



Social Epistemology

A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tsep20

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To cite this article: Annalisa Coliva (23 Sep 2024): Hysteria, Hermeneutical Injustice and Conceptual Engineering, Social Epistemology, DOI: [10.1080/02691728.2024.2400089](https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2024.2400089)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2024.2400089>



Published online: 23 Sep 2024.



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Hysteria, Hermeneutical Injustice and Conceptual Engineering

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we look at what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls “hermeneutical injustice” as it arises in the medical context. By drawing on the history of hysteria, I argue that the concept of hysteria has been held in place by power structures affected by negative prejudice against women. In this sense, the concept of hysteria fits the central conditions of the concept of hermeneutical injustice as characterized by Fricker. Yet, reflection on the case of hysteria also signals the need for widening the understanding of hermeneutical injustice. I thus propose to ameliorate the concept of hermeneutical injustice and show how, once thus ameliorated, it can be used as a powerful tool to advocate for the amelioration of the concept of woman. I then return to the concept of hysteria and argue that it is still in use in everyday contexts, where it embodies identity prejudice against women and constitutes a particularly pernicious form of put-down that perpetrates various forms of epistemic injustice. I conclude that also in that kind of context the concept of hysteria should be abandoned. Like with other loaded concepts, the only admissible uses of that concept would then be in contexts of reclaiming or re-appropriation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 August 2024
Accepted 30 August 2024

KEYWORDS

hysteria; hermeneutical
injustice; conceptual
engineering

1. Introduction

In this paper, we look at what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls ‘hermeneutical injustice’ as it arises in the medical context. By drawing on the history of hysteria (§1), I argue that the very concept HYSTERIA (small caps are used to mention concepts as opposed to words) – particularly its use for diagnostic purposes – has been held in place by power structures affected by negative prejudice against women. In this sense, HYSTERIA fits the central conditions of the concept HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE as characterized by Fricker. Yet, reflection on the case of HYSTERIA also signals the need for widening the understanding of this concept. I thus engage in conceptual engineering to ameliorate the very concept HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE and show how, once thus ameliorated, it can be used as a powerful tool to advocate for the amelioration of fraught concepts, such as WOMAN (§2–3). I then return to HYSTERIA (§4) to argue that while in clinical contexts its use has been fixed, for that concept is no longer in use for diagnostic purposes, HYSTERIA and the corresponding terms and its cognates remain in use in colloquial contexts. I argue that, in those contexts, the use of that concept and the corresponding terms still embodies identity prejudice against women and constitutes a particularly pernicious form of put-down that perpetrates various forms of epistemic injustice. I conclude that also in that kind of context HYSTERIA cannot be ameliorated and should in fact be abandoned. Like with other loaded concepts, the only admissible uses of HYSTERIA would then be in contexts of reclaiming or re-appropriation.

2. Hysteria. A Brief History of a Complex Concept

As is well known, 'hysteria' comes from the Greek word for 'womb'. Since only women have a uterus, hysteria has long been thought to be a woman's disease (or a female disease).¹ The long history of hysteria and the use of the corresponding concept (HYSTERIA) also for diagnostic purposes are intimately related to the role women have been thought to have in a society. In Ancient Egypt and Greece, it was thought that the womb was a wandering organ that could move within the female body and, by moving around, give rise to some of the (eventually almost endless) symptoms the presence of which would be used to classify a patient with what became known as hysteria.² Indeed, the use of 'hysteria' for diagnostic purposes is already documented in Hippocrates. Among the symptoms comprised under it, loss of breath was thought to be caused by the movements of the womb. Excess or lack of libido were also typical symptoms, but also anxiety attacks, limb paralysis and lethargy. While in Rome, the uterus was no longer thought to be a moving organ, the symptoms that went into the diagnosis of hysteria were seen as connected to anomalies in its functioning, ultimately due to a lack of and longing for sexual intercourse and childbearing.

Various remedies were proposed, like inhaling vapors emanated by different substances, which were thought to bring the uterus back to its original position by exercising an influence on the liquids present in the womb. Indeed, this practice remained in existence throughout the centuries, most notably during the Victorian age, when most women carried with them a bottle of smelling salts in case their emotions had aroused. Another recommended cure was to have regular sexual intercourse within wedlock (preferably) and multiple childbearing. Yet, there was also a dissenting voice in Alexandria and Rome – that is, Soranus (first-second century CE) – who recommended sexual abstinence instead. Be that as it may, these remedies were recommended in the interest of restoring what was conceived of as the normal and natural function of the uterus, which coincided with the prevalent thoughts about the proper role of women in society – that is, as wives and mothers.

Widows and single women who presented the relevant symptoms were treated with salts but also externally manipulated by doctors and midwives, to allow the liquids in their wombs to be expelled. Although the idea that vibrators were technologically developed to perform this function to cure more patients in a more expedient manner, as maintained by Rachel Maines (1999), has been contested,³ the practice of manipulating women's genitalia to 'cure' them from the symptoms of hysteria was kept in place for centuries. For, in general, it was thought that the main cause of hysteria was the lack of sexual intercourse and childbearing, and the cure consisted of fostering both (or their surrogates).

