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Reflections on the authority of personal experience

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ABSTRACT: The authority of first person claims may be understood from an epistemic perspective or as a matter of social practice. Building on accounts of Hume, Nagel, and several more recent authors, it is argued that this authority should be understood as limited. To extend it beyond notions of what it is like to experience something, we shift from what should be a narrow subjective edge to a territory of objective claims, thereby reasoning incorrectly. A relevant application is the supposed authority of victims.

KEYWORDS: credibility, epistemic privilege, experience, Hume, Nagel, standpoint theory, testimony, *qualia*, victims, Wittgenstein

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I wish to discuss the supposed authority of appeals to personal experience. I explore both their epistemic credibility and their near-immunity, in some contexts, from critical scrutiny.

2. HUME ON TESTIMONY

I begin by considering issues of testimony as discussed in Hume's essay on miracles. As is well known, Hume argued that evidence from human testimony could never be sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miracle. (Hume, 1993) In evaluating the strength of testimonial evidence for a given claim, we need to consider two fundamental aspects: first of all the *trustworthiness* of the person or persons who are making the claim and secondly the *plausibility* of the claim itself. Trustworthiness of witnesses to miracles is usually highly suspect and, Hume maintains, even if it were perfect, it would be outweighed by the implausibility of the claim itself. In the nature of the case, that claim must be implausible given that a miraculous event must be by definition a violation of the laws of nature.

Trustworthiness may be considered under two aspects: competence, and motivational integrity with regard to a claim of this kind. Plausibility is judged with regard to the coherence of the claim with other empirically established claims – in other words, broad inductive support for that claim. Hume argued that testimony for a claim of miracle will never suffice to establish it as true or as well supported by evidence.

The need to consider plausibility and credibility is present not only regarding claims that others make on the basis of their experience but for claims that one would make on the basis of one's own experience. If we are to accept claims on the testimony of another person, we must presume that other person to be trustworthy, which in this context means that we presume him or her to have both competence and integrity with regard to the subject at hand. When there is reason to doubt either competence or reliability in the context, we may fail to accept the claim on that person's sayso. (This framework is standard in contemporary accounts of testimony.) Nearly all of Hume's considerations on these topics presume that one is considering the claim that a miracle has occurred on the basis of the testimony of persons other than oneself. The problem he emphasizes regarding miracles is that these other people were, or may have been, gullible, ill-educated, prone to religious enthusiasms, motivated to deceive in the context of establishing a new creed, and so on and so forth. In any event, Hume argues, testimonial evidence supplied by other people could not establish a claim that was overwhelmingly implausible, even if such persons were trustworthy to the highest degree. In Hume's terminology, a miracle is a "violation of the laws of nature;" in one footnote he offers a more careful definition according to which the violation of the laws of nature must be due to the intervention of a supernatural entity. (Hume, 1993)

The case where one seems oneself to have witnessed a miraculous event is barely alluded to in Hume's essay. I find two spots, at most, and at both Hume's comments are not exactly lucid. Hume considers an example featuring the Cardinal de Retz, who told a miracle story that he did not seem himself to credit, even though the witnesses to its claims were consistent and credible. Hume comments that the miracle alleged in that case, being supposed to have occurred in the eighteenth century, was unlike many others because the supposed event was not distant in time and space. But then he comments that even in a circumstance where a person was immediately present and thought himself to have observed a miraculous event, he could not accept the occurrence of the supposed miracle on the basis of just reasoning. Why not? Because the evidence would carry falsehood on its face: in other words, an event that one would suppose to be miraculous would (in the nature of the case) be highly implausible, given that it would be a violation of established laws of nature.

What I conclude from this is that if one were, oneself, the witness in such a case, the logic assessing testimony would not work differently. One would have to question one's own trustworthiness regarding one's own experience, and that for the same sorts of reasons that apply to other people. Clearly one would have to ask about the plausibility of the miracle claim, which would by definition be maximally low, and also about motivations that might make one prone to error or deception about the claim and one's own competence to assess claims of this sort. In the case of a claim to the effect that some wondrous event occurred, other people could be moved by vanity, heated imagination, religious enthusiasm, or fascination with the absurd and wonderful – as Hume so forcefully argued. So too could one could be moved in these ways oneself. And, accordingly, one would need to evaluate one's own trustworthiness in such a case.

