Being Bound to Fail. How Epistemic Injustice Fails Educational Opportunities

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Abstract. Inequality is not exclusively a matter of unequal distribution of resources or opportunities. It also affects people's awareness of their social standing with regard to their fellow citizens. Should a theory of justice be concerned with these aspects of people's standing in society? In this paper we answer this question in the affirmative, focussing on the role epistemic injustice plays in shaping the attitudes towards educational opportunities, especially in those cases when “bound to fail” attitudes affect educational outcomes for the worst-off.

Introduction
Theories of justice standardly deal with distributive issues of goods, resources and opportunities, or are mainly concerned with promoting capability enhancing policies. But we know that inequality is not exclusively a matter of unequal distribution of resources or opportunities. It also affects people's awareness of the social standing they occupy with regard to their fellow citizens. When social relationships are set on an unequal footing, the worst offs are not only confined to a position of economic disadvantage, but they are also affected in their sense of self-respect and in the significance they attach to their choices. By tackling justice as a primarily distributive problem, standard theories shade these other forms of inequality, which do not appear to be consequences of coercive conditions people are subject to. These are those cases when people withdraw themselves from social competition (and perhaps even from social cooperation) as it happens with self-exclusionary attitudes individuals and communities at large develop in personal or particular historical circumstances. Should a conception of justice be concerned with these aspects of people's standing in society?

In this paper we articulate an answer to this question by exploring the moral psychology of

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justice. By ‘moral psychology of justice’ we refer to an inquiry into the moral dimension of the attitudes persons develop towards institutions with regard to their conditions of socio-economic deprivation and status inequality. The moral psychology of justice does not take attitudes of blame, praise, guilt or resentment to be directed exclusively towards other persons, as in the original picture by Peter Strawson’, but it enlarges it to include attitudes persons have towards the institutions they are subjected to. Our moral sentiments concern also - and, in some cases, crucially - the way institutions treat us in our social standing. The philosophical exploration of this dimension can shed light on the subjective conditions of injustice, such as the attitudes of general dissatisfaction, hopelessness, arbitrariness and distrust people have towards unjust institutions. Partly aside from the question of what would justify those demands (say, whether subjective conditions of deprivation are indeed a concern of justice), our interest lies in the effects that those attitudes have on people’s life-plans.

We will explore only one aspect of this field, focussing on the role prejudice plays in shaping people’s attitudes towards educational opportunities. Our hypothesis is a specific kind of injustice, associated but distinct from distributive injustice, affects the moral sentiments of the worst-offs. Following Miranda Fricker’s suggestion, we term it “epistemic” injustice. Our contention is that a specific kind of moral dispositions, what we call “bound to fail” attitudes, affect the educational outcomes for the worst-offs. These are those attitudes which lead to life-prospects expectations that are either doomed to fail due to the lack of cultural capital resources, or as a consequence of the internalized expectation that choices don’t count for whatever life-prospect one may have. In order to clarify the moral dimension of “bound to fail” attitudes, we move from Miranda Fricker's analysis of one of the forms of epistemic injustice, what she calls “hermeneutical” injustice. In Fricker's analysis, hermeneutical injustice occurs when victims do not possess the concepts to express their condition of subservience. We claim that, even when the proper concepts are available, often the worst-offs internalize their condition of deprivation, thus failing to interpret it as a case of injustice for which claims of redress are legitimate. We show that such forms of injustice are relevant for the project of a democratic reform in education, allowing us to account for attitudes of failure that lead to self-exclusionary consequences. Our conclusion is that internalized attitudes of failure are a concern of justice because the cause of those attitudes cannot be primarily ascribed to a non deceptive and autonomous choice of self-exclusion.

1. Inequality and access to education

Inequality affects educational opportunities at many levels. It may restrict opportunities for financial resources, both at primary and college level education, but also opportunities to access knowledge of available resources for education. In a recent study, Miles Corak (2012) shows an interesting result concerning the correlation between intergenerational mobility and income inequality in Western Countries:

More inequality at any point in time is associated with a greater transfer of economic status across the generations. In more unequal societies, the poor are more likely to see their children grow up to be the next generation of poor, and the rich are more likely to see their children remain at the top rungs of the economic ladder. (Corak 2012: 3).

This correlation, known by economists as the “Great Gatsby Curve”\(^3\), shows that where societies are more unequal, social mobility is less likely to occur. This of course is not a bad news for the wealthy offsprings, whose expectation to keep up with the socio-economic status of their parents is likely to be fulfilled. But unfortunately, it is a bad news for the children of the worst-offs, whose expectations of improvement are very unlikely to be met.

