

Old Bad Attitudes

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In the summer of 1401, a debate began that has continued more or less continuously ever since, concerning the place of women in a world that has been dominated by men. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the person who singlehandedly began this debate was a woman, Christine de Pizan, a widow with children living on the fringes of the French aristocracy, who until then had distinguished herself only as the author of conventional courtly poetry. In a series of fierce letters, Christine set out to pick a fight, and succeeding in starting a debate that continued for centuries under the heading of the “querelle des femmes.”¹ Christine knew, in so doing, that she was breaking new intellectual ground, refusing to accept a judgment about the inferiority of women that, in her words, had been the conclusion of “nearly all the treatises of philosophers, poets, and orators too numerous to mention.”² But Christine did not conceive of herself as a philosopher, and did not press her case through the scholastic approach of the universities. Her work has, accordingly, been generally neglected within philosophical circles.

Christine’s chief project, during this stage of her career,³ was to identify misogyny, especially as it appears in literary texts, to diagnose its source, and then to mount a defense of the reputation of

¹ On the long history of this debate see Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400–1789.” For a collection of early texts in translation, see Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*.

² *City of Ladies* I.1. All translations from this work are my own, from the Middle French. The most reliably literal complete English translation is that of Earl Jeffrey Richards.

³ Christine’s later writings shift away from gender, toward broader questions of politics. I will not here be concerned with that stage of her career; for discussion see Kate Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*. For a good overview of Christine’s life and work, see the Norton *Selected Writings*, edited by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. For comprehensive biographies, see Françoise Autrand, *Christine de Pizan: une femme en politique* and, in English, Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works*.

women. Among historians of philosophy, these efforts have barely been registered, in part because of Christine's place outside the medieval university, but even more because her very topic has only recently begun to receive sustained attention within the field. Indeed, even now, it is not easy to write philosophically about Christine, because we still lack adequate conceptual resources to think about what she is trying to do. In what follows, I seek to understand her work more fully, in the hope that her example will help us think more clearly for ourselves about these issues.

Because Christine stood apart from the philosophers, and because the topics of philosophy continue to stand at some distance from her, it takes some amount of systematic bridge-building to cover that distance. Accordingly, what follows is not a conventional study of the history of philosophy. Instead, I begin with Christine, then take inspiration from her to construct various theoretical frameworks for thinking about her claims, and then I attempt to return to her over the bridge I have just assembled. If the approach works, others may be able to use the bridge themselves, and so find they have an easier path toward thinking about both Christine and other historical texts that engage with similar questions.

The bridge is built from three separate theoretical spans. First, I identify the central target of Christine's anti-misogynist project, the bad attitudes of men toward women. To do justice to the scope of Christine's concerns, I develop a broad analytic framework for thinking about these attitudes, beginning with the now familiar case of testimonial injustice and working toward a more comprehensive account. Second, focusing specifically on the badness of those attitudes, I assess Christine's focus on prejudice at the level of individual psychology, and I offer a qualified defense of this approach against the modern tendency to focus on broader structures. Third, I turn to Christine's defense against these bad attitudes, and the obstacles it faces. This requires thinking about the epistemology of disagreement along broader lines than is common today.

1. Bad Attitudes Generalized

Christine writes at a time in which virtually everything that had ever been written had been written by a man. What she finds, in reading those texts, is an attitude of persistent hostility toward women. At the start of her most prominent work on this theme, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she asks,

What reason can there be for why so many different men—clerics and others—have been and remain so ready to say with their mouth and write in their treatises such abominable and hateful things about women and their qualities? And not just one or two of them... but, generally speaking, nearly all the treatises of philosophers, poets, and orators too numerous to mention seem to speak with one voice and agree on a similar conclusion, determining that the female moral character (*mours femenins*) is subject to and imbued with every vice. (*City of Ladies* I.1)

The chief target of her attack, and the impetus behind the 1401 quarrel, was Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*, one of the most popular and admired literary works of the Middle Ages.⁴ Christine minces no words in characterizing the work's misogyny: "in what way can it be of value or to a good end that he so excessively, impetuously, and quite untruthfully accuses, blames, and defames women regarding an assortment of very grave vices, and asserts that their behavior is full of every perversity?"⁵ It would be hard to overstate the audacity of such a remark from the pen of someone in Christine's position. Characteristically, she recognizes as much only to redouble her attack:

Finally, let it not be attributed to folly, arrogance, or presumption that I, a woman, dare to reprimand and refute so subtle an author and to divest his work of its renown, when he, just one man, dared undertake to defame and condemn without exception an entire sex. (*Debate*, p. 63)

⁴ For background on the *Romance of the Rose*, and the larger debate, see David Hult's introduction to his translation of Christine's correspondence. The debate concerns more than the work's treatment of women; it also concerns, in particular, its sexual explicitness. Here I set the latter issue aside.

⁵ *Debate*, p. 56. Quotations from the *Debate* correspondence generally follow Hult's carefully literal translation.

To think through what is at stake in such charges, the first thing we need is a clear sense of what these bad attitudes amount to.

An adequate account of Christine's perspective requires grappling with the wide range of injustices that she describes. This is not easy to do in any systematic way, however, for although there has been much recent work on various aspects of the phenomena, there is no framework available that is general enough to encompass the range of Christine's concerns. In this first section, then, I attempt to sketch such an account.

Let's begin with the sort of case that has generated the most recent attention, injustices of a distinctively epistemic sort. These are the sort of bad attitudes that led both Christine's interlocutors and subsequent generations to marginalize her work as unserious. We can follow Miranda Fricker in using the label *testimonial injustice* for cases such as this, where "a prejudice on the hearer's part causes him to give the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given."⁶ Fricker has in mind cases where a jury gives inadequate credence to a witness on account of race, or an employee's ideas are denigrated on account of gender. What marks these cases as injustices is that they are done out of prejudice. Of course, prejudice comes in many kinds, and I will focus on this part of the story in §2, but for now let's refer to this simply as the bad-making feature of the case. Continuing to generalize, we can say that these cases involves two individuals, a first agent who is the "speaker" and a second agent, the "hearer," who is reacting unjustly. Of course, it need not be a case of speaking and hearing, but if it is to count as a case of *testimonial injustice*, it is essential that the first agent somehow seek to convey some piece of information, and the second agent somehow misjudge that offering. On Fricker's account, the misjudgment involves according "less credibility" to the

⁶ *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 4. In more recent work Fricker has suggested that epistemic injustice be treated as an "umbrella concept" containing a variety of sub-kinds ("Epistemic Justice," p. 1318). As I will try to indicate in the notes to follow, the recent literature has made huge strides in exploring that wider terrain. For an overview of the current state of the art, see Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus, *The Routledge Handbook to Epistemic Injustice*.

speaker, but this is only one possibility. I might also be acting unjustly if, out of prejudice, I gave *more* credibility to a speaker than I would otherwise have done.⁷ Generalizing still further, it seems that any sort of misappraisal of a meaningful action might count as an injustice—even if the action is not intended as testimony, and even if the misappraisal does not specifically concern the agent’s credibility. As a first step toward defining this wider scope, let’s use the broader label *epistemic injustice* for cases that have the following schematic form:

- A. Communicative Act
 - B. Evaluative Misjudgment
 - + C. Bad-Making Feature
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- Epistemic Injustice

This schema, arid as it is, is useful because it offers an abstract recipe for generating epistemic injustice: take an agent who is acting in some sort of meaningful way, add a second agent who is somehow misjudging that communicative act, and then mix in a prejudice or some other feature of the case that turns the misjudgment into an injustice.

This is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of epistemic injustice, and as we will shortly see it needs to be broadened to serve Christine’s purposes. Even so, it captures the sort of epistemic injustices she confronts, which are grounded in the bad attitudes of her contemporaries.⁸ In the passage quoted earlier, she expects not just that her readers will not give her claims the appropriate credence, but that further they will charge her with “folly, arrogance, or presumption.” As it

⁷ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* p. 17, refers to this as a “credibility excess.” On the injustice of such excess, when granted to privileged subjects, see José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* ch. 2.

⁸ As §2 will discuss, Christine focuses on individual bad attitudes rather than structural features of society. This means leaving aside, for instance, the epistemic injustices that arise when society forecloses educational opportunities to certain of its members (on which see, e.g., Ben Kotzee, “Education and Epistemic Injustice”). As we will see in §3, Christine is surprisingly complacent about these sorts of societal inequities.

happens, a subsequent letter uses just this sort of language against her: “You fashion yourself as a judge, after having spoken based upon opinion or reckless presumption. Oh, what very foolish pride! Oh, what a speech issuing forth too rashly and thoughtlessly from the mouth of a woman...”⁹ Elsewhere she attacks literature that treats women as “treacherous, cunning, false ... all too mendacious, fickle, erratic, and loose.”¹⁰ These attitudes misjudge women in ways that go beyond an inappropriately low credence, and so the point of the ABC schema is to capture the full range of epistemic injustice.

