

The Epistemological Significance of Psychic Trauma

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This essay explores the epistemological significance of the kinds of beliefs that grow out of traumatic experiences, such as the rape survivor's belief that she is never safe. On current theories of justification, beliefs like this one are generally dismissed due to either insufficient evidence or insufficient propositional content. Here, Freedman distinguishes two discrete sides of the aftermath of psychic trauma, the shattered self and the shattered worldview. This move enables us to see these beliefs as beliefs; in other words, as having cognitive content. Freedman argues that what we then need is a theory of justification that allows us to handpick reliable sources of information on sexual violence, and give credibility where deemed appropriate. She advances a mix of reliabilism and coherentism that privileges feminism. On this account, the evidence for the class of beliefs in question will depend on an act of sexual violence (or testimony, or statistics) to the extent that the act is a reliable indication of the prevalence of sexual violence against women.

What happens to our beliefs about the world after a traumatic experience, and are these traumatically informed beliefs justified? The sorts of beliefs that I have in mind, for example, are the rape survivor's belief that she is never safe or the child abuse survivor's belief that adults cannot be trusted. While my intuition is that, for these survivors, these beliefs and ones like them are justified, they do not fit comfortably within our mainstream theories of justification. As friends or partners of survivors of traumatic events we can show deep understanding of the consequences of terror and violence, indeed we show a certain compassion even in the absence of any personal connection to the survivor.¹ But as epistemologists we routinely dismiss traumatically informed beliefs as irrational, for one of two reasons. Either we dismiss the beliefs due to insufficient evidence

or we reinterpret the beliefs, not as legitimate expressions of a shattered worldview, but rather as emotional responses—we say it is fear talking, not reasoned opinion. In other words, if it is agreed that the beliefs under consideration are propositional attitudes (or propositionally contentful) then they are thought to lack adequate justification; otherwise it is assumed that they are reducible to emotional states. Psychological trauma, at least as a source of justified belief, lacks a kind of epistemic legitimacy.

In what follows, I argue against this bias. I show that neither of these two alternatives is satisfactory. In the wake of a traumatic event, a victim's emotional state is volatile, to be sure, as she undergoes intense personal suffering. But this is only one side of the aftermath of psychic trauma—the shattered self. The other side is the shattered worldview, the consequence of trauma on the survivor's *beliefs* about the world. The shattered self and the shattered worldview are, of course, connected, but they are also, I maintain, discrete responses to a traumatic experience. I argue that after a traumatic event a survivor experiences a kind of cognitive dissonance as she is faced with a whole new set of beliefs that have cropped up, often very suddenly, which are inconsistent with previously held beliefs. She asks herself, am I really not capable of protecting myself against serious harm? Is the world not a safe place, or was I somehow incautious? Am I somehow responsible for the attack? Is it indicative of an individual failing, or a social one? The survivor struggles with the question, "What am I to believe?" and in some cases the answer leads to a full-fledged rejection of the old belief set in favor of a new one.

This new set of beliefs makes up what I call the alternative worldview, at the center of which is the claim that the world is fundamentally unsafe for women *because* they are women. In what follows, I argue that the evidence for this claim is found in the universality of the everydayness of sexual violence against women. That said, there are a number of epistemic hurdles en route to accepting this alternative worldview. The first, which I have already mentioned, is the conflation of the emotional and cognitive responses to trauma. But even if we accept these beliefs *as* beliefs, we face still more challenges when it comes to accessing the evidence for them. Despite the fact that we are constantly inundated with sensationalized images of sex and violence and women, the dark side of sexual violence against women—the harsh realities—are akin to a social secret. Still another problem is that the sources of knowledge and belief about sexual violence are, at least in part, unconventional. *A priori* knowledge is ruled out and, except in the case of victims themselves, so too is perceptual knowledge. And while we sometimes learn about sexual violence through statistical reports, it is more common to hear about it through various forms of testimony, most of which lack authority, such as anecdotes, second-hand reports, and shared stories between women in anonymous support groups. The unfortunate consequence of this situation is that while the evidence is there

if we dig deep enough, its credibility is always under question. What we need, then, is a theory of justification that allows us to gain access to these sources and privilege them as reliable indicators of true belief. My suggestion here is that a reliabilist theory of justification, guided by a feminist coherentism, will allow us to do just that. On this account, the evidence for the alternative worldview depends on an act of sexual violence (or statistics, or testimony) to the extent that the act is a reliable indication of the prevalence of sexual violence.

PSYCHIC TRAUMA AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The word *trauma* is used today to describe a kind of psychological wound. What was once a concept reserved strictly for physical blows (think of trauma wards or trauma surgeons), its meaning has, since the late nineteenth century, been psychologized.² Yet psychic trauma only gained official recognition as a diagnostic category in psychological medicine by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980, with the publication of the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA 1980). The APA's formal acknowledgment of psychological trauma as a psychiatric disorder came largely as a result of what the medical anthropologist Allan Young has aptly dubbed "the *DSM-III* Revolution," a predominantly political struggle waged by Vietnam War activists, including war veterans and professionals within the psychiatric community, on behalf of veterans suffering from war-related trauma (1995, 89).³ In the wake of this revolution, feminists and trauma theorists were quick to notice that survivors of rape, domestic battery, and child abuse shared essentially the same symptoms as those seen in war veterans.⁴ In her influential 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman explained: "Not until the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was it recognized that the most common post-traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life" (1992, 28). Since the publication of Herman's book the field of trauma studies (or traumatology, as some prefer)⁵ has exploded, and this is no surprise.⁶ From the perspective of individuals working to oppose violence against women, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) offered, for the first time ever, a kind of validation of the aftereffects of this violence and a way of understanding, explaining, and classifying the variety of post-traumatic symptoms they were witnessing. And while there have been philosophical questions raised about the ways in which we categorize mental illness and compelling arguments about the construction of the *concept* of PTSD,⁷ no theorist of trauma disputes that acts of terror lead to the debilitating cluster of symptoms seen in survivors of traumatic events and which we today associate with PTSD, such as hyperarousal, hypervigilance, and intrusion.

