

# EXPLAINING MANSPLAINING THROUGH FRAMEWORKS OF SILENCING, EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, AND GENDER METAPHYSICS



## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that mansplaining is not just a conversational quirk but a mechanism of gender construction that reinforces systemic oppression. Drawing on the frameworks of silencing, epistemic injustice, and gender metaphysics, I come to the main thesis that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed, reinforcing hierarchical power structures and perpetuating societal inequality. As I further demonstrate, mansplaining functions as a form of epistemic violence that silences women and subordinates them within testimonial exchanges.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Mansplaining, a term coined by Rebecca Solnit in her essay “Men Explain Things to Me,” is a prevalent—albeit underestimated—gendered phenomenon with both serious implications and pernicious harms.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, despite its systematic societal impact and recognition, mansplaining’s philosophical analyses are scarce. The ones that do exist fail to address the question of gender construction in mansplaining, which, as I argue, is pivotal.

This paper’s goal is first to analyze the phenomenon of mansplaining and understand the roles of epistemic agents, the mechanisms involved, as well as the harms that follow. It will then address the question of gender, which, as I want to prove, is key to understanding mansplaining. I will examine mansplaining through three philosophical lenses: silencing (II), epistemic injustice (III), and gender metaphysics (IV) to arrive at the conclusion that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed.

To start, the framework of silencing will lay the foundation for dissecting mansplaining. This approach situates mansplaining within the realm of philosophy of language due to its fundamental nature as a testimonial exchange. The next section will unravel the magnitude of harm perpetuated by mansplaining through the framework of epistemic injustice as articulated by Miranda Fricker.<sup>2</sup> Yet, to comprehensively unpack mansplaining, an examination of power dynamics is imperative. Herein lies the role of Sally Haslanger’s account of feminist metaphysics: offering insights into the gendered construction and embeddedness of mansplaining within power structures.<sup>3</sup> At the end of my exploration, I hope to have shed light on the gender dimension of mansplaining.

## II. MANSPLAINING AS SILENCING

Mansplaining is often described as a situation that “occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about

something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he’s talking to does.”<sup>4</sup> This conceptualization has been extensively researched within philosophy of language and substantiated by empirical findings.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from Nicole Dular’s understanding, there are two types of ‘splaining:

*Mansplaining*: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of gendered prejudicial identity stereotypes.

*X-splaining*: a dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles (of hearer/receiver of knowledge and speaker/giver of knowledge in a testimonial exchange) due to the operation of a prejudicial identity stereotype.<sup>6</sup>

What is implicit in Dular’s classification is the power dynamic. The hearer belongs to a dominant group juxtaposed against a speaker in a marginalized position.<sup>7</sup> Mansplaining, as Mia Mercado puts it, “implies that the person best suited to explain the topic at hand is a man, regardless of subject matter and whether or not the man present is the one most qualified to do the explaining.”<sup>8</sup>

Casey Rebecca Johnson’s inquiry starts with a classification, presenting three distinct typologies of mansplaining: “‘Well, actually’ mansplaining, straw-mansplaining, and speech act-confusion mansplaining.”<sup>9</sup> The forthcoming discussion will focus on mansplaining as a “speech-act confusion,” which can be characterized by its illocutionary force. Speech-acts, in general, can be analyzed on multiple levels; one can distinguish between locutionary acts (saying anything at all), illocutionary acts (saying something with a specific

4 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “mansplain,” accessed December 9, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mansplain>.

5 Ursula Lutzky and Robert Lawson, “Gender Politics and Discourses of #mansplaining, #manspreading, and #maninterruption on Twitter,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119861807>.

6 Nicole Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (University of Western Ontario, 2021): 12, 10.5206/fpq/2021.1.8482.

7 Dular, “Epistemic Injustice,” 12.

8 Mia Mercado, “Here Is What Mansplaining Actually Looks Like,” *Bustle* (2017), <https://www.bustle.com/p/here-is-what-mansplaining-actually-looks-like-because-its-way-more-common-than-you-probably-think-57097>.