A crucial effect of the correlation represented by the curve, and indeed a cause of its reinforcement over time, is the role that access to education plays in determining the intergenerational mobility. More exactly, the gradient of cultural capital transmission across generations closely follows the gradient of income transmission.\(^4\) Thus, if we measure the transmission of cultural capital by the years of extra schooling a child can expect to obtain for each additional year of parental education, we find out that, among Western countries, “the greater the similarity between parent-child years of schooling, the greater the tie between their earnings”. In other words, “when education is strongly transmitted between parents and children, so are earnings” (Corak 2012: 14). The explanation given by Corak is straightforward:

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\(^3\) Cited in Corak (2012: 2). The term was coined by Alan Krueger, chairman of the American Council of Economic Affairs, in a speech delivered at the Center for American Progress on January 12, 2012 (http://www.americanprogress.org/events/2012/01/12/17181/the-rise-and-consequences-of-inequality/). Corak refers to Gary Becker’s work as the model underlying his findings. See Becker and Tomes (1979: 1153–1189); Becker and Tomes (1986), and Solon (2004).

[F]amilies with more human capital can invest more in their children [and] a higher return to education encourages parents to invest more in their children and also gives those with more education a greater income to do so. It changes both incentives and opportunities, and therefore is central in determining the degree of mobility. *(ibid.)*

Although Corak’s study targeted the American school system, it carries a more general significance. It indicates that also non-monetary investments are a crucial determinant of children’s life chances, including the large scale dropout from schools of students belonging to the lower socioeconomic strata of the society. Explaining the link between social stratification and educational attitudes is a long delved research field,⁵ but less attention has been paid so far to how an education system can breed epistemic injustice. This can happen in many ways: students can be denied participation in the pedagogical activities⁶ (Hookway, 2010); their own hermeneutical resources as well as experiences might not be represented in the curriculum; the organisation of the classroom may exclude certain students of diverse social background; the design of the evaluation and selection system may implicitly favour certain class of students over others.

Exclusionary curriculum may also deny the richness of knowledge that the subject carries. The educational process thus objectifies the individual, denies her subjectivity as an epistemic agent, that is as someone who should have equal participation in the knowledge process. The person is thus harmed in her capacity as a knower. The educational process excludes from the bounds of knowledge the rich cultural and historical reservoir that constitute her hermeneutical resources.

This is not only a denial of the claim of a resource as a valid knowledge, but it also undermines the community’s claim to knowledge. It is an injustice done to an individual by virtue of them being part of that community. This likely leads to a feeling of inferiority in the student, as well as a lack of confidence in one’s own ability to learn.

A democratic public provision of education, sensitive to pedagogical and curricular exclusion,

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⁵ A vast amount of empirical evidence of the link between inequality and dropout phenomena is available in the literature. See Bryk & Thum (1989); Ekstrom et al. (1986); Rumberger (1983); Rumberger (1995); Rumberger & Larson, (1998), Rumberger (2001). Other reasons for dropout include residential mobility (see Rumberger, 1995), a condition of disengagement with the class or peers, poor academic achievement and absenteeism (Rumberger and Larson 1998), demographic background based on race, language, gender, ethnicity and immigration status (Rumberger, 1983, 1995), low educational and occupational aspirations (Rumberger and Larson 1998, Rumberger, 1995).

⁶ Children can also drop out of schools due to the composition of the classroom, the resources available and the processes and practices that the school engages in. On this point, see Rumberger (2001).
ought to be able to overcome such cases of exclusion. The reasons ranging from exclusionary curriculum to pedagogic practices have been well acknowledged in the debates on educational reform\textsuperscript{7}. This has highlighted the need for participatory classrooms, curricula that are sensitive to the context and the histories of diverse groups, as well as the need to associate and engage with diverse groups differently. Yet, the acknowledgement of diversity in the curriculum and the classroom has still not been able to address the issue of self-excluding groups. In what follows, we will focus on a special instance of self-exclusionary attitudes, those which we term ‘bound to fail’ attitudes.

2. Epistemic Injustice and ‘Bound to Fail’ Attitudes

When self-exclusion is not determined by curricular or socio-economic factors, it is generally considered as an act of autonomous choice. The person, it is argued, understands the consequences of such a choice, and acts autonomously in choosing a different life plan. But, such an argument does not account for the substantive reasons that people have for self-exclusion, and the impact it has on their self-esteem. Considerations of disadvantage may in fact span over a large spectrum of moral sentiments, from sincere compassion to commiseration, or even blame. When one is aware that one's condition of economic disadvantage is also the ground of judgments of these sorts, more often than self-vindication or efforts of social promotion, sentiments of shame arise in response.

