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Knowledge Without Citable Reasons

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I want to thank Paul Lieberman, Nancy Nyquist Potter, and Marilyn Nissim-Sabat for their very thoughtful and stimulating commentaries on my paper (Lieberman 2007; Potter 2007; Nissim-Sabat 2007). Each offers an interesting and distinct challenge to my work and I am happy for the opportunity to reply to the insights they bring to it. In this short response, I focus on what I take to be the most serious objections from each commentator, with the hopes of both clearing up some ambiguities and loose ends present in my paper as well as elaborating some of my ideas in more detail.

Lieberman's commentary (2007) is succinct and does a nice job of drawing out the clinical relevance of the main argument of my paper by making explicit an implicit idea that lies behind externalist theories of knowledge. According to externalism, if a subject *S* forms a belief that *p* using a reliable method, defined roughly as one that tends to produce more true beliefs than false ones, then so long as *p* is true we can say that *S* knows that *p*. This is the case even if the subject does not see herself as forming *p* reliably, even if, in other words, she is super blindsighted. It is this point that distinguishes externalism from traditional internalist theories of knowledge as justified true belief. On the externalist account, a subject can know that *p* even if she cannot provide any reasons for her belief that *p*. But, as Lieberman suggests, lacking cognitive access to the reasons for one's beliefs does not imply that there are no reasons to be had. Indeed, if the causal process that led a subject to adopt *p* is a reliable one, such that *p* is true for *S* non-accidentally, then that alone counts as a reason in support of *S*'s belief that *p*. And this is true even if *S* cannot see that reason for herself. Not all causes for belief can count equally as reasons for belief, but reliable causes can.

This insight into some of the thinking that lies behind externalism allows us to make the important distinction between knowledge without reasons and knowledge without citable reasons, which in turn, as Lieberman notes, opens a conceptual door for clinicians and therapists to unearth the reasons their patients have for their beliefs but lack access to. And this, as Lieberman claims, "is the clinical stake in the philosophical issue" (2007, 23). The trauma survivor is not an automaton; there are reasons for her beliefs, qua survivor, that are operating at some unconscious level and can thus be established "externally," for instance, by the careful observation of her therapist.

In my paper, I use the case of survivors of sexual violence to illustrate that the phenomenon of super blindsightedness is not rare, but rather commonplace. Lieberman agrees with this conclusion, but thinks that the premises I use to get there are too strong. He might be right. In discussing competing theories of trauma, my intent was to show that only a naïve interpretation of trauma would posit the traumatic memory as something

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that is readily accessible to a trauma survivor, and to prove this point I use the language of repression and dissociation. I meant to support the theoretical plausibility of some form of psychological blocking; I did not mean to take a stand on the issue of repressed memories (and the correlated problem of recovered memories that has fuelled the "memory wars"); the evidence here is underdetermined and the matter is, in any case, best left to the experts, which I am not.[1] But we do not need to go this far to prove that super blindsightedness is an everyday phenomenon. As Lieberman argues, even if the repression of trauma is rare, trauma is certainly not, and it effects the beliefs of traumatized individuals in ways that they often do not fully understand. This fact alone is enough to support my conclusion about the prevalence of super blindsightedness while remaining neutral with respect to the precise nature of psychological blocking.

My argument in favor of externalist theories of knowledge is motivated by the fact that traumatic experiences like sexual violence influence the cognitive life of victims, transforming their beliefs about themselves, their perpetrators, the world, and their place in it. Traumatic events are thus informational, even if the trauma survivor lacks conscious access to this information. Potter's analysis (2007) elaborates this phenomenon by drawing out further psychiatric and clinical implications of it, and I welcome these insights. For instance, as Potter discusses, in a clinical setting there are two related issues that arise in the case of the super blindsighted trauma survivor. First, because she lacks access to the reasons for those beliefs of hers that are shaped by her traumatic experience, she faces challenges narrating that experience and its aftermath. Moreover, super blindsightedness can lead to a pernicious self-doubt that can undermine a survivor's credibility, not only in her own eyes but also in the eyes of others. This points to a main attraction of an externalist theory of knowledge, which allows us to acknowledge the epistemic success and thus treat as knowers those individuals who are super blindsighted. But how are we to distinguish the kinds of cases that merit praise from those that do not? This question is especially pressing from a clinical point of view: When faced with individuals who are unable to provide reasons for their beliefs, how do we decide whom to believe? For, as Potter points out, not all beliefs formed in the aftermath of sexual violence are true. Take, for example, the case of the survivor who forms precisely the wrong beliefs, such as "if I don't go out at night, I'll be safe from rape" or "If I find a sympathetic male protector, I will be safe from sexual violence" or "If I weren't such an exhibitionist, this never would have happened"" (Potter 2007, 21). Then there is the woman who generalizes too broadly from her experience and holds that "all men are predators" (Potter 2007, 21), and the Sudanese refugee who claims that "the world is a dangerous place" (Potter 2007, 22). As these examples illustrate, not all cases of would-be knowers ought to be treated as knowers. However, in both instances individuals lack access to the reasons for their beliefs and so we cannot discriminate between them on this basis. How, then, are they to be distinguished?

The reliabilist has an easy answer to this worry, at least as a first pass, which is to say that, in cases like the ones cited, there is little risk of mistaking knowers from would-be knowers because the beliefs in question are false. It is reasonable to assume that clinicians working with trauma survivors will be familiar with the statistics on sexual violence against women (of the sort that I documented in my paper) and will therefore, at least in most cases, have no difficulty picking out the false beliefs of survivors from the true ones. The clinician will simply conclude, as Potter does, that the survivor who believes "if I was wearing a longer skirt, I would not have been raped" has formed precisely the wrong belief. That takes care of the practical side of things. From an epistemic point of view, these beliefs will fail to count as knowledge, not because the individuals who hold them cannot defend them, but rather because they are false and so fail to meet this necessary condition of epistemic success.

