

Daniel Dohrn

Can't one truly judge that one is judging?

Philosophie

Universität Konstanz D 22

D-78457 Konstanz

Germany

e-mail: Daniel_Dohrn@yahoo.com

Tel. 0049(0)7531882727

Can't one truly judge that one is judging?

Matthew Soteriou provides an analysis of authoritatively knowing one's own mental acts which depends on a surprising assumption: One cannot truly judge that one is judging. After briefly criticizing his account of one's awareness that one is judging, I critically scrutinize two of his arguments against the possibility of truly judging that one is judging. Firstly, assuming such a possibility leads to a regress. Secondly, the second-order judgement inevitably replaces the first-order judgement such as to make the former wrong.

Matthew Soteriou (2005) has provided a thorough analysis of our intuitive claims to be directly and authoritatively aware of our own mental activity. Soteriou opposes non-occurrent belief and conscious judgement. The latter is a mental act, the former is not. Conscious judgement is identified with occurrent belief (Soteriou 2005, 96). While one can have a non-occurrent belief that one is believing that p despite not believing that p , one's non-occurrent belief that one is now judging that p cannot be subject to such a mistake. Whenever one is judging that p , one has a non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p (Soteriou 2005, 95). Whenever one has a non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p , this belief cannot be false. By Soteriou's lights, the special authority of a non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p is due to the following relationship: Since there is no fact distinguishing the non-occurrent belief that one is now *judging* that p from the non-occurrent belief that one is believing that p unless one really is judging that p , one cannot have a non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p without one's judging that p (Soteriou 2005, 99).

I am doubtful that this argument is cogent. For if there is a fact of the matter deciding whether

one non-occurently believes that p or judges that p (as there surely is), there is a difference in content between one's believing that one believes that p and one's believing that one judges that p , for instance in truth-conditions. But if there is such a difference in the content of one's attitudes, it might be sufficient to distinguish one's non-occurrent belief that one believes that p from one's non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p .

Be that as it may, my main problem is a different one: Soteriou's explanation of our authority regarding the mental activity of judging is confined to non-occurrent belief that one is judging. If this explanation is to be complete, he must rule out the following alternative: Sometimes one is aware of a present judgement that p not by dint of a non-occurrent belief but by dint of a conscious judgement that q , i.e. that one is now judging that p . If this alternative could not be ruled out, Soteriou by his own lights would not have attained his aim of accounting for the special authority he ascribes to one's awareness of one's own conscious judgements.

The alternative of consciously truly judging that q is ruled out by two claims of Soteriou's:

1. Veridical awareness of one's presently judging that p must consist in a non-occurrent belief that q .
2. The conscious judgement that q is necessarily false.

The first claim is contained in the following passage:

“The claim that one must consciously judge that one is judging that p in order to consciously judge that p would obviously generate an infinite regress –in order to consciously judge that one is judging that p , one would have to consciously judge that one is judging that one is judging that p , and so on. One's awareness of what one is doing in judging that p must, rather,

consist in a non-occurrent belief about what one is doing. So the claim is that one's belief that p is conscious and occurrent – i.e., one consciously judges that p – only if one has a non-occurrent belief that one is accepting that p .”(Soteriou 2005, 95)

Soteriou's argument here goes as follows: Assume that I explicitly and with full concentrated awareness judge that p (e.g. that it is raining). In this case, it can surely be said that I consciously judge that p . Now if I in order to consciously judge that p had to consciously judge that I was judging that p , an infinite regress would follow. I would have to consciously judge that I am judging that I am judging that p and so on. Thus, to consciously judge that p , I cannot have to consciously judge that I am judging that p . But Soteriou wants to sustain his general claim that awareness of a present conscious judgement can only consist in a non-occurrent belief that one is judging that p . Thus he must endorse a stronger result: Awareness of what one is doing in judging that p does not consist in a conscious judgement but in a non-occurrent belief. Neither result follows from the regress argument. Of course my awareness that I am judging that p may consist in a conscious judgement that q and not merely in a non-occurrent belief. In principle, it may even be –implausibly- claimed that a first-order conscious judgement that p requires a second-order conscious judgement that q , and that the same holds for the judgement that q and so on. In order to avoid the regress, only the following must hold: In a system of higher-order conscious judgements (the judgement _{n} that one is judging _{$n-1$} ... that one is judging that p), the judgement of the highest order (n) must not be conscious in virtue of a conscious judgement but in virtue of a non-occurrent belief. The main issue I want to draw attention to is that one's awareness that one is judging that p may rest on a conscious judgement as well as on a non-occurrent belief.