Starting from that schema, we can systematically explore this terrain by noticing that, for each of the three ingredients ABC, there will be a range of sub-categories. Saving C for the next section, let’s first consider stage B and then turn to stage A. The paradigm case of a stage-B misjudgment, as we have seen, is testimonial injustice, a misjudgment about credibility. Generalizing, cases of this form involve a communication’s failing to generate the appropriate level of uptake in the respondent: your assertion of P ought to produce a certain level of confidence on my part in P, and yet (for morally problematic reasons) it does not. This of course comes in degrees: I might be slightly less confident of what someone tells me, or I might be wholly dismissive. It also may or may not spread out over the speaker’s other communicative acts, meaning that my insufficient credence may be a one-time reaction, or limited to certain contexts, or may apply to everything the speaker says. More interestingly, the paradigmatic failure-of-uptake case is just one from a still larger family of cases. For if we cast a wider net over the various stages of the communicative process, we can distinguish at least the following discrete places where misjudgment is possible:

⁹ Pierre Col, in *Debate*, p. 144.

¹⁰ *God of Love’s Letter*, in *Debate*, p. 40. For another general statement of the situation, see *City of Ladies* I.37: “Men commonly say that female knowledge is like a thing of no value, and it is a commonly stated reproach, in describing some foolishness, to say ‘That’s women’s talk!’ In short, the common view and talk of men is that women’s only purpose in the world always has been and will be to bear children and spin wool.”

- B1. Misjudging the content of what is being communicated.
- B2. Misjudging the intention of the communication.
- B3. Misjudging the degree of credence owed to the content of the communication.
- B4. Normatively misjudging the communication.
- B5. Emotionally misjudging the communication.

The paradigm case of testimonial injustice falls under B3, but each of these other cases might be taken just as seriously as a locus of epistemic injustice.

Under B1 falls cases where a communicant is misheard, misunderstood, or underappreciated. This, by and large, has been Christine's own fate over the six centuries since she wrote. The range of subcases here is important and heterogeneous enough to deserve a separate itemization:

- B1a. Misperceiving what is communicated (including not perceiving it at all).
- B1b. Misunderstanding what is communicated.
- B1c. Mistaking the significance of what is communicated.

Each of these might be applied to Christine's reception, or lack thereof, among later readers, but the phenomenon is perfectly familiar in other contexts. I might (B1a) quite literally not hear what you say at a meeting, because I am not listening to you at all, or I might mishear it because I am not giving you my full attention. At a higher cognitive level, I might (B1b) fail to understand what you are saying, perhaps because I am not taking it seriously enough, or because one or each of us lacks the conceptual resources to understand the point you are trying to make.¹¹ Finally, at a still higher level, I might (B1c) understand the basic content of what is being communicated but not grasp its significance, and so ignore it as irrelevant. Later in the discussion, we might imagine that someone

¹¹ Fricker speaks of *hermeneutic injustice* in cases where the speaker lacks the conceptual resources for understanding her own situation. More relevant to Christine's bad attitudes are cases where the hearer is blameworthy for lacking the necessary concepts. Gaile Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing," speaks here of *willful hermeneutical ignorance*.

else makes the same point and I suddenly see why it is so important, and hasten to endorse the idea. All of these cases are liable to precede the paradigm B3 case of testimonial injustice, because they have the potential to disrupt the communicative process before the question of credibility can arise.

At B2, the failure is not at the level of content but at the level of judging the speaker's intention. I might think that you are lying, bullshitting, bragging, flattering, in the grip of some passion, or otherwise motivated by something other than the intention to convey what is true. Christine, along these lines above, lists the charges against women as "treacherous, cunning, false."¹² Again, at least conceptually speaking, misjudgments at this level are prior to mistaken judgments of credibility, and might well explain such judgments, as when I do not believe you because I think you are motivated solely by partisan political animus.

Cases that fall into B4 are closely related to B2, but differ because here we are concerned not precisely with the intention behind a communicative act, but rather with the propriety of that act. Normative condemnation can range from the mild, as when a remark is judged to be uncivil or vulgar, to the extreme, as when Salmon Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was judged a blasphemy worthy of death. The judgment might focus either on the content of the communication, or on the communication itself, as when I question not what you are saying but the context in which you are saying it, or perhaps your manner of saying it.¹³ Particularly notable here, on the content side, is a claim's being judged to be unjustified, most familiarly expressed as a denial of knowledge. *They don't know what they're talking about*, I might dismissively say of the protestors I see marching down the street, making the point not just that I disagree with their viewpoint, but also that they are so poorly informed that they ought not to be expressing a view at all.¹⁴ So it is that Christine gets charged,

¹² Quill Kukla discusses cases of this form in "Performative Force," 450–53.

¹³ For epistemic injustices involving style of expression, see Eric Bayrún García, "Expression-Style Exclusion." On the broader pattern of double-standards regarding behavioral norms see Kate Manne, *Entitled*, esp. ch. 9.

¹⁴ For an empirical study of divergent responses to political protest, see Kahan et al., "They Saw a Protest."

above, with “reckless presumption.” The judgment that justification is lacking might come prior to the B3-level, and fuel that misjudgment of credibility. But it might also come afterwards, and perhaps characteristically does. First I reject what you are saying, and then I reject your very entitlement to say it.

Finally, someone might misjudge an act on an emotional level (B5), either by misjudging the emotion expressed by the speaker,¹⁵ or by himself becoming inappropriately emotional: angry, irritated, defensive, scared, jocular, and so on. This sort of response runs all through Christine’s correspondence, as her critics themselves adopt an overheated, angry rhetoric—“Oh, what very foolish pride!” (as above)—that accuses her of emotional impropriety. Here we are at the outer edge of our category, since it is not clear that anger at someone’s speech counts as precisely an epistemic injustice. One might instead, then, speak here of an affective injustice.¹⁶ But given the close relationship between the emotional and the normative, and the salience of emotional reactions to many central cases of epistemic injustice, it seems reasonable to include the category here.

It is worth making an inventory of these five levels, because injustice can arise at any one of them, and regularly does. Moreover, reflecting on these various misjudgments makes it evident just how interconnected they are liable to be. Very often, the sort of prejudice that fuels epistemic injustice acts at all five levels over time, creating a vicious feedback loop where a communicant’s message is not properly heard because it is judged to be disingenuous, false, irritating and unjustified—and continues to be misjudged in those ways because it is not properly heard.¹⁷

¹⁵ A classic study of this phenomenon is Naomi Scheman, “Anger and the Politics of Naming.” More recently, see Trip Glazer, “Epistemic Violence.”

¹⁶ Discussions of prejudice sometimes mark a similar distinction between cognitive and affective responses. See e.g. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, pp. 57–60.

¹⁷ This might ultimately result in the “runaway” collapse of credibility described by Karen Jones, “The Politics of Credibility,” pp. 159–60.

All of this points to the many potential forms of misjudgment at stage B. But in some ways it is even more important to consider the variety of cases at stage A that might trigger a misjudgment. Epistemic injustice essentially involves a failure of information communication. But it would be wrong to assume that all such cases involve an *actual* speech act, because one important class of cases concerns utterances that are never voiced, perhaps because the would-be speaker fears to speak, or because she despairs of her words' having their intended effect.¹⁸ It is not clear that Christine is a victim of this sort of injustice, since she gives every impression of saying exactly what she thinks. Yet she is of course the exception to a rule that, until modern times, has suppressed female voices in almost every place and time. So a full analysis of epistemic injustice needs to enlarge A to cover both actual and potential communicative acts. In addition, we need to register various in-between cases, where something is said—the speaker does indeed speak—but the content of the speech is not what it would be if the speaker felt free to speak her mind. In cases such as this, the locus of injustice may still partly come at stage B, with the hearer's misjudgment, inasmuch as in some such cases the hearer still ought to recognize that what is being said does not reflect the speaker's thoughts. In other cases, however, it might arguably be said that the hearer made no mistake at stage B: he might defend himself along familiar lines to the effect that "How was I supposed to know she was thinking that? Why didn't she say something?" In cases such as this, however, the primary locus of injustice may be found at stage A, in the explanation of why she did not say something, and the fault would consist in the failure to create an environment in which the would-be speaker felt able to say what she was thinking. This means in turn that stage C—the bad-making feature—needs itself to be expanded, not just to account for misjudgments at stage B, but also to account for why, in some environments, the failure of a communicative act at stage A itself

¹⁸ Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," speaks in this context of "testimonial smothering."

counts as an epistemic injustice.

In offering this steadily expanding account, I am moving against the grain of the usual philosophical analysis, away from precisely demarcated cases and toward an increasingly capacious schema. But to understand the range of Christine's concerns it is necessary to go farther still, because up to this point we have been assuming that the speech in question is one that conveys information. Yet, as modern speech-act theory has made familiar, there are many other things that we do with words. Someone might, for instance, be telling me a joke, while my prejudices stand in the way of thinking it funny. A more serious form of injustice arises when the communicative act expresses a volition. *The City of Ladies* considers cases of this sort at some length in the context of rape. Christine writes:

I am grieved and troubled by men who say that women want to be raped and that it doesn't displease them at all to be raped by men, even if they verbally protest. I have difficulty believing that such great villainy is agreeable to them. (II.44)¹⁹

These verbal protests (*escondissent de bouche*) might be understood as expressions of what they want, and so understood this case would remain within the B3 paradigm of testimonial injustice: the speaker makes an assertion about her wants, and the hearer refuses to credit it, perhaps because he does not believe that this is *really* what she wants. Or it could be understood as a B1 case: as the hearer's failure to understand the words being uttered, or a failure to understand their intended force. Rae Langton has described in this connection how women can be silenced when their words no longer have the power even to be understood as a refusal.²⁰ Far from being a distinctively

¹⁹ On the medieval representation of women's enjoying rape, see Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 76–80.