If I believe myself to be experiencing or remembering some sensation or idea, I am in a sense a witness to my own experience. Say my experience leads me to assert that a miraculous event has occurred. I can of course consider the likelihood of my own claim; in the nature of the case, its likelihood must be low. I need also to consider my own trustworthiness regarding a claim of this kind. Could I be prone to error, misinterpretation, or self-deception about something like this? The answer is clearly affirmative: I am a human being like the others and will be subject to the same sorts of mistake.

3. INCORRIGIBILITY?

The idea that one may and often should scrutinize one's own knowledge and beliefs, as based on one's firsthand experience, is of course far from novel. Several decades back, philosophical discussions of the supposed 'in corrigibility' of beliefs about one's firsthand experience were common. The consensus emerging from them was that there is no thing as the incorrigibility of first person reports, if by "in corrigible" we mean that such claims, sincerely made, cannot be false. A person can misreport, misunderstand, misdescribe, or misremember things from her own experience. She can make incorrect inferences, erroneous extrapolations, and so forth on the basis of what she takes to be her own experience. There is no incorrigibility in the case.

Wittgenstein in his later work rejected the notion that ideas or sensations should be regarded as in any sense *objects* of experience that could be known. (Wittgenstein, 1963) On his account, roughly the following is true: one does not know one's own experience; one lives through it. There are no objects to be known; one's sensation or idea is not an entity in the head or mind, an entity one would be in a special position to observe or describe. On this account there would surely be no such thing as being an authority as to the correctness of a report about one's own experience. I can call such experience firsthand and insist that it is 'mine', but on a Wittgensteinian account, it would amount to a category mistake to suppose that I make reports about it or that I am in possession of some epistemic privilege or authority as to the accuracy of such reports. Wittgenstein preferred to think in terms of avowals, and not of reports.

4. NAGEL AND THE SUBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW

I shift now to consider the widely read essay "What is it Like to be a Bat?". In that work, Thomas Nagel forcibly argues that an organism has conscious states if and only if there is *something it is like* to be that organism. (Nagel, 1991) This 'something it is like' is the subjective character of experience, the '*pour soi*,' what the organism is like for itself as distinct from the '*en soi*' or what the organism is like in itself. On Nagel's account, I do know what it is like to be myself; presumably, since I am a human being, I know what it is like to be a human being. But I cannot know what it is like to be a bat. To know that, it would not suffice to understand how a bat would behave, or how I would behave if I were pretending to be a bat or were a bat. Behavior is not the issue. Nor is it a matter of me being myself, considering what

sort of experience a bat might have. Rather the question is how it feels *for a bat* to be a bat. And that I cannot know.

Now Nagel begins with bats; this can only be a beginning. He chose bats for a reason, but clearly, similar difficulties arise if one tries to grasp what it would be like a member of any other species. I cannot know what it is like to be a dog, a robin, a spider or a dolphin. But do I know what it is like to be some human being other than myself? Do I know what it is like to be a young man? An African politician? A warlord? Nagel acknowledges that sometimes the problem of knowing what it is like to be another arises within my own species. He says that the problem is not confined to exotic cases. It also exists between one person and another. What is the problem? It is that of *grasping the specific subjective character of the experience of another creature*. Point of view, Nagel says, is the essence of the internal world; there is an internal world for a subject only from the perspective of that subject. I have my point of view. I do not have the point of view of a bat, a dog, a spider or a dolphin. Nor do I have the point of view of a young man, a warlord, or an African politician. Nagel asserts firmly that my experience of the world is intrinsically inseparable from my point of view. As a matter of basic metaphysics, I do not have the point of view of any other person in this room. This point of view, the stance from which I am conscious of the world, is mine and mine alone.

If the point here is one about subjectivity and objectivity, then not only can I not know what it is like to be a warlord, I can't know what it is like to be my closest woman friend. As a matter of basic metaphysics and epistemology, only I know what it is like to experience the world as me. The fact that I know what it is like to experience the world from my point of view and not anyone else's, that mine is the point of view and the only point of view that I cannot subtract from the very nature of my experience, can seem profound or it can seem trivial. Either way, there is that basic fact.