Let me now turn to the second tenet of Soteriou's (2):

“[...] the conscious judgement that one is now judging that p will always be false. For, obviously, in so judging, one is not consciously judging that p , and the proposition that p and the proposition that one is judging that p are quite different.”(Soteriou 2005, 96)

According to Soteriou, the conscious judgement that q is always false. Soteriou’s argument goes as follows: The judgement that q is necessarily different from the judgement that p because the proposition that q is different from the proposition that p . Whenever I try to catch my conscious judgement that p by a judgement, it will have turned into the conscious judgement that q . Thus I am not any longer consciously judging that p whenever I consciously judge that q .

Soteriou’s argument rests on two assumptions: Firstly, if two judgements have different contents, they are different. Secondly, one cannot consciously entertain two judgements at the same moment, the judgement that q and the judgement that p . How does Soteriou understand “at the same moment”? He denies that our knowledge of our mental activity of judging can be due to observation, introspection, or inference. The reason to rule out observation and introspection is the following: “For an episode of judging is not a mental event that has duration in the way, say, a sensation or perceptual experience has... So in order to be true, one’s belief about what one is doing when one believes that one is judging must be simultaneous with the non-enduring act of judging.”(Soteriou 2005, 96)¹ Granted that the

¹ Soteriou rules out the alternative of inferentially knowing the act of judgement by his above argument that inference would have to amount to a conscious judgement which would always be false (Soteriou 2005, 96). But why should inferential processes not be non-occurrent? Why do they always require conscious judgement? When I hear thunder and thus form the non-occurrent belief that there is thunder, my inferring the non-occurrent belief that there is a

event of judging has no duration in the way perception or sensation has, it still does not follow that one cannot simultaneously perform *two* acts, one of judging that *p* and one of judging that *q*. Surely one can judge that *p and q* in one moment.² Why can't one perform two acts, judging that *p* and judging that *q*, in one moment? Soteriou needs strong metaphysical or conceptual reasons beyond those considered in order to exclude two simultaneous acts of judging. Even if it is granted that one cannot perform two acts, judging that *p* and judging that *q*, in one moment, the judgement that *p and q* ("*p* and I am judging that *p*") may already amount to an act of truly judging that *p* which is simultaneous with an act of truly judging that one is judging that *p*. For *by the very same* individual act of judging that *p and q*, one may be said to judge that *p* and to judge that *q*. Surely Soteriou may insist that the act of judging that *p and q* is not the act of *simply* judging that *q*. Still it is an act of judging that *q* by which one judges that one judges that *p*.³

What further reasons could one have for endorsing the principle that judging that *q* and judging that *p* cannot be simultaneous? One may change from the level of conceptual to the level of empirical psychological claims: It is too complicated to concentrate on two

thunderstorm may be confined to the realm of non-occurrent belief without any conscious judgement playing a role.

² To be sure, one might deny that there can be an act of judging that *p and q*. Presumably the price would be an unattractively narrow view of mental acts which binds them to atomic propositions.

³ Finally, there is the eventuality of a self-referring judgement: I am judging that I am judging. But Soteriou can deny such a judgement to be well-formed. But what about "This (what I am doing now) is an act of judging"?

judgements at the same moment in the same way as it is too complicated for me to follow Soteriou's complex reasoning and to solve a system of mathematical equations simultaneously. To scrutinize this empirical claim, make an experiment. Try to consciously and attentively entertain two judgements, to attentively and assiduously judge both that you are reading this article now and at the same time that you are judging that you are reading it now. I am confident that you will succeed in doing so. Again, why should we have the capacity to judge that p and q but not to judge that p and to judge that q in one moment?

There is a common sense argument against Soteriou's main claim that one cannot be conscious of one's presently judging: A sincere assertion " p " amounts to a judgement that p . One normal use of "I think that p " is to emphasize that one judges that p , say when asked "Do you really think that p ?". But it seems natural to assume that one thereby also expresses a certain reflectiveness, a focus of attention not only on p being the case, but on one's relationship to the belief that p , one's presently entertaining this belief. Hence uttering "I think that p " normally manifests one's presently being conscious that one judges that p . For this reason, it seems strange to claim that someone asserting "I think that p " is not conscious of her presently judging that p , or that it does not presently occur to her that she is judging that p . Soteriou seems committed to this claim.

I conclude that, taken in isolation, the two arguments of Soteriou's I considered do not successfully discard the possibility that our awareness of a conscious judgement that p at least sometimes consists in a conscious judgement that q . If his argument for the special authority of this awareness does not extend to the conscious second-order judgement that q , Soteriou does not sufficiently establish his main claim that this authority applies to any case of judging activity. Then the task remains to account for the epistemic standing of second-order judgements. Since conscious and attentive self-ascription of thought amounts to such second--

order judgement, this task is an essential part of the epistemology of mental activity envisaged by Soteriou.

References

Soteriou, M. (2005). Mental Activity and the Epistemology of Mind. *Nous* 39:1, 83-105