

### Lecture 3: In what ways is self-knowledge privileged?

**Where are we:** We've been asking how we come to have knowledge of our own mental states, comparing *inner sense* and *transparency* views in particular

**This week:** we'll think it more depth about the question of whether we have privileged access to our own mental states, and in particular consider some evidence that we have only limited access to our own mental states

#### 1. Cunning Bridge section between Transparency and Privileged Access

Alex Byrne argues that his transparency-based account of introspection accounts for our privileged access to our own beliefs (see too Jordi Fernandez).

Byrne's rule for self-ascribing beliefs: "If p, believe that you believe that p"

"[A]s a contingent matter, trying to follow BEL will usually produce knowledge of what one believes. Venturing out on a limb—of course the matter requires more discussion—we may tentatively conclude that privileged access is thereby explained. (2005: 98)"

It results in self attributions that

- i. Are especially reliably and
- ii. result from the use of a uniquely first-person method

Thereby explaining why

- i. Beliefs about one's mental states acquired through the usual route are more likely to amount to knowledge that beliefs about others' mental states (and, more generally, beliefs about one's environment)
- ii. Knowledge of one's mental states is *peculiar* in comparison to one's knowledge of others minds. One has a special method or way of knowing that one believes that the cat is indoors.

#### 2. So what's this privileged access stuff all about?

"Current conscious experience is generally the last refuge of the skeptic against uncertainty. Though we might doubt the existence of other minds, that the sun will rise tomorrow, that the earth existed five minute ago, that there's any "external world" at all, even whether two and three make five, still we can know, it's said, the basic features of our ongoing stream of experience." (Schwitzgebel p.245)

"There is a constant temptation in philosophy to postulate a realm of phenomena in which nothing is hidden from us.... A cognitive home in which everything lies open to our view." (Timothy Williamson 93)

**Different species of privileged access claim:**

Our access to our own minds if *epistemically* privileged.

Strongest version: infallibility and omniscience (n.b. those can come apart)

Weaker version: it's just a bit better than normal.

Our access to our own minds is *methodologically special*.

More interesting versions: in a way that makes it epistemically privileged...

#### 3. Privileged Access and Rationality

Cogito

He claims that what he calls *cogito*-judgements (judgments that one is thinking / wanting / intending something) are what he calls “contextually self-verifying” in the following sense: “One cannot err if one does not think it, and if one does think it one cannot err. In this sense, such thinkings are *infallible*.” (p.92)

Successful critical reasoning and obedience to certain rational norms relies on the ability to know and review our mental states in a way that is distinctive....

“There must be a non-contingent, rational relation, of a sort to be explained, between relevant first-person judgments and their subject matter or truth.”

And, why’s that then?

“When one carries out a proof, one checks the steps of the reasoning making sure that the inferences are valid. Any activity of proof requires some conception of validity, which requires an ability to think of the propositions in a proof as constituting reasons for what follows from them. ...To be a critical reasoner, one must also be able to, and sometimes actually, use one’s knowledge of reasons to make, criticize, change, confirm *commitments* regarding propositions – to engage explicitly in reason-induced changes of mind.”

This allows us to reason *from* the fact we can reason critically *to* a claim about privileged self-knowledge.

“So if we failed normally to know our thoughts and attitudes, in ordinary reasoning about reasons, either through systematic falsity of our judgments or through systematic mismatch between our entitlement and truth, critical reasoning would not occur among us.... But critical reasoning does occur among us; and we are entitled to reflective judgments by virtue of their contribution to the reasonability of critical reasoning. So as critical reasoners we must know our thoughts and attitudes.” (p.103)

Burge uses this claim to dismiss Inner Sense views on the grounds that they give us only contingent knowledge of our own mental states, which can’t underwrite the kind of critical reasoning we participate in.

Final take home: “So entitlement to knowledge of one’s own thoughts and attitudes is not purely a matter of what one does. It has to do with who one is. One’s status as a person and critical reasoner entails epistemic entitlement to some judgment about one’s propositional attitudes. It entails some non-observational knowledge of them.” (p.114)

#### 4. An ironic aside: remember Externalism?

Burge is one of the early architects of **externalism about mental content**, the view that the content of one’s thoughts doesn’t supervene on facts “internal” to the individual (e.g. facts about their body and brain) but depends on further facts about their social and natural environment.