One of the most interesting attempt to analyse the moral psychology of injustice is due to Miranda Fricker, who calls ‘epistemic injustice’ the kind of injustice when “a wrong [is] done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007: 1).\textsuperscript{8} According to Fricker, epistemic injustice is of two kinds: testimonial and hermeneutic. Testimonial injustice is caused by a “prejudice in the economy of credibility”; it occurs when “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (\textit{ibid}). On the other hand, hermeneutical

\textsuperscript{7} Kumar and Sarangapani (2004) lay out the features that is required for quality education among which curricular and pedagogic reform, the need to be inclusive to cultural contexts, better teacher education. Coleman (1968) and Sarangapani (2003) shows how school ethos affects educational quality, and Little (1999) argues for the need of sensitivity to the cultural context in pedagogy and education. Smith and Ngoma-Maema (2003) demonstrate the effects of examination system reform in improving the quality of education in post-apartheid South Africa.

\textsuperscript{8} In a similar fashion, David Coady claims that epistemic injustice occurs when someone’s “right to know is violated” or when someone is deliberately misled or manipulated by withdrawing information that they ought to have (2010: 105). For Christopher Hookway, an epistemic injustice can also occur when we are denied the resources required by us to fulfill our epistemic functions (2010).
injustice “is caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources”, such as in the case of “sexual harassment in a culture that still lacks that critical concept” (2007: 1, 159). Hermeneutical forms of injustice occur “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (ibid). Hermeneutical prejudice stems “from a gap in collective hermeneutical resources—a gap, that is, in our shared tools of social interpretation— where it is no accident that the cognitive disadvantage created by this gap impinges unequally on different social groups” (ibid: 6). The disadvantage is a product of hermeneutical marginalisation of the excluded group that results from unequal participation in the practices of generation of social meanings (ibid). Hermeneutical injustice emerges out of a structural prejudice in the development of “our collective forms of understanding” thus leading to inadequate conceptualisation and ill-understanding of “the social experiences of members of hermeneutically marginalized groups….perhaps even by the subjects themselves; and/or attempts at communication made by such groups, where they do have an adequate grip on the content of what they aim to convey, are not heard as rational owing to their expressive style being inadequately understood” (ibid: 6-7). In Fricker’s analysis then, hermeneutical injustice is the case when victims of injustice do not even possess the concepts to express their condition of subservience.

Yet, the paradigmatic cases of hermeneutical injustice analysed by Fricker do not include crucial instances of misrecognition of one’s condition of subservience. These are those cases in which persons have the adequate conceptual resources, and yet are not able to interpret their own experiences, and the product of their choices, as a result of a structural prejudice. Even in the case when those concepts are available, there is a difference between having the concept of a condition of unjust deprivation available, and interpreting one’s condition as being affected by that condition. Thus, contrary to Fricker, for whom hermeneutic injustice potentially renders the subject incapable of making sense of their own social experience, structural prejudice can lead to internalised attitudes of self-exclusion that inhibits the agent from making sense of their own experience as resulting from a prejudice.

This is the context within which ‘bound to file’ attitudes arise. They consists in the expectation that one’s attempts to accomplish a life-plan are doomed to fail, often leading to blame oneself for a given failure when it occurs.

Bound to fail attitudes may be forward and backward looking. A person can be bound to fail
either when she avoids engaging in any activity whose goal she systematically expects not to be able to achieve, or to judge an experienced failure the consequence of her lack of an ability. In both cases, ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are distinctively social: they are the consequence of a disadvantage in the access to the opportunities required to achieve a planned goal, which they misrecognize and which is not in power of the person to retain or dismiss.

In particular, three epistemic features characterize ‘bound to fail’ attitudes: (i) a person’s awareness of her condition she mistakenly attributes to causes she can only bear responsibility for (call it misrecognition); (ii) the limited epistemic resources that she can rely on in tracing back the causes of her failure (available heuristics); (iii) the reasonable expectation that a person has for a life-plan whose outcome she is aware not being able to satisfy (self-trust). Let’s briefly look at them.

The case of misrecognition is when the epistemic entitlement of the right-holder is violated by an intentional withdrawing of information that is relevant for the person’s assessment of her opportunity set. In simpler words, when a person competing for a position fails to obtain it because she does not know that the the competition is rigged, she is denied an information that is essential for her assessment of the causes of her failure. This is is a case of epistemic

