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INTROSPECTION AND EVIDENCE*

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Introspection

What is introspection? Etymologically, the word suggests an inward look, a way of inspecting one's own mind that significantly resembles literal outward looking. If that is introspection, then it is controversial whether there is such a thing. According to Ryle, the idea that one can know about one's own mind by introspection or "non-sensuous inner perception" is a "logical muddle" (1949: 154–5). This chapter adopts a more ecumenical conception of introspection: to a first approximation, it is simply the means by which a person knows about her present mental states (cf. Dretske 2003: 7). To a second approximation: "means" should be qualified by "unaided". One can know that one is angry by being told so, or by viewing a cerebroscope, or by remembering that one went to bed angry and anger always remains the next morning, but it is not helpful to class these means as introspection. On the other hand, if "John Doe's way of finding out about John Doe are the same as John Doe's ways of finding out about Richard Roe" (Ryle 1949: 149), then in the intended sense John Doe uses introspection to find out about his mental life.¹ He does that by using the same broadly unaided observational methods he uses to find out about the mental life of Richard Roe.

To use some standard (albeit slightly misleading) jargon, introspection is the means by which a person gains "self-knowledge". The definite article should not be taken to suggest that there is a single direct and unaided means or method of discerning one's present psychology—there may be diverse ways of introspecting (Schwitzgebel 2012; Samoilova 2016). An ecumenical conception of mental states helps to avoid a restricted diet of examples. In particular, factive states like *knowing that the sun rises* and object-involving states like *seeing the moon* should count as mental. (We should also understand "mental state" broadly, to include episodes like *thinking about lunch*.)

At least some ways of introspecting appear to afford *peculiar* access to our mental states. That is, there are ways of finding out about one's mental life that are applicable only in one's own case—something that Ryle can be read as denying.² However I find out that I feel an itch, this method does not apply to your itch. I find out that you feel an itch by observing your behavior or your recent insect bite, or by testimony. None of those are needed in my

own case. Similarly, I can know that I see the moon without observing my direction of gaze or confirming that my eyes are open.

At least some ways of introspecting appear to afford *privileged* access to our mental states. That is, the beliefs about one's mental life acquired by these ways are more likely to amount to knowledge than similar beliefs about the mental lives of others, acquired through the usual routes. Perhaps I can believe that I feel an itch and be wrong, but typically this belief amounts to knowledge, or so it is natural to think. By contrast, even though it is quite easy to know that another person feels an itch, here there are so many more possibilities for error. Privileged access as explained here is a comparative notion: roughly, the first-person case is more knowledge-conducive than the third-person case. It is compatible with privileged access that the first-person case is not very knowledge-conducive. The astronomical novice may be quite poor at knowing that he sees a planet. (Perhaps he mistakes the pole star for Venus.) Nonetheless, keeping his ability to identify the planets constant, in a similar situation he is likely to be less reliable about whether a fellow astronomer sees a planet—perhaps his colleague has her eyes closed, or her telescope is not pointing quite where he thinks it is.

Privileged and peculiar access should not be conflated, although they are plausibly connected. It is natural to think that privileged access is explained by peculiar access—the first-person method, whatever it is, has epistemic advantages over the third-person one. And here there is an immediate connection with evidence, because according to some philosophers, what makes the first-person method peculiar is—at least in part—that it does not rely on evidence. Thus Davidson, contrasting knowledge of our own minds with perceptual knowledge and knowledge of others' minds, writes:

Each of these three kinds of empirical knowledge has its distinctive characteristics. What I know about the contents of my own mind I generally know without appeal to evidence or investigation. There are exceptions, but the primacy of unmediated self-knowledge is attested by the fact that we distrust the exceptions until they can be reconciled with the unmediated.