Since the 1980s, PTSD has been used as a model for exploring some of the consequences of violence against women. In turn, violence against women, in particular rape, provides a model for exploring the epistemological

significance of psychic trauma. This is the model that I will use for the remainder of this essay. I chose it instead of, say, the Holocaust or military combat (the three dominant models in the literature) for two important reasons. First, as a feminist philosopher, I am particularly sensitive to the paucity of philosophical theorizing around rape. I do not think this omission is a reflection of bad politics on the part of philosophers, or that it is a deliberate attempt to skirt an issue that, at least in our society, is fundamentally gendered.⁸ I suspect, rather, that it is due to a common, albeit problematic belief that the “personal” nature of the subject matter is not germane to philosophical reflection. Indeed, this is precisely the position taken by the author of a recent review of Susan Brison’s remarkable new book, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2001). In *Aftermath*, Brison argues for the philosophical importance of first-person narratives, strengthening her case by giving just that—an in-depth account of her violent rape and attempted murder, and the aftermath of that experience. In his on-line review of *Aftermath* for Salon.com, Charles Taylor states: “I’m afraid that the intense personal nature of Brison’s suffering doesn’t suit the rigorous logic required of philosophy, even philosophy grounded in personal experience.”⁹ This way of thinking confirms, I think, that philosophical theorizing is not immune to the marks of systemic sexism (however mundane a claim in some circles, one that still clearly bears repeating). Framing my epistemic quandary around the post-traumatic effects of rape will, I hope, help show that the kinds of assumptions that lie behind Taylor’s comments are getting increasingly difficult to support.

The second reason for my choice is that I am a rape survivor. Just over a decade ago, I was violently raped and almost killed, and so I too have first-hand experience of the aftermath of a traumatic event. Though we would not want to say that I am lucky to be in this position, I am in it, and this provides me with an important perspective on psychic trauma—the ability to speak from whereof one knows.¹⁰ I am convinced by Brison’s argument that in philosophy (as elsewhere) first-person accounts of our particular life experiences are necessary, not only so that we may be transparent about our biases, but also to help us understand and have empathy with those different from ourselves (Brison 2001, 26). While I do not here provide a detailed narrative of my own rape, I hope that by identifying myself as a rape survivor I may help uncover certain biases within mainstream epistemology, while making mine explicit.

AFTERMATH

Victims of sexual assault often say that after their attack “the world can never be the same.” This sounds like a heavy ontological claim, signaling a kind of paradigm shift marking the transition from a pre-assault world to a post-assault world. And it may well be defensible as such, but I think it is fair to say that the phrase is being used metaphorically, as a way of expressing a deep skepticism

and disillusionment with the world. Over a period of time—a childhood, a marriage, a date, overnight, one hour, five minutes—the victim of a sexual assault learns certain loathsome facts about the world and the possibilities of human behavior, and a worldview is shattered. This is why the Kuhnian metaphor resonates so acutely for people who have lived through traumatic experiences—they have been made privy to a hitherto unknown and, I shall argue, typically censored picture of the world, and thus to them the world can genuinely seem to be a different place.

This shattered worldview and the corresponding recognition of certain realities that we would rather not have to face is one side of the aftermath of surviving sexual violence, and it is the locus of cognitive dissonance. The other side of the aftermath is a shattered self, and the intense personal suffering that goes along with it. For the victim of sexual assault, it is not just that the world has changed—*we've changed*. “I used to be” and “my old self” are common refrains among rape survivors.¹¹ Patricia Weaver Francisco explicitly mourns the loss of her former self in her memoir *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*, as she reflects back to the moments before her rape, over a decade earlier, and to the person she used to be: “I’m not sure I’d want to spend a lot of time with her, but I regret her passing. She’s about to be lost, and I want to keep her here with her notebook, her red pen, her young body, her happiness (1999, 12).” Although there is no one single response to a traumatic event, the effect of all such events is to inspire helplessness, fear, and terror in the victim. As a result, within a traumatized individual the ordinary human responses to danger are shot. As Herman puts it, “When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized” (1992, 34). The effect this has on a victim’s emotional, psychological, and physiological self can be severe, resulting in all of the classic symptoms of PTSD, such as hyperarousal, hypervigilance, intrusion, and constriction.¹² It is hardly surprising that through all this the survivor feels estranged from the person she was prior to her assault. The impact of psychic trauma on a victim’s cognitive state can also be acute, crushing her beliefs and tearing apart her picture of the world. These are the twin sides of surviving sexual violence: a shattered self and a shattered worldview. Whereas the former is a statement about ourselves, the latter is a statement about the world and our beliefs about it—the cognitive place.