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9 It is crucial to remark that, so defined, ‘bound to fail attitudes’ are neither cases of adaptive preferences, nor cases of delusion. It is not a case of adaptive preference because they are not are coping mechanisms for cognitive dissonance. Mechanisms of adaptive preference, such as sour grape cases, are those which ensure that “no option outside the opportunity set is preferred to the most preferred option within it”. (Elster 2007: 175). In other words, when someone adapts her preferences, she redefines the set of opportunities available by acting on the most preferred option, making it sure that what she prefers does not follow outside her reach. In the Aesop’s fable, the fox craves for the grape, to relinquish later its desire when it realizes the grape can’t be caught, disdaining it afterwards. Bound to fail attitudes do not work according to this mechanism, for the person is aware of the fact that her opportunity set does not meet her expectations, although those expectations are reasonable (which is not the case for adaptive preference). On the contrary, adaptive preference can be a consequence of the a ‘bound to fail’ attitude. Neither ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are cases of delusion. Delusional is the attitude of holding a belief true with strong conviction despite massive evidence to the contrary. As the terms suggests, such an attitude is conducive of self-deception. Put in terms of opportunities, in cases of the delusional person, while her most preferred option lies outside her opportunity set, she fails to realize that the preference will never be satisfied. ‘Bound to fail’ attitudes are not cases of delusion because the delusional subject actively discards a truthful evaluation of her condition and of the unreasonable expectations despite the evidence. ‘Bound to fail’ attitudes are rather characterized by the fact that the person fully realizes that a reasonable option is outside her opportunity set, thus proactively undermining its desiderability.

10 Following Coady (2010), Kotzee argues for two kinds of epistemic injustice: “(1) being unjustly put in a position in which one does not know what one should be entitled to know, and (2) being unjustly put in a position in which one is wrong about something that one should be right about. These correspond, roughly, to being kept ignorant and to being lied to.” (2013: 345) These cases are not discussed by Kotzee in detail. The examples he has in mind are those of manipulation and deception where the information is intentionally withdrawn from the subject whose interests are being harmed; an information which the subject has a right to. The cases that we discuss are those where prejudice is subtle and where there might not be any intention to harm.
injustice, and not only of justice in general, because she is denied the epistemic resources for a proper self-assessment of the causes of her failure. Denied those resources, it is reasonable for a person to attribute her failure to a personal fault, mistake, or deficiency. Even more this is reasonable when evidence is framed within institutional contexts with a high reputational aura. The candidate, in these cases, will be reasonable in self-blaming given the evidence available. And yet, she will be wrong. She will regret her mistakes, even though she never had a chance in the first place. Misrecognition of this sort lead persons to conclude that their failure is deserved after all: they mistakenly identify the source of their failure with the lack of adequate skills or competence, a deficiency that can’t be ascribed to society, but only to their weakness of will, or at most to the circumstances of their choices. Nobody else being responsible for those deficiencies, the persons in such a condition can’t but conclude that they have to take the burden upon themselves, and so... give up. Yet, they would be mistaken in drawing such a conclusion when overt or structural prejudice is in place, for their failure is not the consequence of cognitive lack or weakness of any kind. Inducing people to conclude that their failure is their fault is equal to wronging a person not only as a moral being, but as a knower. This may be the case even when institutions promotes equal access to educational opportunities, and yet the conditions of entry, rules of institutional engagement, and the resources required to flourish favour one group of people over others. When this is the case, the institution does not guarantee success based on one’s own efforts, but is constrained by the pre-existing prejudice designed in the system of written and unwritten rules.

Under these conditions, persons might blame themselves for not being good enough to compete or they might not even enter the competition believing that all their efforts would lead to naught, and by excluding themselves from spheres where the subject would reasonably be expected to participate. This way, the individual misrecognition of the structural prejudice leads a person to attribute exclusion from the participatory spheres to the wrong kind of reasons. In conditions where appealing to prejudice is regarded as playing a victim, the person will tend blame oneself for failures, or take as a matter of pride not playing the victim. In such cases, misrecognizing one’s proper condition will be then not a matter of lacking the concept, of failing to understand one’s condition as being governed by prejudice.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have argued that any design of the educational system sorts out children based on their social origin. Education systems, according to them, is created to reproduce and legitimise the dominant culture and delegitimise the culture of the dominated classes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 41). The education system also succeeds in obtaining legitimation, from the dominated, of the knowledge systems of the
The second epistemic aspect of ‘bound to fail’ attitude concern cases with a person is uncertain with regard the causes of her failure. This is different from misrecognition, where the fail-making features are identified with causes imputable to her choices, thus leading to self-blame. In the case when the causes of - say- a rejection from accessing some opportunities are obscure, no clear fail-making feature can be blamed.