(Davidson 1991: 205)

It may be right that I can generally know “the contents of my own mind . . . without appeal to evidence or investigation”. Does this fact itself show that beliefs about one's mental states, arrived at by this “unmediated” route, are more likely to amount to knowledge than corresponding third-person beliefs about others' mental states, arrived at by evidence or investigation? At one point Davidson suggests that it does:

Because we usually know what we believe (and desire and doubt and intend) without needing or using evidence (even when it is available), our sincere avowals concerning our present states of mind are not subject to the failings of conclusions based on evidence. Thus sincere first person present tense claims about thoughts, while neither infallible or incorrigible, have an authority no second or third person claim, or first person other-tense claim, can have.

(Davidson 1987: 16)

But this is mistaken. Given the assumption that “sincere avowals concerning our present states of mind” are not based on evidence, nothing follows about how likely it is that such

avowals express knowledge. Perhaps I sincerely predict the winners of various horse races in advance—I am clairvoyant and the predictions just pop into my head (cf. Hamlyn 1970: 81–2). My faculty of clairvoyance appears just as evidence-free as introspection. Granted that I sometimes know the winners by this method, I might be mistaken most of the time. (For further discussion, see Byrne 2018: 51–3).

Evidence

Evidence, unlike introspection, is something we explicitly talk about in ordinary life. But since philosophers have offered wildly different accounts of evidence, the notion cannot be taken for granted.

Whatever evidence is, different people can have different amounts of it: epidemiologists have more evidence about Covid-19 transmission than the rest of us. What one should believe depends at least in part on what evidence one has, not simply on what evidence there is. If I take a test that shows that I am infected with coronavirus, then there is compelling evidence that I am infected. But it would be irresponsible of me to believe that if I have no idea of the test result.

Perhaps a better initial question, then, is: What is a person's evidence? Predictably, philosophers have not converged on a single answer. According to Feldman, "the evidence someone has at a time is limited to what the person is thinking of at the time" (Conee and Feldman 2004: 219): evidence is thought. According to Williamson, a person's evidence is what she knows (Williamson 2000: ch. 9): evidence is knowledge. According to orthodox Bayesians a person's evidence consists in those propositions to which she gives credence 1: evidence is certainty. Other philosophers locate a person's evidence in her perceptual experience, or (more specifically) in its phenomenal character: evidence is experience. (See, e.g., Conee and Feldman 2008: 84; Dougherty and Rysiew 2014; Smithies 2019: 24–5; Tucker, this volume).

On some of these views evidence is propositional: one's evidence is that such-and-such. According to the Bayesian one's evidence may be false; according to Williamson it must be true, since only truths are known. On the usual formulation of the "experiential" view, evidence is not propositional. It is often obscure what philosophers mean by "experience", but this much is clear: unlike the things one believes, has credence in, or knows, one's experiences are not propositions³ (Cf. Williamson 2000: 197). Some philosophers embrace both experiential and propositional conceptions of evidence. For example, according to Schellenberg, there are two kinds of evidence, phenomenal and factive:

consider a perceiver and a hallucinator. Percy, the perceiver, accurately perceives a white cup on a desk. Hallie, the hallucinator, suffers a subjectively indistinguishable hallucination as of a white cup on a desk; that is, it seems to her that there is a white cup where in fact there is none. ...

... I will argue that perceptual experience provides us with both phenomenal and factive evidence. ... To a first approximation, we can understand *phenomenal evidence* as determined by how our environment sensorily seems to us when we are experiencing. To a first approximation, we can understand *factive perceptual evidence* as necessarily determined by the perceived particulars such that the evidence is guaranteed to be an accurate guide to the environment.

(Schellenberg 2018: 167; see also Plantinga 1993, 98–9, 177)

Schellenberg's factive perceptual evidence is perceptual evidence on Williamson's conception (205–7): knowledge about one's environment acquired more-or-less directly by perception. She also distinguishes factive perceptual evidence and phenomenal evidence from (factive) *introspective evidence*:

while perceptual evidence is of (or as of) one's environment, introspective evidence is of (or as of) one's experience or some other mental state. They differ in their source: while perceptual evidence stems from perception, introspective evidence stems from introspection.

