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The Epistemic Blindness of White Solipsism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a specific type of knowledge, this being the type of knowledge that allows for the ability of an individual to know another person. I analyzed Shannon Sullivan's book *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* to gain insight into an individual's ability to know another person. Within the text, I concentrated on the first chapter "Ignorance and Habit", and the argument Sullivan articulates in this chapter. This argument is in regard to the consequence of what Sullivan describes as white solipsism and how it can cause unconscious habits. To better display Sullivan's argument, I used the epistemic framework articulated in Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory and his three stages of knowing. These stages of Experience, Understanding, and Judging, were used to explain how white solipsism could affect a white person's ability as a knower in the first stage of Experience. From this, I described how white solipsism causes the inability of a white person to have knowledge of people of different racial backgrounds from themselves. Ultimately, I conclude that white solipsism causes white people to have false knowledge because they are no longer looking for new experiences and that white solipsism causes ignorance and epistemic blindness regarding alternate viewpoints.

Introduction

How am I to know another person outside of myself? This paper focuses on a specific type of knowledge, this being the type of knowledge that allows for the ability of an individual to know another person. To do this I analyzed Shannon Sullivan's book *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. I concentrated on the first chapter, "Ignorance and Habit", as well as the argument Sullivan articulates in this chapter. This argument is in regard to the consequence of what Sullivan describes as white solipsism and how it can cause unconscious habits. From this, I used Bernard Lonergan's cognitional theory, his three stages of knowing, to explain how white solipsism can affect a white person's ability as a knower. In light of this, I show that white solipsism causes white people to view their views as the only important viewpoint. A habitual form of white solipsism can then be seen to affect the actions of white people and their understanding of the world. In light of this, I demonstrate that white solipsism limits perception and from this can be considered an epistemic vice in the stage of Experience. Due to white solipsism being an epistemic vice, I show that white people are not good knowers of people of different racial backgrounds from themselves. Ultimately, I conclude that this vice causes white people to have false knowledge because they are no longer looking for new experiences and that white solipsism causes ignorance and epistemic blindness regarding alternate viewpoints.

Three Stages of Knowing

To begin my discussion of knowledge, I will lay out a framework for how we, as knowers, can come to knowledge. To do this, I will describe Bernard Lonergan's three stages of knowing to serve as my framework. For Lonergan the three stages of knowing are Experience, Understanding

and Judging, with the stages occurring in that order. The first stage of Experience can be seen as the individual knower going out into the world and perceive things, gathering information. This gathering of information is done through, “seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring...” (Lonergan 1971, p. 6). Lonergan’s second stage is Understanding, when “our consciousness expands in a new dimension when from mere experiencing we turn to the effort to understand what we have experienced” (9). The knower must look at all the data and information they have collected and attempt to bring it together and try to make sense of what they have experienced. Finally, the knower must reflect on what they have brought together, the knower must decide if they hold the idea to be true; this is our third stage of knowing, the stage of Judging. This shows that knowing is not a static entity, that is given to someone, but for Lonergan is rather a dynamic process that a knower partakes in.

Due to knowing being a dynamic process, there is one major implication. This implication is that knowing like any process can either be done poorly or well. In light of the implication of individuals being better or poorer knowers, I ask one question. Simply, how can we be better or poorer knowers? To answer this question, I will introduce the concept of epistemic virtues and epistemic vices in reference to Lonergan’s stages of knowing. Before discussing the epistemic virtues for Lonergan, I will first define the notion of virtue.

Epistemic Virtue

To define virtue, we will turn to Linda Zagzebski and her book titled *On Epistemology*. In the text, Zagzebski defines virtue as “an acquired human excellence that includes a characteristic emotion disposition and reliable success at bringing about the end of the acts motivated by the emotion in question” (Zagzebski 2009, p. 81). This definition can be broken down into three distinct characteristics of virtue. In the first part of the definition, Zagzebski states that virtue is “an acquired human excellence”. From this notion of a virtue being acquired, we can conclude that virtue is something an individual must work at and practice. Now, if we are to acquire a virtue through practice, the virtue must become habitual since an individual must do it constantly. In light of this, it can be concluded that our actions define us as individuals because they form our habits. Next Zagzebski states that virtue “includes a characteristic emotion disposition” (81). What this means is that there is an emotional reaction by the person who is acting out the virtue. This is the emotional feeling or reaction that comes after the action of the virtue. An example would be that after you act out the virtue you think or reflect upon yourself, “I like doing this action, it comes easy to me.” Finally, the last characteristic of virtue is made clear when Zagzebski states that virtue has “reliable success at bringing about the end of the acts motivated by the emotion” (81). This notion of “reliable success” and “bringing about the end” can be seen as a cognitive element or a skill in judging how best to use the virtue. We must judge if the action in question will bring about the desired end of the emotion or habit and if we can reliably judge the action to bring about the success. An example of this would be: we must judge if jumping into a pool to save a drowning person would be the courageous thing to do. We must judge if we are good enough swimmers to pull the person out of the water, or if we are simply dooming ourselves and the other person to drowning in the pool. From all of these parts, we can state that the three components of virtue are: it must be habitual, there is an emotional component and there is some cognitive judgment that must be made.