²⁰ Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts." The now-standard label for this phenomenon is "illocutionary silencing." For a detailed inventory of the ways in which refusals and similar speech acts can go wrong, see Mary Kate McGowan, "On Multiple Types of Silencing." Here I am setting aside the considerable controversy over how (or whether) to apply Austin's speech-act framework to this territory. For recent discussions of that issue see Kukla, "Performative Force," and Mason, *Feminist Philosophy* ch. 13.

modern phenomenon, this seems to be precisely what Christine describes.

Naturally, Christine proceeds to show, using historical examples, the absurdity of supposing that women want to be raped. But the discussion, as it progresses, suggests something more: that cases of this sort are not properly diagnosed in terms of epistemic injustice or any other form of silencing—as if the rapist somehow misjudges the communicative act. Instead, the rapist understands perfectly well what the woman wants, and chooses to proceed anyway, against her will. Here is how Tarquin, son of the king of Rome, raped Lucretia:

After he spent a long time trying to convince her to give in to his will, with grand promises, gifts and offerings, he saw that his entreaties were getting him nowhere, so he drew his sword and threatened to kill her if she made a sound and did not submit to his will. She replied that he might as well go ahead and kill her because she would rather die than consent. Tarquin, who saw clearly that all his efforts were fruitless, then had another heinous idea, telling her that he would publicly announce that he had found her with one of his servants. In short, the thought that people would believe his words so appalled her that she finally submitted to him. (*City of Ladies* II.44)

Epistemic injustice does play a role at the end of the story, in Lucretia's calculation that Tarquin would be believed rather than her. But Tarquin himself does not misjudge Lucretia's words: he understands her perfectly, but seeks to get what he wants. Tarquin's injustice is that, even though he knows what Lucretia wants, he does not care.

Although we still have a case with the ABC structure, we are now in the domain of what we might call a *volitional injustice*, where instead of not giving the appropriate credit to the speaker's beliefs, the hearer does not give the appropriate weight to her desires. Plainly, this is an extremely important kind of bad attitude, arising notoriously both in cases of sexual violence and in failures to secure medical consent. It is likely to be involved quite generally whenever someone does something

to others against their will.²¹ As before, it is important to let stage A range over both actual and potential communicative acts, since it will often be the case that an agent's wishes go unexpressed, or are not fully expressed. Accordingly, as before, the locus of injustice may be at stage B or at stage A, or both, depending on whether the fault lies with the misjudgment of the speech act itself, or with the broader environment that caused the speaker to be silent or to hedge her words.

We could continue further down the road of cataloging the various bad attitudes with regard to communicative acts, considering in turn a long list of speech acts such as commanding, promising, pleading, and so on. But we have seen enough to make it clear how, taking inspiration from Christine, we can broaden the initial schema for epistemic injustice into something much more comprehensive. Borrowing an expression from Quill Kukla²² (and putting it to broader use), let us speak of *discursive injustice* in any case where one or another kind of speech act fails to succeed for reasons connected to prejudice or some other bad-making feature. The initial ABC schema still serves to capture this broader class, but we can remind ourselves of how the range of cases has expanded by offering parenthetical glosses on each stage:

- A. Communicative Act (actual or potential)
- B. Evaluative Misjudgment (pertaining to the content or to the force of the speech act)
- + C. Bad-Making Feature (distorting stage A or B)

Discursive Injustice

²¹ The classic feminist treatment of sexual consent and male violence is Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*. For a wide-ranging discussion of how women's wills are misjudged and distorted in various contexts, see Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*. McGowan, after cataloging various forms of silencing, remarks that "A far more common explanation [for why refusals fail] is that the addressee privileges his or her own desires over those of the one who refuses" ("Multiple Types," p. 46).

²² Kukla, "Performative Force." On Kukla's narrower usage, a discursive injustice occurs when one one's social identity, in a certain context, distorts the kind of speech act they are able to perform, turning, e.g., commands into mere requests.

On this usage, the category of discursive injustice encompasses epistemic injustices, but also extends to misjudgments of non-assertoric speech acts. Even in the context of this broadened schema, the various subclasses under stage B retain their earlier described structure. Speech acts of all kinds may be misconstrued and misjudged in the various ways described above. The only adjustment required is that the paradigm case of (B3)—a misjudged degree of credence—has to be recast more generally, as

B3'. Misjudging the degree of *respect* owed to the content of the communication.

One form of disrespect is testimonial, a misjudgment about the appropriate degree of credence. But we can now see how that's potentially a misleading paradigm, because other sorts of speech acts are disrespected in other sorts of ways. In cases of volitional injustice, for instance, it is the speaker's desires that are not appropriately respected.

Obviously, as we move steadily up the taxonomic ladder we are shedding analytic precision with every step. What we gain is a comprehensive sense of the discursive injustices against women that Christine targets, and how they interrelate. But, even here, we are still only partway to a grasp of her broader critique of misogyny. For the greater part of the defamations that Christine describes are concerned not with communicative acts at all, but rather with the conduct of women more generally. Thus her chief complaint against Jean de Meun, as quoted above, is not specifically aimed at discursive injustice but at a more general libel against women's character and behavior: "he so excessively, impetuously, and quite untruthfully accuses, blames, and defames women regarding an assortment of very grave vices, and asserts that their behavior is full of every perversity" (*Debate*, p. 56). The *City of Ladies* runs through various forms of perverse behavior, and the various virtues that have been accordingly been denied of women—bravery, wisdom, justice, temperance, and more—and offers a long list of historical examples of women whose conduct and character has been exemplary. To account for this broader range of bad attitudes, we need to enlarge the earlier schema

so that it extends to actions of every sort, so as to encompass allegations of “every type of perversity.” Then we need to go still further to encompass the inner dispositions—the allegedly missing virtues and the “grave vices”—that supposedly give rise to the perverse behavior. Going further still, we need to consider attitudes about the underlying nature of women, and the culture in which they are raised, so as to capture the general libel against “the female moral character” (*City of Ladies* I.1). Taking all this into account, we need to expand A as follows:

A'. Human Agent (acts, character, nature, and culture)

When combined with (B) misjudgments about women based on (C) prejudice or some other sort of bad-making feature, we arrive at a comprehensive picture of the bad attitudes that consist in misogyny. So it is that an author like Jean de Meun can, in Christine’s words, “defame and condemn without exception an entire sex.”²³

At this point the relatively well-defined case of epistemic injustice has been expanded almost beyond recognition, in a way that perhaps limits its usefulness as an analytic category.²⁴ Even so, A' gives us a target of the proper breadth if we want to understand the phenomenon of misogyny as Christine understands it, without constraining the subject in a way that threatens to inflict an epistemic injustice on Christine herself.²⁵ On this analysis, the broad category of discursive injustice appears as just one special case from the larger family of bad attitudes toward human beings. Thus, to revert to an earlier example, a misjudgment about what the protestors are *saying* is of a kind with a misjudgment about the merits of what they are *doing*. An employer may, to take another example,

²³ *Debate*, p. 63, as quoted earlier. It is perhaps worth noting that, in principle, one can have a bad attitude toward oneself, and of course, notoriously, one can have a bad attitude toward one’s own group.

²⁴ But compare Ásta, “Categorical Injustice,” who proposes the comprehensive notion of a *categorical injustice*, which obtains whenever a person’s social category leaves them unable to perform an action that, institutionally, they are entitled to perform. For Ásta, as on my account, discursive injustice is just one special case of a broader phenomenon.

²⁵ On the risks of constraining what counts as epistemic injustice in a way that does further epistemic harm, see Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” and Gaile Pohlhaus, “Varieties of Epistemic Injustice,” 14–16.

not only fail to appreciate the value of an employee's workplace ideas but also fail to appreciate the value of her workplace actions, and may go on to reach invidious conclusions about her as an individual or about her sex as a whole. The sub-cases under B can likewise be expanded so that they apply not narrowly to communicative acts but broadly to a person's actions, character, nature, and culture. The only part of the analysis that does not carry over from the discursive case to the broader analysis is B3'—misjudged degrees of respect. This has no clear counterpart when we consider bad attitudes outside the discursive sphere, because B3', by definition, is a response to the intentional content of a communicative act. Inasmuch as such intentionality is effectively what demarcates the space of discursive injustice within the larger field of bad attitudes, we should not expect to find an analogue to B3' in non-discursive cases. And if the generalized category of bad attitudes—so obvious in Christine's work—has not ordinarily been noticed, this may be because an excessive theoretical focus on testimonial injustice has made epistemic injustice look like an isolated phenomenon. But as soon as one casts the epistemic case in broader terms, first as one among various discursive cases and then as just one among various kinds of human agency, it becomes clear how all these injustices fit together as a family.