In a footnote, Nagel states his main point against physicalism. It is that if one understood how subjective experience could have an objective nature, one would understand the existence of subjects other than oneself. Nagel has argued precisely that we *cannot* understand how subjective experience could have an objective nature. This is his major theme in the essay. He argues that we cannot understand even what it would mean for physicalism to be true, because to understand that we would have to understand how the subjective (a person's point of view) could become objective (publicly accessible, knowable by someone other than herself). And that -- how what is subjective in this sense could become objective -- is something we cannot understand.

Now Nagel states that he does not wish to endorse a position of solipsism. He allows that I would not know what it is like to be a deaf/blind man, for instance but his official position is that I *could know* what it is like to be someone other than myself, provided that person is *sufficiently similar* to me. (From this qualification, I would infer that Nagel would grant that I do not know what it is like to be a warlord, but would wish to maintain that I *do know* what it is like to be my closest woman friend.) But I do not think he can support the latter claim because he has committed himself to the universal epistemic theory that there is a fundamental sense in which no person can ever know what it is like, or would be like, to be any other person.

Accordingly, contrary to Nagel's official dissociation from the problem of other minds, there is a gap between the experience of one person and that of another, a gap that exists universally between one experiencing subject and another. It does not only exist only for persons with radically different backgrounds or sensory apparatus. Rather, it applies to any two subjects who have a point of view from which they experience the world. Given what Nagel points to as the irreducibly subjective and un-capturable of conscious experience, there will always be an unbridgeable gulf between my experience and that of another person. I do not know and cannot know what it is like to be a young man, an African politician, a warlord, or a victim of torture. These matters may be profound. But nor do I have knowledge of another's subjectivity in a more trivial context: I do not even know what it is like for my closest woman friend to taste a pineapple.

Knowing what it is like to experience something means knowing what it is like *as this person* (this creature) to experience it. And only this one can know it. I have unique knowledge of my experience, you of yours, and Nagel of his. Metaphysically, every consciousness is utterly distinct from every other. The point is universal. It seems to establish a kind of unique and special knowledge and indeed some kind of authority. But what sorts of knowledge and authority are these?

5. VICTIMS AND NOTIONS OF EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE

As remarked, these are old questions. I became especially interested in them in considering the deference that is often paid to victims of serious wrongdoing. In this context I came to identify a line argument granting to victims a kind of epistemic and moral authority based on claims of their unique knowledge of their unique suffering and reasoning to conclusions about ways in which we should defer to victims. We can apply Nagel's account to argue that there is a profound sense in which the suffering of any victim is unique to that person. Only the specific suffering victim of a wrong knows what it is like to suffer from her point of view on the world. On the grounds that the suffering of a victim is something that only that victim can know, it is often argued that we should defer to the authority of the victim on other matters. For some, in significant contexts, the force of such arguments is considerable: consider, for instance, the seriousness with which victim impact statements are taken in many contexts. The uniqueness of victim suffering seems to establish an authority or prerogative even over matters of treatment, criminal procedure, criminal sentencing, memorialization, and other responses to wrongdoing. We may understand such arguments as beginning with the sort of subject-based claim developed by Nagel (only the victim of a wrong can know what it is to suffer from that wrong) and moving on to assert moral authority in other areas, often far removed from first person experience.

When we reflect on this matter, we can identify basic problems with such arguments. Not only are they premised on a supposition of incorrigible knowledge about what a victim has experienced, they would have us inappropriately extend the supposed authority in the area of 'what it is like' too far into further terrain.

Consider for example the perspective of a victim who has suffered terribly from rape and torture. Terribly, we cannot say that suffering from *such wrongs* is

rare. But following Nagel that there is a uniqueness to *this person's* experience. Only she knows what it is like to go through what she has gone through. Her experience is in some irreducible way hers alone. We can use Nagel's terminology to insist that only she knows what it is like to go through this (as herself). But it is difficult to otherwise articulate just what she does know when she knows this. Now I emphasize here that I do not wish to deny that this person, and all victims of serious wrongdoing, deserve respect and consideration in virtue of their experience. The questions that need to be considered are what sort of knowledge that is, and what is implied by that respect and consideration.