For Lonergan, there are multiple virtues and vices that are specific for each stage of knowing. To better explain the idea of how the virtues and vices affect a knower, I will use an

example of two students working on a problem. Let's say you are student A and you are working on an assignment with student B. This assignment requires you and your partner to work together to answer a multiple-choice question. Before starting this assignment, you overheard from other classmates that student B is incredibly intelligent and is never wrong. For this situation, you have collected all the relevant information regarding the topic for which you will answer the multiple-choice question and understand it perfectly, meaning you have completed the first two stages of knowing without any problems. Now it is time for you and your partner to put down your answer, and your partner feels that the answer is C. You decide to agree with your partner without judging for yourself because the individual you are working with is believed to be smart by your other classmates. This is an example of an epistemic vice for the stage of judging; you are looking to an authority and not thinking for yourself, regarding the answer's validity. The opposite of this action would be the epistemic virtue, that of autonomy or the ability to think for oneself.

This example illustrates that when an individual partakes in either an epistemic vice or a virtue they affect the way their knowing is done. The individual can be a good knower by engaging in an epistemic virtue or a poor knower by engaging in an epistemic vice. Now that I have articulated the stages of knowing for Lonergan and how someone can come to knowledge, I look to a new text to discuss how Sullivan describes the epistemic blindness of white people and how this blindness may stop the knowing process.

White Solipsism

For Sullivan, the epistemic blindness of white people is rooted in the notion of white solipsism. Sullivan states:

[...] white solipsism is a real problem. In many people's day-to-day lives, it can seem as if only white people exist. While the literal existence of people of color may be acknowledged, such acknowledgement often occurs on an abstract level that produces ethical solipsism in which only white values, interests, and needs are considered important and worthy of attention. (Sullivan 2006, p. 17)

To better describe this passage, I will break it down into multiple sections. I will start with the first full sentence were Sullivan states, "in many people's day-to-day lives, it can seem as if only white people exist" (17). What Sullivan is articulating is the segregation of people by race in cities and across nations. We can see this in one of the largest cities in the United States, Chicago. There are portions of the city, like South Chicago, that are predominantly if not entirely of the racial minority with 75% being Black and 20% being Hispanic (Statistical Atlas 1). Conversely, there are portions of Chicago, such as Lincoln Park, that are predominantly white, almost 82% (Statistical Atlas 2). What this means is that the likelihood that a white person in Lincoln Park will see another white person is very high, but the likelihood of a white person in Lincoln Park seeing a Black or Hispanic person is very low. In light of these statistics, it is easy to see how Sullivan can come to the notion that in many white people's lives they are able to go about their day-to-day activities only encountering and engaging with other white people.

The final part of the passage that is of interest is when Sullivan states, "while the literal existence of people of color may be acknowledged, such acknowledgement often occurs on an abstract level that produces ethical solipsism in which only white values, interests, and needs are considered important and worthy of attention" (Sullivan 2006, p. 17). Sullivan is describing how even though white people know people of other racial backgrounds exist this knowledge of

mere existence is the extent of their knowledge regarding these individuals. Sullivan is stating that white people only know of racial minorities by description, this would be a kind of I-it knowledge, or a simple knowledge of existence that Martin Buber describes in his book *I and Thou*. For Buber this is the type of knowledge one would have of an object, knowing it only in its relation to oneself. An example being I only know of the lamp sitting in the corner of the room by its relation to me, I don't know if it has thoughts or feelings or any concerns. I only know that it is about 5 feet from me, that it takes up physical space and it is not in any apparent motion.

Sullivan's argument continues this I-it notion through the description of the relationship white people have with racial minorities. Since white people don't think of racial minorities, because the white people do not see them, the minorities can simply be considered as an external object, like the lamp in the corner. From this, the external racial group is then not considered to have interests or concerns and in turn white people only view their own concerns as important and disregard the other. This reducing and eliminating of the concerns of others brings about the creation of white solipsism, the experience that there is only one possible viewpoint, the viewpoint of white people.

For white people this white solipsism can lead to the idea that their way of experiencing the world is the only way to experience the world. Sullivan continues this idea and shows the effects this can have in the creation of a racial habit. She does this by expanding on the concept of W.E.B Du Bois, the notion of unconscious habit. This notion is described by Du Bois as the idea that "much of human behavior is guided by irrational unconscious habits" (qtd. in Sullivan 2006, p. 21). What Du Bois is saying is that our habits guide us and guide our actions potentially without our awareness of them. This means that there is a basic framework we are operating under that affects our actions and we may not be aware of the framework's existence.

Sullivan expands on this idea when she states, "as an instance of habit, race often functions subconsciously, as a predisposition for acting in the world that is not consciously chosen or planned" (25). This means that we not only have an unconscious habit, but also a racial habit that affects the way we behave in the world without our knowledge. In light of this, it can be seen that, due to our racial background, we have some habits that affect the way we move and experience the world.