A major worry for externalism about mental content is that it problematises privileged self-knowledge, since the very content that features in your mental states depends on facts outside your ken (e.g. facts about your environment which could well change without you knowing it).

Burge’s response:

“...to self-ascribe thoughts in the way expressed by that-clauses, one has to understand the thoughts one is referring to well enough to think them. One need not have any more explicatory understanding of one’s thoughts than is necessary to think them. One need not master anti-individualism, much less have an empirical mastery of the conditions that have established the identity of the thoughts one thinks. Such mastery is emphatically not guaranteed by mastery of *cogito*-self-ascriptions. But one *is* guaranteed that one ascribes something of which one has the ordinary understanding involved in using concepts and thinking thoughts.” (p.96)

- Is that right, though? How can you assess your own rationality without full access to the content of the terms that features in your thoughts?
- E.g. how can I determine if there’s a conflict between my belief that I have arthritis and my belief that my arthritis is in my thigh, if I’m unsure whether arthritis as it features in my thoughts refers to something that can be in my thigh or just in my joints?

A dilemma for the externalist: if this isn’t a problem, then the kind of content the externalist is talking about isn’t the kind of mental content that really matters for critical reasoning...

5. Unfortunately, there’s a decent amount of empirical evidence that we are actually very poor introspectors of our own reasons.

This literature starts with Nisbett and Wilson (1977) who found that subjects were frequently unaware of what factors influenced their judgements and decisions.

But this concerns factors that are subconscious or subliminal. Surely we’d be better at just reporting the reasons for judgements we make explicitly?

More recent work on **choice-blindness** by Petter Johansson and colleagues casts doubt on that.

- People don’t seem to notice when they are asked to make a choice (e.g. between two male or two female faces), but then asked to give reasons why they chose the option they did not in fact choose.
- People have no problem providing reasons for the “choice” they did not in fact make.
- The effect extends to moral judgments and political views

See too the (1993) Wilson and Kraft study cited by Brie Gertler in the paper we discussed last week (in which she argues against transparency) as evidence that beliefs are unstable under introspection. It found that people tend to cite reasons for their feelings that are “plausible, accessible, and easy to verbalize”.

“When people are asked why they feel the way they do about something, they often change their attitudes in the direction of the attitude implied by their reasons’ (Wilson and Kraft 1993: 409).

6. Well at least our access to our occurrent conscious states will be immune to these sorts of worries. Right? Right????

Eric Schwitzgebel argues that that is not the case.

“Most people are poor introspectors of their own ongoing conscious experience. We fail not just in assessing the causes of our mental states or the processes underwriting them; and not just in our judgments about nonphenomenal mental states like traits, motives, and skills; and not only when we

are distracted, or passionate, or inattentive, or self-deceived, or pathologically deluded, or when we're reflecting about minor matters, or about the past, or only for a moment, or where fine discrimination is required. We are both ignorant and prone to error. There are major lacunae in our self-knowledge that are not easily filled in, and we make gross, enduring mistakes about even the most basic features of our currently ongoing conscious experience (or "phenomenology"), even in favorable circumstances of careful reflection, with distressing regularity. We either err or stand perplexed, depending—rather superficially, I suspect—on our mood and caution."

Schwitzgebel's key evidence is how hard most people find it is to answer questions that require them to report with any fineness of grain on their own conscious experience e.g....

- Are emotional states like joy, anger, and fear always felt phenomenally – that is, as part of one's stream of conscious experience – or only sometimes?
- Is their character always more or less the same or does it differ widely?
- Do you really enjoy Christmas?
- Do you really feel bad while doing the dishes?
- Are you happier weeding or going to a restaurant with your family?
- What is your emotional experience RIGHT NOW?
- Is there a phenomenology of thought?
- Does thought have a distinctive experiential character.
- Does inner speech have a phenomenology? "Is there an experiential distinction between inner speaking and inner hearing?"

#### Recommended Reading:

- \*Burge, Tyler, 'Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96 (1996): 91-116.
- Byrne, Alex (2005) 'Introspection'. *Philosophical Topics* 33: 79-104.
- \*\*Schwitzgebel, Eric. The Unreliability of Naive Introspection. *The Philosophical Review* 1 April 2008; 117 (2): 245–273.
- \*Williamson, Timothy. (2002) *Knowledge and its Limits* Chapter 4 Anti-Luminosity