“Who Are You Going to Believe, Me or Your Lying Eyes?”

The Question of Expert Knowledge

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For my teacher, Kees Bolle, who, in 1974, as we stood waiting for an elevator, asked me, “Do you think there are moral experts?”

New initiates to Phi Beta Kappa, families, colleagues, it is a great honor to address you today. Thank you so much to past president Donnell Butler, for your introduction, and thank you also to President Jon Stone and the members of this chapter for bestowing this privilege on me. A thinker who has had a great impact on me, Emmanuel Levinas, about whom I will say a little more later on, once wrote that intellectuals are the ones who always miss their mark, but at least they aim very far. If missing the mark qualifies one to be an intellectual, then I think I have nothing to worry about. As to the aim of today’s talk, yes, it is reaching very far. But I cannot help hoping that you recognize the question as your own.

In the last few years, I have been doing reading that profoundly puzzles me. Just to give you an example, I happened on a lengthy review in which the famous philosopher Thomas Nagel presents the work of another famous philosopher, Daniel Dennett. The latter, in his 18th book, claims that consciousness is an illusion. The first person perspective, he maintains, that is, what I have to say in my own voice about my own experience, has no authority. We are our neural machinery, as Dennett put it. The job of understanding who and what we are falls to the natural scientists, pursuing physics, chemistry, molecular biology and neurophysiology. Only they can unravel the ultimate secrets of self. Hmm... I wonder. Since Dennett
himself acknowledges that his claim about consciousness is conjectural, isn’t he just presenting us with a first-person perspective we are free to dismiss on the very ground that it is a first person perspective? When, in addition, I hear him saying that the first-person perspective remains a useful fiction, necessary for us to function, what in the end does it matter? Let the philosophers ponder such imponderables as to whether consciousness is real or not.

Yet, even if not a few details of this discussion elude me, I do sense that a crucial question is at stake, the question of expert knowledge. Marilynne Robinson, contemporary novelist and essayist of note, places such claims as Daniel Dennett’s into a broader perspective. “A central claim of the modern worldview is that we do not know our own minds, our own motives, our own desires. And, an important corollary---certain well qualified others do know them.”\(^4\) In the case at hand, these well qualified others are the natural scientists, but other fields have both preceded and accompanied them. In what areas, one might ask, do we acknowledge experts and bow to their authority, and in what areas do we insist that there are no experts? On this, the experts themselves do not agree.

Take my own field, Religious Studies. One of the giants whose approach to religion is still very much alive today is the French philosopher and sociologist Emile Durkheim. In a book published in 1912, he argued that when members of a religious tradition claimed to experience a transformation as a result of a ritual activity, they were right; they were indeed experiencing a transformation. They were wrong, however, about the real source of that transformation. “The reasons employed by believers indeed are often erroneous; nevertheless, real reasons exist
and it is the job of science to discover them.”

Whereas worshippers attribute the source of their transformation to a divinity, the social scientist knows that the real source is the community to which the individual belongs. According to Durkheim, the members of that community worship their own society, all the while thinking that they are worshipping a god.

For another giant of the field, American philosopher and psychologist William James, on the other hand, the only reality we can be sure of is that of our own subjective awareness. “That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it---may be sneered at as unscientific but it is the one measure of our concrete actuality.”

James was particularly opposed to the claims of some experts in his time regarding mystical experience. Since the neurology of mystics often shows some abnormality, these experts argued, the mystic’s claims about reality could be dismissed out of hand. For James, physiology, whether normal or abnormal, could not determine the truth or falsehood of what someone communicates. “In the natural sciences and industrial arts, it never occurs to any one to try to refute opinions by showing up their author’s constitution. Opinions here are invariably tested by logic and experiment, no matter what may be their author’s neurological type. It should be no otherwise with religious opinions.”

In other words, the only way to judge the content of a mystic’s vision is to evaluate its claims, most importantly for James, to see whether they produce good and lasting results. We cannot dismiss another person’s first person perspective in any other way, and certainly not by dismissing the first person perspective simply because it is a first person perspective.
The question of who has the authority to tell us about ourselves is not new. Plato grapples with a version of expert knowledge in his dialogue “Crito.” In it, Socrates is calmly awaiting death. He has been condemned by the city of Athens to drink the poison hemlock and it is now just a matter of days. His old friend, Crito, comes to visit him in prison and urges him to flee. Most people would expect Socrates’s friends to help him to run away, he argues, especially since the judgment against him was unjust. Socrates interrupts him. Instead of listening to most people, he asks, should we not listen to the opinion of the experts? Does not someone in physical training listen only to the trainer? By analogy, in matters of right and wrong, should we not pay attention exclusively to the experts?

