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Social Facts
&
Collective Intentionality

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOCIAL FACTS:
THE EVIDENTIAL VALUE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE VERSUS TESTIMONY

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Summary

"The Personal is Political": This was an often-heard slogan of feminist groups in the late sixties and early seventies. The slogan is no doubt open to many interpretations. There is one interpretation which touches on the epistemology of social facts, viz. the slogan claims that in assessing the features of a political system, personal experiences have privileged evidentiary value. For instance, in the face of third-person reports about political corruption, I may remain unmoved in my belief that the political powers are morally upstanding, and it is only when I myself am adversely affected, that I come to change my views. There are two standard patterns of explanation of this type of belief formation: (i) We know that third-person reports may be less reliable than first-person experiences; (ii) If the third-person reports are no less reliable than first-person experiences, we may just be dealing with a standard pattern of epistemic irrationality. However, we argue that there is also a much more surprising pattern of explanation: under certain conditions, a Bayesian argument can be proffered to the effect that it is rational to change one's beliefs in the face of personal experiences and not in the face of third-person reports, *even if* these experiences and reports are equally reliable. Hence, the feminist slogan (at least on one particular interpretation of it) receives unexpected support from Bayesian corners. We also show that this pattern of explanation has surprising repercussions on the question of the evidentiary value of miracles in philosophy of religion.

'Wait till it happens to *you!*' This phrase reminds us of some familiar facts about ourselves – viz. that in various ways we count our own experiences differently from those of others. I hear testimony that people feel more energetic after taking vitamin E, that the university administration has treated some of my colleagues callously, that the ghost of Hamlet's father can be seen walking the battlements, and I remain skeptical. Perhaps vitamin E is merely a placebo, perhaps the administration is overall a bunch of fine fellows, maybe there is a special trick of the light in Elsinore. But let the same experiences happen to *me*, and everything changes. Suddenly I am bending the ear of anyone who will listen to me about the wonders of vitamins, about the need to impeach the entire administration, about the supernatural phenomena in Elsinore. And usually, of course, to no avail. 'Wait,' I say, 'till it happens to you!'

There is more than one source of this phenomenon. Hume famously thought, and most of us agree, that one should take seriously the possibility that any given bit of testimony is mistaken, is an outright lie or is corrupted in transmission. No doubt something like this *can* sometimes help to explain why I am more reluctant to draw conclusions from your testimony than from my own experiences, but these considerations cannot always provide for an adequate explanation. In our examples, we can easily imagine the situation so set up as to rule out the possibility that you are a liar or that your testimony was corrupted in transmission. Of course, you could be mistaken – perhaps you did not really feel *so* terrific *so* soon after taking the vitamin, perhaps the dean did not really say *that* awful thing to you, perhaps what you saw on the battlements did *not quite* have the human features that you thought it did, ... But notice that *I* might be mistaken too. I need not think and generally do not think that I am a better observer than you are of the correlations between what I eat and how I feel, of the tone of a remark, of what is up on the battlements.

If it is the case that your testimony is no less reliable than my own experiences, then what are we to think about my willingness to draw conclusions from my own experiences but

not from your testimony? There is a tendency to appeal to psychological factors to explain this difference. For instance, we are resistant to changing our beliefs in the face of evidence, unless we have been emotionally affected in some way or other, and personal experience just tends to affect us to a greater extent than testimony. Or, since testimony tends to be less reliable than personal experience in general, we are habituated to assign less weight to it and, so, in those special cases in which testimony is no less reliable than personal experience, we carry on with our old and proven habits. Certainly such psychological factors provide for an adequate explanation in some cases. But is the correct explanation *always* to be found in psychological factors? Or, can it be epistemically rational to change my beliefs in the face of my own experiences but not in the face of equally reliable testimony? Can I have good epistemic reasons to shrug my shoulders in the face of reliable testimony and to wait until it happens to *me* before drawing any conclusions?

We will argue that in some cases it is a sound Bayesian strategy to favor personal experience over equally reliable testimony. I update my beliefs not only on grounds of the new evidence but also on how I came to learn this new evidence. And this will typically make for a difference between evidence acquired through personal experience and evidence acquired through testimony.

To see how the way in which I come to learn new evidence can affect the conclusions I draw from the evidence, consider the following two cases. In case 1, a coin is tossed 100 times and I am invited to ask about a fairly scattered subset of 25 tosses. You inform me that these were all heads. I regard this as strong evidence that the coin has a bias towards heads. In case 2, you have seen the outcomes of the 100 tosses and you choose to tell me about 25 of the outcomes. You name a fairly scattered subset of 25 tosses and you tell me that the outcomes of these tosses were all heads. I need not regard this as particularly persuasive evidence that the coin is biassed: if, for example, I assign any weight to the possibility that you want me to believe the coin is biassed towards heads, I will discount your evidence

completely. My evidence in these cases is not only that 25 coin tosses came up heads, but also the details of how I came to learn this fact. And the latter information can make for all the difference. Let us see how this comes about.