2. Bad Attitudes as Individualistic and Psychologistic

What unifies the class of bad attitudes—saving it from being so capacious as to have no analytic value at all—is that the injustices described are all internal psychological states. The focus so far has been on those states that arise at stage B: misjudgments of someone's actions. It is now time to look at how these bad attitudes are grounded, at stage C, in some further bad-making feature. To follow Christine at this point requires looking for that feature within the psychology of the misjudging agent, as a motivating prejudice. Her account is accordingly individualistic and psychologistic twice over, inasmuch as the specific bad attitudes of stage B are grounded in a deeper,

more general level of bad attitudes at stage C.

This way of conceiving the oppression of women runs against a prominent view in much modern social theory, which holds that we should set aside psychological speculation about individual agents and focus instead on the actual conditions of oppression and the structural reasons behind it. The so-called structuralists admit, of course, that many people hold bad attitudes about others, and that individual acts of oppression are sometimes the result of sexist rage, racial animus, and so on. But they see these attitudes as a product of systemic features of society, and so a distraction both from the serious explanatory work of theory and the ameliorative political work of social reform. Engaging with Christine offers an opportunity to grapple with these issues.

In order to get clear on the rival explanatory categories, we might begin, with apologies to the history of logic, by describing a Square of Oppression:

I. Individual Bad Attitudes

II. Individual Actions

III. Ideologies

IV. Structures

Items in the left column stands to items in the right column as internal features of the mind to external features of the world. The top row stands to the bottom row as the individual versus the societal. Various accounts of oppression put different weight on the different corners of this square. Ethicists historically, taking for granted an individualistic methodology, have concentrated on the top row, and debated whether the locus of moral responsibility lies with (II) the action in the world or (I) the prior intention to perform the act. Much of modern thought, in contrast, has focused on the society-level categories along the bottom row. For the Marxist, a central focus is (III) ideology, a system of pernicious ideas that gets internalized, more or less fully and more or less explicitly, within individuals.²⁶ For the structuralist, the focus is on (IV), the ways in which institutions are organized

²⁶ For a very clear discussion of ideology in this sense see Tommie Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory.” For a recent contrasting approach to ideology, located less in psychology and more in the background culture,

so as to generate unjust actions at the individual level.

It would today be very hard to deny the important explanatory role played by ideology and structures. Within recent social theory it is a commonplace that oppression can arise from wholly structural causes, without any intent to discriminate, or from ideologies to which individuals are entirely oblivious. A criminal justice system, in principle, might be composed of agents who have decent intentions, and yet the system, for structural and ideological reasons, might consistently produce unjust outcomes. In a case like this, there can be injustice without bad attitudes.²⁷ Quite generally, according to many theorists, it is a mistake to focus either one's analytic or ameliorative projects at the level of the bad attitudes. In the influential words of sociologist Charles Tilly, prejudice "plays a secondary part in inequality's extent and form," because the dominant explanatory factors concern the ways in which a society is organized.²⁸ More recently, Kate Manne has rejected a "psychologistic" notion of misogyny, and proposed defining it externally, as "a systematic facet of social power relations and a predictable manifestation of the ideology that governs them."²⁹ This allows her to reject the very question of "how would we know if someone who behaves in a resentful, spiteful fashion is *really* resentful, deep down.... The answer is that what matters is *not* deep down, but right there on the surface" (60–61).

There is a tendency, in considering these issues, to push views toward one extreme or the

see Sally Haslanger, "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements."

²⁷ For this point in the context of epistemic injustice see Haslanger, "Social Structure" and Elizabeth Anderson, "Epistemic Justice." For the general question of what a social structure is, see, e.g., Haslanger, "What Is a (Social) Structural Explanation?" and Amie Thomasson, "Structural Explanations."

²⁸ Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, p. 15. Charlotte Witt similarly argues that we should direct our attention "away from a primary focus on individual psychologies, their gender schemas, deformed preferences, and unconscious biases, and toward the social world and its normative structure, which defines the conditions of agency for women" (*Metaphysics of Gender*, p. 129). See also Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, esp. ch. 2.

²⁹ *Down Girl*, p. 49. Parenthetical references to Manne in the main text are to page numbers of this work.

other, into either an exclusive first-row individualism or a strict second-row structuralism. In practice, positions are rarely so one-sided. Individualists recognize a role for structural theorizing, and structuralists grant that individual agents matter. As Manne, for instance, recently insists, “I do not disavow the notion of individual agents who deserve to be called misogynists.”³⁰ The focus of her critique is something she calls the naïve conception of misogyny, by which she means a deep-seated hatred of women in general.³¹ As we have seen in §1, Christine de Pizan holds a more nuanced account of the sort of bad attitudes at issue in misogyny. Even so, her thought is characteristically premodern in its nearly exclusive individualism, and is moreover heavily psychologistic, such that a society’s misogyny just is the collection of bad attitudes to be found in its individual agents. Can this sort of approach still be defended? Although we cannot expect from Christine herself a full defense against objections that would not be articulated until centuries later, there is, I think, something to be learned from her example. Here I will content myself with looking at the resources she has to respond to two kinds of anti-individualist objections, the first epistemic and the second causal.

When Manne urges that we reconceive of misogyny in non-psychologistic terms, as “a property of social environments” (66), she bases her case in part on epistemic considerations. Conceived of as a matter of individual attitudes, misogyny becomes “inscrutable” (19). It leaves us

³⁰ “*Down Girl* Précis,” p. 216. For other examples, see Jackson and Pettit, “In Defense of Explanatory Ecumenism,” against Jon Elster’s strict individualism, and Alex Madva, “A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism,” against recent forms of structuralism. It is instructive to see that, in subsequent exchanges, two of the main figures Madva takes as his target, Saray Ayala and Sally Haslanger, effectively agree with Madva on the need for both sorts of projects. Ann Cudd, in *Analyzing Oppression*, also argues for this sort of two-level methodology. Even Elizabeth Anderson, whose *Imperative of Integration* is a paragon of the structural approach, rejects a hardline version of that position, writing instead that “a comprehensive theory of group inequality must include an account of the psychological mechanisms—stereotyping and prejudice—underlying the intergroup interactions that reproduce inequality” (p. 12).

³¹ See *Down Girl*, pp. 43–49.

with the choice between two bad options, either “doing psychology to glean an agent’s intentions, or having to take their word for it” (60). The latter is obviously unacceptable, and the former is not much better, especially given our growing modern understanding of the hidden complexity of our biases. As is now familiar, discrimination often results from attitudes of which the agent may not be entirely aware. No matter one’s own race or gender, there is a widespread, implicit tendency to privilege men over women, and white people over people of color.³² Accordingly, when it comes to the bad attitudes described in §1, someone may be unaware that he gives too little credence to someone’s beliefs, or too little weight to someone’s desires. Such implicit attitudes may be unjust even if not explicitly endorsed by the agent, and they may be of immense importance in explaining oppression, particularly if their occurrence is as widespread as some recent scholarship has argued. Yet, though we can get a glimpse of the prevalence of these bad attitudes statistically, over time and across a population, this hardly establishes that they are at work in any particular case. One may suspect that a particular judgment is motivated by bias, but such charges will inevitably be contestable, and of course routinely are contested.

Christine makes this sort of contested third-person charge when she claims that Jean de Meun “impetuously and quite untruthfully ... defames women” (as above). Indeed, she extends the charge to nearly all of literature. As she is careful to acknowledge, this requires an inference: from the written words in question to a claim about the bad-making attitude behind the words. What she observes, to begin with, is the following pattern: “I could hardly find a book concerned with human affairs, regardless of its author, in which, before I finished it, I did not find some chapters or passages criticizing women” (*City of Ladies* I.1). She seeks to show that these criticisms are factually incorrect. But she also seeks to establish a moral claim: that there is a bad-making feature at work in

³² See, recently, Beeghly and Madva, *An Introduction to Implicit Bias*.

these criticisms of women—some kind of prejudice or animus—that makes these authors guilty of an injustice against women. This is the stage of the project that, for the structuralist, is liable to be an unprofitable waste of theoretical and political energy.

If we look at the debate over Jean de Meun, we can see how Christine proceeds. The first obstacle she faces is to establish that he actually means the things that he says. This is not as easy to establish as it might seem, not just because the *Romance of the Rose* is a work of fiction, but because the poem consists in various speeches by narrators who offer markedly different points of view. The misogynistic low-point of the poem comes in the speech of the Jealous Husband, who issues a long screed against his own wife and, by explicit extension, against all women:

All of you are, will be, and have been,
either in deed or in will, whores.
For, though one might eliminate the deed,
no one can constrain the will. (pp. 165–66)

The speech culminates in the threat, seemingly enacted, to give his wife a vicious beating. Is this Jean de Meun's own view? Pierre Col, in response to Christine, insists that it is not:

And it is quite mistaken to say that the author considers the defects that the Jealous Man describes, in acting out his character, to be [actually] in women. He certainly does not, but rather recites what a jealous man says every day about all women, in order to illustrate and to correct the very great irrationality and the disordered passion that are in a jealous man. (*Debate*, p. 144)

To this Christine responds that the poem's negative attitudes toward women run beyond this speech from the Jealous Man. There is also the priest, given the name Genius, who says "more evil and degrading things about women than anyone else in the book."³³ And indeed that is arguably the case.