BELIEFS AND EMOTIONS

The first step in elaborating a theory of justification that treats as well evidenced the sorts of beliefs which arise out of the aftermath of a traumatic experience is to recognize them *as* beliefs, namely that which has cognitive content. This can be tricky because the shattered worldview and shattered self are, of course, intimately connected in ways that cognitive scientists, mental health experts,

and trauma theorists are only beginning to understand. Moreover, there is an important and ongoing debate about whether emotional states are themselves cognitively contentful.¹³ But, for my purpose, that is beside the point, since I am only interested here in what is indisputably and strictly cognitive—that is, beliefs, cognitions, or propositional attitudes. I agree with Robert Brandom (2000) that a belief has propositional content because it is *assertible*, because it can be used inferentially, as a premise or conclusion of an inference. This is what distinguishes ‘believing that’ from merely responding in certain ways. Believing involves, as Brandom argues, further commitments and entitlements, and the willingness to use the proposition normatively, in the giving and taking of reasons (2000, 108–9). This account of what it means to ‘believe that’ helps draw a line between the two sides of the aftermath of psychic trauma. And while there is some grey area in between the emotional and cognitive responses, we can clearly distinguish the two. Indeed, that these are discrete responses to trauma is what makes it possible for an individual to adopt the belief that the world is unsafe for women, while simultaneously rejecting a corresponding emotional state of fear. An elaboration of some examples of these kinds of cases should help illustrate this point. And although for my purposes here it is not necessary to establish that emotional or physiological responses to trauma lack cognitive content, a few examples of this sort will help begin to demarcate the shattered worldview from the shattered self.

So, for instance, like many rape survivors, I regularly jump at the slightest sudden noise—a book slamming shut, a telephone ring, a friendly good morning from my partner who I had thought was still in bed. This is called exaggerated startle response, a form of hyperarousal. I respond this way indiscriminately, equally in moments where I believe that I am safe as in moments where I believe that I am unsafe. The response itself is devoid of cognitive content; it is a physiological response, and one that is more conditioned by the traumatic experience and my memory of it than anything in the here and now. As Jennifer Robinson puts it in her article “Startle”: “Startle is a reflex, an involuntary response that requires no prior learning and occurs too rapidly for there to be any cognitive activity at all” (Robinson 1995; reprinted in Leighton 2003, 241).¹⁴ Having cognitions—thoughts, beliefs, judgments—about my own safety seems neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for this response, which is, instead, bodily. Indeed, it is often said that trauma is held in the body. As Herman states, “Traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the present” (1992, 35), and exaggerated startle response epitomizes this idea.

In a comparable case, I frequently have trouble sleeping at night because my nervous system is on high alert. I lie in bed awake for hours listening to the pounding of my own heart (this is another manifestation of hyperarousal). This physiological response is regularly, though not always, accompanied by an

emotional response: I actually feel afraid, I feel scared to close my eyes, I simply do not feel safe. Yet, again, this state of mind (or being) is not dependent on a corresponding cognition about, for example, my personal safety.¹⁵ Thus, what happens is that I feel and act terribly afraid even though, in that moment, I believe that I am safe. There is a kind of intense fear in the acknowledged absence of any real danger—the emotions and the relevant judgments do not match. Indeed, this is why the state of hyperarousal (and other related symptoms of PTSD) can be difficult to live with, namely, because our beliefs about the world and our relative safety in it are impotent guards against it.¹⁶ It is as though there is a traumatized part of our body that stores the experience of the trauma, and when something triggers that part, because it is not *itself* a cognitive place, no form of *rational* persuasion can effectively mitigate it.¹⁷

A similar story can be told about our cognitive states. As we have just seen, it is possible for an individual to believe that she is safe in place *p* at time *t* and yet experience hyperarousal and even feel afraid. Likewise, it is possible for an individual to believe that she is *unsafe* in place *p* at time *t* and yet not experience the relevant emotional or physiological state. So, for example, I may believe that race-car driving is a very dangerous sport, but not feel any corresponding fear or panic when I am behind the wheel of my race-car. Similarly, I may believe that I am not truly safe right now, here, in my own home, yet not feel any corresponding alarm or fear, just as I may believe that I cannot trust men who are strangers to me, yet not feel any anxiety or sadness in the presence of this particular man who is unknown to me. More generally, I may believe that the world is an unsafe place for me, and yet not live in a constant state of fear, perhaps having also adopted the belief that there is nothing to be gained—and much to be lost—by always being afraid. Indeed, arguably, this is not only a possible state of affairs but also a desirable one and a main aim of psychotherapy, that is, not to rid us of our beliefs about the world, but to make them easier to live with. In this way, our beliefs about our relative safety and the corresponding emotional responses can fail to track one another.

These examples show that the cognitive and emotional responses to trauma are discrete, and while they may overlap, this is not necessarily or even likely the norm. This is significant because the two sides of the aftermath of psychic trauma often get lumped together, with the result being that we routinely mistake beliefs for emotions, and vice versa. This is particularly problematic in the case of trauma survivors, whose beliefs and emotions are *both* volatile after an attack and who are not themselves always able to separate the two. By conflating them, the trauma survivor loses out not once, but twice. Her fear and anxiety get treated as beliefs then dismissed as unjustified (“Why are you acting so scared? After all, you’re safe here among friends”). At the same time, her beliefs get written off as emotional responses (“Of course you feel unsafe, after all you’ve been through”). No doubt, this is problematic on a variety of

moral and political grounds, but it is also problematic on *epistemic* grounds. Maintaining a firm distinction between the shattered self and the shattered worldview is the first step to recognizing the survivor's beliefs *as* beliefs. Only then can we ask whether these beliefs are justified.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND THE SHATTERED WORLDVIEW