The problem is that Plato makes none too clear who the experts in morality are. One contender, as Socrates argues, is the Laws of the State. If a citizen has not managed to convince others to change a statute, he or she is honor bond to follow whatever the Laws claim to be right. Another contender is the philosopher. After all, isn’t it really Socrates who convinces us that the Laws are the authority we need to follow? A third possibility comes in to complicate matters. At the very end of “Crito,” Socrates declares that he has made up his mind; he will not try to escape. The last line of the dialogue “let us follow this course, since God points out the way,” suggests that the expert, in the final analysis, is one’s own inner voice. That inner voice, shaped by community standards—the laws—is not merely their mirror image. It results from an expertly trained reason, in the habit of weighing sides. Yet, ultimately, one must choose how to act. In ethical matters, at the crucial moment, there is no external expert.
We seem to have shifted grounds. Many of us might agree that in the area of ethics, there are no experts, only the fragility of our own conscience, and that this only increases our responsibility to weigh sides carefully, to become learned in many matters. Still, what does this have to do with whether or not we are our neural machinery? Natural scientists will tell us about that neural machinery and that is simply one more source of information that we need to evaluate when we make ethical decisions. I do not think it is that simple. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, the writer, Dr. Richard Friedman, from the Weil Cornell Medical College, discusses the findings of neurosciences in relation to the experience of beauty. He reports on a study of mathematicians’ brains while the latter were thinking about various equations. Neuroscientists, using fMRI machines, found activation of the medial orbitofrontal cortex, an area that has been shown to light up when people find music or art beautiful. Dr. Friedman then exclaims: “Geeks, take heart: While you can’t see or hear mathematical ideas, they too are capable of arousing a sense of beauty.” But why should geeks take heart from the fMRi machine? Don’t they already feel the beauty of mathematics? Is the beauty not real unless it is confirmed by neurologists? Is this kind of description merely adding to our knowledge of ourselves, or shifting the source of authority to machines that can read what we are really feeling?

Another consequence of the “we are our neural machinery argument” makes me equally uneasy. It is one thing to say, as one of the discoverers of the double helix structure of DNA, Francis Crick did, that “you, your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in
fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”14 His is a first person perspective and can and has been debated. It is another matter to enact practically what this amounts to. In his latest book, The Gene, Pulitzer Prize winner Dr. Siddharta Mukherjee, points out that we are moving to one of the most profound transitions in our history. Once we become adept at reading all those cells and molecules and their cyclical flows, “we will learn to read and write ourselves, ourselves.”15 If the subjective point of view is an illusion, however, who will have the authority to rewrite us, and on what basis?

How have I gotten myself into such a complex of questions? I think I got myself here because this is where we all are. The first task lies in even formulating the problem well, and here I turn to the great American novelist, Don DeLillo. In his latest book, Zero K, he creates a character, Jeff Lockhart, whose parents have decided to have their brains held in cryonic suspension, that is, frozen at very, very low temperatures, before the moment of death, so that they can be reassembled and brought back to life once scientists achieve sufficient knowledge of our neural circuitry. Cryonic suspension is not a novelist’s invention. Currently, three such facilities in the world perform the procedure and store the brains. A number of people have chosen this route and others anticipate doing so.

When Jeff, the narrator of Zero K, expresses doubts about this choice, his father retorts that so many well-qualified people are working on this project of redesigning atom by atom not only the human being but also the natural environment that he should not allow his narrow understanding of what is possible to determine his thinking. “Think beyond personal experience, leave it behind,” he
tells his son. What weight can one’s subjective feeling that we should not be tampering with life on such a vast scale have in the face of so many experts?

But Jeff cannot let go of what he calls his own window on the world. At one point in the novel, he enters into a large chamber filled with people who are awaiting the procedure. His father had been telling him to expect awe and reverence on their faces. Yet that is not his reading of it. “Is this what I was seeing? I saw ... not patients but subjects, submissive and unstirring...I did not see peace, comfort and dignity, only a person under the authority of others.” At another moment, he wonders whether he is not looking at the controlled future, men and women being subordinated, willingly or not, to some form of centralized command.” Even if, in some sense, individuals choose to undergo being redesigned, to what degree will the whole process make us into objects to be experimented with, reshaping us in ways we did not intend?

The narrator and, no doubt, DeLillo then catch themselves. Jeff pokes fun at his fears. Is he not jumping to conclusions? Is he not being facile and are not his fears of a totalitarian environment hollow? Is he not going too fast? Perhaps I too should rebuke myself for linking the idea that we are just our neural machinery to the idea that we will redesign ourselves once we think we understand how this neural machinery works, and then linking this idea to the possibility that we will cede our moral authority to a centralized pool of experts that individuals will not be able to resist. Hold your horses! And I will hold them. Nothing dictates that we end up there. Yet, I always have in the back of my mind, a few sentences of the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In his great book, Totality and Infinity, he
argues for ethics as the basis of all reality. The most real thing in the world is another person’s face, commanding us to protect it. In the first few pages of his book, Levinas acknowledges that we most often fail to fulfill the responsibility that the vulnerable face of another human being evokes. We succumb to fear and hunger; we are physical creatures, whose thoughts are driven by our biological needs. But, he adds, to be a human being is to know that this is the way it is. Freedom is to know that freedom is in danger. To be aware of how precarious our freedom is means to have some time to avoid and prevent the moment of inhumanity.20

In our particular historical juncture, being vigilant about our freedom means being vigilant about definitions of the human. They are never merely theoretical. It means being vigilant about the authority of the first person perspective about the first person. It is perpetually to evaluate the line separating the area in which we need to listen to experts, and there are many such areas, and the area in which we declare that there is no expertise except our own experience. This latter position runs the danger of becoming a lazy arbitrariness. The only way to fend that off is to keep oneself in top training. It is to read the scientists, so many of whom are aware of the limits of their science and who beautifully explain the workings of layers of our world. It is to read the poets, the philosophers, and the novelists. They articulate the large questions that face us, with humor and seriousness. Perhaps reading remains the only true way of redesigning ourselves, in ways that do not violate us. In the end, like Socrates, each one of us will have to say, “this is where I stand, this is where I draw the line, perhaps only to draw it differently on another
day. In our world, in which expert knowledge is indispensable, so is the hard won ability to know when it does not apply.

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3 Nagel, “Consciousness,” 32-34
6 Ibid., 125.
8 Ibid., 22.
10 Ibid., 85.
11 Ibid., 90-91.
12 Ibid., 96.
17 Ibid., 93.
18 Ibid., 146.
19 Ibid., 147.