³³ *Debate*, p. 175. Compare Christine's earlier remark: "As for the filth that is written there about women, many people say, in order to excuse him, that it is the Jealous Man who is speaking, claiming that he is in truth acting as did God who spoke through the mouth of Jeremiah.... Even if you wish to tell me that the Jealous Man speaks this way

One gets a flavor of Genius's speech from his remark that "there is so much vice in woman that no one can recount her perverse ways in rhyme or in verse" (*Romance*, p. 276). Generally, Christine concludes that "to some extent, in all the characters, he can scarcely refrain from insulting women" (*Debate*, p. 175).

Yet even granted that these attitudes represent Jean de Meun's own views, a second obstacle remains: to show that these are bad attitudes in the sense of §1. To settle this issue, Christine must assess the motivation behind his words, and test for the sort of bad-making features that turn simple factual errors into unjust attitudes. Accordingly, she wonders about Jean de Meun:

What's more, he spoke so superficially and spitefully about married women who deceive their husbands—a state about which he could not have known anything through experience, and therefore spoke in such a general manner. What good purpose could there be, and what good could follow? I don't see anything in it but an impediment to the good and the peace of marriage, making husbands who hear such babble and rubbish suspicious and disinclined to love their wives, if they lend credence to those words. (*Debate*, p. 58)

To start with, then, there is a puzzle about motivation: a gap between his overstated and seemingly hostile remarks and the evidential basis for those remarks, which Christine sees no evident way to account for. She continues:

If he had only reproached indecent women and advised that one flee *them*, it would have been a good and just teaching. But no! Instead, without exception, he accuses all women. But if the author, venturing so far beyond the bounds of reason, took it upon himself to accuse women or judge them untruthfully, the blame for this should be imputed not to them but rather to the one who tells a lie so far from the truth and so lacking in credibility, since the opposite is manifestly apparent. (*ibid.*)

The generality of his attack, based on nothing like adequate evidence, and indeed running quite

because of his passions, I cannot understand how such an attitude pertains to the function of Genius" (*Debate*, pp. 55–56).

contrary to the evidence, warrants a charge of irresponsibility and accordingly a charge of moral blame for something that has to be judged simply a “lie”: a deliberate falsehood told with the aim of deceiving others.

Assessing this debate would require a more detailed investigation into the *Romance of the Rose* in its historical context than is possible within the scope of this essay.³⁴ But the requisite rigors of such an investigation are notable, because they highlight the epistemically problematic character of Christine’s project. Even if she makes a compelling argument about Jean de Meun, that is of course just one case out of countlessly many. Moreover, even if her individualistic approach is tenable when we are dealing with a man like Jean de Meun, who expressed himself over 17,000 poetic lines, it is hard to see how this approach can be generalized.

Christine herself, in other places, is willing to reach more general conclusions. She ascribes the bad attitudes of male authors to gender bias, remarking that “if women had written the books, I know in truth that the facts (*fait*) would be different.”³⁵ Behind this lie various deeper explanations. Ignorant men oppose the education of girls, even though it should be obvious that education is of value to both girls and boys, because “they don’t like the idea of women knowing more than they do” (*City of Ladies* II.36). In literary circles, she argues, there are those who just mindlessly repeat the misogyny of earlier works, those who aim in good faith at moral instruction but foolishly offer sweeping generalizations, those who are jealous of women’s greater achievements, and those who are simply “impotent old men filled with desire” (*ibid.*, I.8). Here, plainly, we have fully entered into the sort of psychologistic approach that Manne criticizes. And just as Christine herself criticizes Jean de Meun for his sweeping generalizations, it seems fair to say that claims like hers will themselves

³⁴ An excellent tool is Christine McWebb’s *Debating the Roman de la Rose*, which provides texts and translations, as well as further historical context, for many documents from this period, with still further material available at <<https://uwaterloo.ca/margot/margot-projects/reading-roman-rose-text-and-image>>.

³⁵ *The God of Love’s Letter*, in *Debate* p. 43.

look increasingly suspicious the more widely she pitches them. The individualism of her anti-misogynistic project imposes its own constraint: that her argument be made in a case-by-case manner, rather than in terms of sweeping generalizations about the attitudes of male authors. Most often, if perhaps not always, this is a limitation to her method that she herself recognizes and honors.

Responding to this first epistemic objection against Christine's individualistic, psychologistic method requires a concession: that the project must be local and particularized in its scope. That leads naturally to the second main objection to be considered, that to focus on the level of individual psychology—particular bad attitudes—is to miss out on the fundamental causal forces at work in oppression. Rather than look primarily to the first-row items from the square of oppression, which necessarily target the attitudes of individuals and their particular manifestations in action, we ought to attend to the more general explanatory items on the second row: ideology and structure. This is the principal modern argument against an individualistic methodology in the social sciences. According to Tilly, for instance, the causes of oppression are structural rather than individual: “the crucial causal mechanisms behind categorical inequality, I argue, do not consist of individual mental events, states of consciousness, or self-sustaining actions of social systems.”³⁶ For Manne, similarly, the direction of causality runs from patriarchal structures down to individual attitudes:

On my view, misogyny need not and usually will not arise from specialized and, to my mind, fairly puzzling putative psychological attitudes, like the idea that women are seen as sexual objects, viewed as subhuman, or as having a hateful, detestable “essence.” Rather, it's generally about the enforcement and re-establishment of patriarchal order and the protests when it gets challenged.

Disgust flows from, and augments, these social processes. (69)

Bad attitudes, on this view, are a consequence rather than the source of our patriarchal social

³⁶ *Durable Inequality*, p. 24.

structure, and so it is the structure itself that should be the chief object of our theoretical and political efforts.

Christine herself is sometimes tempted to set aside the bad attitudes of individuals, as if they are not worthy of her sustained attention. Thus in the *City of Ladies*, after making her initial lament about the constant misogyny of male authors, she imagines a visit from three crowned and radiant women: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. One of the very first pieces of advice that Lady Reason gives her is to stop taking these matters so seriously: “Get a hold of yourself, regain your senses, and don’t worry about these trifles (*fanfelues*). For you should know that all the bad things said so generally about women harm those who speak and not women themselves” (*City of Ladies* I.2). And in the same breath with which she castigates Jean de Meun on the grounds that he can “scarcely refrain from insulting women,” she adds that “they, thank God, are not harmed in any way by this” (*Debate*, pp. 175–76)

On balance, however, this is not Christine’s considered view. After all, it is precisely such “trifles” that both the *City of Ladies* and the earlier correspondence over the *Roman de Rose* are devoted to attacking at length. Moreover, that correspondence offers a particularly vivid real-life example of the sorts of harms that the bad attitudes can cause:

Not long ago, I heard ... a man of authority, talk about a married man he knows, who has as much faith in the *Romance of the Rose* as he does in the Gospel. He is exceptionally jealous, and when his passion takes hold of him most violently he goes to fetch his book, reads it before his wife, and then he strikes her and beats her up, saying: “Foul woman, just like the one he speaks of, truly you are playing the same kind of trick on me. That good and wise man Master Jean de Meun knew well what women are capable of doing!” And at each word that he finds applicable he strikes a blow or two with his foot or the palm of his hand. So it seems to me that, whenever someone swears by that book, a poor wife such as she pays dearly for it. (*Debate*, p. 182)

Passages such as this, as well as the overall tenor of her response to such literature, suggest that we

should not put great weight on those places where she downplays the significance of individual misogynistic attitudes.

Reflection on Christine's work helps explain, moreover, exactly what is lost in the modern tendency to look past the individualistic toward the ideological and the structural. If our ambitions are a revolution that would change the world all at once, then what is needed is a grand explanatory theory, describing ideologies and structures, and providing a recipe for sweeping social change. But even the most idealistic champion of such a project should allow that individual people, in their ordinary lives, have to cope immediately with those who have power over their lives. The wife in Christine's story needs to understand her husband, and how his behavior might be changed. The same holds true for modern women in abusive relationships, or for young men of color who have to navigate the hostility of neighborhood police. One may of course aspire to ideological and structural explanations of police brutality, but the residents of Ferguson, Missouri—or Atlanta, Minneapolis, the banlieues of Paris, the Muslim quarters of Delhi, and so on—cannot afford to abstract away from the particularities of individual psychology. For those living in conditions of actual oppression, there will often be concrete individuals who are the immediate agents of that oppression, and their particular bad attitudes will have to be navigated on a daily basis.