The victim's suffering is her experience, felt from her own subjective viewpoint; only she can know what it was like to go through this, so no one else can. This point, following both upon Nagel's account and from commonsense understanding, does seem important and is granted here. The question I wish to raise here concerns not its truth but the further question of what we may derive from it, so far as epistemic and moral authority are concerned. We may ask, for instance: Does the victim's knowledge of what it is like to experience these things, what it was like for *her* to experience these things, give her moral authority over issues of the criminal responsibility of the perpetrator? Does it establish expertise about appropriate sentencing? Or whether a convicted perpetrator should be officially pardoned, or forgiven if he repents? Or whether he does genuinely repent when he seems to do so? We arrive here at what is called the victim's prerogative to forgive and we need to ask whether there is always such a prerogative. If so, what are its foundations? Does her unique subjective knowledge make her an expert over matters of the treatment of her own physical and psychic injuries? Or over public policies pertaining to issues of the prevention of wrongs, their memorialization, or private or public apologies? Contrary to considerable popular wisdom on such topics, I humbly submit that the answer to all these questions is 'no.' (The victim's prerogative to forgive is often assumed, but is questioned in some recent philosophical accounts of forgiveness.) Knowing what it is like to experience something, knowing what we may for convenience call 'the raw edge of consciousness,' does not establish one as a moral or epistemic authority on any of these broader matters. They bring in questions of equity, law, science, and the rights of other persons. The raw edge of consciousness does not extend far; it is narrow indeed.

The fact that only a victim knows what it is like to suffer as she has does *not* establish that victim to be an authority on treatment, punishment, memorialization, forgiveness, or even her own best treatment or the most apt description of what she has gone through. Only victims know what it is like to be them, experiencing these things; to be sure, victims have some kind of unique authority over that raw edge of consciousness. But even if we ignore issues about fallibility here, the inference questions remain. What further epistemic authority can be derived from our unique firsthand consciousness of our own experience? In the case of a suffering victim, how should we move from granting her unique access to 'the edge?' The answer seems to be 'not very far.' Puzzlingly, at this point *knowing what it is like* seems both huge and very small.

There is a case to be made, then, that arguments based on subjective uniqueness are systematically incorrect because they would have us extract much from little. The 'much' is a kind of moral and epistemic authority; the 'little' is the narrowness of the raw edge of consciousness. What do I know when I know what it is like to be me, experiencing a hot bath after walking outside on a cold winter day? A common philosophical term in the context is '*qualia*.' I know my *qualia*. Qualia are the felt characteristics of experience that I have referred to here as the raw edge of sensation. My *qualia* are unique to me, Nagel's to him, and yours to you. Wittgenstein (1963) would not like it at all, but we could say that *this is it*. *This*, the felt sensation or conscious idea, is what I know, and only I know it. I know what it is like to be in that hot bath, what I am feeling, what I am thinking. I know the felt characteristics of my subjective experience in that circumstance, when I am experiencing that. We might also suppose that, having been there (as me) I know what it would be like to be there (as me) again. In fact, that supposition can be questioned due to variability in memory or ability to articulate. But in any event, what would follow from such knowledge? To be sure, only I know what it is like to have my experiences of the world from my point of view, only you know what it is like to have your experiences of the world from your point of view, only Nagel from his, and so on and so forth. But this knowledge does not deductively or inductively support claims to broader knowledge of an epistemic, moral, or political nature.

6. STANDPOINT THEORY

We seem here to be dealing with a question of epistemic privilege: in the sorts of cases I am considering, the supposed epistemic privilege is that of a victim. To ground my discussion of this supposed privilege I will shift to reflect on feminist standpoint theory. A standpoint theory may be defined as a theory according to which certain persons are taken to have an epistemically privileged position due to their experience as oppressed persons in society. In a useful review article Elizabeth Anderson (2006) states the requirements for a complete standpoint theory, using the notion of 'privilege' in a crucial role. Anderson states that a complete standpoint theory should include the following:

1. the social location of the privileged perspective;
2. the scope of the privilege claimed;
3. the aspect of that social location that generates what is deemed to be superior knowledge;
4. the ground of the privilege; (I take this to mean an answer to the question of what it is about the social location that generates the superior knowledge);
5. the type of epistemic superiority claimed (is it greater accuracy of predictions, moral expertise, greater ability to articulate... or whatever?);
6. the other perspectives relative to which the epistemic superiority is claimed;
7. the modes of access to the privileged perspective.