To make the numbers definite, suppose that the prior probabilities that the coin is fair and that the coin is biassed, i.e. $P(F)$ and $P(B)$, are each ½. Suppose, again to make calculations easier, that if the coin is biassed, it is in fact a two-headed coin. Then if my evidence were Y – i.e. the statement that a (particular, specified) set of 25 outcomes were heads, we would have

$$(*) \ P(F|Y) = P(Y|F) \ P(F) \ / \ [P(Y|F) \ P(F) + P(Y|B) \ P(B)] = a \ / \ (a + 1),$$

where $a = P(Y|F)$ is a very small number. So $P(F|Y)$ would be close to 0 and so $P(B|Y)$ would be close to 1.

Even in case 1, my evidence e_1 is not strictly speaking Y. Instead, we should write it as $X_1 \& Y$, where X_1 is the statement that I learned about a particular set of outcomes through my asking you for the outcomes of a particular set of tosses and no others. To evaluate $P(F|e_1)$, the simplest way to proceed is to think of ourselves as first conditionalizing on X_1 and subsequently on Y. After we have conditionalized on X_1, we will be conditionalizing on Y by using a formula – call it $(*^{X1})$ – which is just like $(*)$, except that all occurrences of P are replaced by P^{X1}, where P^{X1} is our probability function after conditionalization on X_1. In case 2, my evidence e_2 is actually $X_2 \& Y$, where X_2 is the statement that I learned about a particular set of outcomes through your chosing to provide me with the outcomes of a particular set of tosses. To evaluate $P(F|e_2)$, we proceed in the same way and calculate $(*^{X2})$.

Compare $(*)$, $(*^{X1})$ and $(*^{X2})$. Clearly, $P(F) = P^{X1}(F) = P^{X2}(F)$ and hence $P(B) = P^{X1}(B) = P^{X2}(B)$: merely being told how we learned about a particular set of outcomes does not affect our views about the fairness of the coin. Also clearly, $P(Y|B) = P^{X1}(Y|B) = P^{X2}(Y|B) = 1$: with a two-headed coin nothing but heads can be thrown. However, $P^{X2}(Y|F) > P(Y|F) = P^{X1}(Y|F)$. If I believe that you want me to believe that the coin is biassed,

then the information that you picked the outcomes will raise the conditional probability that these outcomes were all heads given that the coin is fair: indeed, $P^{X2}(Y|F)$ will be close to 1 and so $P^{X2}(F|Y)$ will be close to $1/(1+1) = 1/2$, i.e. the value for $P(F)$ that we began with. On the other hand, the information that I asked you for a particular set of outcomes does not affect the conditional probability that these outcomes where all heads given that the coin is fair: $P^{X1}(Y|F)$, just like $P(Y|F)$, is close to 0. Hence, $P^{X1}(F|Y)$, just like $P(F)$, is close to 0.

Let us return to our original examples. Let F be either the statement that vitamin E is at best a placebo, or that the administration is a bunch of fine fellows, or that there is no ghost of Hamlet roaming Elsinore. Let Y be either the statement that a particular person experienced an energy boost after taking vitamin E, that a particular person was treated callously by the administration, or that a particular person met with an image in Elsinore that was strongly suggestive of a human figure disappearing in thin air. Certainly it is possible to fill in the details for F and Y in such a way that, just like in the coin-tossing story, $P(F) = P(B) = ½$ and $P(F|Y)$ is close to 0. But I should not update my beliefs merely by conditionalizing on Y but also on how I came to learn that Y. Now suppose that I come to learn through personal experience – i.e. it was me who experienced an energy boost after taking vitamin E (etc.). Let X_1 be the statement that I come to learn through personal experience and let P^{X1} be the probability function after conditionalizing on X_1. Just like in the coin-tossing case, $P^{X1}(Y|F) = P(Y|F)$ is close to 0: it is unlikely that a particular person would experience an energy boost given that vitamin E is merely a placebo (etc.) and the information that I came to learn about this through personal experience does not affect this conditional probability. Hence, $P^{X1}(F|Y) = P(F|Y)$ is close to 0: coming to learn through personal experience will force us to change our beliefs.

Suppose however that I come to learn through testimony. Let X_2 be the statement that I come to learn through testimony and let P^{X2} be the probability function after conditionalizing on X_2.

Now, even if vitamin E is not a cure for anything whatsoever, someone out there is recovering from some illness right after starting up a daily dosage of vitamin E. Even if the administration is overall a bunch of fine fellows, someone out there will meet with an encounter that can reasonably be interpreted as callous. Even if there is no ghost of Hamlet's father roaming Elsinore, someone out there at some time and place will meet with conditions that are strongly suggestive of ghost-like roamings. Furthermore, there is a tendency for people who have such unusual experiences to testify in more or less broad circles. Consequently, just like in the coin-tossing story, $P^{X2}(Y|F)$ is close to 1: it is highly probable that I will meet with some testimony of an unusual experience, conditional upon vitamin E being a mere placebo, the administration being overall a bunch of fine fellows and there being no ghost of Hamlet's father roaming in Elsinore. But then similarly, $P^{X2}(F|Y)$ will differ only minimally from $P(F)$: coming to learn about unusual experiences through testimony minimally affects the beliefs that we started off with.

