

**Evidence and First-Person Authority**  
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**ABSTRACT**

In *Expression and the Inner*, David Finkelstein explores the peculiarities of self-knowledge as opposed to other sorts of knowledge that an agent might acquire; 'self-knowledge' does not refer, however, to the mere fact that an agent possesses knowledge about certain features of herself, but to a *kind* of knowledge about oneself that no one else can possess. The question about the peculiarities of self-knowledge is thereby transformed into the issue about the asymmetries between first-person and third-person access to certain features of oneself. Thus, Finkelstein initiates his book with an example where one such asymmetry is emphasized:

Sarah knows Max *very* well. If you wanted to find out what size shirt he wears or how long he goes between haircuts, you'd do better to ask her than him. Nonetheless, it doesn't even occur to you to think that Max, rather than Sarah, might be mistaken about which ticket he intends to use. It doesn't occur to you to ask Max for evidence supporting his assertion that he intends to see Dylan. (And if you *were* to ask for evidence, he would think you were joking). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how Max could be mistaken about which concert he means to attend. This isn't to say that he's never wrong about what he intends. But it's hard to see how he could be wrong in *this* case, and, as a rule, if you want to know what Max intends, he's the best person to ask. He is, we might say, the best *authority* concerning his intentions. And not only his intentions; Max speaks with what seems to be a similar sort of authority about his own hopes, fears, desires, beliefs, moods, emotions, sensations, and passing thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be a clear asymmetry between Max and his wife Sarah concerning their respective knowledge of which concert Max intends to go to, but such that it does not apply to knowledge of 'what size shirt she wear or how long he goes between haircuts', since Sarah *may* know better than Max himself the answer to such questions. These asymmetries are surely associated with the different roles that *evidence* play in each such case. Whereas Sarah is claimed to know *better than* Max himself about certain habits of him and this is assumed to occur because she (being quite faithful to her gender stereotypes) pays more attention to those details than her manly husband and, as a result, she is in possession of more evidence to justify her claims; Max has, on the contrary, a rather privileged view about some intentions of his to the effect that asking for evidence can only be interpreted as *a joke*. Thus, Finkelstein concludes that Max "... is, we might say, the best *authority* concerning his intentions."<sup>2</sup> So, Finkelstein ends up characterizing the phenomenon of first-person authority as follows:

Both in Chapter I and in the beginning of this chapter, I characterized the phenomenon of first-person authority in terms of these two facts. (1) If you want to know my psychological condition, I'm usually the best person to ask and (2) there's no need for me to consider behavioral evidence in order for me to say what I'm thinking or feeling.<sup>3</sup>

*Max's best* (even though not *infallible*) *authority* on certain intentions of his is, hence, associated

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<sup>1</sup> Finkelstein (2003), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Finkelstein (2003), p. 1. The fact that it Max is the *best* authority in this case does not mean that it is *infallible* as Finkelstein himself emphasizes: "This isn't to say that he's never wrong about what he intends." (Finkelstein (2003), p. 1)

<sup>3</sup> Finkesltein (2003), p. 124.

with the unintelligibility of a demand for evidence,<sup>4</sup> whereby the sort of authority being stressed is *primarily epistemic*. And this holds even though one may turn out to conclude -as Finkelstein's himself would do- that such an authority ultimately derives from a different sort of authority.

Finkelstein takes, though, a further step:

Not only his intentions; Max speaks with what seems to be a similar sort of authority about his own hopes, fears, desires, beliefs, moods, emotions, sensations, and passing thoughts.<sup>5</sup>

whereby Finkelstein commits himself to quite a substantial thesis, namely: what is true about intentions concerning which concert to go, also *applies unrestrictedly to hopes, fears, desires, beliefs, moods, emotions, sensations, and passing thoughts*. To defend this claim is surely one of the major challenges in his book. I will argue, however, that the conceptual tools Finkelstein elaborates to account for Max' intentions regarding the concert are only applicable to other, more complex, cases on the basis of *an equivocation* which I will try to unveil by bringing out the rather disparate role that evidence plays in *trivial* (say, those in the same vein as Max's authority about his final decision to go to Dylan's concert) cases as opposed to *more complex* ones to be specified, like psychoanalytic cases as well some interestingly ambiguous ones. I will, more specifically, conclude (a) that *Max' authority about some trivial, short-term, intentions of his does not expand to other more complex states*, and also (b) that *the authority that is missing in the latter cases is not of the same kind as the authority that Max possesses with regard to trivial, short-term, intentions*. To this purpose, I will firstly sketch Finkelstein's account of trivial cases of first-person authority and also how he applies it to more complex ones. This will concern sections 2 and 3, whereas, in the remaining sections, I will try to uncover the equivocation that makes such an application plausible and thereby motivate claims (a) and (b). A consequence of my line of reasoning will be that the phenomenon of first-person authority cannot be fully apprehended if only trivial cases like Max' are taken into consideration; and also that, once the phenomenon had been more satisfactorily characterized in the light of the examination of some more complex cases as well, we will be in a much better position to inquire about the conditions that make the different aspects of such a phenomenon at all possible.

## References

Finkelstein, D. (2003), *Expression and the Inner*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

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4 "There's an asymmetry between speaking about someone else's anger and speaking about one's own. I am able to ascribe mental states to myself responsible without being able to cite *evidence* in support of the ascriptions. This is a central feature of first-person authority."(Finkelstein (2003), p. 21; my emphasis)

5 Finkelstein (2003), p. 1.