We may consider these requirements, remaining with the case of victims as explained so far. The social location is that of suffering victim; the scope of epistemic privilege is the raw edge of the victim's own consciousness; the aspect of her location generating the epistemic privilege is her experiencing the world from her own point of view. The epistemic superiority is restricted to this domain and based on the subject's unique access to it; the superiority is claimed over others who do not have this access. The mode of access is direct subjective awareness, that of a person experiencing the world from her own point of view. Applying Anderson's account to this case, we find a confirmation of the point previously made: the scope of such epistemic privilege is narrow indeed. Political and moral authority are not established, and any epistemic authority is severely limited.

7. AUTHORITY, CREDIBILITY, AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

The discussions so far presume that questions about privilege and authority pertaining to one's own experience are epistemic – that because we experience as we do, necessarily from our own perspective, we are the only persons who can know what it is like to have our own consciousness. So far we have been considering what sort of knowledge this might be and what other sorts of knowledge might correctly be established on its basis. Some recent authors take a radically different approach. They maintain that the epistemic focus amounts to a misdirection, arguing that we need instead to consider the granting of authority over one's own beliefs, sensations, and intentions to be a matter of social practice. Claims to such effect have recently been made by Mariane Janack (1997), Richard Moran (2001), and Victoria McGeer (2008).

Mariane Janack approaches feminist standpoint theory from a social, rather than an epistemic, point of view. She sets her account in the context of well-known difficulties with standpoint theory: people who are non-European, female, or lower than middle class (and arguably in some sense 'oppressed') may not display epistemic privilege or authority in the sense of offering the most plausible insights into the workings of society. They often disagree with each other, which is another problem if one is going to deem them authoritative. The same sorts of considerations apply to victims. Though feminist writers typically refer to oppressed persons, there is a clear sense in which oppressed persons can be regarded as victims. Janack argues that the problem of authority should not be understood as a matter of persons being epistemically privileged because they have insights that others do not. Rather, she says, it should be understood as a matter of social practices. A key problem regarding the sorts of oppressed persons who were of concern to early standpoint theorists is that their voices tend to be ignored. They have been treated as beings unable to produce their own accounts of their own experience. Such accounts as did exist were often not taken seriously by others. For example, a doctor was regarded as an authority on the tribulations of early pregnancy whereas a pregnant woman not so.

There are clearly problems of social attitude here, and the solution to them lies not in epistemology but in social practice. Concerning oppressed persons and, in

particular victims, Janack recommends that we should grant them authority in the sense that they are allowed and encouraged to speak from their own perspective, and when they do so speak, we should pay attention. On her account this attention is not because they have unique insights based on a special standpoint in society but rather because they are persons with equal status and deserving to be heard and not dismissed. Janack's point is that the standpoint of such persons should be taken seriously in the sense that they should be listened to, not disregarded and not discredited. She does not maintain – nor could she plausibly maintain -- that what they say is beyond critical scrutiny or that it equips them to be authorities on matters of ethics and social policy.

The notion of incorrigibility may be revisited in this context. Incorrigibility can be construed not so much in the epistemic sense of truth about first person experience being guaranteed by first person sincerity, but rather as a matter of there being no one other than the experiencing who is socially granted the authority to correct a person when she describes what she is going through. The subject can get it wrong and she can find that out by attending to questions from someone else, but in the end it is her own verdict on the correct description that will stand. Let us say, for instance, that I feel a kind of surge of unpleasant emotion when someone hugs my husband. I think I'm angry. I feel angry, or I seem to feel angry. But wait: perhaps it's something else. My friend asks whether I'm not jealous rather than angry. The hugger was a quite attractive woman who has always been an admirer of his – and I know that. I think about the matter and realize: yes; it wasn't simple anger that I felt. It was jealousy after all. My interpretation of this flash of feelings was not only corrigible; it was corrected by another. We can see from this case that one's knowledge of one's own experience *is* corrigible in the sense that a sincere report on it may turn out to be incorrect. And yet there remains a sense in which the subject's word is the final word. It is I who allow and acknowledge that my feeling was one of jealousy; since only I know what it is like to experience what I did, it is up to me to accept the correction or not. It is a matter of social practice that we grant people authority over their own sensory, intellectual, and emotional states. I know what it is like to be me; my friend does not, and it is she who suggests that I am jealous, not angry; I might decide that she is right. But this is for me to decide; mine is the final voice on the matter. There is *not* first person incorrigibility in the sense that I cannot make mistakes: my sincerity of at a given time fails to ensure the correctness of my claim at that time. But as a matter of social practice, there *is* incorrigibility in the different sense that, in the final analysis, it is for me, the experiencing subject, and me alone to allow a correction to stand.

