

I Don't Want to Change Your Mind: A Reply to Sherman
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Gob Bluth from *Arrested Development*, arguably, exemplifies the trope known as Jerk with a Heart of Gold (the less couth among us might call him a ‘lovable asshole’). Gob’s blithe exterior is a thin cover for a man who cares deeply about his family and friends, and who usually tries, if misguidedly, to do the right thing. At the same time, he is the downright insensitive perpetrator of all kinds of injustices and unkindnesses towards women, minorities, and other members of disadvantaged groups. Gob, like many of us, has epistemic shortcomings, which leave him unable to act according to his own values.

In a recent exchange, Ben Sherman, Mark Alfano, Lacey Davidson and Daniel Kelly have taken steps to analyze just what is so worrisome about people like Gob. The framework under consideration is Miranda Fricker’s account of the problem of *testimonial injustice*, the disvaluing of a speaker’s word due to prejudice against the speaker, and her proposed solution, to cultivate the virtue of *testimonial justice*, where hearers attempt to neutralize their biases by adjusting those credibility assessments upwards.¹ As Sherman points out, to combat testimonial injustice, “we would need the moral and epistemic sensitivity to recognize when we faced such decisions.”² Hence the worry: if our strategy for addressing the harms of epistemic injustice turns on waiting for Gob to come to the realization that he is biased, we had best hang up our hats.

The authors in this exchange disagree over very little. Notably, Sherman and Alfano both express skepticism over whether a virtue theoretic framework is equipped to address the harms of epistemic injustice. I find myself sympathetic to this criticism. Similarly, Alfano, and Davidson and Kelly point out that the problem of epistemic injustice might be more fruitfully addressed when individuals take advantage of ‘external’ resources—employing ecological strategies and modifying environments to facilitate goal-directed action, rather than relying on conscious, reflective, in the moment control. I myself have made similar suggestions about reducing the influence of implicit racial biases.³

But here, I want to focus on why we find people like Gob so distressing. I believe that an underappreciated source of trouble for strategies aimed at ameliorating the effects of psychological prejudice is an implicit *individualist* perspective on agency and reasoning—the view that human beings reason best in isolated acts of conscious, reflective deliberation. In what follows, I will introduce John Doris’ notion of *collaborativism* about agency, and argue that a shift in focus away from individualism can help alleviate some of the hopelessness concerning whether moral and epistemic sensitivity about testimonial injustice is in principle possible for people like Gob.

¹ Miranda Fricker 2007.

² Benjamin R. Sherman 2015b.

³ See: Natalia Washington and Daniel Kelly, forthcoming.

Precisifying the Worry

First, let us say a bit more about our target. Gob is just one character in a cast of biased listeners committing testimonial injustices, who vary with respect to how motivated they are to judge fairly and how aware they are of the specific kinds of epistemic shortcomings they are up against. Further, when it comes to judging fairly, there are two notions we might have in mind—first, the ability to give a speaker’s testimony exactly the amount of credit it is due, and second, the ability to give a speaker’s testimony exactly the amount of credit that your explicitly held beliefs about them would warrant. Of course, these come apart, and if someone believes explicitly that a particular group of people deserve less credibility (for instance, Sherman’s example of the Klan’s Grand Cyclops) then their judgements represent a moral problem of a different kind (explicit prejudice as opposed to implicit prejudice). To simplify matters, we can restrict our inquiry to explicit egalitarians: those who believe that factors like race and gender do not affect a speaker’s credibility.⁴

This leaves people like you, me, and Gob: explicit egalitarians motivated to make unbiased judgements. Of course, human beings are plagued by a number of implicit cognitive biases which operate without conscious intention or awareness.⁵ And as Sherman and Alfano are both acutely aware, at least one of those biases is epistemic—what is known as *Bias Blind Spot* is a lack of awareness that one harbors implicit cognitive biases. As social psychologists Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross put it, “people recognize the existence, and the impact, of most of the biases that social and cognitive psychologists have described over the past few decades. What they lack recognition of... is the role that those same biases play in governing their own judgments and inferences.”⁶

Davidson and Kelly are keen to point out that this lack of recognition comes in two different forms.⁷ On one hand, there is the recognition, in the moment of judgement, that ones’ deliberative process has been influenced by implicit cognitive mechanisms. At the present, there is a powerful case to be made that we will never have this kind of Bad Judgment Alarm, or be able to fully eradicate our biases. On the other hand, however, individuals vary with respect to their recognition of bias in general. Some lucky few of us tuned in to the social psychological literature on the introspection illusion can be aware of our tendency toward unfair credibility assessments in certain kinds of cases (as with Davidson and Kelly’s Character A).⁸

But this doesn’t seem to describe Gob. Gob does not see himself as having such a tendency—indeed, he seems to think of himself as infallible as he famously quips, “*I’ve*

⁴ One might suppose that explicit egalitarians can vary with respect to how motivated they are to keep their own judgements free from bias. Though again, individuals who don’t care to live up to their values seem to be a different kind of problem. We’ll also put aside anyone disposed to think something like ‘*Prejudice is bad—I just don’t care if I’m prejudiced*’.