Nothing in Christine's project diminishes the importance of ideology and structure. But her example highlights why social theorists should avoid suggesting the need to choose between the general and the particular. Even if it is natural for the theorist or reformer to pursue broad systemic features of society, the real-world conditions of oppression sometimes require a concern with the causal role of individuals. So it is that Christine finds herself engaged not with abstract questions of ideology, but with the concrete impact of a particular book. The lesson we can draw from her work is that all four corners of the square of oppression require attention.

3. Defending Against the Bad Attitudes

Having offered a schema for the bad attitudes, and defended their importance as objects of theoretical and practical concern, I turn finally to the problem of defending against them.

Continuing to follow Christine's example, we will see how the defense stage of her project is in fact the most problematic stage of all. If we were to conclude, ultimately, that social reform should aim at the structural rather than the individual level, it would not be because the bad attitudes are not important, but because there are epistemic reasons why responding to them directly may prove fruitless.

Christine describes her approach in a cover letter to a collection of the correspondence that she sent to the Queen of France in 1402. In the midst of various formulaic apologies for her limited intelligence and eloquence,³⁷ she announces "the diligence, desire, and will with which my scant power strives, through truthful defenses, to stand up against certain opinions that run counter to propriety and to the honor and praise of women." She declares herself to the Queen to be "moved by truth ... to debate their adversaries and accusers" through "rightful arguments" (*Debate*, p. 99).

The strategy is to combat the bad attitudes of her opponents with argument and reason, letting the truth itself shine forth. So, for instance, Christine pushes back against the defenders of Jean de Meun with a series of concrete, sensible questions:

Where are the countries or kingdoms that have been ravaged by women's great iniquities? ... Let us talk about what kind of great crimes one can accuse even the worst and the most deceitful of them of having committed. What are they capable of, and how do they deceive you? If these women ask you for the money out of your purse, they are not stealing from you or robbing you: don't give them anything if you don't want to! If you say that you are infatuated, then be infatuated no more! Do they

³⁷ On the conventionality of this language among medieval authors in general, see Christina Van Dyke, "Lewd, Feeble, and Frail."

pursue you at your home, beg you or take you by force? It would be good to know how they mislead you. (*Debate*, pp. 57–58)

As for the nearly universal charge that women are less intelligent than men, Christine argues, in a passage worth quoting at some length, that the explanation lies in differences in upbringing:

Lady Reason: If it were customary to send little girls to school and have them study the sciences as is customary for boys, they would learn and understand the subtleties of all the arts and sciences just as well as boys....

Christine: Lady, what are you saying? If you do not mind, please pause over this point. Certainly, men would never pause to accept this question as true if it were not explained more clearly, because they would say that it is commonly observed that men know more than women do.

Lady Reason: Do you know why women know less?

Christine: Not unless you tell me, lady.

Lady Reason: Without a doubt, that is because women do not get involved in as many different things. They stay at home and content themselves with running the household. There is nothing from which a rational creature learns more than the practice and experience of many different things.

Christine: My lady, if women have as much intelligence to comprehend and learn as men, why do they not learn more?

Lady Reason: Because, my daughter, it is not necessary to society that they get involved in things that are assigned to men to do. As I have told you before, it is enough for them to do the ordinary tasks that have been established. As for what is judged through experience—that from their being commonly observed to know less than men, it is judged that their intelligence is less—look at rural men in the countryside or living in the mountains. You will find in many places that they are so simple as to seem quite like animals. And yet there is no doubt whatsoever that, with respect to everything in body and intelligence, Nature has perfected them just as well as the wisest and most learned men living in cities and fine towns. (*City of Ladies* I.27)

All of this is meant to dispel the charge that women are less intelligent than men, but Christine's

reasoning is surprising. First, she seems to accept it as a plain fact, “commonly observed,” that “men know more than women do.” What she denies is that this “experience” warrants the further judgment that “their intelligence is less.” It is to block this inference from knowing less to being less intelligent that she offers the two alternative explanations developed here: first, that girls do not go to school; second, that even as adults they stay at home and do not involve themselves in the “practice and experience of many different things.” The case of rural men is also meant to block the illicit inference: such men are “so simple as to seem quite like animals,” she remarks, but then partly walks back this haughty elitism, adding that in terms of native intelligence they are equal to anyone. Second, Christine is not suggesting that society should be organized differently. To be sure, it is an implication of her view that women are equally capable of doing at least many of the things that men do. But “it is not necessary to society” that the current arrangement be changed. And Christine is even prepared to allow that in some ways it is better for men to do the work, as when she remarks elsewhere about legal work that “Although there are women to whom God gave very great intelligence, still, given the propriety (*bonnesteté*) to which they are inclined, it would hardly be suitable for them to go and boldly render judgment like men, since there are enough men who do that” (*City of Ladies* I.11). So Christine is no social reformer; equality of opportunity for women is not her goal. Her careful and persistent focus is on the unjust attitudes that label women as naturally inferior.³⁸

Coupled with these reasoned arguments in favor of women’s natural equality are the arguments we have examined already to show that the rival attitudes of men are based not on reason but on bias. Thus, as quoted earlier, whereas she is “moved by truth,” Jean de Meun merely “pretended to know” and “tells a lie so far from the truth.” Her own “diligence” and “rightful

³⁸ On Christine’s broader views about educating girls, see Susan Bell, “Christine de Pizan.” For a forceful indictment of Christine’s conservative tendencies, see Sheila Delany, “Mothers to Think Back Through.” For the historical context against which those tendencies would have seemed quite unexceptional, see Antony Black, *Political Thought*, p. 17: “the general view was that divisions between ranks, while not rigid, were indispensable.”

arguments” are contrasted with his “venturing so far beyond the bounds of reason.” The pattern, then, is to meet prejudice with reason, in much the way that W. E. B. DuBois would later characterize his own response to racism: “We must not forget that most Americans answer all queries regarding the Negro *a priori*, and that the least that human courtesy can do is to listen to evidence.”³⁹ Christine similarly seeks to identify the “a priori” stance of misogyny, grounded in antecedent prejudices about women, and to respond with “evidence” marshaled around careful reasoning.

As sound as Christine’s strategies were in principle, in practice they failed to succeed, as she herself acknowledged. Far from bringing an end to the “querelle des femmes,” Christine’s arguments were merely an opening salvo. To understand why she was not more successful, it is helpful to consider in general terms the sorts of epistemic relations that can arise between two individuals in dialogue over some proposition. In such a case there are three main variables in play: the credence each side gives to the proposition in question; the credence they each give to their own trustworthiness as epistemic agents in this particular context; and the credence each gives to the trustworthiness of the other. From these variables we can describe what I will call a *dialectic structure*, and we can then compare these structures along different dimensions, assessing for instance their rationality, their emotional impact, and their stability over time.

The most straightforward such case is when each side agrees on the proposition in question, they each hold themselves in high epistemic respect, and they each equally respect the other. This kind of dialectic structure is highly stable: the two parties are in agreement and it seems appropriate that they should be, since they each respect their own judgment and the other’s. Everything in such a situation coheres and, barring new information, the structure is likely to endure. Contrast this happy but boring situation with a much less stable dialectic structure, where the two interlocutors

³⁹ *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 70.

respect themselves and respect each other (rightly or wrongly supposing that each side is equally intelligent and well-informed), but disagree on the proposition in question. The rationality of these so-called “peer disagreements” has received extensive attention in recent years,⁴⁰ and it is easy to see why, because the structure seems to be both extremely common and yet extremely unstable. It is common, inasmuch as respectful disagreement appears pervasive across contested disciplines such as science, philosophy, religion, and politics. But it is unstable, because each party is likely to be nagged by worries along the lines of, “If we’re both so smart and well-informed, why do we disagree?” The worry may then lead to revision to any of the three variables in the structure: the two sides might move toward each other in their judgment about the proposition, or might come to think less of their own reliability, or to think less well of the other. Persisting in an attitude of respectful disagreement, rather than revising one’s credences in one of these three ways, is doubtful in its rationality, and thus unstable as a dialectic structure.

In Christine’s case, the bad attitudes in play guarantee that respectful disagreement will be fleeting at best, quickly transforming itself into some other dialectic structure. She describes herself as being in a situation of asymmetric disagreement, when she reads authors whom she respects, but who disrespect her as a woman. This sort of structure is extremely unstable, because it is very hard, both rationally and emotionally, to persist in respectfully disagreeing with the opinion of someone who despises you. In a situation with that structure, one of two things is likely to happen: either a pathetic collapse of self-respect on one side into acceptance of epistemic inferiority, or a hardening of views into mutual disrespect. Christine says that she herself experienced the pathetic collapse:

I could hardly find a book concerned with human affairs, regardless of its author, in which, before I finished it, I did not find some chapters or passages criticizing women. This reason alone, brief and short, brought me to conclude that even if my intelligence in its simplicity and ignorance was not able

⁴⁰ For a recent collection of studies, see Christensen and Lackey, *The Epistemology of Disagreement*.

to recognize the great defects in myself and other women alike, it must nevertheless be so. And so I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew.⁴¹

This sort of dialectic structure has a certain measure of stability, particularly in cases where the collapse happens to someone who is the target of the other side's bad attitudes. For it can seem to make perfect sense that someone disrespects you, if you yourself share in that disrespect. But for Christine this was at most a passing phase (if not entirely a rhetorical invention), and by the time of her correspondence over Jean de Meun the dominant dialectic structure is mutually disrespectful disagreement, where two parties disagree while respecting themselves and disrespecting each other.

