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Review of *The Epistemology of Resistance* by Jose Medina

Michael J. Monahan

Marquette University, michael.monahan@marquette.edu

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The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations

José Medina (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). 332 pages. \$35.00 ISBN 978-019-992904-7.

Reviewed by Michael J. Monahan

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY, MICHAEL.MONAHAN@MARQUETTE.EDU

José Medina situates his recent book as an exercise in non-ideal theory (13) that furthers the project of articulating an account of the integral role that epistemology plays in relation to political theory and praxis. In other words, following in the footsteps of Lorraine Code, Miranda Fricker, Linda Alcoff, and so many other laborers in the vineyard of what might be thought of as liberatory epistemology, Medina's text undertakes the twofold project of articulating the particularly (though not *purely*) epistemic manifestations of oppression (especially in terms of gender, race, and sexuality) on the one hand, and the epistemic practices and conditions necessary for liberation from oppression on the other. Medina offers a diagnosis and a prescription in relation to the ways and means whereby oppression harms us in our particular capacities as *knowers*, and the ways and means whereby our knowledge practices and standards reinforce, legitimate, or mitigate oppression. The task he thus sets for himself is indubitably ambitious, and he draws upon a diverse array of thinkers, traditions, and examples to achieve his aims. The end result is an impressive example of the integral link between intellectual work and activism, pairing rigorous scholarship and theoretical acumen with a clear sensitivity to the ways in which those intellectual virtues will or will not "pay off" in terms of concrete action. The range and depth of *The Epistemology of Resistance* is such that I cannot hope to offer a chapter-by-chapter summary in the scope of this review, so I will proceed by offering a very brief sketch of the overall argument before offering a more in-depth account of what I take to be one crucial aspect of the text.

Medina makes clear from the outset that his focus is upon the "epistemic aspects of our social interactions" that "take place in complex and diverse communities under conditions of oppression" (3). As he argues in the course of the text, oppression functions in part by fostering in the oppressors a kind of ignorance, insensitivity, and indifference to the suffering of others that he calls *epistemic arrogance* (31), while among the oppressed it fosters *ego skepticism*, which is "a skepticism about the self, about its capacities and even about its very existence" (42). Oppression thus fosters both a first-order ignorance about the workings of the social world and one's role within that world, and a *meta-ignorance* that obscures one's sense of one's own epistemic failings (149). In other words, under just epistemic conditions, one will typically acknowledge one's own epistemic lacunae—one will have some knowledge of one's ignorance, but oppression facilitates an ignorance of one's own ignorance through a variety of mechanisms Medina describes in compelling detail. Significantly, this ignorance must be understood as an *active ignorance* (56) for which

we bear responsibility as individuals and as members of communities (226). This active ignorance, functioning on both the first-order and the meta-level, aims at establishing a dominant mode of understanding the world that drowns out, disavows, or ignores alternative understandings. Part of the epistemic harm is thus that the false universal of (for example) the masculine or white perspective, in establishing itself as the *normative* hegemonic view, creates epistemic conditions in which it is very difficult for alternative, *resistant* perspectives to assert themselves. At the heart of Medina's critical endeavor is thus a critique of any epistemological theory that makes the arrival at some stable endpoint, or even a fixed and settled consensus, its *telos*. Rather, what should motivate our epistemic endeavors is the fostering of what he refers to as a "kaleidoscopic consciousness" (200) in which knowledge is always in *friction* with *resistant* perspectives between communities, between individuals within a community, and *internally* to a given agent. Only through this ongoing process of friction are we able to approach "meta-lucidity" (192).

The "resistance" of the book's title, therefore, refers both to the praxis of resisting oppression, and to the positive kinds of *epistemic resistance* that Medina argues are necessary components of that praxis. Adequately resisting oppression, in other words, requires that we take responsibility for our epistemic shortcomings. Through particularly compelling use of examples, Medina lays out his account of the responsibility we bear as epistemic agents on a variety of levels and vectors. As individuals, we bear responsibility both for our first-order ignorance of the different situations and perspectives of relevant others and their histories (and very often in the case of the privileged, of one's own particular difference, perspective, and history), as well as for the meta-ignorance we bear in relation to that first-order ignorance (the ways in which we ignore or disavow our own ignorance). Both of these manifestations of ignorance, however, are fostered and supported within and through communities, and thus there must always be a *social* aspect to that responsibility (158). To advance his articulation of this social aspect, Medina's text offers a thorough and sophisticated account of what he refers to as "the insufficiencies of purely individualistic and purely collectivist views of responsibility with respect to justice" (313). While he does not deny that individuals can and do act as individuals, and collectivities act collectively, he argues that the most efficacious political resistance will require "chained action," where actions are repeated by others, and "coalesce in such a way that they become a *traceable performative chain*, with each action in the chain having traceable effects in the subsequent actions of others" (225). This makes it possible, he argues, for us to conceive of our responsibilities as *chained* to that of diverse others (individual and collective). Ultimately, an epistemology of resistance aims not at the assimilation or even *integration* of all difference, but rather seeks a "network solidarity" (308) that acknowledges difference, and fosters a pluralism that can generate and sustain the beneficial epistemic friction that Medina holds to be a necessary condition both for effective resistance of oppression and for the cultivation of the epistemic virtues conducive to *meta-lucidity* under conditions of what he refers to as "polyphonic contextualism" (206).