Given this, we can expand the idea of white solipsism and see it as an unconscious racial habit. Sullivan does this by using an example of a college class. She describes how the racial habits for white people are praised in this college environment, where raising one's hand and having the conversation dictated by the professor is encouraged. She goes on to show how this habit of raising one's hand contrasts the racial habits for black people where "people tend to value individual regulation of when turns are taken", which is seen as rude and interruptive in the college environment (28). To explain the meaning of this example Sullivan gives us a hint into what she was thinking by stating, "my descriptions of racial habit should be read as an illustration of some of the ways by which habits of communication in the classroom racialize (and class) both the space of education and the habits of those being educated" (29).

This, on the surface, shows that the two contrasting forms of communication are important and that the overall setting is important. If we dive deeper, we can see in what sense each of these two aspects are important. This example shows us that these unconscious racial habits affect the way the professor perceives the students. Additionally, the setting of the college classroom was created using white solipsism, meaning that it was created under the framework that there is only one way to ask question or conduct conversation. In the example the white students would

automatically be seen as performing the right action because the environment views the white students actions as good. This perceived good action originates from the fact that the action is in line with the unconscious racial habit. This is the opposite case with the black student, where their actions would be viewed as rude even though the student is operating in a perfectly good way based on their own racial habit. This illustrates an immediate difference in the way a teacher would perceive the white student versus the black student. From this, we can state that white solipsism, white people believing that their way is the only way, is a framework or an unconscious racial habit that white people are operating under.

Now I will look at how white solipsism limited the ability of the professor to accurately perceive the student of a different racial background and the implications of white solipsism. I will use Lonergan's cognitional theory to help articulate what is exactly happening during white solipsism, in terms of epistemology. We showed that white solipsism does not allow white people to perceive the world accurately and gain all relevant information. For Lonergan the gaining of all relevant information is a characteristic that is required for good knowing in the stage of Experience. From this, I argue that white solipsism causes white people to be bad knowers of people of different racial backgrounds because the solipsism hinders an aspect of their knowing. In light of white solipsism causing white people to be bad knowers, it can be concluded that white solipsism is an epistemic vice in the stage of experience.

One could argue that for white people to engage in an epistemic vice they would have to actively know they were doing so. I argue, rather, that white people can engage in white solipsism without them knowing that they are partaking in the vice because it is an unconscious habit, as shown before. Due to the fact that white people are partaking in this epistemic vice we must now conclude that they have not completed this stage of knowing, Experience. Meaning that regardless of how well white people conduct the other two stages of knowing, Understanding and Judgment, they are still considered bad knowers because of their use of this epistemic vice in the first stage of knowing.

This raises the question, what are the ramifications of being a bad knower? Sullivan answers this question of the ramifications in her discussion of how bad knowing caused by habits can affect our ability to gain knowledge. Sullivan states, "thought as unconscious, the concept of habit demonstrates how habits often are deviously obstructionist, actively blocking the self's attempts to transform itself for the better" (44). This means that bad habits can obstruct our ability to grow because they influence our future actions. If we recognize, however, a current action as something we don't want to do in the future we should change the current habit to influence the future actions. This is easy enough to change when you know what the habit and actions are, you make the conscious effort to do the opposite. The problem is when you have a bad, unconscious habit, it can be almost impossible to change the actions because you have no idea that the actions are bad or that you even want to change the habit.

With an in-depth look into this passage, it can be seen as an explanation of how these habits create a positive feedback cycle in white people's inability to attain knowledge. White people are blocked from originally perceiving all of the necessary information due to the epistemic vice of white solipsism, this is our bad habit. This, in turn, causes white people to feel they have knowledge even when there are errors in the process of their knowing. Further, they are unable to see the error because this white solipsism is an unconscious habit that white people are unaware of.

Now, because white people feel that they already have adequate knowledge on the subject

of other racial groups they have no drive to acquire any other new information in an attempt to correct themselves. Thus, showing the difficulty of overcoming a bad unconscious habit. This, in turn, creates a white ignorance to all ideas that are non-white. This ignorance does not allow an individual to “transform itself for the better” because they are blocked by their incorrect belief that they have true knowledge (44). From this, we can conclude that white solipsism causes epistemic blindness for white people which, in turn, causes white ignorance and a cognitive block for white people to have accurate knowledge of people of other racial backgrounds.

I have shown that white solipsism causes white people to view their views as the only important viewpoint. From this, I illustrated how habitual white solipsism affects the actions of white people and their understanding of the world. In light of this, I demonstrated that white solipsism limits perception and from this can be considered an epistemic vice in the stage of Experience. Due to white solipsism being an epistemic vice, I showed that white people are not good knowers of people of different racial backgrounds from themselves. From this, I concluded that this vice causes white people to have false knowledge because they are no longer looking for the experiences and that white solipsism causes ignorance and epistemic blindness.

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