9 Casey Rebecca Johnson, “Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (University of Western Ontario, 2020), 10.5206/fpq/2020.4.8168.

1 Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Haymarket Books, 2015), 1–16.

2 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2013).



force), and perlocutionary acts (further effects of saying something with a specific force).<sup>10</sup> The pivotal factor contributing to a successful performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake.<sup>11</sup> Johnson's examination operates through the lens of illocutionary force, a concept developed by Rae Langton,<sup>12</sup> encapsulating instances in testimonial exchanges when, due to a lack of uptake, "women are able to utter, but not able to fully successfully refuse."<sup>13</sup>

To get a better understanding of the concept, let us analyze the example of mansplaining as a speech-act confusion taken from Solnit's book and reformulated by Johnson:

- 1) Rebecca: I've been researching Eadweard Muybridge, and . . .
- 2) Ralph: And have you heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year? It considers all sorts of important . . . (*holds forth*)
- 3) Sally: That's her book
- 4) Ralph: *continues undeterred*
- 5) Sally: That's HER book!<sup>14</sup>

In (1), Rebecca intends to make an assertion, however, Ralph wrongfully interprets it as a query. Sally's utterance, in contrast to that, is clearly formulated as a reply to her interlocutor. She does not take Rebecca's utterance as a request for information or a question. In this regard, it is apparent that Rebecca's uptake fails to be successful, from Ralph's viewpoint. As Johnson emphasizes,

We can see why Ralph's behaviour is pernicious when we consider why he reacted to Rebecca's utterance (1) in the ways conventional for questions. Clearly the conversational context did not dictate that her utterance (1) must be a question. We can see from (3) that Sallie responded as if it were an assertion—she is attempting in (3) to show Ralph that he was mistaken to react as if Rebecca were trying to ask a question.<sup>15</sup>

10 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., eds. James Opie Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford University Press, 1975), 83–164.

11 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 138.

12 Rae Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 25–64, 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199247066.003.0002.

13 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 8.

14 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 15.

15 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 16.

Ralph's response is thus informed by noxious social structures, and, as a result, Rebecca is left silenced. In Johnson's words, "This means that women who are in conversation with Ralph and people with similar habits and attitudes, are illocutionary disabled in Langton's sense."<sup>16</sup>

To try and understand Ralph's behavior, we ought to make inferences about his beliefs. In his mind, the woman's expertise is perceived as comparatively inferior. This perception positions the male individual in a self-ascribed superior stance, assuming a role of authority in proffering explanations. Consequently, this assessment likely involves ascribing woman's expertise as necessitating *his* guidance.<sup>17</sup> Ralph's utterance in (2) suggests that he takes the gender of the speaker into account, reacting to Rebecca's utterance in the way conventional for requesting information or questioning. The fundamental issue inherent in Ralph's reaction pertains to gender dynamics' undue influence in the act of asserting statements. This reliance, consciously or not, propagates a spectrum of misogynistic beliefs.

As Johnson concludes, "Facing mansplaining as a recurrent response is frustrating, exhausting, and epistemically stunting."<sup>18</sup> The consistent treatment of women's attempted assertions as requests for information poses an obstacle to their successful transmission of knowledge through testimony. Moreover, "Knowing that they are likely to be mansplained to may also make women reluctant to testify at all."<sup>19</sup> Mansplaining is, thus, an *epistemically violent act* due to, in Kristie Dotson's words, "the failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges."<sup>20</sup>

While mansplaining as an instance of silencing is a useful and informative theory, it has notable limitations. Primarily, the research overlooks the ethical dimensions of the harms inflicted by mansplaining. Silencing constitutes a grave ethical wrong insofar as its victims are undermined in the capacity to transmit knowledge—the capacity that makes them rational beings.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Johnson's analysis does not encompass the entirety of mansplaining instances, warranting a more comprehensive theoretical scope. Nevertheless,

16 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

17 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

18 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 17.