After a traumatic event, a survivor experiences, in the language of *DSM-IV*, “a loss of previously sustained beliefs,” and in their place crop up a new set of beliefs, many of which are contradictory or otherwise inconsistent with the old beliefs (APA 1994, 465). The theory of cognitive dissonance, developed by Leon Festinger in the late fifties, speaks to the state of discomfort that accompanies this sort of inconsistency within an individual's belief set. Festinger argued that individuals tend to seek consistency among their beliefs, and that when an individual holds contradictory or conflicting beliefs (cognitions) the result is a psychological state of anxiety (dissonance). Festinger used the example of the habitual smoker who learns that smoking is bad for him yet continues to smoke (Festinger 1957, 2). The smoker experiences dissonance because of his inconsistent beliefs: “Smoking isn't good for me” and “One more cigarette can't hurt me much.” Because dissonance is an uncomfortable state, the smoker is motivated to eliminate or reduce the importance of dissonant beliefs, change the dissonant beliefs, or acquire new consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant ones (Festinger 1957, 18–31). So, for instance, the smoker may convince himself that the odds that he will get sick from smoking are not as bad as some claim, or he may convince himself that the pleasure from smoking is more valuable than the benefits of good health—or he may just quit smoking. In any case, the psychological difficulty of holding inconsistent beliefs is taken to be powerful enough to motivate the smoker to reconcile the inconsistencies.¹⁸

In the case of rape survivors, the kinds of beliefs that are most volatile after an attack are those that center on relationships (actual or potential) and themes of trust and safety. This is certainly true of my own experience, and it is regularly confirmed by the women I meet in sexual assault survivor groups, as well as by first-person reports and autobiographies of trauma survivors. So, for example, prior to my rape I believed in what Aphrodite Matsakis calls (1998, 26) the “just-world philosophy,” according to which the world is basically fair, and so long as “you are sufficiently careful, intelligent, moral, and competent, you can avoid misfortune.”¹⁹ I believed, in other words, that it was within my power to protect myself from any harm. This belief, however, was difficult to sustain in the aftermath of my rape. The evidence that supported it, garnered from decades of safe living, now seemed scant. The bare facts of the rape were outrageous enough (though, I was soon to learn, not uncommon) to cast serious doubt on the idea that the world is “basically fair.”

The “just-world philosophy” goes hand in hand with what Brison calls the “myth of our own immunity,” the idea that acts of unspeakable violence cannot happen to us (2001, 9). Both this myth and the belief that the world is basically fair get destroyed in an act of sexual violence; in my case, the consequence was a whole mess of inconsistent beliefs. Is the world really not a safe place? Can’t I at least protect myself from harm if I take the necessary precautions? Can a person prevent herself from being raped? If that is true, then am I somehow responsible for my rape? Could I have somehow avoided it? But how could I be responsible for the crazed and brutalizing actions of a knife-wielding rapist? Well, then, is the world not a safe place—am I really not safe anywhere? But surely (I thought) this cannot be true, I must at least be safe among friends and family. There must be someone who I can trust, on whom I can depend. Yet it was my most trustworthy friend who, albeit unwittingly, led me to the place of my attack—and so on. So, what *was* I to believe? I may have spent years after my rape in a state of shock and fear, but I also spent years in a state of cognitive dissonance, with a smattering of inconsistent beliefs that caused me palpable distress. But it was not at all easy to resolve the dissonance: which beliefs should be kept, which ones should be tossed out, and, more to the point, which ones was I (am I) justified in holding?

More generally, how do survivors reconcile their inconsistent beliefs? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be: not easily, not quickly, and sometimes not at all. As we shall see shortly, there are good reasons—good epistemic reasons—for embracing the kinds of beliefs that arise in the aftermath of sexual violence: the facts about sexual violence against women provide the necessary grounds. But there are other kinds of reasons—economic, pragmatic, and legal—that make it difficult for a survivor to reconcile herself to this alternative worldview. Topping this list is the fact that the true record of sexual violence against women is kept underground.

SOCIAL SECRETS: FACTS ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The next step, then, in formulating a theory of justification that treats as well evidenced the sorts of beliefs that make up the alternative worldview is to recognize that there are systemic barriers in place that function to obscure and discredit the evidence for this worldview. A theory of justification thus needs to be tailor-made to overcome these barriers, which are of two sorts. One, which I shall look at shortly, is that the sources of information on sexual violence against women are nontraditional; the other is that the evidence, when we do manage to uncover it, paints a picture of the world that runs counter to the one regularly presented to us, such that even if we accept the beliefs in question as propositionally contentful, they appear baseless. Indeed, despite increased awareness and public concern over the last few decades about violence against

women, the everyday nature of sexual violence remains largely hidden. And when women speak out about their experiences, they are often and quickly silenced. So, for example, in a poetic recounting of her rape, author Nancy Venable Raine devotes an entire chapter to one woman's response to her having spoken out: "I thought your article was well-written," the woman said to her, "but let's face it, no one wants to hear about such terrible things" (quoted in Venable Raine 1998, 119). If the facts about sexual violence were common knowledge, however, we might hope to see an end to this routine silencing. Francisco puts the point eloquently:

While statistics tell us of rape's pervasiveness—one in four women, one every six minutes—if we've won the statistical lottery, our days begin in the morning and proceed until darkness as if rape did not occur. . . . If the occurrence of rape were audible, its decibel level equal to its frequency, it would overpower our days and nights, interrupt our meals, our bedtime stories, howl behind our lovemaking, an insistent jackhammer of distress. We would demand an end to it. And if we failed to locate its source, we would condemn the whole structure. We would refuse to live under such conditions. (Francisco 1999, 1–2)

Why is there such resistance to acknowledging the everyday nature of sexual violence against women? One possibility is that the problem is so horrific that we want to believe it is uncommon, a snag in the moral fabric of our world. As Herman has noted: "The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for too long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level" (1992, 2). The truth of male violence against women is certainly disturbing to consider. We are thus inclined to think it is not prevalent in our culture, among our peers, within our family. And so, the *Kirkus Review's* notice of Francisco's *Telling* describes it, accurately enough, as "a poetic, searingly personal book about a subject much of society would prefer to ignore" (January 1, 1999).