This response, however, simply raises a further question; namely, how reliable is the experience of trauma as a method of forming beliefs if it produces false beliefs? This is the real force behind Potter's critique and there are at least two different ways of answering to it. One is to be more specific about the sorts of beliefs formed by survivors of

traumatic experiences as a way of narrowing down the class of beliefs in question, to rule out the regular occurrence of false beliefs. This is Potter's suggestion to me and it is a good one, but it is limited in its application. Some sorts of beliefs can and should be ruled out (e.g., generalizations). As Potter notes, generalizations like "all men are predators" are suspect, and for good reason. Law-like generalizations like this one are always literally false; the inductive reasoning that supports them is never airtight, and this is especially obvious when we are talking about social facts. But beyond prohibiting generalizations, I worry that there is no principled way of narrowing down the class of beliefs formed by the experience of sexual violence. Take the case of the rape survivor who falsely believes that "if I was wearing a longer skirt, I would not have been raped." It seems to me that a belief like this one is just as plausibly shaped by her traumatic experience as the alternative true belief, that is, "my being raped had nothing to do with the length of my skirt." Thus, as a method for producing beliefs, the trauma of sexual violence does not result exclusively in true beliefs. But that is not the claim I defend in my paper. Rather, I argue that a traumatic experience is a reliable way of forming beliefs, which is to say that it results in a greater proportion of true beliefs than false ones. If this is right, then the challenge raised by Potter's examples can be met by allowing for the occurrence of false beliefs, so long as they do not outnumber true ones. And although the ratio of true beliefs to false ones given in this standard definition of reliabilism is admittedly imprecise, it nevertheless establishes that beliefs formed in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, when true, are not true by accident.

Nissim-Sabat's critique of my paper raises a number of interesting questions that merit reflection, although of the three commentaries hers is the most difficult to reconcile with my work. It is not the details of my argument that she finds problematic, but rather the very epistemological framework I employ. Her main complaint is that the internalist–externalist context is inadequate for conceptualizing the case of the survivor of sexual violence, and as such my argument serves less as a victory over Brandom than as an example of the paucity of analytic epistemology in dealing with the consequences of violence against individuals. Nissim-Sabat also disapproves of my casting the case study in terms of "survivors" of sexual violence rather than "victims"; this objection turns out to be connected to the larger issue at hand, so I will begin with it.

Nissam-Sabat notes the tendency in feminist literature to avoid using the term "victim" to sidestep the insidious problem of victim-blaming. As she claims, this move has the right sort of motivations, but the unintended consequence of leaving out of our theoretical framework those victims who do not survive. My linguistic dependence on the term "survivor" instead of "victim" is in part a mere terminological tick, but one that is meant to draw our attention to the cognitive life of those who survive extreme acts of violence. From an epistemological point of view, it is qua survivor, not qua victim, that this population of individuals is theoretically interesting. But Nissim-Sabat sees deeper significance in this. She views it as part and parcel of my avoidance of the question of why some victims dissociate and others do not. I steer clear of this issue, it is suggested, because it too runs perilously close to victim-blaming.

The question of why some survivors dissociate or otherwise block out the details of their traumatic experience is a fascinating one. Nissim-Sabat's suggestion about why I do not pursue it in my paper is, however, off the mark. It is not that I am worried about positing "two categories of victim: the strong, who remain psychically relatively intact, and the weak, who do not" (Nissim-Sabat 2007, 15). It is rather that these questions, however intriguing, fall outside of the scope of my epistemological concerns. From an epistemic standpoint, I am not interested in the reasons why an individual becomes super blindsighted, but rather in the epistemic status of her true beliefs, qua survivor. Psychological blocking of one sort or another is thus the point of departure of my inquiry, not the point of investigation. Nissim-Sabat, on the other hand, takes up this question and offers a compelling response to it, which in turn raises a further objection to my account. In her view, the reason why some individuals lack conscious awareness of the details of their traumatic

experience while others do not lies in their divergent pre-trauma psychological vulnerability, and she attributes this in large part to the prior beliefs of the individual. So, for example, a woman who believes that sex before marriage (even if through rape) will ruin her, "may be more vulnerable to dissociation from the details, if raped" (Nissim-Sabat 2007, 15).

In my paper, I discuss the sort of challenge faced by this survivor under the rubric of "social and political factors," which I refer to as "external." This gives rise to an unfortunate ambiguity in my paper that fuels Nissim-Sabat's main objection with the epistemological framework I employ. As she rightly notes, these so-called external factors can be internalized in the belief systems of individuals, blurring the line between "internal" and "external." This suggests that I ought to have been more careful in describing this particular set of challenges; perhaps distinguishing them as "social and political" would suffice. For the terms "internal" and "external" in this instance are conceptually and semantically distinct from the epistemic terms "internalism" and "externalism." It is the epistemic sense of these terms that I am preoccupied with in my paper, and the semantic boundary here is clear enough. According to epistemic internalism, for an individual to know that *p*, that individual must have cognitive awareness of what makes *p* justified for her, such that she is able to provide reasons for her belief that *p*. Epistemic externalism, on the other hand, grants that an individual can know that *p* even if she is unable to provide reasons for why she believes that *p*, so long as *p* was reliably formed. Conscious accessibility to the reasons for one's non-accidentally true beliefs is a requirement for internalism; the externalist points out that knowledge without citable reasons is not reducible to knowledge without reasons.

Note

1. For a recent and comprehensive survey of this debate, see Loftus and Davis (2006).

References

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