⁵ See: Timothy Wilson 2002; Banaji and Greenwald 2013.

⁶ Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross 2002, 369.

⁷ Lacey J. Davidson and Daniel Kelly 2015.

⁸ Emily Pronin and Matthew B. Kugler 2006.

never admitted to a mistake. What would I have made a mistake about?” Gob is not going to cultivate testimonial justice because he believes his intuitive judgments are correct. Likewise, he believes he is already as humble and as vigilant as he needs to be. It is no surprise that most of Gob’s beliefs seem right to him.

The worry about people like Gob is one about a kind of stubborn insensitivity to epistemic shortcomings. Due to the Bias Blind Spot, Gob is unable to practice the kind of humility Sherman advocates. He will not be disposed to modify his views on the assumption he is error prone. Most distressing is the possibility that there are *many* people in the world like Gob who will never come to the realization that they harbor implicit bias on their own. How are we to address testimonial injustice when this is its source? In the next section, I will introduce collaborativism, and suggest that the kind of sensitivity required is not (merely) to be found among the inner psychological workings of the individual.

Collaborativism about Agency and Reasoning

In his 2015 book *Talking to Ourselves*, John Doris defends what he calls collaborativism about agency. Arguing that a wealth of evidence from the empirical sciences of the mind makes traditional, individualist conceptions of agency untenable, Doris builds a persuasive case that human beings reason best in groups. In his words,

...optimal reasoning is socially *embedded*. That is, human beings typically reason best when reasoning takes the form of an ongoing social process. Sociality is not merely a *precondition* of optimal reasoning, like adequate sleep and nutrition; optimal reasoning is itself characteristically social.⁹

At its heart, collaborativism is both intuitive and easy to see reflected in our own lives. Most of our judgements and opinions about the world are not formed in instances of solitary meditation, fist to chin like Rodin’s Thinker, but in conversation: in bars and coffee shops, in classrooms, at water coolers, and during church socials, across dinner tables and pillows, and, increasingly, on internet forums. Our social worlds perform the function of filtering information, as we refine our views by trying to convince others of them, or over time become convinced ourselves, returning week after week to familiar disagreements.

If Doris is right, and asocial, individual deliberation is a subpar form of reasoning, then we ought to be concerned that our approach toward addressing epistemic injustice has so far focused on changing individual reasoners. I am not arguing that altering individuals’ biased thought patterns is not a worthwhile goal, or even a necessary part of a larger project. But when it comes to the task of ensuring that speakers’ testimony is fairly evaluated, as Doris says, “if reflectivism engenders skeptical difficulty, individualism obscures the best avenue of escape.”¹⁰ The ‘moral and epistemic sensitivity’ required to maximize epistemic justice is more than a Bad Judgement Alarm—it is a social and

⁹ Doris 2015, 115.

¹⁰ Doris 2015, 110.

moral ecology that facilitates the expression of our values.¹¹ Ultimately, we may wish that Gob gives fair credence to speakers' testimony, not just because he has reasoned his way to it, but because *that is what one does*.¹²

Thus, if the best way of addressing Gob is debating with him, it is not just because we want to change *his* mind—it is because doing so is a form of collaborative reasoning. Debate involves the give and take of reasons in a social space, which can alter the social schema structuring Gob's and others' reasoning. It is a form of social agency.

The Practicalities

Here are a few bare sketches of how we may begin the shift away from individualism: A collaborativist solution starts in our classrooms, board rooms, and court rooms—those places where testimonial injustice has the greatest detrimental impact. In the main, we should strive to make sure that the discussions that take place here support unprejudiced reasoning. Institutional changes, such as policies for blind review and checklist procedures are good places to begin. Collaborativism also suggests that a diversity of viewpoints is crucial for good decision-making. We should be wary of decision procedures that begin and end with a 'decider'.

Changes to the epistemic environment are also important. Increasing the visibility of the limits of introspection, and of strategies like corrective testimonial justice, will not just serve as ecological reminders to individuals aware of their own faults, but as challenges to those like Gob. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that argument and confrontation help reduce the effects of implicit bias, whereas letting prejudice slide increases its influence (see: Czopp et al., 2006; Rasinski et al., 2013).

Hopefully, by now, this discussion has provided a buffer against the concern that testimonial injustice is somehow psychologically inevitable. Still, there are likely those who still see individual psychological mechanisms as the main point of intervention when dealing with prejudice. One motivation for this view, perhaps, is the desire to negotiate whether and how individual agents are responsible or blameworthy in unjust situations. Fair enough. I want to reiterate, however, that because individual judgments are in part a function of collaborative reasoning, changing groups may be the best way to change minds. Happily, I don't need to convince you otherwise.

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¹¹ In a strong sense, I ally myself with Alfano's counsel to "go social and distal."

¹² Many thanks to Sally Haslanger for discussions on this point. For more on the complex interaction between social structure and psychological bias, see Haslanger (2015; 2016).

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