In cases when uncertainty is involved, a person has no clue as to what may lead to scholastic failure, finding out what has gone wrong will be often based on the best information of the situation she can retrieve from her environment. But the best information she can obtain may still be misleading, especially when prejudice is deeply embedded in the pedagogical practices.\(^\text{12}\) Her reasoning, based on the available heuristics, would then lead her to a false assessment of the causes of failure. The simplest explanation suggested by the heuristic would be that people fail due to the lack of adequate efforts or talents. This is again the case when institutions are credible, such as when educational opportunities are offered on non discriminatory and equal access basis, or even when affirmative action policies are enacted. When measures of this kind are in place, the credibility of those measures has a framing effect\(^\text{13}\) on the considerations the person makes regarding the causes of her own failure.

Of course, uncertainty is not always a concern of justice. For instance, you are not wronged when you gamble on a future - say, a soccer game - whose outcome is still undetermined at the moment of choice. But uncertainty is a concern of epistemic injustice, when it affects the entitlement to know that a person in virtue of being a right-holder. Uncertainty is ubiquitous in matters of epistemic injustice, and often plays a subtle role in the fine structure of educated prejudice. So, if you are a philosophy graduate with a foreign degree applying for an academic position in the United States (have you ever tried?), there is a good chance that you will not get a job as easily as someone with an American PhD. For the sake of the argument, let us even

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\(\text{12}\) This is the case of ‘hidden curricula’ that transmits knowledge that is learnt at school but does not constitute the intended part of the curriculum. The arrangement of the classroom, the pedagogical practices and the school environment tend to impart beliefs, norms, and values that do not constitute the core of the curriculum. See Apple and King (1983), Martin (1976), Giroux and Penna (1979).

\(\text{13}\) Framing effect is that in which the way opportunities and alternatives are presented affect individual choice and judgments.
assume that the American PhD does perform better under the criteria described in the call. Thus, when competing for a position, it is more likely that, if you have a foreign degree, you have a lower chance to get the job. When the call comes, you lose, and your competitor gets the job. She or he is even better than you. Everything is in order here. Yet, when situations of these sorts are systemic, there is a good chance that some prejudice inhabits the mind of the committee members despite their good intentions. For they may have good reasons on their side (they don’t know - for instance - what education you have received during your doctoral years), and for matters of prudence they decide to hire someone whose education they can trust. Thus, the committee has a good justification, or at least a fair story to tell about you. But, no matter how good the assessment is, the ground for the judgment of your qualifications is flawed by considerations that very often do not regard your qualifications as such, but the profile of the group of applicants you belong to (those without an American Phd). So, you are wronged in virtue of considerations of - say - merit that might be accurate in the average for your profile (and even justifiable in your own case!), but which are given by considerations of your profile, not of you.

Now, one might argue that there is nothing wrong when this happens, even more when the outcome of a selection procedure turns out to be accurate. The objection makes sense only if we assume that justice concerns the outcomes of a procedure. If profiling an applicant reveals to be the most efficient way to obtain outcomes that satisfy a given criterion, for instance, merit, then profiling is just under criteria of merit. But this argument fails because, even in the case the assessment is accurate (you don’t get the job because your are not the best candidate), it is accurate because you have been judged as belonging to a group profile, not for your skills. Therefore, a procedure may be justified from the point of view of the outcome, and yet fail to assess your individual characteristics.

The general point here is that the ground of assessment of your merits is framed by the credibility attached to your profile belonging, not to you as an applicant in flesh and blood. Whether or not your profile belonging is a good indicator of your quality, it is still the case that you are evaluated for the profile you belong to, something over which you bear no responsibility. One may unintentionally wrong you by framing your credibility through the profile you belong to, thus undermining your individuality. When this is the case, we should then say that judging your failure as a consequence of your demerits is the consequence of the epistemic bias embedded in the credibility judgment, which you have no resource to oppose. This is a case of
hermeneutical injustice, in which persons are denied epistemic resources for an assessment of their opportunity set to which they are entitled qua persons. Notice that while in the case of intentional wrongdoing, the responsibility for the injustice done to the victim is ascribed to a person or a collective, the same can’t be in the case just described. For one thing, since the wrongdoing is unintentional, those responsible for the wrongdoing may not have acted immorally; after all, we claimed, the committee is scrupulous in attending to its task and performs it in the common conviction that choosing the most meritorious is a commendable moral action. For another, there is properly no wrongdoing in the act itself of selecting a candidate according to criteria of merit. The wrongdoing rather consists in the procedure itself, more precisely in the features of profiling and credibility without which the procedure would not work.

