticated savage, many audience members felt entitled to assume the role of colonizer, only to find themselves uncomfortable with the implications of the game" (Fusco 1995, 47). Fusco

and Gómez-Peña tricked<18> visitors into believing they were seeing human specimens, and the visitors ignored evidence to the contrary. When the trickery was revealed, many felt betrayed by the manipulation of expectations of truth-telling within scientific museums. But the piece ingeniously reveals those expectations and asks challenging questions about whose story is presented as truth. Thus, trickery can be an important resistance tool. In the next section, I argue that trickery is not just practically and politically useful, but also epistemically virtuous in promoting objectivity.

THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF BETRAYAL

A trustworthy person follows the Doctrine of the Mean (Potter 2002, 14–16). On Aristotle’s account of the Doctrine of the Mean, the virtuous person has the right emotions and engages in the right actions to the proper degree “at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (Aristotle 1969, 1106b15–25). Thus, the fully virtuous person does not live up to all normative expectations that others rely on her to uphold, and a person can be either deficient or excessive in trustworthiness. We call deficiency in the virtue of courage “cowardice” and excessive courage “foolhardiness,” but English lacks parallel terms for trustworthiness. I call the virtue “trustworthiness,” the vice of deficiency “untrustworthiness,” and the vice of excess “excessive trustworthiness.” Can anything more substantive be said about the appropriate circumstances for betraying trust?

I now defend the following criteria that flesh out the Doctrine-of-the-Mean account of trustworthiness: *A betrayal is epistemically vicious when it strengthens or promotes oppressive, exclusive networks of trust, and a betrayal is epistemically virtuous when it expands trust networks to involve the oppressed.*<19> I argue that these criteria properly distinguish between imposters (like MacMaster), who are untrustworthy, and tricksters, who virtuously betray oppressive expectations and thereby avoid excessive trustworthiness.<20>

Recall the two points of agreement between feminist empiricist and feminist standpoint epistemologies: objectivity requires diversity and critical community interactions. Exclusive, oppressive networks of trust impede critical dialogue from a diversity of values and social locations. Thus, oppressive norms that promote a climate of distrust in oppressed groups undermine objectivity. Acts of betrayal that undermine these norms promote an inclusive climate of trust and thereby promote objectivity. To put the point somewhat paradoxically, acts of betrayal can actually in the long run promote trust, when they are betrayals of oppressive norms that constrict networks of trust. For this reason, tricksters who betray others’ trust in them to be authentic are displaying epistemic virtue, because they follow the Doctrine of the Mean by avoiding excessive trustworthiness with respect to oppressive norms. Such tricksters should not be condemned as untrustworthy, nor praised merely for strategic cunning, when their acts of resistance expand trust networks. Such resistance can strengthen the oppressed’s self-trust, and also challenge the stereotypes and conceptual frameworks that prevent others from trusting the oppressed. Although a variety of tricksters meet my criteria, I consider just two types: revealed tricksters (whose betrayal is eventually recognized), and stealth tricksters (whose trickery remains hidden). Both follow the Doctrine of the Mean, but in different ways.

Revealed tricksters often resist oppression by making the privileged aware of their oppressive norms. They trick the privileged into seeing how their ignorant expectations of oppressed peoples promote exclusive trust networks, constructing only the privileged as trustworthy and credible.

Fusco and Gómez-Peña betrayed the expectations of visitors to the museums that everything can be taken literally. Many visitors and officials condemned their betrayal as immoral. But this reaction ignores the virtue of resisting oppressive norms. Fusco and Gómez-Peña expose the cultural imperialism that both allows whites to erase others and excludes colonized people from the production of knowledge about them. Norms of expertise and expectations of detached inquiry support the position of Western elites as knowers and undermine the authority of colonized peoples. In tricking people into examining their expectations of what is in museums, who put it there, and whose conceptions of knowledge and expertise ought to be trusted, Fusco and Gómez-Peña resist the exclusion of colonized people from the trust networks that constitute the scientific community.<21> The performance piece provides a powerful opportunity for strong objectivity. Audience members who were “taken in” and later realized that the piece was satirical can reflect on how they appeared to the artists. This enables a reflective audience member to “pass over in thought” to the world of the artists—“to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location” (Harding 1991, 151). From this location, audience members might see their patterns of trust and distrust (for example, their trust in museums where the knowledge of non-Western peoples is excluded).<22>