In the Middle Ages, hysteria took on a religious overtone in the context of marked misogyny. As is well-known, Aquinas famously asserted in the *Summa Theologica* that 'the woman is a failed man', thus echoing Aristotle's views as presented in his *Politics*. Women were thought to be both physically and morally inferior to men also in consequence of the original sin. The symptoms of hysteria, the causes of which were unknown and incomprehensible to doctors, were considered to be provoked by the influence of the devil, and women exhibiting them were often thought to be witches who, for this reason, were prosecuted and often killed. Witchcraft, moreover, was considered to be a way for women to exert control, through the devil's help, over people around them to foster their own hidden goals. That is, witchcraft was thought to be a form of manipulation to obtain power over other people through mysterious and maleficent means.

While the connection between hysteria and witchcraft disappeared, if only during the Enlightenment, the idea of hysteria as an organic disease due to the malfunctioning of the uterus remained for centuries. In physicians influenced by Rousseau, for instance, it was connected with the idea that urban civilization had altered the natural function of women as wives and child bearers and that could only be cured by going back to a state of nature.

It is mainly with Jean-Martin Charcot in the nineteenth century CE and the rise of neurophysiology that hysteria stopped being considered a disease caused by the malfunctioning of the uterus. For Charcot, it was caused by a lesion in the brain that could occur in both men and women. However,

his case studies at the Hôpital de Salpêtrière in Paris and his famous photographs of hysterical women contributed to keeping in place the idea that hysteria was at least mainly a woman's disease.

Sigmund Freud was greatly influenced by Charcot and developed psychoanalysis by studying hysteria. He thought that hysteria could be present both in men (he self-diagnosed it at some point in his life) and women. However, for Freud hysteria was caused by the Oedipus complex and by a failure to develop a normal personality, leading to a rejection of normal adult relationships and childbearing. What was previously thought to be the cause of hysteria – the lack of and therefore longing for sexual intercourse and childbearing – was now somewhat taken to be a consequence of hysteria. Yet, its cause was considered to be a failure to develop a mature personality by the standards of what later critics would consider patriarchal values. Furthermore, Freud indicated manipulation of the environment as the 'secondary advantage' – a side benefit – of hysteria, particularly important to women who were incapable of fulfilling their goals directly. Thus, in psychoanalysis, a legacy of the idea of 'possessed' women that was developed in the Middle Ages was still present.

Studies conducted on soldiers during the two World Wars (reported in Tasca et al. 2018) showed a growth in hysterical symptoms, such as paralysis, particularly in men confronted with the moral dilemma of either becoming assassins or else being exposed as cowards. It was also discovered that soldiers belonging to different armies reacted differently. The number of cases of hysteria was higher in the Indian army than in the British one, while the opposite was the case for anxiety. Bar the problems with HYSTERIA as a diagnostic category, the data also seemed to show that there was an inverse proportion between hysteria and anxiety due to social contextual factors.

It was only in 1980 with DSM-III that HYSTERIA disappeared as a diagnostic category, mainly because too many and too disparate symptoms were comprised under it (about 75), making it in fact useless as a diagnostic tool. Furthermore, its connection with the womb had been severed, the symptoms were now seen as not gender-specific and, whatever their causes, they were no longer thought to depend on malfunctioning of the womb.

Yet, the term 'hysteria' remains in our language even today, and it still has gender connotations (on which I will return in §4). For some feminists, moreover, the term should be reclaimed to foster a discourse that, like the symptoms of women supposedly affected by hysteria, denounces the effects of patriarchal values.⁴

While this reclaiming of the term 'hysteria' has been contested, most notably by Elaine Showalter, who, partially quoting Lacan, writes:

'Where have they gone, the hysterics of yesteryear . . . those amazing women, the Anna O.s, the Emmy von N.s? What is there now to take the place of the hysterical symptoms of long ago?'. We might answer that the despised hysterics of yesteryear have been replaced by the feminist radicals of today.⁵

It is obvious that the history of the concept of hysteria is intimately related to the social imagery of women as inferior to men and as having specific natural functions whose fulfillment was necessary (and sufficient) for their happiness and proper flourishing.

3. Hysteria and Hermeneutical Injustice

HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE, a concept that has recently entered philosophers' conceptual toolkit thanks to Miranda Fricker's (2007), occurs when there is a gap in the collective hermeneutical – that is, conceptual – resources, held in place by identity prejudice against the marginalized group and by the fact that the latter cannot participate in those practices in which (new) meanings are created and shared. A leading example in Fricker's work is SEXUAL HARASSMENT. Before its introduction in our shared conceptual resources, people who suffered that form of discriminatory behavior did not have the hermeneutical resources to make sense (to themselves and others) of their negative experience by understanding it as the kind of wrong it is. Furthermore, once coined within the marginalized community, this concept had to be made available to the public. Yet its insertion encountered

resistance due to prejudices against women and to power structures inherent in the society that benefited from the fact that that wrong would go un-noticed. When hermeneutical injustice occurs, people are harmed in their capacity as knowers and prevented from participating in the process of creation of concepts and words that can make their experiences meaningful. Being unable to make sense of their experience, they may also suffer a loss of personal understanding. Or else, being unable to see their experiences for the kinds of wrong they are, they suffer deep social marginalization.