Our argument has a bearing on some issues both in philosophy of religion and in feminist theory. William James stresses the evidential value of personal experience over testimony in his discussion of mysticism and is taken to task for it by William Alston. In contemporary feminist theory there is a common theme that stresses the value of personal experience as an inspiration for theory construction and an impetus for political action.

William James writes that '(1) mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come' and '(2) [n]o authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically' (1902, p. 14). William Alston spells out the following interpretation of James' position: a religious belief P is justified when formed directly on the basis of personal mystical experience, but it is not justified when formed on the basis of testimony by a person who came to be justified in

believing P on the basis of a personal mystical experience (1991, p. 280). Alston argues against James that if X is justified in believing some proposition P on grounds of a personal experience, then Y is no less justified in believing P on grounds of X's testimony, provided that Y is justified in believing that X is competent, reliable and authoritative. This principle, according to Alston, is acceptable for empirical beliefs and to reject it for religious beliefs is to hold up a double standard. Hence, personal mystical experiences should count for no more than testimony of mystical experiences by a trustworthy witness. Alston grants that mystical experiences are more subject to doubt than ordinary sensory experiences, but this doubt is present for personal experience no less than for testimony. He concludes: 'And if those not blessed with first hand experience of God cannot become justified in their belief about God from the testimony of those who are so blessed, then we are of all men the most miserable' (1991, pp. 282-283).

Feminists have long maintained that personal experience can provide for privileged evidence in social theorizing and for a legitimate impetus towards social action. Virginia Held (1984, pp. 41-61) argues against Rawls's and Hare's admonition to construct moral theory in an impartial and detached manner and favors moral knowledge that springs from personal experience. Chandra Mohanty (1987, p. 32) argues that personal experience is a privileged form of evidence in historical scholarship. Paul Lauritzen (1996) argues that an author's own personal experience with infertility treatment or proxy decision-making for dying relatives gives him or her some special authority to write about such matters in the context of medical ethics. Joan Scott (1991, p. 787) takes it to be one of the meanings of the slogan "The Personal is Political" that the personal experience of oppression provides women with a special impetus to political resistance and joint action. We take it that the reverence for personal experience that is shared by these authors goes beyond the commonplace that personal experience is typically more reliable than witness testimony. But then one might ask: What gives personal experience this special evidential value?

Why would it matter to my social theorizing or my political commitments that things happen to me rather than that I come to learn through reliable sources that they are happening to others?

We do not claim to defend William James or contemporary feminist's writers on their own turf. But it is curious that their common thesis – i.e. that personal experience has a privileged evidential status – can be defended on strictly Bayesian grounds.

Consider an example of a mystical experience cited in Alston (1991, pp. 18-19 with reference to Beardsworth, 1977, p. 91). A patient in a ward prays to God for mercy. As he is waiting in the grounds with other patients, he has the following experience: "Suddenly someone stood beside me in a dusty brown robe and a voice said 'Mad or sane, you are one of my sheep.'" As Alston point out, mystical experiences remain somewhat open to doubt. It *may* still be the case that my mind is playing a trick on me and it *may* still be the case that a natural person in a brown robe made an unrecorded hasty visit to the ward and mumbled some significant words in passing by. For all this to fall into place at a particular occasion may be highly improbable, just like it is highly improbable that strictly natural conditions would create an image in someone's mind that is suggestive of a human figure disappearing in thin air in Elsinore. If a mystical experience stands in the same evidential relation to religious beliefs as the perception of an image resembling a human figure at Elsinore to supernatural beliefs, then we can conclude with James and against Alston that the evidential value of personal mystical experiences exceeds the evidential value of reliable testimony of personal experiences. Speaking with Alston, Bayesians have good epistemic reason to be of all men the most miserable!

Suppose that a particular woman has many times been one of two finalists for a job in a company but has always been passed over for an equally qualified male. Is sexism to blame? Of course it *may* be the case that the hiring practices of the company are entirely gender neutral: when two applicants are equally qualified, then the chair simply flips a coin. But for a particular woman to meet with such a streak of bad luck is

improbable, just like it is improbable that one meet with callous comments from an administration that is really a bunch of fine fellows. If the experience of a woman consistently losing out to equally qualified male competitors stands in the same evidential relation to beliefs about gender discrimination as the experience of meeting with callous remarks from the administration to beliefs about the fairness of the administration, then we can conclude with contemporary feminists that the personal experience of oppression has a privileged evidential status in coming to adopt feminist stands. However unlikely it may seem, Bayesians should join Joan Scott in raising a banner reading "The Personal is Political".[1]

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