A failure to interpret their condition as being determined by a structural prejudice might even undermine the intellectual self-trust of the excluded. Intellectual self-trust as defined by Karen Jones is

a stance that an agent takes towards her own cognitive methods and mechanisms, comprising both cognitive and affective elements, and revealed in the agent’s perception of reasons to withhold or defer in her judgment on the basis of their deliverances. The level of self-trust you have in a domain can be at odds with your own judgment about how reliable you are in a domain, as cognitive habits lag behind reflective awareness. (2012: 238)

Exclusion can undermine the intellectual self-trust when,

because of who you are, you do not receive affirmation in your capacities as an inquirer, in a domain, by having others take you at your word- or at least take you seriously, as someone whose opinion deserves engagement- it is predictable that you will suffer a loss of self-trust. If affirmation comes too readily on account of social privilege rather than competence, your self-trust will suffer an opposite distortion. (ibid: 237)

The lack of intellectual self-trust as defined by Jones is the consequence of testimonial injustice due to overt prejudice. Such a lack can also develop when the person is not able to access the proper reasons for her exclusion - say, when prejudice is unspoken - or interpret her own
condition of self-exclusion as being driven by internalised processes of self-exclusion. A ‘bound to fail’ attitude can develop as a result of both these conditions. If repeated attempts at success in a domain are frustrated, the person is bound to lose confidence in her abilities, and she would not rely on the deliverances of her methods and mechanisms, concluding that the failure it’s her own (ibid: 243). Such a consciousness of epistemic failure instills doubt in the mind of the subject, as well in her own self-assessment as a credible epistemic agent, who will not not consider herself sufficiently competent in the domain of her attempts. The source of trust and confidence will then be sought outside her judgment, and the reasons for such exclusion would be accessible only by relying upon the information available in the very context vitiated by prejudice.

Summing up, we can provide a more precise characterization of ‘bound to fail’ attitudes. ‘Bound to fail’ attitudes are a form of hermeneutical injustice (in Fricker’s sense) arising from a widespread prejudice in the context of choice, that the person fails to appreciate due to misrecognition, uncertainty, or a lack of intellectual self-trust. It is a form of injustice that affects the capacity of persons to appreciate the sources of their sentiments of failure, and trace back those failures to their proper source.

3. Equality of educational opportunities and the significance of choice

When the education system mirrors the inegalitarian character of the society, the opportunities of success for students coming from low income backgrounds will tend to reproduce the educational pattern of their parents. We argued that a crucial factor that helps to explain this correlation consists in the self-exclusionary attitude disadvantaged students develop towards higher-educational achievements they consider unobtainable. The paradigmatic case of self-exclusion we considered is that of ‘bound to fail’ attitudes. We argued that, in presence of policies that grant wider access to better education, the persistence of ‘bound to fail’ attitudes may not to be concern of distributive justice, but is a concern ‘epistemic’ injustice. Where the general expectation for low-income students is low, confidence in the capacity of realizing a valuable life-plan is frustrated.

The general formulation of the idea that inequality, in its different forms, frustrates our capacity of valuing choices of our life-plans, is due to Rawls’ Theory of Justice (Rawls 1999, 2nd ed.). Rawls
refers to ‘self-respect’ as “perhaps the most important primary good” whose social bases a society governed by principles of justice should be able to distribute. Rawls defines self-respect as having two aspects:

First of all... it includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions. (ibid., p. 386).

However, he continues:

When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavors. It is clear then why self-respect is a primary good. Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism. (ibidem)

The bases of self-respect, for Rawls, are governed by the second principle of justice, in conditions of ‘fair equality of opportunities’. But this latter concept Rawls means that the social order is not to establish and secure the more attractive prospects of those better off unless doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate, such that “those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances.” (ibid., p. 63). More specifically, he adds:

[A]ssuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class. (ibid, p. 63)

Issues regarding the nature of fair equality in the specific domain of educational opportunities have been widely discussed after Rawls, leading to a debate whose contenders are mainly
egalitarian theorists and those who defend the idea of education as a “positional good”.\textsuperscript{14} We will not discuss these positions here, but it suffices to notice for our purpose that these authors seem to share a common assumption, the idea that an educational system enhancing fair equality of opportunity would favour equal prospects of achievement for those similarly motivated and endowed. Yet, standing the argument of the previous section, such a project falls short of addressing how the provision of educational goods by means of progressive policies would alleviate the attitude of failure and lack of self-respect - as Rawls would put it. When the very endowment and motivation of self-excluding minorities are affected by the burdens of epistemic injustice, nothing guarantees that their expectations will be fostered, even within a system of generally trustworthy institutions that promotes fair equality of educational opportunities, by such affirmative action programs. Thus, it can happen that even within a democratic education system that in principle promotes equality, students from disadvantaged or low-income backgrounds would still misrecognize their conditions of failure as their own fault, and in doing so burden their sense of self-worth. Even more so, this can happen when the person has no rational ground to blame a largely trustworthy institution that seeks to promote equality of opportunity.