As the previous short history of hysteria should have made clear, HYSTERIA and particularly its use for diagnostic purposes have been held in place by power structures affected by negative prejudice against women.⁶ To repeat, these prejudices include their being seen as inferior to men and having to fulfill their 'natural' role as wives and mothers to be considered healthy both physically and emotionally.

However, what this shows is also that hermeneutical injustice may not be due solely to a *gap* in or a *lack* of conceptual resources in a community due to power structures that do not allow marginalized groups to create meanings. Rather, it may also arise when power structures hold in place concepts, which are themselves imbued with negative prejudice against marginalized groups. In their turn, these concepts prevent members of marginalized groups and society at large from making sense of their (own) experiences.

The case of HYSTERIA is thus of paramount interest. While fitting the central conditions for hermeneutical injustice – that is, obscuring from collective understanding some significant area of one's social experience, due to structural identity prejudice – it also signals the need for widening the understanding of this notion to include cases in which it is the very *presence* of a concept that prevents marginalized groups from properly making sense of their condition. Arguably, at least in many cases diagnosed as instances of HYSTERIA women were giving expression to their difficulty in fulfilling the roles traditionally assigned to them in the society, either by developing anxiety symptoms or by refusing to have sex and falling in a state of lethargy or by longing for sexual intercourse that could not be had outside of wedlock.

What the history of hysteria teaches us is thus not only of interest *per se* or as a further instance of hermeneutical injustice. Rather, it is of utmost *philosophical* significance because, in the vein of conceptual engineering, it shows us that a category first developed in philosophy to make sense of certain phenomena must itself be revised to become a more empirically adequate conceptual tool.

More precisely, it invites us to redefine the concept of hermeneutical injustice as follows:

HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE =_{df} the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources either because of a lack of conceptual resources or because of the presence of faulty conceptual resources that depend on, and contribute to reinforce, the identity prejudice against marginalized groups.

Understood in this broader way, the notion of hermeneutical injustice can then be used in all kinds of cases in which the very presence of a concept in our collective resources has prevented marginalized people from having significant areas of their social experience understood. WITCH may be a case in point, POSSESSED, in the sense of being possessed by the devil, is another one, and surely, there are more. Indeed, slurs, epithets and pejoratives may often fit the definition of HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE just provided. That is, they too would be cases of faulty or inadequate concepts, which depend on and contribute to reinforcing identity prejudice against marginalized groups.⁷

4. Hysteria, Hermeneutical Injustice and Conceptual Engineering

As just hinted at, what I have proposed would nowadays be considered a form of conceptual engineering applied to the concept of HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE. According to David Chalmers (2020), HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE is a key example, in philosophy, of *de novo* engineering – that is, roughly, of the invention of a new concept. Conceptual engineering, however, can also take the form of a 're-

engineering', which consists in fixing or replacing an already existing concept. Herman Cappelen (2018) in his recent *Fixing Language: An Essay in Conceptual Engineering* mostly focuses on this latter case of conceptual engineering.

Now, I have presented reasons to think that this highly theoretical concept, as first characterized by Fricker, is somewhat defective, insofar as it does leave out phenomena that are rightly considered forms of epistemic injustice, perpetrated and kept in place due to identity prejudice and effected by using a specific concept.

The amelioration proposed, therefore, would give us a better conceptual tool to make sense of important aspects of human experience. At once, the concept of HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE would become a better descriptive and a better moral tool, since, once improved upon, it would allow us to uncover forms of epistemic injustice that would otherwise go unnoticed.

The former feature of this particular ameliorative intervention – that is, becoming a better descriptive tool – is not uncommon in highly theoretical domains. Science proceeds and progresses not only by assembling new data and by doing crucial experiments but also by abandoning useless concepts, by sometimes replacing them with new ones as well as by changing and revising already existing ones. A few examples will suffice to make the point: ETHER (abandoned), PHLOGISTON (abandoned), PHILOSOPHER'S STONE (abandoned), ATOM (revised from Democritus to present-day chemistry), MASS (revised from Newtonian to relativity physics), SUBJECT-PREDICATE STRUCTURE (in logic) substituted with ARGUMENT-FUNCTION, etc. Philosophy too can be seen in this light as a discipline engaged in forms of conceptual engineering. Starting out with key concepts in our everyday conceptual repertoire – like BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH, JUSTIFICATION, REASON, just to take some examples in stock in epistemology – it often proposes definitions for individuating them. Or at least it offers criteria for individuating them, in the sense in which, for instance, Wittgenstein was interested in criteria for family resemblance concepts. That is, criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions within a Wittgensteinian framework. They just serve as 'hooks' to group under the same concept items or phenomena that resemble one another only in some and varying respects, like members of the same family.