Thus, revealed tricksters follow the Doctrine of the Mean. They avoid excessive trustworthiness to expectations that exclude oppressed people from networks of trust. Excessive trustworthiness to such norms perpetuates an epistemology of ignorance—enabling the privileged to accept oppressive norms as normal and innocent. By vividly betraying the expectations of the privileged, revealed tricksters can prompt critical examination of the norms, thereby pushing the privileged to see exclusive trust networks. Revealed tricksters can betray the trust of the privileged in ways that promote inclusive networks of trust necessary for objectivity. In doing so, they meet my proposed criterion.

Stealth tricksters carefully animate stereotypes or adopt a deceptive public persona to gain access to trust networks. Animating stereotypes or conforming to others’ expectations are ways of tricking privileged people into feeling comfortable with oppressed groups, thus allowing the marginalized access to trust networks. Consider the example of a feminist academic in a field with widespread hostility to feminist approaches. This academic may intentionally present a public persona that downplays her feminist commitments. She may use coded language to present feminist views, such that other feminists will recognize the feminist origin of her claims, but those unfamiliar with feminist analysis will be unaware of the political identity of the stealth trickster. By “going stealth” with her feminism, the academic may gain the trust of her colleagues and use this trust to gain an audience for feminist criticisms that challenge biased background assumptions. Sometimes nondominant views are more readily accepted by the dominant if the views are not advertised as such. Stealth feminism may be an effective strategy in contexts where feminist objectivity-enhancing critiques are rejected out of hand if voiced by an acknowledged feminist. Of course, this is not always the case. But stealth trickery can sometimes be a valuable strategy for oppressed groups to gain access to trust networks, thereby enhancing the objectivity of the resultant critical dialogue.

In contrast, MacMaster’s imposture does not expand networks of trust. Instead, it further constricts trust networks, and thus cannot be excused by my elaboration of the Doctrine of the Mean. Because MacMaster speaks in place of authentic Syrian activists, this imposture further denies them participation and credibility in the epistemic community. Not only does speaking in place of others exclude marginalized people from trust networks, but the exposure of MacMaster’s imposture casts suspicion on these marginalized others and the social media networks through

which they speak. Thus, there is no epistemic virtue in this act of betrayal, according to my account of trustworthiness.

I have shown that my criteria for the epistemic appraisal of betrayal capture the epistemic virtue of many acts of trickery and the vice of impostures. Thus, my account provides guidelines for agents considering betrayal of others' expectations of authenticity. But such guidelines cannot alone determine whether a betrayal is warranted. Instead they direct the agent to the features of the situation that are salient: namely, the effects of betrayal on the diversity of trust networks. Detailed information about the particular situation at hand is needed to determine whether any particular case will constrict or expand trust networks to involve the oppressed.<23> And often the effect of a betrayal on the three types of trust can be mixed (for example, it increases self-trust but decreases some groups' trust in others). The epistemically responsible agent must attend to the details of the situation and must also make difficult judgments about which act has the most trust-increasing effect. Therefore, our epistemic communities require members with virtuous characters that include wise judgment and well-honed epistemic sensibilities to identify the relevant particularities of the situation.

My examples of revealed and stealth tricksters illustrate the complexities such wise tricksters must confront. Suppose that Fusco and Gómez-Peña had the opportunity to perform at a museum that was simultaneously presenting an exhibit curated by members of a real tribe from South America. Should they present the piece? Making this decision requires determining whether their piece would undermine trust in the other exhibit. Stealth tricksters also face complex situations. The stealth feminist must ask herself whether keeping her feminist identity hidden contributes to an environment in which feminists are not openly trusted. Additionally, she must consider whether the hostile environment is constructing her in ways that damage her feminism. Is she using an effective strategy to gain an audience for feminist views, or are her colleagues using effective coercive strategies to pressure feminists to conform? In wrestling with these complexities, the virtuous trickster should consider how the trickery affects the networks of trust necessary for objectivity.