(Schellenberg 2018: 170)

Perceptual evidence is knowledge of one's environment acquired by perception; introspective evidence is knowledge of one's mental life acquired by introspection.

Introspection and Inner Sense

Some philosophers have argued that one central kind of introspection involves a perception-like faculty of "inner sense":

one's introspective consciousness of oneself appears very similar to one's perceptual consciousness of the external world. The difference is that, in the former case, whatever mechanisms of discrimination are at work are keyed to internal circumstances instead of to external ones. ...

In summary, self-consciousness, on this contemporary view, is just a species of perception: *self*-perception. It is not perception of one's foot with one's eyes, for example, but is rather the perception of one's internal states with what we may call (largely in ignorance) one's faculty of introspection. Self-consciousness is thus no more (and no less) mysterious than perception generally. It is just directed internally rather than externally.

(Churchland 1988: 120–2; see also Armstrong 1968: ch. 15, Lycan 1996: ch. 2, Goldman 2006: ch. 9)

According to Churchland, we have a faculty of inner sense that should be straightforwardly classed with perceptual faculties like vision and audition. If that is right then the epistemology of introspection raises no special difficulties, and one would expect the role of evidence to be the same for both introspection and paradigmatic perception.

Introspection might be like perception at a high level of abstraction. In particular, a reasonable initial hypothesis—albeit one denied by many (see Byrne 2018: ch. 2)—is that introspection involves causal mechanisms of detection linking one's mental life to one's beliefs about one's mental life. However, perhaps the dissimilarities between the supposed faculty of "inner sense" and the paradigmatic perceptual senses cut deeper than the similarities. Shoemaker (1994: 205–6) catalogs a number of these. What about the role of evidence?

Return to Schellenberg's Hallie, hallucinating a white cup on her desk. Hallie believes that her desk has a white cup on it; since there is no such cup, she does not know that her

desk has a white cup on it. We may suppose that Hallie is cognitively unsophisticated and does not have any introspective evidence relevant to what's on her desk—in particular, she does not know that it visually appears to her that there is a white cup on her desk. If factive evidence is the only kind of evidence, then in believing that there is a white cup on her desk Hallie is not emulating Hume's wise man and “proportioning her belief to the evidence” (Hume 2007: 80). With respect to this belief, Hallie is not rational, despite her generally commendable belief-forming habits.

Schellenberg argues at length that factive evidence is not the only kind: Hallie also has phenomenal evidence for the proposition that there is a white cup on her desk (Schellenberg 2018: 171–9). The key idea is that in hallucinating Hallie is exercising perceptual capacities that “have the function to single out particulars in the environment” (178). We need not examine Schellenberg's argument here; the noteworthy point is that it has little prospect of generalizing from perception to introspection. And that is only what one would expect. If phenomenal evidence is “determined by how our environment sensorily seems to us when we are experiencing”, the introspective counterpart does not seem very tempting. Our mental lives do not sensorily seem to us any way at all when we are introspecting. (See, e.g., Shoemaker 1994: 207; Rosenthal 2005: 5) Of course at least in some cases there is what can be called “introspective phenomenology”—bodily sensations and various kinds of imagery. But if anything “sensorily seems” a certain way it is the sensations and images themselves, not the mental states of being (ostensibly) aware of the sensations or images. When one is aware of an itch on one's neck it is the itch that “sensorily seems” tingling or intense, not one's awareness of the itch.

Another more traditional view of the epistemological structure of perception is that perceptual knowledge of one's environment is based on (in Schellenberg's terminology) introspective evidence—factive evidence about appearances. One knows that there is a white cup on a desk partly on the basis of knowing that it appears to one that there is a white cup on a desk. (For a recent defense, see White 2014.) Even if there is no such thing as phenomenal evidence, on this view Hallie can still have some evidence, provided she is sophisticated enough to know how things appear (cf. Williamson 2000: 198–200).