Both in science and philosophy empirical or, as we might call it, metaphysical adequacy is key, as well as logical adequacy. That is, defective and inconsistent concepts are typically abandoned, at least for descriptive purposes. Let me explain: if, on the one hand, after numerous investigations and experiments, it is found that nothing corresponds to PHLOGISTON, then the concept is abandoned. If, on the other hand, a given definition of KNOWLEDGE gives the wrong verdicts – or, as we sometimes say, makes the wrong predictions – concerning several actual and counterfactual cases, then it is abandoned or improved.

Chalmers (2020, 2-6) lists further examples of conceptual engineering in the philosophical domain. For our purposes here, I leave it open whether the verdict should be that central philosophical notions are in fact undefinable and primitive or that we should focus on restricted and regimented uses of them that we may circumscribe for philosophical purposes (*à la* Carnap) or, rather, that they work by family resemblance (*à la* Wittgenstein) or, finally, that there are a number of concepts 'in the vicinity of most philosophical words playing different roles', such that we should embrace 'conceptual pluralism' (Chalmers 2020, 14–15).

In science and philosophy, moral improvement (the second aspect mentioned above) is typically at most a byproduct of these forms of conceptual engineering. Abandoning or revising certain concepts used in scientific and philosophical theorizing may sometimes have positive moral implications. We saw it in §2 with HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE, and, as we have seen in §1, the abandonment of the concept of HYSTERIA for diagnostic purposes, effected by DSM-III, has certainly had important ethical consequences too. What is relevant, however, is that these concepts, as defective as they may have been on moral or ethical grounds, have not been changed because (or merely, or only because) theorists wanted to correct their moral or ethical shortcomings. In science, that is, it is unlikely that key theoretical concepts be revised solely based on their perceived moral or ethical shortcomings. Rather, they are revised based on considerations of empirical adequacy – that is, regarding their

appropriateness with respect to the understanding and explanation of the relevant empirical phenomena.

However, at least, some contemporary projects in conceptual engineering, most notably Sally Haslanger's (2012),⁸ call for the abandonment of certain concepts or for their revision precisely on mostly, if not only, ethical or moral grounds. The aim of Haslanger's project is to expose and eventually oppose the kinds of harm people falling under those concepts are systematically subject to. By individuating a certain class of individuals based on such re-engineered concepts, it would become apparent – in fact true by definition – that these subjects are oppressed. By advocating the day when there won't be *any* subjects falling under such concepts, she then joins forces with those who want to fight oppression. Haslanger's aim, moreover, does not seem to be merely 'internal' to a given discipline. That is, the amelioration is not proposed just for the sake of perfecting scientists, philosophers or their disciplines (yet there is that, too). Rather, at least in some key cases, the proposed revisions should go all the way down and should inform the conceptual resources available to much larger communities. Which communities Haslanger has in mind is a thorny issue. Clearly, it may be the community of those and only of those who share that moral outlook, or indeed an entire linguistic community (if so, which one?), or interesting intersections or extensions of them, etc. It is in this connection that things become particularly tricky. Several reasons immediately come to mind. What if someone has a different moral outlook and resists the proposed amelioration precisely on moral grounds? What if a linguistic community is generally impervious to top-down interventions because it resents the idea of being 'lectured' and forced to use (or not to use) a given concept? What if a group of individuals finds it difficult to listen to experts, either because experts' reasons evade them or because they mistrust them because of a variety of reasons, which range from considering experts at the service of more or less occult powers, to being at a loss given experts' disagreement; up to considering experts as members of a socially dominant group which is historically responsible for the exploitation of the socially weaker group and is therefore not listened to by members of the latter group, irrespective of whether experts may have a point? For these and similar reasons, some philosophers hold out little hope that conceptual engineering could really take place in such wider and socially more influential contexts. I agree that the prospects look dim.⁹

It is precisely for this reason that it becomes important to offer a general motivation for this kind of conceptual engineering and, to that effect, having an improved notion of HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE is key. If we are stuck with the original concept, HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE could only be applied in those situations in which the *lack* of a concept would harm a given group of people in their capacity as knowers. The improved-upon notion of HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE, in contrast, allows us to diagnose the harm suffered by those who were excluded because a faulty or defective concept *C* was in fact held in place by power structures that had an interest in obscuring the experience of these marginalized people from collective understanding. A case in point may be the concept WOMAN. I am not presuming here that the ameliorated concept should necessarily be the one proposed by Haslanger (2012, 234).¹⁰ Namely, *S* is a woman if and only if

- (i) *S* is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) That *S* has these features marks *S* within the dominant ideology of *S*'s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies *S* occupying such a position); and
- (iii) The fact that *S* satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in *S*'s systematic subordination, that is, along some dimension, *S*'s social position is oppressive and *S*'s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.

