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Commentary on: Trudy Govier's "Reflections on the authority of personal experience"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Govier's reflection on the authority of personal experience raises some interesting questions about how a highly subjective and individual account of self and personal experience might associate with a highly social and narrative account of self and identity. The question is an interesting one because Nagel's 'what it is like to be a bat' is a landmark challenge to materialist theories of consciousness while epistemic privilege and Standpoint Theory are clear challenges to individualized and asocial theories of consciousness. Prof. Govier's argument seems to be, that the move from Nagel to Anderson (or any proponent of epistemic privilege) is a fallacious one. This is because while conscious experience may be unique and privileged it does not follow that the person who has the experience has privileged epistemic access to matters related to the content of the experience. As Prof. Govier writes, "it is a fallacy 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, [or has] epistemic privilege, or merits epistemic deference on such a matter. That obviously extends to issues of public policy."

Professor Govier considers whether or not a survivor of rape for instance, has any epistemic authority beyond a privileged access to the qualia of her own experience. In line with Mariane Janack (1997), Prof. Govier agrees that it is right to take the testimony of 'victims' and the oppressed seriously so as to counter a social history that may have downplayed or ignored such testimony. However Prof. Govier argues that it is a fallacy to infer from a claim of subjective uniqueness that a subject has any unique political or moral authority on matters related to their first-hand experience. A rape survivor for instance, may know uniquely what it is like, *for her*, to have lived through a rape. However according to Prof. Govier that does not mean that the rape survivor is in any authoritative epistemic position with regard to the moral and political dimensions having to do with acts of rape. Thus appeals to the authority of personal experience when the matter at hand is a moral or political issue are illegitimate, according to Professor Govier.

2. SELF AND AUTHORITY

I both agree and disagree with Prof. Govier's conclusion mostly because of what I see as these competing notions of 'self' and consciousness at play in the argument. I suggest distinguishing between these two notions so as to draw out the fallacious elements in the first sense while proposing a legitimate non-fallacious interpretation in the second.

The first sense in line with Nagel argues that self is equated with a unique singular consciousness replete with qualia that are inaccessible to any other being. This kind of 'self' is wholly subjective and as Govier puts it "knowing what it is like [in this sense] is both huge and very small." Huge, I assume, because it is a vast seemingly immaterial terrain wholly unknowable to others which nevertheless constitutes what it is like to be ourselves, and very small because it yields very little in terms of epistemic authority regarding matters beyond subjective qualia. I agree that it is fallacious to infer from this sense of self and personal testimony any authority regarding matters moral or political.

However the secondary sense of self and consciousness that seems to run through the argument is consistent with epistemic privilege and feminist Standpoint Theory. On this conception, the self emerges through a collective, narrative interaction with other selves who are similarly situated. Here the issue is not 'what it is like to be me' in the sense of qualia but rather 'what is it like to be one of us' in the sense of shared experiences of injustice and marginalization. This self is necessarily collective because it relies on group identification as well as a transition from individual psychological experiences of self to a social and political view of self in relation to others. The valium addicted housewife of the 1960s chronicled in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* who wound up in a consciousness raising group in the 1970s learned that what she mistakenly took to be her personal failings and frustrations were in fact shared by countless numbers of women and were shaped by a history of oppression and patriarchy. The self that emerged was necessarily a synthesis of personal testimony and collective understanding. The self in this sense then is relationally constructed rather than individually and immaterially determined.

Looking more specifically at the matter of rape, consider philosopher Susan Brison, who in her 2002 book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of Self* chronicles her efforts to 'remake' her self after surviving a rape. Brison writes, "An interesting result of group therapy with trauma survivors is that one comes to have greater compassion for one's earlier self by empathizing with others who experienced similar traumas. This means you stop blaming yourself by realizing that others who acted or reacted similarly are not blameworthy. Rape survivors, who typically have difficulty getting angry with their assailants find that in group therapy they are able to get angry on their own behalf by first getting angry on behalf of others." (p. 30) For Brison, the self that she was able to remake after the violence and trauma was necessarily embodied and relational as opposed to immaterial and inaccessibly subjective. Could this kind of self have non-fallacious epistemic privilege or authority on moral and political matters of rape? I would argue that it can and should.

In a recent Op-Ed piece arguing for the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act in the U.S., Brison said, "Before my trial, I overheard the prosecutor and my lawyer labeling rapes "nasty" or "nice" and agreeing that mine was a "nasty" one. Our society is still so ridden with victim blaming and denial that most survivors of rape and domestic violence don't even report their abuse for fear that they won't be believed or assisted. Those who do all too rarely see justice done (Brison, 2012)." Here Brison is not appealing to her authority as an academic or a philosopher but as a survivor of rape. Should that lend a particular credibility and privilege to her claims on VAWA legislation? I would argue that it can and should. Brison developed her perspective not simply because she was raped. Rather, in line with epistemic privilege and standpoint theory, it was something she earned after doing the work or remaking her self in relation to others who survived. Her perspective on the potential impact of the legislation, on the misperceptions of rape, and the experience of being a rape survivor afford her insights not available to either her lawyers or seemingly, many politicians and legislators. I would maintain that this is in part due to the implicit gender biases and sexual stereotypes that are often invisible to those with social power and privilege. The standpoint of the survivor helps to reveal biases not seen by those who have never faced the trauma.

Professor Govier agreeing with Janack also makes the point that "They [the oppressed] often disagree with each other, which is another problem if one is going to deem them authoritative." However the fact that two experts disagree for example, is not reason to discount their expertise. It may be a reason to reduce our confidence in either experts' opinion but it does not undermine their overall authority so I wonder why it should be a factor when considering epistemic privilege.

3. CONCLUSION

For these reasons I would agree with Prof. Govier that making an inference from Nagel's subjective qualia to a socially constructed and relational theory of self, like those proposed by standpoint theorists, would be fallacious. But I disagree that inferring epistemic privilege based on a relational theory of self, stemming from trauma or oppression, is fallacious. I suggest that such a move can and should be a legitimate appeal to authority and relevant first-hand personal testimony.

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