The idea that a democratic system of educational opportunities may fail to live up to its ideal is not a welcome news, and of course many would object that not only this is a commitment we should not give up to, but that the claim is also false. Inclusive policies do have effect, in the long run, on the appreciation students and parents have of the value of education. But while this claim is contingently true, also the reverse holds, as Corak’s data show.

The point is rather a general one: shall we accept that a concern of justice stands when institutions try their best to promote inclusive policies? Granting that in the non-ideal conditions democratic education can only partially comply with the requirements of justice, what else shall be done once those policies are in place? For instance, shall we force students to attend higher education, if they voluntarily choose not to?

The argument has its appeal. After all - one may say - it is up to a person, willing to chose in her best interest, to buy the consequences of her choices, provided that she has sufficient opportunities to realize a meaningful life plan or redress her conditions of disadvantage.

\textsuperscript{14} For the debate on equality of educational opportunities, see Koski and Reich (2006), Brighouse and Swift (2006), Anderson (2007), Satz (2007), Bou Habib (2010), Kotzee (2013).
Arguments of this sort are voiced by those scholars who hold valid the distinction between choices and circumstances, and believe that justice should only neutralize the effects of the latter, for a person cannot be responsible for events that are not in her control. On the contrary, when a choice is made in absence of coercion or of a widespread prejudice due to epistemic injustice, there is no obligation of justice to redress the bad luck that may follow from it. Choices dictated by ‘bound to fail’ attitudes seem a plain case of the second sort, for they are voluntary acts of withdrawal from social engagement made in full awareness of the consequences that may possibly ensue from them.

Not so yet. It is necessary that a person has made a voluntary choice in order to judge her responsible for the consequences of her choice; but from this claim it doesn’t follow that voluntary choice alone is sufficient to judge her responsible. The voluntariness of a choice is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to hold someone responsible for her actions. Bound to fail attitudes are cases of voluntary choices that do not yet justify claims of responsibility because they result from a context that halts the person’s capacity to value the choices she makes. To explain this point, we should pay attention to the fact that epistemic injustice is often incorporated in the moral attitudes of social actors. These can take many forms and quite common in the layman, ranging from condescension to judgments of undeserved advantage (especially in case of affirmative action policies). More crucially, those attitudes are reflected in the poor self-assessment of disadvantaged students which lay the ground to their own expectation failure and self-blame. A suggestion that can help to explain how coercive schemes of unspoken prejudice may affect people’s capacities comes from A. C. Julius, who has addressed this issue from the point of views of what he calls “framing someone”:

I frame you if I act with the intention of leading you to act in a way that advances my interests. …I must not frame you unless I can justify doing so by appeal to your own interests or to other choices that you have made or to other principles or ethical contexts that my action calls up (Julius 2003: 328).

Among the ways someone could be framed, Julius mentions the case when “the framed person gains nothing from having been framed” and yet “she has often chosen her earlier actions in the knowledge that would lead the framer to frame her; such a pre-history might supply a justification by choice were it to imply that she has consented to the framing”. (ibid.)
Julius is right in identifying in the ‘pre-history’ of past choices the source of the expectation that a person would have nothing to object to be framed in a way that would curb her future choices. The source of this expectation would be rational after all for the framer, since the past choices of the person being framed can be explained as consent, or just merely disregard for one’s own condition.

Our suggestion is that ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are the self-fulfilling effect of a widespread prejudice that frames the choice of the disadvantaged by expecting failure in her achievements. One may chose so by just being careless, or actively disregarding the consequences of one’s choices. In other, even more interesting cases, self-blame can emerge as the response to a scheme of coercion that appears perfectly justifiable by justice. Examples here are parents’ legal duty to send their children to school, or the requirements of having an educational degree in running for public offices. As such obligations appear justifiable upon reflection, the disadvantaged students, and their parents alike, would have nobody else to blame if not themselves for their lack of ability, talent, capital, or simply as something they even deserve.

This may appear a conjectural story of the sources of self-respect that is over conceding to those who simply lack sufficient effort and motivation. Perhaps this is true, at least in some instances, but offering counterexamples to a conjectural story would miss the moral of the story. The moral is that ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are a concern of justice, even when they appear the product of a voluntary choice, because they affect people’s capacity of valuing choices in general.

The crucial distinction here is between making a particular choice and valuing one’s capacity of making a choice. Clearly, a person that is able to make a choice, would normally attach some value (or utility) to the opportunity set she has. When an option is preferred over another, she acts rationally if she satisfies that preference. But sometimes people are indifferent with regard the opportunities they have: not only they are unable to assign value to those opportunities, but often they can’t even rank their preferences. In cases of this sort, it would not be irrational to toss a coin in order to choose. More so, letting the coin to choose on our behalf would still count as a voluntary act whose consequences we would be causally responsible for. Yet, the legal sense in which we are liable to punishment is quite distinct from the moral sense of being liable to judgements of praise or blame. In order to attribute moral responsibility, we should be able to identify the determining will that grounds the action. But letting a coin to choose on our behalf because of the little value of that choice would not express such a determination, for there is no will, good or bad, one could have possibly acted upon by tossing the coin. This way, the value
we attach to our lives loses significance because the choices we value are beyond our reach for causes that we do not control, and often have no knowledge of.