Victoria McGeer offers an account similar to that of Janack in its shift away from epistemology but differing in that she connects the authority of first person reports with the agency of persons. Insisting that a person is not a mind-reader of herself, McGeer distinguishes first person authority from that to be provided by a privileged spectator position. She maintains that there is a non-spectator sense in which authority exists: the subject is an *agent* who decides what to believe, what to do, or how to describe what is experienced. McGeer follows Richard Moran 2001. Moran urged developing “the transcendental perspective of agency,” which gives a kind of first-person authority based on the fact that we are able to step back from

our own character and are responsible for what we believe, desire, and intend. McGeer maintains that Moran is too Kantian in demanding and that we distance ourselves too much from our inclinations. She argues instead for allowance for the desires and temptations of an empirical self. But she follows Moran in part and claims that, presuming a certain level of moral development, we can recognize that just as others may make mistakes and give in to temptations, we may can do so ourselves. In the light of such possible failings, it is necessary for a person to reflect and then decide for himself or herself what to think and do. These deliberations would include reflections on how to do it and how to describe what one is doing. This is a matter of agency.

Each person is and should be her own agent, not permitting others to supplant her position. McGeer says that the world of our own experience is projectively distorted by our hopes and desires and that a morally wise agent will understand those facts and be sensitive to how they affect our empirical selves. She states that a morally mature and wise agent is a person who understands the ways in which she is responsible for her own psychological states.

Although the accounts of McGeer and Moran are fascinating and insightful, their impact regarding the problems of first person authority, as considered here, remains somewhat limited. Even duly considering facts of agency or norms of social practice, first person authority is fairly narrow. Considering, specifically, victims, we will allow that a victim should have the final say on what she suffered, and that it is up to her to decide whether her own descriptions of it merit amendment. We may reason with Janack, regarding this victim deserving to be heard, or we may reason with Moran and McGeer that it is for the victim as an agent to decide what to believe about her experience. These social – as distinct from epistemological - perspectives are related to equality, agency, and autonomy. We have shifted from epistemic considerations to a considerable extent. This seems like an improvement – though I admit to continued puzzlement over limited impact of ‘knowing what it is like to be...’ as in Nagel. First person authority so interpreted has its limits. From the claim that it is up to me to define what I want, intend, or experience, it will not follow that I can claim authority on broader matters such as medical needs, the deserts of perpetrators, the content of textbooks, or the appropriate forms of memorialization.

8. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Attempting now to draw together these points, let me state some preliminary conclusions.

First, it is a mistake to infer from a claim of uniqueness in Nagel’s sense that the experiencing subject is in the best position (an authority position) to know some further matter, epistemic privilege, or merits epistemic deference on such a matter. That obviously extends to issues of public policy. Insofar as this sort of mistake occurs quite frequently and involves reasoning from one type of claim to another, we may refer to it as a fallacy. Referring specifically to the case of victims, though a victim alone may know what it is like to suffer from some injury, it does not follow that she is in a unique and privileged position to stipulate what should be done in response to that injury.

Second, the authority of the first person is extremely limited if we look at it from an epistemic point of view as in Nagel's account. It may be more plausibly understood as a matter of social practice, as in the accounts of Janacke, Moran, and McGeer. But even there, it is of limited scope.

Third, further reflections on the implications of experiential uniqueness as in Nagel seem to be called for, and might incorporate considerations of social practice.

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