Having offered this very brief sketch of the overall argument of Medina's text, I will now turn to a more focused engagement with a specific theme, namely, the theme of metaphor in relation to our accounts of epistemic justice. While Medina employs such metaphors throughout the text, he only addresses the topic explicitly, and briefly, in the forward. In the remainder of this review, I will argue that Medina's actual use of metaphor offers advantages that remain only implicit in the text, and that rendering them explicit can, in fact, strengthen his overall argument.

It is difficult to take on issues of epistemology and oppression without drawing upon a long and well-established line of metaphors for knowledge that appeal to *vision*. The hegemony of this metaphor, as well as the more common and compelling critiques of it, are doubtless well known to anyone who has worked on these issues.¹ Aside from the inherent privileging of perceptual *ability* to be found in contrasting with *disability*, the visual paradigm has been critiqued for entailing a rigid subject/object distinction, and generating an understanding of perception as a passive phenomenon. In the forward to *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Medina states that he hopes "to have contributed a bit to such overcoming [of the visual paradigm] by avoiding the visual language at least in some of my discussions when it was possible and appropriate," turning instead to more neutral terms like *insensitivity* and *numbness* (xii). In describing this decision, he appeals to the "problems associated with equating epistemic deficiencies with perception disabilities," but makes little reference to the more theoretical critiques of the visual metaphor (*ibid.*).

This is a weakness, I submit, insofar as the metaphors that Medina actually uses in the course of his text manifest advantages over the visual paradigm in terms of theory that both illustrate his larger understanding and demonstrate the weaknesses of the visual paradigm. For example, his use of the *friction* metaphor appeals to touch. *Polyphonic contextualism* and the need for our actions to "echo" within a context of chained action appeal to sound (244). These appeals to touch and sound avoid the theoretical limitations of the visual paradigm in ways that Medina himself does not make explicit. To touch is at the same time to be touched, thus avoiding the radical subject/object distinction common to the visual paradigm, and placing the touching/touched in both a passive and active role in relation to one another. Likewise, sound is a matter of the *interaction* of components through a medium that connects the listener with the source of the sound. Indeed, sound is in fact generated by a kind of resistance between objects, either when one object strikes another, as with a drum, or when two objects are brought together in a way that generates friction, as with a bow and violin string. This means that friction/touch always generates sound (even if it is not always audible by humans), which in turn is always *felt* as much as heard, demonstrating the interconnectivity of these two modes of sensation.

Medina's use of these metaphors of touch and sound thus help, because of the ways in which they function as *sensations*, to illuminate his emphasis on interconnectivity, and the role of resistance in epistemic life. For there would

be no touch, and no sound, without resistance (friction) and movement. We see in these metaphors, therefore, an illustration not only of the centrality of resistance but of the need for constant and dynamic development and change in our epistemic life—that is, as Medina asserts in relation to knowledge, we are not aiming toward the arrival at some fixed and static conclusion but, rather, at the ongoing generation of friction. Thus, while the standard paradigm of vision (which is in actuality a very deep misunderstanding of how vision works) invites us to think of objects as discrete individuals, where one actively sees and the other is passively seen and it is common for images to be understood as static, the metaphors Medina employs avoid this misapprehension of the social world and its role in our capacity as knowers.

This being said, Medina is quite rightly concerned with the impact the use of such metaphors may have on those who lack access to one or more avenues of sense perception, and though his use of aural and tactile metaphors may not escape this concern either, he makes clear what he sees as the advantages of his preferred terminology. “Insensitivity and numbness are more appropriate than blindness because,” he tells us, “they can be easily extended to the non-perceptual, and indeed the epistemic deficiencies in question go beyond our perceptual organs” (xii). Thus, in addition to the disrespect the visual metaphor shows for blind people, Medina’s concern is that perception in general does not capture the full scope of the epistemic deficiencies that are the focus of the text, and so he proposes the terms “insensitivity” and “numbness.” Nevertheless, I find it difficult to understand how to conceive of insensitivity or numbness apart from some appeal to sensory (and thus perceptual) organs. On the one hand, to be insensitive, or numb, literally just means to lack *sensation*. We may use such terms to describe emotional distance or lack of tact, but when we apply them in this way to “non-perceptual” deficiencies, they are still metaphors that appeal to the appropriate use of functioning sensory organs, and so do not avoid the disrespecting of those who lack the use of those organs. On the other hand, given Medina’s own commitments to the *affective* dimension of epistemic interactions (81), and the foregrounding of embodiment (268), it seems strange for him to draw a clear boundary between the perceptual and the non-perceptual in the first place. Insensitivity and numbness are thus, like metaphors of vision, metaphoric appeals to sensory organs (in general), yet they are more than *mere* metaphors, insofar as a polyphonic contextualism aiming at the generation of epistemic *friction* between inescapably socially embodied agents seems on every level to be concerned with *literal*, and not just metaphorical, sensitivity to oneself and others. This move does not, in other words, escape his concern about disrespect, and given the role that perception plays in his account of epistemology, it may not be possible to completely avoid the problem. How to address it in the long term is an important question beyond the scope of this review.

In conclusion, Medina’s outstanding book makes a crucial and timely contribution to a cluster of philosophical problems spanning several sub-fields and disciplines that contribute to our understanding of the relationship between

epistemology and oppression. It most assuredly deserves to be read by those theorists and activists working in and around these issues.

NOTES

1. See Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 12.
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