Yet, whatever the details might be, it would not coincide with the concept WOMAN, AS ADULT FEMALE HUMAN BEING which individuates women based on natal sex, assigned, in its turn, on the basis of observable bodily characteristics.¹¹ For, if understood only along such a dimension, the concept

WOMAN and its applications would exclude transwomen who identify as belonging to that gender.¹² If so, it may be claimed that by keeping in place the original concept WOMAN, because of an identity prejudice against, in this case, transwomen, the latter are being harmed and prevented from making sense of important aspects of their experience. Thus, the amelioration of a given concept *C*, such as, WOMAN, is to be defended on the ground that not improving on *C* would perpetrate a form of hermeneutical injustice towards marginalized members of our society.¹³

To the extent that a key societal goal is to improve the life of its members, so that they can have their identities and experiences recognized, pointing out how sticking to the original concept *C* would in fact prevent the fulfillment of that goal by perpetrating a form of hermeneutical injustice is important. For doing so would now shift the conversation from whether people in these marginalized categories are ontologically women, under one or the other of the possible understandings of that notion, to what including them under the revised category would achieve for them and for our society. Since, arguably, it would achieve more justice, at least in the form of epistemic justice, because this is a shared value in a society, the amelioration of the target concept *C* should be seen as a tool to advance such a shared value.¹⁴

5. Fixing Hysteria

In general, there are two ways in which we can fix concepts. Either we change their intensions, so to speak, so that their extensions change, or we change their reference or discover that it is different from the one originally assigned to them, up to the point, in some cases, of realizing that there is nothing that falls under them. Examples of the first kind are ubiquitous in philosophy (e.g. the various contrasting notions of BELIEF or KNOWLEDGE), and typically, the ameliorated concept will be more adequate from a descriptive, metaphysical, logical or pragmatic point of view. Examples of the second kind are somewhat more peculiar and go from cases like MADAGASCAR, which was originally used to refer to the mainland and later on started being used to refer to the homonymous island, to cases like JADE, which was originally used only to refer to nephrite, while now it is used to refer to both nephrite and jadeite, up to cases like WITCH, ETHER and PHLOGISTON, which have been discovered to have empty reference. These latter cases do not necessarily lead to the disappearance of a concept, though. For the concept, albeit empty, can remain as a relic of our conceptual history (like WITCH, ETHER and PHLOGISTON, say, whose histories are routinely studied by historians of ideas), or it can remain in use in fictional contexts (e.g. SANTA CLAUS) or in metaphorical ones (like in 'you are a witch', said of a woman who, for instance, succeeded in an arduous task, which seemed *prima facie* impossible to accomplish). Moreover, it may remain in use in resistant contexts, or even in descriptive ones, albeit erroneously.

Still, it is important to recognize that sometimes conceptual amelioration may not take the form of keeping a given concept while revising it, but instead abandoning it, at least for descriptive purposes. That is, the target concept *C* is no longer used to state that some individuals fall under it.¹⁵ In fact, several theorists interested in conceptual engineering have made this point. For instance, this could be a possible outcome of what (Chalmers 2020, 3) calls 'the evaluation stage', which, in turn, is one of the three stages of conceptual engineering he envisages (the other two being the 'designing stage' and the 'implementation stage'). As Chalmers explains, 'here the key is the evaluation of how good these concepts are in themselves and for certain purposes, to see how well they play key roles' (Chalmers 2020).

Cappelen (2018, 35) lists complete abandonment as one possible ameliorative strategy. Personally, I think partial abandonment is enough if we are insisting on the abandonment of the concept for *descriptive* purposes. The reason why complete abandonment may be too strong is that any concept can, as a matter of fact, remain in our conceptual repository as a relic from our conceptual past and thus become the object of study of historians of ideas or remain in use in metaphorical contexts (or in resistant ones, as we shall presently see). Not allowing for that much would be an act of historical revisionism, which could have deeply falsifying effects. That is, we need

to be able to access, study and understand why certain concepts were in fact partially abandoned, particularly when that happened for significant and instructive reasons, like in the case of *HYSTERIA*. In fact, keeping the concept for this kind of purpose is entirely in the interest of those who want to denounce injustice and identity prejudice to show how they were perpetrated by utilizing *HYSTERIA* as a diagnostic tool. Finally, notice that one leading example of conceptual engineering, namely Haslanger's proposed amelioration of *WOMAN*, if implemented successfully, should in fact lead to making it an empty concept, which should then be abandoned, in its turn, at least as a descriptive tool. As (Haslanger 2000, 46) puts it: 'I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day where there are no more women (though, of course, we should not aim to do away with females)'. Whether or not one agrees with Haslanger's proposed amelioration or with her claim that the project of feminism is to arrive at the disappearance of women (but not of females), it is clear that the eventual goal of her ameliorative project, and therefore, a way in which conceptual engineers may go about their business, is to dispose of a given concept at least for descriptive purposes because its reference would turn out to be an empty set.