The moral psychology of ‘bound to fail’ attitudes reflects this deep sense of unworthiness that turns choices into chances. When choices lose their significance, because they don’t make the difference in our chances to achieve our goals, the capacity itself of making a choice loses its value. No matter whether a wider range of options is made available by an inclusive policy, the condition of disadvantage overrides those efforts, and preempts their hope for success.\(^\text{15}\)

If this analysis is correct, then ‘bound to fail attitudes’ have a bearing on both senses in which Rawls conceives of self-respect: they diminish the person’s sense of self-worth, and impair confidence in the ability to fulfill one’s intentions. But - we argued - they run also deeper in the moral psychology of persons, leading many to picture themselves as losers, even when democratic institutions enact more inclusive policies. Shall we have a concern of justice even in this case then, such as to make additional efforts to identify and remove those coercive aspects of societal prejudice that extend over the obligation of just distribution? We have not offered a definitive answer to this question, but have suggested that this concern is legitimate. What we have rather argued for is that, in offering an answer to this question, one should not conclude too quickly that a voluntary choice of self-exclusion justifies the absence of concern, because while it is true that societal prejudice may not frame the capacity of making choices, it does impairs the value we attach to that capacity. This latter aspect is a proper concern of justice

**Conclusion**

In this paper we argued that ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are an instance of a particular kind of epistemic wrongdoing, what we called - using Fricker’s jargon - ‘internalized’ hermeneutical injustice. ‘Bound to fail’ attitudes are a concern of justice because the cause of those internalized attitudes cannot be primarily ascribed to a non deceptive and autonomous choice of self-exclusion. The reason is that the condition under which a choice of self-exclusion is made is itself impaired, for that condition is due to factors that are outside the control of self-excluded and for which she bears no responsibility. Absent a provision of ex-ante equality in the epistemic resources, any choice that reinforces conditions of impairment cannot be ascribed to a

\(^{15}\) A more detailed version of this argument has been explored in Kollar, Santoro (2012). See also Scanlon for a seminal proposal on this topic (Scanlon 1988).
proper chooser. No one can autonomously form a plan of life that would accept being failure as inevitable, and when this is the case the impairing conditions have a preponderant weight in leading to attitudes of this sort. When social inequalities, and prejudices of different sorts hedged to them halt what people reasonably expect from their life-prospects, ‘bound to fail’ attitudes are a very human response persons have to lack of control over the ability to pursue their plans. This way, those inequalities and prejudices undermine the value that we attach to our choices by eroding the distinction between what is a matter of luck and what is a consequence of choice, and thereby the significance that we attach to the ability of making choices in the first place.

How should someone concerned with equality of opportunities address the cases of epistemic injustice that we have discussed here? We argued that policies intended to promote equality of educational opportunities, as well as curricula reform, are per se insufficient to provide the social bases for properly autonomous choice, for they are designed to provide redress of conditions of impairment by extending the set of available options, whereas the impairment lies in the capacity of appreciating options in general as worth pursuing. The point of view of hermeneutical injustice, both in the internalized and non internalized form, points out that the significance of choice is a problem of distributive justice. Any educational policy meant to address the problem of being 'bound to fail' by leveraging on the distribution of opportunities (for resources or welfare) misses the target. Despite the efforts of implementing educational reforms inspired by an ideal of equality of opportunities, the massive data on intergenerational transmission of educational resources show that these are strongly dependent on pre-existing socio-economic conditions. Any serious attempt of addressing 'bound to fail' attitudes within education programs will face then a roadblock insofar as reforms are taken in isolation from the wider context of societal upbringing. Even an institutional design inspired by an inclusive principle of educational equality, will fail its social purpose when these attitudes are predominant among the worst-offs. In this work we have addressed this issue from a normative perspective, arguing that in order to address the persistence of ‘bound to fail’ attitudes within democratic institutions, we should rather focus a conception of self-respect as due to everybody in virtue of their equal status as persons.16

16 This is also the inspiring ideal of ‘relational egalitarians’, which see equality has having an intrinsic value. In an egalitarian society, what matters is that "people should relate to one another as equals or should enjoy the same fundamental status" (Arneson 2013, para 1 under heading relational equality).
References