In conclusion, trustworthiness is a complex epistemic virtue. Untrustworthiness in epistemic communities can damage social practices that enhance objectivity. Untrustworthy imposture can be an arrogant act of privilege, further silencing marginalized voices. It can thwart their efforts to enter epistemic communities that have previously excluded them. But one can also be excessively trustworthy. Sometimes betraying the trust of others is needed to disrupt systems that exclude oppressed groups from networks of trust. Some who are castigated as imposters are in fact engaging in objectivity-enhancing acts of resistance. By challenging stereotypes or undermining structures that promote distrust in the oppressed, such tricksters are epistemically virtuous.

NOTES

I thank Sarah Hoagland, Anne Leighton, Jacqueline Anderson, Cory Andrews, Sarah Berry, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, the works-in-progress group and the Philosophy department at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, audiences at the Society for Analytical Feminism and FEMMSS4, and two anonymous reviewers for *Hypatia* for helpful feedback on this paper.

1. Nor will I address alternative conceptions of objectivity that do not identify objectivity with absence of bias (for example, Scheman's account of objectivity as trustworthiness [Scheman 2001]).

2. On the epistemic value of looking back at one's self from the "world" of others, see also Lugones 2003, 97.

3. More precisely, each type of trust is required to the proper degree. It is possible to have excessive trust of each type, but usually only privileged groups are excessively trusted (Jones 2012a, 246).

4. My claim that exclusive, oppressive networks of trust undermine objectivity is not an argument against conceptual separatism. Feminists have shown the epistemic value of separate spaces and conceptual schemes that enable the oppressed to construct separate "worlds" of meaning (for example, Hoagland 1988; 2001; Lugones 2003; Hoagland 2007). When oppressed groups choose to separate, they create opportunities for strong objectivity. In contrast, excluding oppressed groups who wish to participate in dominant epistemic communities undermines objectivity, as do practices that damage self-trust in separate spaces.

5. On ecological analyses, see Code 2006.

6. In this paper, I focus on MacMaster's imposture as a Syrian activist. In contrast, most public discussion focused on a presumed gender imposture. Discussion of gender imposture requires responsible analysis that was missing from much of the media attention and is beyond the scope of this paper. There is a long-standing history of transphobic representations of transgender people as evil-deceiver gender imposters (Bettcher 2007). Additionally, the Internet provides a powerful medium for transgender people to explore their identities, express themselves, and build community (Whittle 1998). Thus, discussion of MacMaster's gender presentation on the blog demands careful analysis to avoid playing into transphobic narratives. I hope to address these issues in future work.

7. Post-exposure, MacMaster deleted the blog. Where online documents disappeared, I have provided alternatives quoting the original.

8. "Daniel Nassar" is a pseudonym used by a gay Syrian man (Nassar 2011).

9. I thank Anne Leighton for helping me clarify this point.

10. To avoid a one-sided narrative of victimhood, I should mention that activists used the Amina controversy to draw attention to their causes and to challenge Western coverage of the Middle East (for example, Abbas and Boundaoui 2011; Hamwi and Nassar 2011; Nassar 2011). On the damage done by narratives that ignore resistance, see Lugones 2003, 53–63; Hoagland 2007, 102.

11. Of course, much depends on how comment threads are moderated, and whether uptake, shared standards, and equality of intellectual authority are present.

12. More precisely, the trustworthy person takes the fact that others are relying on her to fulfill these expectations as a reason to avoid violating them (Jones 2012b).

13. Insofar as norms of authenticity demand sharing of self-knowledge, they are a subset of the knowledge-sharing norms that Heidi Grasswick analyzes (Grasswick 2011).

14. Since MacMaster's blog played on many stereotypes, Kathryn Norlock suggested to me that some readers enjoyed the blog because it confirmed their previously held worldview, for example, one in which Western activists save non-Western peoples. I agree that this plausibly describes many readers. But this does not diminish my claim that if blogs are to provide an opportunity for learning, rather than just confirmation bias, readers are sometimes warranted in expecting authenticity. That readers often do not avail themselves of opportunities to challenge their beliefs does not mean that the opportunities are not, or should not, be there.

15. Note that this is a reasonable normative expectation, not a warranted prediction that everyone will uphold these norms. Additionally, my argument that the expectations of truth-telling

were reasonable is indexed to this particular community of blogs. Certainly, expectations of truth-telling are unreasonable in other areas of social media (for example, fan-fiction blogs).