What the foregoing has borne out (§1–2) is that *HYSTERIA* in a sense has been fixed. In particular, we know that it is no longer in use in the medical context as a diagnostic category. To repeat, since too many and too disparate symptoms with no precise etiology went into its individuation, the concept had become useless for diagnostic purposes. Thus, from a clinical point of view, there are no hysterical subjects – no matter what their gender or symptoms might be. Of course, there are still people who may suffer from this or that mental disorder, but not from hysteria. To be more accurate, since the concept *HYSTERIA* proved non-explanatory for diagnostic purposes after millennia of engineering and re-engineering since its first appearance back in antiquity, it was finally dismissed with DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association 1980) at least for these very specialized purposes. To reiterate, the problem was not that the concept was somewhat vague and comprised of several symptoms, for a certain amount of vagueness and open-endedness in our concepts are typically admitted, not only in everyday contexts but also in more specialized ones. The problem with *HYSTERIA* as a diagnostic tool, to repeat, is rather that it subsumed under itself *too many disparate symptoms with no specific etiology*. Hence, it was useless with respect to the task of diagnosing and possibly curing patients affected by mental disorders.

Yet, the concept remains in our ordinary conceptual repertoire and the corresponding word, and its cognates are still used in some linguistic communities (I am thinking specifically of English- and Italian-speaking communities), even though their use may be fading. Thus, it is not like with the concepts of *ETHER* or of *PHLOGISTON* that are in our conceptual repertoire but no longer in use in descriptive, albeit colloquial, contexts. There are at least two aspects of this situation that are problematic.

First, the concept *HYSTERIA* and the use of the corresponding word still have strong gender connotations. Much like 'crazy', 'hysterical' is mostly reserved for categorizing women's angry or otherwise overly emotional behavior, even to these days – that is, when it is known that symptoms traditionally associated with hysteria are in fact displayed by men too, that there is no connection whatsoever between those symptoms and the uterus and that, as a matter of fact, the concept of *HYSTERIA* is no longer in use for diagnostic purposes at all. Hence, *a fortiori*, no woman could rightly be considered to fall under it.

I said that so much is known, but, in fact, it may not be common knowledge, and this may foster the idea that *HYSTERIA* does refer to a medical condition, which borders irrationality and mental disorder, that only women can suffer from. I take the short history of hysteria presented in §1 to be a useful pedagogical tool, which, if disseminated, could help dismantle the association between women and this alleged mental disorder.

Second, the use of the term 'hysteria' and its cognates is a powerful put-down. For example, it is quite common in an animated conversation especially (albeit not exclusively) between a man and a woman to witness that, if the latter displays angry behavior, she is going to be dismissed with phrases such as 'you're hysterical', 'don't be hysterical' or 'you are making a hysterical

scene', etc. It is less common to see that these phrases are used between women having equally animated conversations¹⁶ or by women towards men in a similar setting. The effect of the use of 'hysterical' in this kind of context is to silence (other) women's concerns – which could, at least on several occasions, be legitimate if considered on merit – by dismissing them as products or phantasies of irrational minds. It does so not by considering their content and by deeming it wrong or nonsensical, but by altogether dismissing them on the grounds that their *style of expression* is a display of mental disorder such that whatever the content might be, it is not worth taking seriously.

This is – in general – a patent *non sequitur*: from the fact that one might be presenting the content that *p* in a manner which is not socially (and contextually) recognized as legitimate, it does not follow that *p* is false, unjustified or otherwise defective. Consider pragmatically deviant expressions like singing or yelling that it is not raining, when it is, in response to the question 'is it raining?'. Or consider works of art produced by mentally ill people. When Vincent van Gogh painted himself without an ear and a big bandage on his head, he was certainly mentally ill and his style of expression (the colors, the strokes of the brush, etc.) was certainly deviant with respect to the received artistic canons of the time, but what he portrayed was true and emotionally significant.

Notice that this kind of put-down has also the effect of requiring women, if they want to be listened to at all, to exercise a form of control of their style of expression, which could be very demanding – indeed disproportionately demanding – for them, at least in context. For in at least some of the situations at hand, they would be the ones who are suffering a wrong and would typically be in a position of inferiority both physically and psychologically. Asking them to manifest their concerns in a calm and polite way – as the wrong is being perpetrated, manifested or discovered – for otherwise they would be considered no less than insane is clearly excessive.

Consider tweaking the situation a bit and let us suppose that the same content that *p* is expressed by a man to another man in the same angry way. Various reactions are likely: from physical ones (that are never admissible) to engagement with what the opponent is saying, even while asking the opponent to calm down. Yet, it is unlikely (or at least considerably less likely) that the interlocutor will be dismissed by being considered insane solely in virtue of his way of expressing *p*. That is, whatever the reaction might be, short of a physical one, it will display considering the interlocutor worth listening to, if only to disagree with him. Not so in the original example. That is the wrong women typically perceive when they are subjected to that kind of put-down. Their own testimony or take on a given situation is dismissed as simply not worth attending to. In this sense, the use of 'hysterical' and its cognates as a put-down harms women in their capacity as knowers, since by doing so they are assigned zero credibility with respect to the issue at the end. In fact, the use of this word as a put-down results quite clearly in *testimonial* injustice. That is the kind of epistemic injustice, also identified by (Fricker 2007, Chapter 1), which occurs when identity prejudice causes a hearer to unfairly assign a lower level of credibility to a speaker's testimony or report, by doubting, ignoring or failing to take a speaker's testimony seriously.