This brief typology of dialectic structures, although by no means exhaustive, has identified five particularly salient ways in which the three relevant credences of the two parties interact:

- I. Respectful agreement
- II. Respectful disagreement (peer disagreement)
- III. Asymmetric disagreement
- IV. Asymmetric agreement (pathetic collapse)
- V. Disrespectful disagreement

Ideally, dialogue would move both parties upward, toward mutual respect (II) and ultimately respectful agreement (I). Christine depicts herself as starting out at III, hoping to win her interlocutors' respect and then assent. Instead, unfortunately, the dialectic progresses downward toward IV and ultimately V.

With respect to IV, the above-quoted pathetic-collapse passage comes right at the start of the *City of Ladies*, and points toward the motivation for the entire work: to provide women with the resources to fight off the damage of misogyny to their own intellectual and moral confidence.⁴² She

⁴¹ *City of Ladies* I.1. For discussion of this phenomenon, see Karen Jones, "The Politics of Intellectual Self-Trust."

⁴² That women are the intended audience of *City of Ladies* is particularly clear in its final chapter, III.19. Rosalind

reports that the method worked, and continues to work, in her own case:

And if you so discount my arguments on account of the meagerness of my faculties (for which you reproach me when you say “being a woman,” etc.), you should know that I do not in truth consider this a vile insult or any sort of reproach, because of the comfort arising from the noble memory and continued experience of a great abundance of noble women who have been and still are most worthy of praise and accustomed to every virtuous activity. (*Debate*, p. 97)

The strategy has a good chance of success with one side of IV: the side whose self-respect has pathetically collapsed into agreement over the proposition in question. Such an agent has a bad attitude with respect to herself. Granted that people can stably maintain such self-directed bad attitudes, still those attitudes are likely to be more open to countervailing evidence. Moreover, the case as described is one of collapse from a prior state where there were things that women “felt and knew” (as Christine puts it at the end of the pathetic-collapse passage). She can accordingly appeal to these occluded sentiments in making her case. This is not to say that, even here, persuasion will be easy, but at least the situation seems tractable.

Insofar as Christine is able to lift herself, and other women, out of their state of collapsed self-respect, she will have succeeded in shifting the dialectic structure from pathetic agreement back toward disagreement over the proposition in question. Here the question arises: will the shift be upward, back toward III, or downward, toward V? In other words, in the context of the dispute in question, will women reject their interlocutors’ misogyny in a respectful or disrespectful way? As it happens, the trajectory of Christine’s correspondence is entirely downward, and as a result her project reaches an impasse. For when she arrives at V, she finds herself in a dialectic structure that is every bit as stable as type I, since here again everything fits together: the two sides are in

Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women*, considers at length how, in this and other works, Christine takes aim at varying audiences and adjusts her argumentative strategy accordingly.

disagreement, but they have reason to expect as much, inasmuch as neither respects the reasoning of the other. Although such disrespectful disagreement has received much less attention in recent philosophy than has respectful disagreement between peers, it is in many ways just as interesting, not because it seems irrational but because, on the contrary, it seems all too rational, as well as emotionally satisfying, and hence all too stable. Indeed, as we have seen, each of the less stable types—II, III, IV—is prone to end up at V, making this the most fundamental kind of disagreement of all.

One can trace the devolution in dialectic structures quite plainly through the correspondence. Initially, she pursues the upward path, seeking to respectfully persuade the other side to abandon its disrespect, and move from III at least to II. Thus she stresses that her motives arise not from bias but from an honest pursuit of the truth:

But do not believe, dear sir (and may no other person be of this opinion), that I have stated or laid out the aforesaid responses on the basis of biased justifications, because I am a woman. For in truth my motivation stems from nothing other than simply advocating pure truth, since I know, with certain science, that this truth is contrary to the statements I have denied. And insofar as I am in fact a woman, I am better suited to attest to these matters than he who, not having had this experience, speaks instead through conjecture and in a haphazard manner. (*Debate*, p. 60)

Even here, Christine's criticisms of the other side—that they proceed “through conjecture and in a haphazard manner”—are already pointing downward, toward a stance of mutual disrespect. Still, she attempts to take the high road of appealing to reason, and indeed she describes her own epistemic position in the strongest possible terms, as having achieved the ideal of “certain science.” Yet such avowals of epistemic achievement are unlikely to have force against a disputant who brings bad attitudes to the table. Still worse, since she is herself a member of the group that is the target of these bad attitudes, there is a kind of doubling of the bias against her: her interlocutor is biased against the content of her claims, and biased against her epistemic credentials. Accordingly, Christine

finds herself in a kind of circular trap: her defense against misogyny might be effective, if it could get a fair hearing, but it cannot get a fair hearing until the misogyny has been defeated.

It does not take long for the positions of the two sides to harden into outright hostility. Thus Pierre Col writes, as quoted earlier: “Oh, what very foolish pride! Oh, what a speech issuing forth too rashly and thoughtlessly from the mouth of a woman, which condemns a man of such lofty intelligence” (*Debate*, p. 144). Christine labels this a “vile insult” and replies in kind: “I could certainly reply to you insultingly, but I do not wish to do so—notwithstanding the fact that you torment me with ugly reproaches, having little justification and no reason to do so. O obscured intelligence! O perverted knowledge, blinded by your own will” (*Debate*, p. 175). Here the disrespect of one party to the dispute fuels disrespect on the other side, leading to a situation where neither respects the other sufficiently to make productive dialogue possible. The toxic stability of disrespectful disagreement is now on full display.

At the start of Christine’s final letter, she offers a sophisticated reflection on the difficulty of the epistemic situation:

Because human intelligence cannot be elevated to the height of clear knowledge that comprehends the entire truth of hidden things, owing to the gross, earthly obscurity that encumbers it and removes true clarity, it is appropriate to rely on opinion rather than certain science to make a determination about the things that are imagined more plausible (*voirsemblables*). It is for this reason that, often times, various questions arise from opposing opinions, even among those who are most subtle. Each one strives through lively argument to demonstrate that his opinion is true. That this is manifest through experience is clear, as we can see through ourselves in the present situation. (*Debate*, p. 159)

Giving up on her earlier claim to have “certain science,” Christine acknowledges that, in the present case, neither side has anything more than uncertain opinion, which each strives to make persuasive using “lively argument.” Hence the debate endures, because such modes of discourse do not compel assent in the way a genuinely self-evident demonstration would. In effect, this is a concession, and it

might have paved the way toward each party's adopting less extreme credences, and so attenuating their disagreement. But this is not what Christine expects to happen and it is not the stance that she herself takes. Instead, startlingly, she immediately goes on to admit that, under these circumstances, her mind is not open to persuasion:

This is why I say, in responding to you, subtle cleric—you whose lively perception and linguistic skill in demonstrating the opinions you have formed are not diminished by any ignorance—that I want to assure you that however well your arguments may be crafted to lead to your intended goal, contrary to my own opinion, these arguments, in spite of their pleasing eloquence, do not in the slightest alter my convictions or turn my perception against what I have previously written on the subject.

On its face, this might look objectionably close-minded. But Christine is simply registering what by now in their exchange of letters is obvious: that her opponents are motivated by bias rather than truth. Why then should she take their arguments seriously? And inasmuch as her opponents will reason in an analogous fashion—judging her to be both biased in her conclusions and intellectually inferior in her reasoning—the result is that neither side is open to persuasion. This is something that Christine explicitly recognizes near the end of this final letter: “I don't know why we are debating these questions at such length, for I believe that neither you nor I have any desire to alter our opinions: you say he is good; I say he is bad” (*Debate*, p. 188). By this point, one might think that Christine is entitled to her close-mindedness, and that it might even be an epistemic virtue, essential to her intellectual flourishing.⁴³ Be that as it may, the symmetry of their positions ensures that there is no escape from this type-V disagreement. Would things have turned out differently if Christine

⁴³ Here I am indebted to Heather Battaly, “Can Closed-Mindedness Be an Intellectual Virtue?” In her view close-mindedness can be a virtue, at least in “epistemically hostile environments.” For related discussions see Fantl, *The Limitations of the Open Mind*, and Levy and Alfano, “Knowledge from Vice.” Christine provides an excellent historical case-study of this phenomenon. Although we have seen her implement this strategy just in one localized case, one might speculate that her intellectual flourishing over time required a settled disposition to disregard the prevailing sexism of her era.

had more resolutely attempted to retain the one-sided respect that marks a type-III disagreement? Could the dialectic have moved upward, toward II or I? For the historian, such questions are moot. But inasmuch as Christine's struggles endure today, it is worth thinking about other options.