Unfortunately, censoring the facts around sexual violence against women is no less problematic even if it is not due to any moral failing but rather stems from hope for a better kind of world. This leaves us with the impression that it is not a serious social problem. In fact, sexual violence against women is more prevalent than any cancer. And while rape devastates the lives of both women and men, as a systemic crime rape is primarily targeted at girls and women. As Amnesty International states in its 2004 report *It's in Our Hands: Stop Violence against Women*, violence against women is "the most outrageous human rights scandal of our times," and sexual violence against women is universal (Amnesty 2004, iii, 6). Indeed, the statistics on sexual violence against women tell an alarming story. Although statistics are not always reliable, the case for

the universality of sexual violence is likely even stronger than they make it out to be, since rape is notoriously underreported.²⁰

How widespread is sexual violence against women? A 1997 study in Edinburgh found that 28 percent of women aged 16 or over had been forced into unwanted sexual activity (ESRC 2002, 16). Amnesty International reports that in Turkey, 35.6 percent of women have experience marital rape “sometimes” and 16.3 percent have experienced it “often” (2004, 34). In Canada, a woman is sexually assaulted by forced sexual intercourse every 17 minutes (so, in less time than it will take you to read this paper); a woman is sexually assaulted in many other ways every 6 minutes, and 1 out of 2 women over the age of sixteen, or 51 percent, have experienced physical or sexual violence.²¹ And sexual violence cuts across all classes and social groups. For example, nearly 50 percent of all assailants who force women into sexual intercourse are married or living in common law at the time of the assault “and are considered responsible members of the community” (Statistics Canada 1993). That said, a recent World Health Organization report suggests that women living in the global South and women living in poverty suffer disproportionately (WHO 2002, 99). So, for instance, studies have shown that aboriginal women in Canada—a demographic group whose living conditions are often likened to the global South—experience violence of a “nonincidental” sort: not just one rape or assault or battering, but a lifetime of it. Indeed, as the Mohawk author Patricia Monture-Angus has noted, pointing to statistics is really doing a disservice in these cases, since they almost disguise what she calls “the utter totality of the experiences of violence that Aboriginal women face” (Monture-Angus 1995, 170–71).

UNCONVENTIONAL SOURCES

These statistics go to show that sexual violence is a social problem of serious magnitude. They provide evidence for the beliefs that form the core of the alternative worldview: the world is fundamentally unsafe for women because they are women; sexual violence is a gender-based phenomenon. Because sexual violence against women is a social secret, however, this view appears groundless—and this is further compounded by the fact that the evidence for it comes to us from unconventional sources. How do we learn about the prevalence of sexual violence against women? For survivors, their experience is one source—and at least in this case, a phenomenally powerful one. But for others, sexual violence is not something that is directly (or indirectly, for that matter) perceived. And it is certainly not known a priori. So, these two main traditional sources of knowledge are, in this case, ruled out. And while testimony is an important source of information on sexual violence, it is only occasionally the testimony of authority. So, for example, we learn about sexual violence from reading papers like this one, where statistical information is revealed, and sometimes stories

are shared between best friends. In at least these two cases, the authority of the testimony is generally not in question. But testimony often is gathered over time, in a piecemeal fashion, in ways that are generally overlooked and underrated in terms of their reliability and credibility, as when stories are regularly shared among complete strangers in anonymous support groups. In this kind of way we hear first-hand reports, but we also hear anecdotes and second-hand reports—a woman's sister was raped, a friend of a friend was attacked, a woman's second cousin, and so on. We also learn about sexual violence through testimony that is exchanged confidentially, in unorthodox environments, such as in the therapist's office, and between doctor or nurse and patient. The unfortunate consequence of this situation is that while the evidence is there if we dig deep enough, its credibility is always under question.

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM

The statistical information presented earlier suggests that the nontraditional sources discussed above are *reliable*, more likely than not to lead to true beliefs about sexual violence against women.²² The final challenge, then, in developing a theory of justification that will support the claims which lie at the center of the alternative worldview is to be able to ferret out these sources and privilege them as reliable indicators of true belief. As we shall soon see, in order to do this, our theory of justification needs to be a mix of epistemic internalism and externalism. While these terms have multiple meanings, I am using *externalism* to mean that what justifies our holding the beliefs we do is a causal process of one kind or another that is external to our mental states, and I am using *internalism* to mean that justification rests on an internal reasoning process.²³ An analysis of the beliefs formed in the experience of psychic trauma provides some insight into the merits of these two approaches to justification, while at the same time illustrating what is wrong with this traditional dichotomy.

Before I was raped, I believed that the world was basically fair, that I could protect myself from harm, that people could be reasoned with, that I was safe in my own home, and that men could be trusted. Since my rape, I have rejected these particular beliefs and, indeed, a whole class of beliefs that are intimately related to them: that I am safe in this person's home, or in that person's car, or with that strange man, or walking down that street at this time of day. I have wholly rejected the "just-world philosophy." I now believe that the world is fundamentally unsafe for myself and for other women. I also believe that women are basically unable to protect themselves against sexual violence. These are now my *beliefs* about the world, which is not to say that I do not occasionally modify my belief set with respect to a particular situation or individual. So, for instance, I may, in the face of sufficient counterevidence, come to believe that I am safe in place *p* at time *t*, or that person *s* can be trusted, but these

are exceptions to the rule. The default position, so to speak, is that the world is fundamentally unsafe for women because they are women. I have embraced the alternative worldview.

What is the epistemic status of these beliefs? Are they justified? If, as we have just seen, there is plenty of evidence to support this worldview, then it seems reasonable to expect that I am justified in holding my particular belief that I am not really ever safe, as are you for holding your similar belief, and so on. In other words, a given instance, or sentence token, of the propositional content that makes up the alternative worldview should be warranted for any particular individual, or at least for anyone who is in the position to hold it. But if these beliefs are warranted for any given individual, whether or not that individual is herself a survivor of sexual assault, then justification cannot be strictly internal or external—neither is independently sufficient, though they are jointly necessary. What I propose below is a reliabilist theory of justification, combined with a coherentism that privileges feminism.