Yet there is more: by being silenced in this way, women's fully human identity is being denied. For by being dismissed as insane, they are not considered to belong to the category of wholly functional human beings, assuming, roughly, the understanding of HUMAN BEING AS RATIONAL ANIMAL. By being silenced in this way, women are kept in a minority condition, which, like any self-fulfilling prophecy, will keep perpetrating the harm. That is, it is only by being considered equal and by seeing their concerns considered on merit that women will have the opportunity to engage in the process of giving reasons for them and defending their take from objections and, by so doing, honing their reasoning abilities. If in contrast, they are excluded from the practice of giving and asking for reasons because, due to their style of expression, they are *ipso facto* denied rationality, they will not have the opportunity to develop the use of their reasoning skills. No doubt that would have pernicious consequences on their self-esteem, up to a loss of personal identity and/or the endurance of deep social marginalization. That is, all the pernicious effects of epistemic injustice could be brought about by this use of 'hysterical' and its cognates.

Yet, such an exclusion from rational practices due to identity prejudice against women for their way of expressing themselves could also actually bring about the development of other ways of influencing people, like manipulating them and the relevant situations to advance their own goals. These means, in turn, as we saw in §1, have traditionally been associated with hysteria and witchcraft, and social manipulation has been seen as the secondary gain of hysteria. Rather than being symptoms of allegedly defective natures, these are in fact just possible side-effects of excluding women from participating in practices which require the exercise of reasoning abilities because of their being denied rationality in the first place due to their style of expression at least in context. We could even go as far as calling this form of epistemic harm ‘rational(ity) injustice’. It counts as a form of epistemic injustice, since being and being considered able to articulate reasons is a basic epistemic capacity, and it would be an injustice because it would be provoked by identity prejudice against a marginalized group. When affected by it, subjects would then be harmed in their capacity as reasoners due to an identity prejudice against them, possibly due to their style of expression.

That said, it seems difficult to defend the idea that the intension of HYSTERIA should be changed to alter its extension and bring about a positive moral change. Rather, it seems that, like in the scientific context, HYSTERIA should simply fall out of use in colloquial contexts too (and is possibly already fading). In fact, I think we should educate people and call them out when this kind of use of that concept occurs, to point out to them that, whether they know it or not, they are acquiescing in a discriminatory practice. Maybe if we do it collegially and consistently enough, and if we manage to convince institutions to no longer sanction the use of this and similar epithets, the concept will no longer be used, at least in this kind of communicative exchange.

I submit that avoiding the forms of epistemic injustice that the use of HYSTERIA in these (non-medical) contexts brings about is a morally and ethically relevant goal, which justifies the kind of activism I am advocating for.¹⁷ Notice, moreover, that this kind of activism is typically considered to be a likely effect of conceptual engineering of an ameliorative kind. This is one further piece of evidence in favor of the fact that even if we are not proposing to keep the concept while improving on it, but are rather proposing to abandon it, at least in the relevant contexts, we are still engaging in conceptual engineering. For the effects of abandoning it would be like the ones of more readily recognizable projects in contemporary conceptual engineering. Furthermore, we are advocating its abandonment precisely by evaluating the consequences – in this case, the moral, ethical and epistemic consequences – that maintaining this concept for descriptive purposes would have, just like more typical instances of present-day projects in conceptual engineering do.

Yet, much like other loaded concepts, I wish to insist that HYSTERIA should not be banned *tout court*. First, we need to be able to access our conceptual history, if only for critical purposes, and, thus, we need to maintain it, at least as a relic from our conceptual past. Second, because it may be readily imagined that it could even be reclaimed by people belonging to the marginalized category or by their historical heirs – that is, women and feminists. After all, as we saw in §1, ‘the despised hysterics of yesteryear have been replaced by the feminist radicals of today’. At least in one country (namely, Italy), feminists did reclaim the concept WITCH. For the most popular slogan of feminist protests in the late 1970s in that country was ‘tremate, tremate, le streghe son tornate’ – roughly, ‘shiver, shiver, witches are back’. It is not at all inconceivable that a similar re-appropriation could take place with respect to HYSTERIA.