Looking ahead to the *City of Ladies*, one does find other strategies for shifting the debate. One of these is to appeal to male allies, or at least to their authority. In particular, her accounts of distinguished women draw heavily on Boccaccio, the most distinguished writer of her day, and she remarks: "let no one say that I say these things to you out of bias (*faueur*): they are Boccaccio's own words, the truth of which is well known and manifest" (*City of Ladies* I.37). Unfortunately, although Boccaccio devoted an entire treatise to distinguished women, its anti-misogynistic potential is undermined by his own hostility toward women. Thus he remarks in the preface:

If men should be praised whenever they perform great deeds with the strength they have been granted, how much more should women be extolled—almost all of whom are endowed by nature with soft, frail bodies and sluggish intelligence— when they assume a manly spirit and, with remarkable intelligence and notable valor, dare to accomplish deeds that would be extremely difficult even for men?⁴⁴

Boccaccio himself deserves a place on Christine's list of authors whose works defame women, even in the course of praising some of them. Then, as now, reliable allies are hard to find.

So it is that Christine needed to write her own book, *The City of Ladies*, in which she collects, at tremendous length, specific examples of women, historical and contemporary, who exhibit the sort of virtue and intelligence that is commonly denied of them. But the question then arises, do all these examples really do any good? Perhaps not, if one thinks only of Christine's bitter opponents.

⁴⁴ *Famous Women*, p. 9. On Christine's use of Boccaccio, see Patricia Phillippy, "Establishing Authority." For an inventory of Boccaccio's many denigrating statements about women see Virginia Brown's introduction to *Famous Women*, pp. xviii–xix.

But that's not the only way, or even the best way, to assess the dialectical efficacy of an argument. There's also the undecided audience to a debate, and they may be persuaded even if one's opponent will never concede. Accordingly, even an entrenched type-V disagreement may be fruitful if one side is better positioned to win over the audience. In time, across society at large, the disagreement may be resolved.⁴⁵ Indeed, when it comes to misogyny, that finally *has* begun to happen, which is precisely why Christine now seems important in ways she previously did not. So we might ask whether, judged by this standard, her arguments did, or do, carry any force. Here I'm not so optimistic. As sympathetic a reader as one might hope for, Simone de Beauvoir, perhaps with the *City of Ladies* in mind, remarks that "nothing is more boring than books retracing the lives of famous women: they are very pale figures next to those of the great men; and most are immersed in the shadows of some male hero" (*The Second Sex*, p. 313). Paleness aside, part of the problem with Christine's examples is that they seek to draw a general conclusion from specific cases. To be sure, when confronted with the most extreme forms of misogyny, it takes as a matter of logic only a single counterexample to refute the view. But real-world misogynists are more elusive. They subscribe to generic calumnies against women, making it unclear just how many particular instances would be required to prove or disprove the thesis. Boccaccio himself illustrates the difficulty. For even in the face of his own examples, he retains the standard bad attitude regarding women, with their "frail bodies and sluggish minds by nature." It is as if his "famous women" are unnatural changelings, not women at all. Here, as in other cases, bias displays a toxic resistance to argument.

In the face of such an impasse, there is a terrible temptation, to which Christine sometimes yields, to indulge in what we might call *evidential inflation*. If a measured recital of the facts is insufficient to move one's opponent, then perhaps an inflated version of those facts will do the job?

⁴⁵ I owe this line of thought to an anonymous referee.

So it is that Christine's long inventory of virtuous and brilliant ladies often stretches even an open-minded reader's credulity to the breaking point, uncritically blending history into mythology. The history of Sappho sits next to stories about the Amazons, and Christian martyrs next to Isis and Minerva, who is said to have founded the arts of both warfare and of spinning wool. The overall treatment, according to another sympathetic modern reader, is "hyperbolic and naïve."⁴⁶ But I suspect there is nothing at all naïve about the hyperbole, inasmuch as Christine knows what she is doing. Her project is not a careful scholarly history, but a reputational defense against bad attitudes, and to that end she is willing to push her argument as far as necessary.

Where disrespectful disagreement is entrenched, evidential inflation often will follow. After all, when one side does not trust the other to respond objectively to the evidence, the obvious response is to exaggerate that evidence in the hope of making some kind of impact. Once this occurs, a likely result will be a corresponding inflation in the virulence of the claims made against one's opponent, and in the strength of one's credence in those claims. It is as if, by inflating the evidence in an attempt to persuade our opponent—or at least our audience—we end up persuading ourselves to redouble our convictions. Thus Marie de Gournay, looking back from the seventeenth century, begins her treatise *On the Equality of Men and Women* with these memorable words:

Most of those who defend the cause of women against the arrogant superiority that men claim for themselves adopt the completely opposite view by claiming superiority for women. For my part,

⁴⁶ Beatrice Gottlieb, "The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century," p. 291. It is instructive to compare Christine's reports with Boccaccio's. Where Christine hesitates not at all to ascribe the most astonishing of achievements to women—e.g., Minerva is credited with the invention of olive oil, spinning wool, the art of warfare, and numbers themselves (I.34)—Boccaccio more carefully remarks that these things are "claimed" of her, and he carefully adds at the end of his discussion that "some authoritative sources" suspect that these inventions belonged not to a single Minerva but to many, and he adds "I shall gladly agree with them in order to increase the number of famous women" (ch. 6). Christine, whose account of Minerva follows Boccaccio's closely, entirely omits this paragraph.

since I avoid all extremes, I am content to make women equal to men.⁴⁷

De Gournay thus seeks to escape the inflationary pressures that arise from disrespectful disagreement. We might again think of DuBois's formula. In the face of the *a priori* certainties of the racist or sexist, the noble path forward is to trust in "human courtesy... to listen to evidence." But in cases where the two sides are locked in mutually disrespectful disagreement, it is sadly unlikely that courtesy will carry the day. In such cases, it is all too tempting to respond to bad attitudes with one's own *a priori* certainties in the other direction. This is liable to result in a categorical embrace of the oppressed against their oppressors. From this perspective, accusations of sexual assault, or police brutality, are always to be believed. The other side is always acting in bad faith. Anything less than unqualified endorsement of the cause looks like a betrayal.

If evidential inflation worked as a strategy in persuading open-minded listeners, then we might embrace it for its consequences, even at some cost to the truth in the short-term. In reality, however, evidential inflation is likely not just to fail but even to be counterproductive. For since the disrespect is mutual, the other side will be equally tempted by inflation, making them even less likely to accept the other side's arguments. And inasmuch as both sides—as well as the audience in between—are capable of recognizing hyperbole when they see it, these mutual exaggerations, far from being persuasive, are likely to increase the mutual disrespect that each side feels for the other, while causing the audience to tune out entirely. Hence the more impassioned and hostile our disputes are, the more likely they are to become increasingly polarized and unproductive over time. This is what makes the stability of disrespectful disagreement so particularly toxic.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Clarke, *Equality of the Sexes*, p. 54.

⁴⁸ Psychologists and political scientists have become increasingly interested, over the last decade, in the phenomenon of polarization and its resistance to evidence. See, e.g., the much discussed study of Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail." Recent work in philosophy is catching up with this literature. See, e.g., Daniel Singer et al., "Rational Social and Political Polarization," which assesses the conditions under which polarization is and is not

Here, ultimately, lies the real problem with Christine's individualistic, psychologistic method. We can make progress, as we have seen, in analyzing the bad attitudes, and we can agree that they play a substantial and invidious role in oppression. But it remains ultimately unclear what the best path is toward curing these attitudes. Evidential inflation seems unlikely to help, but it is not clear that scrupulously adhering to the evidence does any better. Attempting to treat the other side with a respect that goes unreciprocated is both emotionally difficult and of doubtful utility. In short, disrespectful disagreement turns out to be so toxically stable as a dialectic structure as to defy strategies for its dissolution.

From this it does not follow that nothing helps, or that the obstacles to a total cure should cause us to despair of actions that promise to make things somewhat better.⁴⁹ Christine herself was far from despairing. Posing the question of why, in the whole history of literature, she is the first to challenge its entrenched misogyny, she responds that "all things come to a good end, and at a suitable time, over the long centuries" (*City of Ladies* II.53). Yet this anticipation of a happy ending suggests a confidence that succeeding years—indeed, succeeding centuries—have not borne out. Christine herself spent her last decade secluded in a convent with her only surviving child, despondent about the world she lived in. The last we hear from her, in 1429, reveals renewed optimism, in a poem celebrating the greatest of all medieval heroines, Joan of Arc. Christine seems not to have lived to see Joan's betrayal and execution in 1431.⁵⁰

irrational.

⁴⁹ For an encouraging recent example see Duivin et al., "Black Lives Matter Protests Shift Public Discourse."

⁵⁰ Two excellent referee reports have made this paper much better. Thanks also for their help to Yuval Avnur, Christophe Grellard, Adam Hosein, Elinor Mason, Elizabeth Robertson, Julia Staffel, an audience at Glasgow University, and the inspiring online enthusiasm of the participants in the 2020 Colorado Summer Seminar. This article was written during a 2019–2020 fellowship at the Paris Institute for Advanced Study, with the financial support of the French State's program "Investissements d'avenir."

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