19 Johnson, "Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force," 18.

20 Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236, 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x.

21 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.



philosophy of language provides a solid foundation for the continued exploration of the phenomenon.

### III. MANSPLAINING AS EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Miranda Fricker's book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, lays the groundwork for a field that aims at exploring epistemic practices in connection with societal injustices as well as their ethical and epistemic implications.<sup>22</sup> Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice is particularly relevant to understanding phenomena like mansplaining where women's testimony is undervalued due to identity-based prejudice.<sup>23</sup> In this section, I will use the concept of epistemic injustice in order to examine ethical and epistemic harms done to the rightful giver of knowledge in instances of mansplaining.

To grasp the depth of mansplaining, one must explore the concept of power—i.e., identity power—that Fricker bases her theory on.<sup>24</sup> As she elaborates, “identity power is an integral part of the mechanism of testimonial exchange, because of the need for hearers to use social stereotypes as heuristics in their spontaneous assessments of their interlocutor's credibility.”<sup>25</sup> In a situation where the stereotype embodies negative prejudice against the speaker, what follows is a deflated judgment of her credibility that culminates in both epistemic and ethical dysfunction.

Fricker's central case of testimonial injustice unfolds when:

1. A hearer must judge the credibility of a speaker,
2. the hearer assigns a speaker less credibility than they are due, and
3. this credibility deficit can be traced back to prejudice.<sup>26</sup>

Testimonial injustice can be incidental, if its origin and consequences are isolated; or systematic, if it shares a common origin and consequences with other injustices across different spheres of the subject's life.<sup>27</sup> Mansplaining is thus a systematic case of a prejudicial

credibility deficit. As Fricker emphasizes, such cases, if persistent, can be seriously harmful due to a serious epistemic insult, a loss of epistemic courage, as well as other ethical and epistemic harms.<sup>28</sup>

To get to the core of this exploration, one must examine the primary harms that mansplaining causes—the harms that make it noxious. Fricker focuses on an account of epistemic injustice involving “one being wronged in their capacity as a knower.”<sup>29</sup> According to her, for rational beings, being a knower is essential to our human value and intrinsic worth.<sup>30</sup> As she concludes, “when someone suffers a testimonial injustice, they are degraded *qua* knower, and they are symbolically degraded *qua* human.”<sup>31</sup> However, I argue that in instances of testimonial injustice where the underlying prejudiced stereotype explicitly includes the notion that the relevant social category is inherently lesser—such as in the case of mansplaining—the dimension of degradation *qua* woman is not simply symbolic, it is a part of the core epistemic insult.

What follows are secondary harms, such as epistemic and practical harms, as well as harms to one's identity. As Fricker notes, the former can result in a loss of knowledge, which is an epistemic disadvantage for the speaker and an epistemic dysfunction for her community.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, certain epistemic virtues, like epistemic courage, might be lost as well.<sup>33</sup> Practical harms can simply result in not getting a job, whereas harms to one's identity may result in one losing self-confidence in herself as an expert or even a giver of knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of testimonial injustice does not encompass mansplaining fully. On the contrary, it seems to be a perfect addition to the previously explained concept of silencing. What silencing failed to address—the ethical and epistemic harms—can be found in Fricker's theory. Therefore, to continue the exploration, we need to come up with a new definition of the phenomenon. I propose the following:

Mansplaining is a systematic case of gendered prejudicial credibility deficit that leads to a subversion of the roles of a “speaker/giver of knowledge” and “hearer/receiver of knowledge.” It carries significant epistemic and ethical harms, as well as bears illocutionary force. Due to gender prejudice,

28 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 58.

29 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

30 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

31 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

32 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 46.

33 Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 16.

34 Especially noteworthy in academia, if we follow Dular in “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 17.

22 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

23 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

24 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

25 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.

26 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

27 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 27.



the man imposes his testimony on the woman and refuses to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange, owing to ignorance. As a result, he undermines her in the capacity of a knower, degrading her *qua* human.