I submit, the concept of HYSTERIA need not disappear *tout court*, and it could remain in use in specific contexts in which members of the target group consider it a useful tool to conceptualize important aspects of their experience and to communicate it to other members of that very same group or to outside members in an affectively connoted manner. That is, the concept HYSTERIA need not fall out of use and remain only as a relic of our conceptual history, of interest merely to historians of ideas or psychiatry. Yet, its use needs to be regimented and considered permissible only in contexts of re-appropriation as opposed to discrimination.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, *HYSTERIA* is a concept that has been kept in place as a diagnostic tool for millennia due to identity prejudice against women. Its interest to philosophers and not merely to historians of ideas or psychiatry is that it calls for a revision of the original understanding of *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE*, a key concept in contemporary social epistemology introduced by Fricker (2007). Once reconfigured, *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE* can, in turn, be used to advocate in favor of other forms of amelioration of concepts, which, as such, still embed identity prejudice against certain groups. It can do so by eschewing the more traditional path taken so far in current debates, for instance, on the amelioration of concepts such as *WOMAN*. These debates risk perpetrating an ‘essentialist’ outlook – let it be grounded in biological ‘nature’ or in socially acquired ‘nature’ – on what women ‘really’ are (or should be), which is fraught with problems. While a detailed discussion of these problems cannot be pursued here,¹⁸ in this paper, I have shown the potential advantage of bringing the concept of *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE* to bear on this kind of discussion. Doing so allows us to bypass that ‘essentialist’ outlook altogether and allows us to be more inclusive and open to further applications of a concept like *WOMAN*, if these applications can help people, such as transwomen, to make sense of their experience and if it can help all of us remove identity prejudice against them. The debate over the concept *WOMAN* is but one example of the areas in which a reconfigured concept of *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE* could play a key role. As hinted at, once so reconfigured, *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE* could also be used to diagnose what is epistemically amiss in the use of those slurs, epithets and pejoratives which likewise embed identity prejudice against certain groups. In fact, it turns out that the use in everyday contexts of *HYSTERIA* is also a clear example of a faulty concept that is held in place due to identity prejudice against women. Its use for descriptive purposes harms women in their ability to make sense of their own experience, in their ability to testify to that and in their ability to reason about it. It therefore perpetrates various forms of epistemic injustice, such as testimonial injustice and what we have dubbed ‘rational(ity) injustice’. For such a reason, the use of ‘hysterical’ and its cognates for descriptive purposes should be banned. Still, it remains that the concept *HYSTERIA* might conceivably be reclaimed by the target group, if they so wished, just like other faulty concepts originally held in place due to identity prejudice, which were first abandoned for descriptive purposes because of the kinds of harm they were producing and were then reclaimed by the marginalized group to foster their sense of identity and belonging.

Notes

1. In the context of this paper, the term ‘woman’ and ‘female (human being)’, meaning ‘a human being whose natal sex is female’, will be used interchangeably, if not otherwise indicated.
2. For a very accessible reconstruction, see Tasca et al. (2018).
3. See Lieberman and Schatzberg (2018).
4. For a survey of this literature, see Devereux (2014).
5. Schowalter (1993).
6. Thus, Fricker knows that the gap isn’t ‘empty’, as it were but filled with prejudice and bias. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.
7. See Sosa (2018) for various accounts of how slurs and pejoratives work. Notice that the re-engineered notion of *HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE* is not concerned with merely the pragmatic effects of using certain words, which some would think to be synonyms of non-pejorative ones, but with the very idea that the concepts expressed by them are faulty, and, in the case at hand, even though not in all cases, with null extension. For a treatment of pejoratives along these lines, see Hom and May (2013, 2018).
8. Notoriously, Haslanger advocates for the abandonment of the concept *WOMAN*, after having re-engineered it to expose the discrimination women are subject to.
9. I expand on this issue in Coliva (2024). Here, I am not entering the debate about whether conceptual changes of the kind proposed by conceptual engineers are incompatible with semantic externalism. For a sustained defence of the incompatibility thesis, see Cappelen (2018).
10. I discuss Haslanger’s proposal in depth in Coliva (2024).
11. It is important to note that this kind of sex assignment is based mostly on observable bodily features, particularly a subject’s genitalia. As such, it is inaccurate to describe it as based on biological features (as opposed to cultural, or psychological ones, say). For, as an anonymous referee noticed, contemporary studies in this area, such as

Sarah Richardson's, based on neurophysiology, and endocrinology, are united in pointing to the fact that 'a strict sex binary fails to describe the variation present in human biology across domains long assumed to be strongly sexed' (Maayan et al. 2022, 802).

12. Likewise, as claimed by Jenkins (2016), as well as by Coliva (2024), the concept *WOMAN* re-engineered along Haslanger's proposal would exclude transwomen. Jenkins and I, however, have divergent views about the prospects of utilizing a similar strategy to Haslanger's to improve upon that concept and make it more inclusive.
13. I discuss this issue at length in Coliva (2024).
14. I discuss the case of *WOMAN*, in connection with the issue of hermeneutical injustice, in Coliva (2024). As pointed out by an anonymous referee, moreover, a descriptivist project could allow for a multiplicity of concepts, carefully defined to fit the practices of specific subcommunities.
15. This is of course compatible with observing that the concept may still be used by others within dominant and resistant practices. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.
16. Indeed, the use that these terms may have in these less common contexts is an example of how certain biases against women may have been introjected by women themselves. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.
17. In the medical context, as we saw, the use of that term was already dismissed on medical grounds and, arguably, also an ethical improvement, since it did away with a clearly biased concept, which also served no real diagnostic purpose.
18. See Coliva (2024) for a detailed treatment of this case.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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