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### Perception and corrigibility

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PERCEPTION AND CORRIGIBILITY

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It may assist our understanding of our perceptual knowledge of the world to consider whether we might have possessed certain faculties of knowledge other than the ones we in fact have, operating under conditions different from those that actually obtain. It is widely held that it is not logically possible that we should have logically incorrigible knowledge of the external world, and that therefore any objective claim about the world must in principle be corrigible by empirical tests. However, several currently popular arguments for these theses are invalid, and so it is doubtful whether they are known to be true.

Before tackling this issue directly, it is worth pausing to note an ambiguity in the term 'claim about the external world'. Suppose we agreed that, necessarily, Ws are external states of affairs, and that it is not necessary that perceptual beliefs (or perceivings-that) about external states of affairs are correct. It does not follow that it is not necessary that perceptual beliefs about Ws are correct. For we are here dealing with a non-extensional context. Thus we must consider the possibility that we have logically incorrigible knowledge of Ws, though not under the description 'external state of affairs'.

Several arguments against the possibility of incorrigible knowledge of the external world are advanced by Professor C. B. Martin in his treatment of religious experience:

The alleged theological way of knowing may be described as follows: I have direct experience (knowledge, acquaintance, apprehension) of God; therefore I have a valid reason to believe that God exists. By this it may be meant that the statement 'I have had direct experience of God, but God does not exist' is contradictory. If so, the assertion that 'I have had direct experience of God' commits one to the assertion that God exists. . . . The assertion 'I have direct experience of God' includes the assertion 'God exists'. Thus the conclusion 'Therefore, God exists' follows tautologically. Unfortunately, this deduction is useless. If the deduction were to be useful, the addition of the existential claim 'God exists' to the psychological claim of having religious experiences would have to be shown to be warrantable, and this cannot be done.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Cornell University Press, 1959), pp. 66-67. An earlier version of Martin's chapter was published as 'A Religious Way of

Construed—as Martin himself seems to do—as a general argument against the possibility of deducing statements about the external world from statements about one's experiences, this passage embodies two important and widespread logical assumptions. Firstly, it is assumed that if the statement 'I have an experience of kind K but W does not exist' is necessarily false, then it is a contradiction, in the sense that its denial is a tautology; thus there are no synthetic necessary truths. This is controversial. Secondly, even if the preceding point is waived, it is assumed that if one statement logically implies another statement, then the former *includes* the latter. This is false in every straightforward, nontrivial sense of 'includes'.

The fundamental argument against incorrigibility has been the Argument from Distinct Existences. *My experience E and the external state of affairs W are two distinct existences. Therefore no statement about E can logically guarantee any statement about W.* A first remark is that the premise itself is hardly straightforward. It is assumed that because E and W are two distinct existences in the sense that E is one thing and W another, then they are two distinct existences in the sense that it is logically possible for the former to exist without the latter. Although many will find this move quite plausible, others may object that it begs some of the questions at issue. Let us ignore this point. The fact remains that the argument is invalid. For the father of John and John are two distinct existences, and Fred and Fred's child are two distinct existences. Nevertheless, 'the father of John exists at some time' entails 'John exists at some time', and 'Fred has just one son and no daughters' entails 'Fred's child has no brothers'.

In the passage quoted above, Martin may be construed as arguing: Suppose that a certain experience of kind K were an incorrigible indicator of another state of affairs W. Then an experience of kind K obtains only if W obtains. So we cannot determine whether an experience of kind K really obtains without first considering whether W obtains. So we cannot read off from what we immediately experience that an experience of kind K obtains. Thus what we actually experience immediately gives us no indubitable guarantee of the occurrence of some external state of affairs.

This argument also is invalid: the step to the third statement involves a confusion between logical and epistemic conditions. For example, suppose that for an exercise in pure geometry we are given certain data which establish that T is a Euclidean triangle whose sides are equal. This data entails that all the internal angles of T are equal. It is therefore true to say that unless T is equiangular, T is not an equilateral Euclidean triangle. But the original data need have contained no explicit information about the angles of T at all. It is false that one cannot

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Knowing' in *Mind* 1952 and in Flew and MacIntyre (ed.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (SCM 1955), pp. 76-95.

determine whether T is equilateral without first determining whether it is equiangular.