RELIABILISM, COHERENTISM, AND FEMINISM

Shortly, I will look at how this account works for those who have not themselves experienced sexual violence, but to start with, take the case of a survivor. Here an externalist account of justification is important for a few reasons. First, because in this case there is a causal link, namely the act of sexual violence (which is the initial cause of the shattered worldview), which ultimately gives rise to the beliefs that form the alternative worldview. We want to be able to say, along with the externalist, that these beliefs are justified *in virtue of that act*, whether or not the survivor can cite the act as a reason for her newly formed beliefs. This is crucial since it is common for trauma survivors to block out various details of their assault. In fact, there are those who argue that trauma victims are literally unable to recall the traumatic event, and if this is right, then *a fortiori* they will not be able recall the event as a reason for something.²⁴

But that is not the whole story, because the fact that, say, I was raped, is not sufficient to warrant the inference that the world is fundamentally unsafe for women because they are women. For this we need more evidence than our own misfortune, we need proof that it is a *shared* misfortune, we need evidence that sexual violence against women is a social problem, and one of enormous proportions. Thus, we want to say that the beliefs that constitute the alternative worldview are justified in virtue of an act of sexual violence *to the extent that the act is a reliable indication of the prevalence of sexual violence*. A strict externalist account will not do here, however, because to support this claim we need to do more than just trace causal lines—we need to trace the *right* causal lines. We need to somehow sort through a mass of information, and we need to be able to weed out misinformation. The claims at the center of the alternative worldview

are, after all, at odds with certain common, although mistaken assumptions about sexual violence—the “just-world philosophy” and the “myth of our own immunity.” And, as we have just seen, the facts that support them are not in plain sight for all to see. Thus what we need is a principle of reasoning that will enable us to overcome these two barriers, which will provide us with a method for determining which stories count.

To say this is just to say (along with many critics of naturalized epistemology) that externalism, on its own, cannot tell us how to sort through the facts of the matter.²⁵ Nothing in the way that the world is can instruct us how to limit our information sources, or how to determine whose stories count. In other words, causal lines cannot identify themselves as the right causal lines; only we can make that judgment, which is why a theory of justification must, in part, depend on our reasoning processes. This need for internalism is heightened in our case because of the inaccessibility of the information on the prevalence of sexual violence, which does not come to us, at least usually, through the traditional sources of knowledge. As we have just seen, two traditional kinds of knowledge—perception and *a priori* knowledge—are ruled out in this case. And while testimony is an important source of information, it is generally not the testimony of authority. Instead, as we have seen, testimony is regularly given in unorthodox environments, it is exchanged between strangers, and it is often second hand.

That we do not hear these stories first hand, that they are not always publicly owned, has more to do with the taboos that surround talking about the harsh realities of sexual violence against women and the denial of the legitimacy of the alternative worldview than with the veracity of the accounts. As the statistical information presented above confirms, these sources, unorthodox or not, should be taken as reliable indicators of true belief. What we need, then, is a way to privilege them as such in our theory of justification. How can we accomplish this in a way that is not entirely ad hoc? The answer, I think, is to adopt a guiding principle to help us sort through information, as well as misinformation, one that will allow us to handpick reliable sources of knowledge. In other words, we need a principle that will provide us with some kind of method for determining which stories—whose stories—count.

One possibility for such a principle is a kind of coherentism that privileges feminism. The idea here is that we would seek out logical consistency between those beliefs that are in sync with a feminist viewpoint, construed broadly so as to incorporate as many sorts of feminist views as possible. This principle would function like all brands of coherentism such that, for any particular belief, that belief will be justified for an individual if it coheres with the belief set of the individual who holds it.²⁶ What is noteworthy about this version of coherentism is its explicitly stated feminist slant. The justification for embracing this partial perspective is straightforward enough, since it is largely (if not

exclusively) as a result of feminist theorists and advocacy groups that there is any degree of recognition about sexual violence against women. And rounding out this principle will be a reliabilism, insofar as a reliable method will count as *reason*, and thus provide a justification, for why an individual hold the beliefs that she does.

This idea needs some filling out. When it comes down to considering which kinds of sources provide us with reliable facts around sexual violence, which ones are apt to lead to true beliefs, we would privilege those that are consistent with a feminist perspective and seek further coherence from there. This would help us to establish, in the first place, what kinds of sources about sexual violence are to be taken as reliable. So, for instance, we would invoke this principle when trying to determine whether in a certain situation, say a sexual violence support group, the testimony of a complete stranger ought to be seen as reliable. Likewise, we would rely on this principle when trying to determine whether a singular act of sexual violence is a reliable indicator of the prevalence of sexual violence. If our feminist coherentism tells us that these sources are likelier than not to lead to true beliefs about sexual violence, then they will provide justification for the alternative worldview for those individuals in a position to adopt it.

This theory of justification would also help us when trying to decide what to believe about particular issues raised in this context. So, for example, suppose that we are trying to decide what to believe when it comes to the issue of personal responsibility and rape. In order to make our way through the different and often contradictory opinions on this matter, we would reflect on the various feminist views on this issue, and then rely on the principle of coherence to help us to determine whether or not, for instance, women should be held responsible for the acts of violence perpetrated against them. The ultimate aim of this account is to provide a fair and balanced perspective, with its inherent and explicit partiality working to level the playing field when it comes to the facts about sexual violence.