Overall, epistemic injustice explains the phenomenon well. However, even though it is rooted in questions of power, it addresses the question of gender as far as gender stereotype, hence. The question of gender construction remains untouched. That is where gender metaphysics come in.

#### IV. GENDER METAPHYSICS—THE KEY TO IT ALL

In this paper, gender has already been addressed in some manner. It was, however, mostly in relation to the creation and impact of stereotypes. As stated, it is imperative to recognize that at the very core of mansplaining lies gender and its construction. Both in the analyses of mansplaining as illocutionary force and mansplaining as epistemic injustice, it is taken for granted. To examine how power relations unfold, I need to disentangle the gender construction that takes place in the dysfunctional testimonial exchange. The culmination of this paper is a detailed analysis of the testimonial exchange that takes place in mansplaining, with an emphasis on the social construction of gender(s).

It is common for people to say that gender is the social meaning of sex. That is not wrong *per se*, but as a definition, it is ambiguous and semantically underspecified. A better distinction is offered by Sally Haslanger in her work, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*.<sup>35</sup> As she contends, our patriarchal framework is structured by the assumption that there are two (and only two) sexes; a person is either a female or a male.<sup>36</sup> By enforcing that view, not only does one deny the existence of intersex people, but they also give rise to a much stronger assumption: that there are only two genders, a man and a woman.<sup>37</sup> As Haslanger elaborates, “Gender, as opposed to sex is not about testicles and ovaries, the penis and the uterus,

but about identities or about the location of groups within a system of social relation.”<sup>38</sup> She defines gender as a social class structured hierarchically by oppressive relations where physical markers justify differential treatment.<sup>39</sup>

Haslanger’s account of gender involves the background assumption that women are oppressed and that they are oppressed *qua* women. Moreover, oppression is a structural phenomenon that positions certain groups as disadvantaged and others as advantaged or privileged in relation to them. It comes in different forms, such as cultural imperialism and exploitation; or, in the case of mansplaining—marginalization, powerlessness, and systematic epistemic violence.

What Haslanger offers is an analysis that defines gender as a *social class*.<sup>40</sup> She grasps the concept as follows:

$S$  functions as a woman in context  $C$  iff<sub>df</sub>

- i)  $S$  is observed or imagined in  $C$  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 background ideology of  $C$  as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies  $S$ ’s occupying such a position); and
- iii) the fact that  $S$  satisfied (i) and (ii) plays a role in  $S$ ’s systematic subordination in  $C$ , that is, along some dimension,  $S$ ’s social position in  $C$  is oppressive, and  $S$ ’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.<sup>41</sup>

As we already know, the very process of mansplaining starts with a testimonial exchange and leads to a subversion of the roles of a giver and receiver of knowledge. To look at the process through the lens of gender construction, in Haslanger’s conceptualization, we need to first assume that gender is a social class and is positioned in a hierarchy.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, gender

categories are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (*viz.*, women) is

35 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

36 Sally Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Construction of Reality,” *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, Alison Stone (Routledge, 2017), 158, 10.4324/9781315758152-14.

37 Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction,” 158.

38 Haslanger, “The Sex/Gender Distinction,” 167.

39 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

40 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.

41 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 235.

42 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.



socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), typically within the context of other forms of economic and social oppression.<sup>43</sup>

The man, in the act of mansplaining, not only constructs his gender in relation to the woman but also imposes the subordinate position—womanhood—on the interlocutor. This act is not only harmful because of the actions of the individual man, but when situated in the broader context of structural oppression towards women, it reinforces gender stereotypes and binary frameworks and simply fortifies patriarchy. Mansplaining is thus one way gender is constructed.