16. Of course, readers also bear responsibility for using their critical skills. As Lisa Heldke and Mariana Ortega argue, privileged knowers who attempt to correct for their biases by reading marginalized others' texts need to check and question what they read (Heldke 1997; Ortega 2006). Thus, Western readers who failed to question their own ready acceptance of Amina's words were not fully epistemically virtuous. That said, in claiming that readers needed to trust the blog's author, I argue that features of the social-epistemic environment of the blog (for example, the difficulty of determining the real-world identities of bloggers, activists' need for protective anonymity, and the widespread [and culpable] Western ignorance of the Middle East) put the readers in a position of vulnerability with limited ability to detect betrayal. A trustworthy blogger would recognize this vulnerability and not exploit it in ways that damage objectivity. MacMaster failed to do this.

17. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe those who unintentionally betray others' expectations of authenticity.

18. One might object that Fusco and Gómez-Peña did not trick the public, since Fusco claims that "[o]ur original intent was to create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other," and that the audience's acceptance of the performance as literal was unexpected (Fusco 1995, 37). But although their initial intent may not have been to trick the public, they did refuse to correct the audience's misinterpretations once it became clear from the first performance that many were confused (Fusco 1995, 50). Thus, I interpret their decision to continue the performance without clarification a case of trickery. I thank Sarah Hoagland for pushing me on this.

19. Since there are epistemic goods other than objectivity, objectivity-decreasing betrayals are vicious *ceteris paribus* (*mutatis mutandis* for virtuous betrayals).

20. This paper focuses on betrayal of expectations of authenticity, but I suspect that these criteria also account for the epistemic virtue of other types of resistant betrayal.

21. In response to museum representatives who asked the artists to correct the audience's literal interpretation, Fusco says, "We found this particularly ironic, since museum staffs are perhaps the most aware of the rampant distortion of reality that can occur in the labeling of artifacts from other cultures. In other words, we were not the only ones who were lying; our lies simply told a different story. For making this manifest, we were perceived as either noble savages or evil tricksters, dissimulators who discredit museums and betray public trust" (Fusco 1995, 50).

22. By focusing on the value of revealing the trickery, I do not claim that this exhausts the epistemic value of the performance. Audience members who knew it was satire could also learn something from the piece.

23. I thank Jacqueline Anderson for helping me clarify this.

REFERENCES

"A gay girl in Damascus" How the hoax unfolded. 2011. *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8572884/A-Gay-Girl-in-Damascus-how-the-hoax-unfolded.html> (accessed June 27, 2011).

- A lesbian blogger in Syria tells all. 2011. *Women's revolution*. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/05/10/a-gay-girl-in-damascus-lesbian-blogger-becomes-syrian-hero/> (accessed October 25, 2012).
- Abbas, Ali, and Assia Boundaoui. 2011. A gay (straight) girl (man) in Damascus (Edinburgh): The politics behind the roleplay. *KABOBfest*. <http://www.kabobfest.com/2011/06/a-gay-girl-in-damascus.html> (accessed March 4, 2012).
- Alcoff, Linda. 1991/1992. The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter): 5–32.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2006. The epistemology of democracy. *Episteme* 3 (1): 8–22.
- Aristotle 1969. *Nicomachean ethics*. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett.
- Bady, Aaron. 2011. This is the face. *Zunguzungu*. <http://zunguzungu.wordpress.com/2011/06/13/this-is-the-face/> (accessed March 4, 2012).
- Baier, Annette. 1994. *Moral prejudices*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Bailey, Alison. 2007. Strategic ignorance. In *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- BBC News. 2011. Gay girl in Damascus: Tom MacMaster defends blog hoax. *BBC News Scotland*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-13747761> (accessed August 11, 2012).
- Bell, Melissa, and Elizabeth Flock. 2011. “A gay girl in Damascus” comes clean. *Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-gay-girl-in-damascus-comes-clean/2011/06/12/AGkyH0RH_story_1.html (accessed July 24, 2011).
- Bettcher, Talia M. 2007. Evil deceivers and make-believers: On transphobic violence and the politics of illusion. *Hypatia* 22 (3): 43–65.
- Code, Lorraine. 1987. *Epistemic responsibility*. Hanover, N.H.: Brown University Press.
- . 2006. *Ecological thinking: The politics of epistemic location*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems* 33 (6): 14–32.
- Daukas, Nancy. 2006. Epistemic trust and social location. *Episteme* 3 (1–2): 109–24.
- . 2011. Altogether now: A virtue-theoretic approach to pluralism in feminist epistemology. In *Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science*, ed. Heidi Grasswick. New York: Springer.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and ethics in knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fusco, Coco. 1995. *English is broken here: Notes on the cultural fusion in the Americas*. New York: The New Press.
- Grasswick, Heidi. 2011. Liberatory epistemology and the sharing of knowledge: Querying the norms. In *Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science*, ed. Heidi Grasswick. New York: Springer.
- Hamwi, Sami, and Daniel Nassar. 2011. From Damascus with love: Blogging in a totalitarian state. *LGBT Asylum News*. <http://madikazemi.blogspot.com/2011/06/from-damascus-with-love-blogging-in.html> (accessed May 19, 2014).
- Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Hardwig, John. 1991. The role of trust in knowledge. *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (12): 693–708.
- Heldke, Lisa. 1997. On being a responsible traitor. In *Daring to be good: Essays in feminist ethico-politics*, ed. Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson. New York: Routledge.
- Henry, Liz. 2011. Painful doubts about Amina. *Composite*. <http://bookmaniac.org/painful-doubts-about-amina/> (accessed March 3, 2012).