THE EXTENDED WORLDVIEW

One merit of the theory of justification developed here is that one does not have to live through a sexual assault to have justified beliefs about sexual violence against women. The beliefs that make up the alternative worldview are justified in virtue of the prevalence of sexual violence. A survivor's particular traumatic experience is a reliable indicator of that prevalence, but it is not the only one. That said, I suspect that, on balance, victims of sexual violence are more attuned than others to the signs of trauma, and more prepared to give credibility to the traditionally overlooked sources of belief. Still, their singular experience is no more apt to produce true beliefs about sexual violence against

women than any one of the other sorts of indicators discussed above. This helps account for the fact that the alternative worldview is often adopted by our (nontraumatized) partners, therapists, and friends. To have adequate grounds to accept the claims at the center of this alternative worldview one has only to learn the facts about sexual violence. This condition will be met by those individuals who have been exposed to survivors' stories and testimony, or to the statistics on sexual violence, or any other reliable indicator of the prevalence of sexual violence against women.

A FEW CHALLENGES

The facts about sexual violence against women justify the beliefs that form the alternative worldview for any individual in a position to adopt it. That said, even when this typically censored information is available to individuals, even when that challenge can be overcome, there are a number of further obstacles—economic, legal, and pragmatic—that stand in the way of accepting the reality of sexual violence, particularly for survivors themselves.

The most serious of these obstacles is socioeconomic and, in some cases, this may be insurmountable. As a woman in one of my survivor groups once noted after her husband left her and her children penniless, "Look what happens to you when you tell."²⁷ In many cases a survivor's social and economic dependency on her partner will dictate her willingness to live with dissonant beliefs. After all, if one's rapist is one's husband it can be psychologically difficult to sustain the belief that one is safe at home. However, if you have no place else to go, this can also, for socioeconomic reasons, be a difficult belief to reject. This situation is underscored in countries like Afghanistan, where running away from home, regardless of how one is being treated at home, is a crime punishable by jail time, and in India where, according to section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, "Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, not being under 15 years of age, is not rape" (Amnesty 2004, 19, 23).

Moreover, there is a high psychological cost that comes along with embracing the alternative worldview. To accept it means to admit that, in virtue of our sex, because we are women, we are fundamentally unsafe in the world and unable to protect ourselves from serious harm. Many people fail to realize that this is a dominant reason why women blame themselves for their attack—it is not as simple as having low self-esteem. After all, it cannot both be true that the world is basically fair and that you were raped, *unless*, of course, the rape was your fault. Because it is hard to accept that the world is not basically fair, survivors tell themselves that the act of violence is a reflection of their choices, and that they have failed to adequately protect themselves. As Brison put it:

It can be less painful to believe that you did something blame-worthy than it is to think that you live in a world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman. (Brison 2001, 13)

This psychological discomfort helps explain why, for survivors, the restructuring of one's belief set does not happen simply or quickly, or sometimes at all.

There are still other pragmatic reasons for rejecting the alternative worldview. Even if a woman is lucky enough to be able to embrace this worldview and still survive socially and economically, it is still *easier* to believe that the world is a basically safe place. Deciding to have children is easier, choosing a partner is easier, and going on trips is easier. Finally, and most significant for our purposes, it is easier not to have your beliefs about the world routinely dismissed.

What these challenges show is that while there is a whole host of good reasons to reject the alternative worldview that grows out of the experience and awareness of sexual violence, none of them is epistemic. On that front, we have good grounds for accepting the kinds of beliefs that form the alternative worldview. The first step to recognizing this is to treat these beliefs *as* beliefs, and this means maintaining a clear line between the shattered worldview and the shattered self, that is, between the consequences of psychic trauma on our emotions and physiology, on the one hand, and on our beliefs, on the other. With that distinction firmly in place, we can begin to develop a theory of justification that treats these beliefs as warranted for those individuals in a position to adopt them. This entails overcoming two main epistemic hurdles. The first is that the evidence for this view is kept underground, and the second is that, when this evidence is unearthed, it typically comes to us through non-traditional sources of knowledge. To meet these challenges I have proposed a theory of justification that is a mix of internalism and externalism, specifically a reliabilism that is guided by a feminist coherentism.

An analysis of the beliefs the form the alternative worldview drives home the point (made by both epistemic naturalists and feminist philosophers) that only by first discovering *why* people hold the beliefs that they do, can we develop a theory of justification that properly accounts for those beliefs. And this is precisely the epistemological significance of psychic trauma: it demonstrates the need for our theories of justification, if they are to account for a variety of experiences, to be written by a chorus of different voices; we otherwise run the risk of developing theories that neglect whole populations of believers. As friends and partners of survivors of traumatic events, we show deep compassion and understanding of the personal suffering of the aftermath; as epistemologists, concerned with the beliefs that are formed in and grow out of such experiences, we should aim to show no less.

NOTES

For their inspiration and insight I thank Anique Rosenbaum and Susan J. Brison. I also thank Barry Allen for inviting me to give a first reading of this essay to the winter 2003 Guelph-McMaster-Laurier Ph.D. seminar, and my colleagues and the graduate students who participated in that seminar and gave me helpful and instructive comments, especially Jay Lampert. John Gibson provided an insightful critique of the essay, as well. The final version of this piece is much improved because of these individuals, and also because of two anonymous reviewers for *Hypatia*, who offered thoughtful and detailed comments on the paper, most of which I have incorporated.

1. Certainly the near global response to the September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States is evidence for this.

2. Historians of trauma generally mark the beginning of this trend with the publication in the 1860s of British physician John Eric Erichson's lectures in which he analyzed "railway spine" as a "traumatic syndrome"—the first time the term *trauma*, used in this way, appeared in print (Erichson 1866). In the 1880s, Berlin neurologist Paul Oppenheim called it "traumatic neurosis." Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, so around the same time as Oppenheim, Jean-Martin Charcot was carving out a different diagnostic category of trauma in his case studies of "traumatic hysteria." For Oppenheim's work see Lerner 2001; on "railway spine" see Harrington 2001; and on Charcot see Micale 2001.