Given that mansplaining functions within broader patriarchal structures, it does more than reinforce stereotypes—it actively constructs and maintains the category of womanhood as a site of epistemic subordination. However, one might argue that this presumes womanhood is inherently oppressive. Haslanger’s framework does not claim that being a woman is necessarily tied to oppression *in all contexts*, but rather that gender, as socially constructed, operates within a hierarchical system. The category of “woman” exists within structures that position it in opposition to male privilege, reinforcing subordination through epistemic and material conditions. Yet, this raises an important question: could womanhood exist outside of oppression? Haslanger acknowledges that if social conditions changed—if oppressive structures were dismantled—the category of woman could take on a different meaning or even cease to exist in its current form.<sup>44</sup> This is what makes gender a contingent rather than an essential property. In this sense, my argument aligns with Haslanger’s social constructivist approach: mansplaining reinforces a specific historical and structural version of womanhood, but the category itself is neither fixed nor necessarily oppressive outside current patriarchal conditions.

In conclusion, Haslanger’s framework provides a solid understanding of how gender operates as a social class, influencing individuals’ behaviors and reinforcing structural oppression.<sup>45</sup> Mansplaining, viewed through her lens, is one way gender is constructed. It becomes evident that mansplaining is not merely an isolated incident, but a manifestation of broader societal structures and power relations rooted in gender construction.

## V. CONCLUSION

This essay aimed to elucidate the phenomenon of mansplaining through frameworks of silencing, epistemic injustice, and gender metaphysics. It unpacked the phenomenon, examined the roles of epistemic agents within testimonial exchanges, uncovered its underlying mechanisms, and addressed the resulting harms, emphasizing the pivotal role of gender in its interpretation.

The first section, “Mansplaining as Silencing,” provided a semantic foundation for further exploration. I started by bringing up Dular’s definition of mansplaining as “dysfunctional subversion of epistemic roles in testimonial exchange,” driven by gender-based prejudicial identity stereotypes.<sup>46</sup> Next, by analyzing an example taken from Solnit’s book, I examined Johnson’s thesis of mansplaining as illocutionarily disabling.<sup>47</sup> Understanding mansplaining as an obstacle to women’s successful transmission of knowledge through testimony, an act of silencing, and an epistemically violent one, provides the basis to underscore it as a pernicious phenomenon with serious implications.

In the next section, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” I elaborated on harms that mansplaining causes, applying Fricker’s theory.<sup>48</sup> The central point frames mansplaining partially as testimonial injustice. Mansplaining was found to be a systematic case of a prejudicial credibility deficit. In this act, not only is the interlocutor “wronged in their capacity as a knower,” but also degraded *qua* woman.<sup>49</sup>

What constituted a research gap was an exploration of mansplaining as a phenomenon that has gender construction at its very core. To start, I differentiated the terms “sex” and “gender,” then brought up Haslanger’s conceptualization of gender categories as hierarchical in terms of how one is socially positioned. In a setting where women constitute a subordinate group and men belong to the dominant one, gender is established as a social class.<sup>50</sup> I argued that the actions of the man do not only construct his gender in relation to the woman but also impose the subordinate position—womanhood—on his interlocutor. This leads to the conclusion that mansplaining is one way gender is constructed. What remained imperative was the

46 Dular, “Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice,” 12.

47 Johnson, “Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force,” 17.

48 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

49 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

50 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.

43 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 229–30.

44 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 261–69.

45 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 228.



acknowledgment of how prejudicial the phenomenon is. This is not because of the actions of the individual man, but instead is situated in the broader context of structural oppression towards women, as it reinforces gender stereotypes and binary frameworks and upholds societal structures that perpetuate power imbalances.

In final words, mansplaining is a distortive, epistemically violent phenomenon with a distinct illocutionary force. It is a disruptive subversion of the roles of a speaker/giver of knowledge and hearer/receiver of knowledge that brings harms into account, reinforcing oppressive, hierarchical structures. It extends beyond individual instances and reflects deeper societal frameworks and power dynamics embedded in the construction of gender. Taking it as a conversational quirk not only diminishes the epistemically destructive nature of the phenomenon but also is simply an act that distorts women's perception of reality.



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