- Hoagland, Sarah. 1988. *Lesbian ethics*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Institute of Lesbian Studies.
- . 2001. Resisting rationality. In *Engendering rationalities*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2007. Denying relationality: Epistemology and ethics and ignorance. In *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Intemann, Kristen. 2010. 25 years of feminist empiricism and standpoint theory: Where are we now? *Hypatia* 25 (4): 778–96.
- Jones, Karen. 2012a. The politics of intellectual self-trust. *Social Epistemology* 26 (2): 237–51.
- . 2012b. Trustworthiness. *Ethics* 123 (1): 61–85.
- Khondker, Habibul H. 2011. Role of the new media in the Arab Spring. *Globalizations* 8 (5): 675–79.
- Lazar, Shira. 2011. “A gay girl in Damascus” bravely blogs and builds online following from Syria. *CBS News*. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504943_162-20060462-10391715.html (accessed June 27, 2011).
- Lee, Emily S. 2011. The epistemology of the question of authenticity, in place of strategic essentialism. *Hypatia* 26 (2): 258–79.
- Longino, Helen. 1990. *Science as social knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2002. *The fate of knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- MacMaster, Tom. 2011. “A gay girl in Damascus”: an illusion: Apology to readers. *A Gay Girl in Damascus*. http://damascusgaygirl.blogspot.com/2011/06/apology-to-readers_13.html (accessed June 27, 2011).
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The racial contract*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra T. 2003. Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Nassar, Daniel. 2011. Foreign policy: Damascus still has gay girls. *NPR.org*. <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/16/137217280/foreign-policy-damascus-still-has-gay-girls> (accessed March 30, 2012).
- Ortega, Mariana. 2006. Being lovingly, knowingly ignorant: White feminism and women of color. *Hypatia* 21 (3): 56–74.
- Potter, Nancy N. 2002. *How can I be trusted?* New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Read, Max. 2011. “A gay girl in Damascus” is actually a married guy in Edinburgh. *Gawker*. <http://gawker.com/5811169/a-gay-girl-in-damascus-is-actually-a-married-guy-in-edinburgh> (accessed March 30, 2012).
- Rolin, Kristina. 2006. The bias paradox in feminist standpoint epistemology. *Episteme* 1 (2): 125–36.
- Scheman, Naomi. 2001. Epistemology resuscitated: Objectivity as trustworthiness. In *Engendering rationalities*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Solomon, Miriam. 2006. Norms of epistemic diversity. *Episteme* 3 (1): 23–36.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. 2006. *Moral repair: Reconstructing moral relations after wrongdoing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Whittle, Stephen. 1998. The trans-cyberian mail way. *Social & Legal Studies* 7 (3): 389–408.

Wylie, Alison. 2003. Why standpoint matters. In *Science and other cultures*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding. New York: Routledge.