3. The fascinating story of this revolution and of how PTSD entered *DSM-III* can be found in Wilbur J. Scott's definitive study (Scott 1990).

4. In *DSM-IV*, the traumatic events that are "experienced directly include, but are not limited to, military combat, violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, natural or manmade disasters, severe automobile accidents, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness" (1994, 424).

5. This is the name given to a new journal in the field by its founder Charles R. Figley, a psychologist and professor at Florida State University who is also the moderator of an on-line traumatic stress forum, the author of over fifteen books on traumatic stress, and founder of Florida State's Traumatology Institute.

6. The literature on PTSD is cropping up in fields as varied as history, psychology, medicine, biology, anthropology, and literary theory—but philosophy has been the sleeper here. While philosophers of law (Catherine MacKinnon, most notably) have for some time now been writing about violence against women, we are only beginning to see the philosophical importance of psychic trauma explored in mainstream analytic philosophy. Ian Hacking's work in this area (especially, Hacking 1995), Susan J. Brison's new book (Brison 2001), as well as two new collections of papers (French et al. 1998; Burgess-Jackson 1999), are helping to effect this change.

7. In her genealogical study of the concept of trauma, for instance, Ruth Leys argues that since its psychologization there have been two rival models of trauma, mimetic versus antimimetic, which offer fundamentally contradictory explanations of the post-traumatic experience (Leys 2000). Young has argued that PTSD is a historical product which has been *made* real by the "practices, technologies, and narratives with which it

is diagnosed, studied, treated and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources" (1995, 5). And Hacking (1995, 1999) has argued for the contingency of mental illness, and what he calls the "looping effect" of human kinds—how our classification of someone as mentally ill (for example) affects the way their illness develops.

8. Which is decidedly not to say that that rape is exclusively gendered. With respect to childhood sexual assault, for instance, the Canadian National Advisory Council on Status of Women "Sexual Assault Fact Sheet" (1985), reports that 1 in 6 men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18, versus the 1 in 3 incidence rate for females. Moreover, it is notoriously difficult to track the prevalence of adult male rape since, like female rape, though for significantly different sorts of reasons, incidents are vastly underreported.

9. <http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2002/05/08/rape/index.html>

10. "You're lucky" is precisely what the police told Alice Sebold after her rape, because a young girl had been murdered and dismembered in the same tunnel where the rape took place (Sebold 1999, preface).

11. Brison (2001) explores the impact of sexual violence on personal identity in chapter 3, "Outliving Oneself."

12. A discussion of these symptoms is standard stuff in most books on PTSD, although Herman's (1992) discussion is particularly insightful; see especially chapter 3.

13. The state of this debate is captured in a recent collection edited by Leighton (2003).

14. Robinson argues that the startle response is a type of emotional responses, and that cognitive content is neither a sufficient or necessary component of any kind of emotional response.

15. Robert Solomon, an advocate of the cognitive theory of emotion, answers to this kind of counterexample with the argument that there is no one-to-one correspondence between emotions and cognitions, or judgments, but that there is rather a cluster or "complex sequence of judgments," which link to any one emotional response. This sequence of judgments opens the door to the possibility of particular emotional responses that lack the expected cognitive correlate; see his 1988, "On Emotions as Judgments," reprinted in Leighton 2003.

16. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, is a powerful way of releasing the emotions that get stuck in an act of terror, and hence a helpful way to ease the symptoms of PTSD. Drug therapy (or pharmacotherapy) can also be effective, as it helps restore the nervous system to working order.

17. This idea that the body stores trauma has been interpreted literally by certain health-care professionals, and the result is the recent growth of "somatic," or body-focused, psychotherapies such as EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) and psychophysiology. The founder of EMDR, Francine Shapiro, has written a few books on the subject (see especially Shapiro and Forrest 1997; Rothschild 2000).

18. While we would not want to say that all human behavior is rational, let alone intentional, such that we can thus always just pick and chose our beliefs, it seems like a fair and well-grounded presumption that this will generally be the case. Jon Elster offers a brief but insightful discussion of some of the connections between intentionality, Festinger's theory, and the idea of self-deception (Elster 1979, esp. 172–79).

19. A twist on Melvin Lerner's hypothesis that individuals have a psychological need to believe in a "just-world" (Lerner 1980).

20. For example, in South Africa, a country that has a particularly high number of reported rapes—54,000 in 2001–2002—it is estimated that only 1 in 35 rapes are actually reported (Amnesty International 2004, 23).

21. These Canadian statistics come from two sources: Health Canada's *Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women* (1985), and The Violence against Women Survey (VAWS, Statistics Canada 1993). VAWS is the largest survey to date conducted by the federal government in Canada. It was organized by the federal Department of Health, which interviewed 12,300 women about their experiences of sexual and non-sexual violence. Holly Johnson, of the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, offers an in-depth analysis of the results of VAWS in Johnson 1996.

22. Alvin Goldman was the initial proponent of this kind of reliabilism (1979, 1994).

23. For an analysis of the subtle variations on these two concepts, see Richard Fumerton (1988).

24. This is the position taken by the "mimetic" school of thought (Leys 2000).

25. Brandom makes this kind of criticism of reliabilism and boundaries of reference class (2000, 114–17).

26. Keith Lehrer's *Theory of Knowledge* (1990, chaps. 6 and 7) provides a basic analysis of coherentism and most of the standard objections.

27. I have received permission to repeat this story on the condition that I keep the woman's identity anonymous.

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