It may be said that this example fails to capture a crucial feature of the perception case: that even if the having of an experience of kind K did logically guarantee that a certain state of affairs W obtained, that very experience could occur without W obtaining; it would simply not be correctly describable as 'of kind K'. Consider the father-son case, where a similar point applies: one cannot have logically sufficient evidence for Fred's being a father without first establishing that he has children. Similarly, it may be suggested, one cannot have logically sufficient evidence for E's being of kind K without first establishing that W obtains. Thus what we actually experience immediately gives us no logically indubitable guarantee of the occurrence of some external state of affairs.

This criticism too is ill-founded. The fact that the President of the United States is awake logically guarantees that the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces is awake. (For both of these offices are defined and established in a certain way by the Constitution.) Yet it is logically possible that that man—viz., Nixon—who is in fact President should have been awake without it being true that the Commander-in-Chief was awake; he would then not have been correctly describable as 'President'; nor would all sorts of other descriptions be applicable to him. Yet one can have logically sufficient evidence for a particular man's being President without first establishing that he is Commander-in-Chief. Such evidence would concern certain actions of the electors, the Chief Justice, and so on.

Under what conditions would one be justified in concluding that someone had a faculty which gave him logically incorrigible knowledge of the external world? It is clear that empirical testing of the subject's claims about the world could never prove that this was so, though perhaps they might disprove it. What considerations would justify the assertion that if someone has an experience of kind K it follows necessarily that a state of affairs W obtains? This is the general problem of giving an account of necessary truths and our knowledge of them. (The argument so far has presupposed no particular doctrine.)

Under what conditions would one be entitled to say that a man actually had an experience of this kind K? Martin again raises the possibility that there might be no sure way of knowing this that did not involve triviality:

One could say, 'Yes, I had those very experiences, but they certainly did not convince me of God's existence'. The only sure defence here would be to make the claim analytic: 'You couldn't have those experiences and at the same time deny God's existence.'<sup>2</sup>

However, the preceding discussion does not support this fear. There is no reason to suppose that the K-ness of the subject's experience could

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

not be established independently of the occurrence of W. Thus there is no reason to suppose that the defender of incorrigibility in some specific case could only be making a trivial verbal point.

The question of whether we actually have logically incorrigible knowledge of our own mental states is one which need not be pursued here. However, the preceding discussion suggests that it has not been shown that a subject *could* not have logically incorrigible knowledge that he was having an experience of kind K. To say that he did have such knowledge would not be to say that every time he had an experience of kind K he realised it, and further realised that it gave him grounds for believing that W obtained.

As an aside, the special case of alleged mystical experience of God may be reconsidered in the light of the foregoing. The appeal of John Baillie<sup>3</sup> and H. H. Farmer<sup>4</sup>—so strongly attacked by Martin in *Religious Belief*, pp. 69-72—to the uniqueness and incommunicability of religious experience might be reinterpreted as an attempt to defend the possibility that certain features of mystics' experiences do logically imply the existence of God. Certainly propositions (1)-(4) on page 67—'I feel as if an unseen person were interested in my welfare,' 'I feel an elation quite unlike any I have ever felt before,' 'I have feelings of guilt and shame at my sinfulness,' and so on—do not logically imply the existence of God, but mystical experience may have other features, unimaginable by the nonmystic, which do enable the mystic to read off incorrigibly the existence of God. I do not see that the arguments of Martin on pp. 69-72 refute this defence. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that mystics do have such experiences. The analogy of sight and the blind man is used to make the claim plausible, but the analogy breaks down precisely at the crucial point: sight is corrigible. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether, when pressed, actual mystics really would claim logical incorrigibility in the way explored above.

The conclusion at this point is largely negative. Neither the Argument from Distinct Existences nor certain supplementary epistemic arguments show that it is logically impossible that our experience should have certain immediately knowable characteristics which logically guarantee the existence of some external state of affairs. Nor has it been shown that we could not know that there was such a way of knowing.

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<sup>3</sup> John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (Oxford University Press 1949).

<sup>4</sup> H. H. Farmer, *Towards Belief in God* (SCM 1942).