Like Schellenberg's view, this seems quite unappealing in the introspective case, and for exactly the same reason. Perhaps perceptual appearances provide phenomenal evidence for propositions about one's environment. Alternatively, perhaps propositions about one's environment are supported by introspective evidence about perceptual appearances. But knowledge of perceptual appearances themselves fits neither model, since there are no appearances of appearances.

Our faculties of “outer sense” deliver knowledge of our physical environment. According to some philosophers, those deliverances are based on evidence—either phenomenal or introspective. These philosophers may not be right, but they do offer arguments. In contrast, the corresponding thesis about inner sense has almost nothing to recommend it; if we have a faculty of inner sense, its deliverances are not based on evidence.

Groundlessness, Baselessness and Knowledge by Inference

There is another apparent difference between perception and introspection that can usefully be mentioned at this point.

In a discussion of Wittgenstein and self-knowledge, Wright claims that self-ascriptions like “‘I have a headache’, ‘My feet are sore’, ‘I’m tired’, ‘I feel elated’, ‘My vision is blurred’, ‘My ears are ringing’, ‘I feel sick’, and so on” have the following feature:

they are *groundless*. The demand that somebody produce reasons or corroborating evidence for such a claim about themselves—‘How can you tell?’—is always inappropriate. There is nothing they might reasonably be expected to be able to say. In that sense, there is nothing upon which such claims are based.

(Wright 2000: 14; see also Bar-On 2004: ch. 1)

McDowell complains that Wright has conflated avowals being *non-inferential* with their being *baseless*:

As [Wright] says, ‘“How can you tell?”—is always inappropriate’; and ‘there is nothing upon which such claims are based’. ... Now Wright takes it that the essence of the ‘Cartesian’ conception attacked by Wittgenstein is the idea that the authority of avowals can be understood on the model of observational authority. And the authority of observations is indeed non-inferential. But it is precisely *not* baseless.

(McDowell 2000: 48)

According to McDowell, “How can you tell?” (understood as “By what means or method can you tell?”) is “always inappropriate” when asked about a phenomenal avowal, such as “I have a headache” or “I feel tired”. But it is appropriate in the perceptual case, with readily available answers such as “By looking” or “By hearing”. In McDowell’s terminology, the deliverances of introspection are (in a central class of cases) *baseless*.

“Always inappropriate” could be taken in two ways, corresponding to two kinds of baselessness. First, it might simply amount to the impossibility of answering “How can you tell?” with anything more helpful than a shrug—at least, not without doing some clever experimental psychology. Or it might amount to the much stronger claim that there is no (substantive) means or method by which one can tell.

The first gives us *weak-baselessness*:

Knowledge of such-and-such kind is *weakly-baseless* iff “By what substantive means or method did you know?” can’t be positively answered.

The second gives us *strong-baselessness*:

Knowledge of such-and-such kind is *strongly-baseless* iff there is no substantive means or method by which it is acquired.

What does “substantive means or method” mean? On constitutivist views of self-knowledge one is in a position to know that one is such-and-such mental state simply by being *in* that mental state. By feeling a pain, for example, one is thereby in a position to know that one feels a pain. (For a recent extended defense of this view, see Smithies 2019: ch. 5.)⁴ In the relevant sense, this is a “non-substantive” means of knowing that one feels a pain. Constitutivism, then, is theory on which self-knowledge is strongly-baseless: “By feeling a pain”

does not specify a substantive means or method by which one knows that one feels a pain. The inner-sense theory is a clear case of the opposite: “By inner sense” does specify a substantive means or method.

Inference is another substantive means of acquiring knowledge, so if avowals are strongly-baseless they are not known by inference. However, if some inferences can be hidden from the inferrer, then avowals can be both weakly-baseless and known by inference.

Wright’s term “groundlessness” can be pressed into service to mark another distinction. Let us say that a known claim is *groundless* iff it is not known on the basis of evidence. Groundlessness does not entail strong-baselessness: on a view like Williamson’s, (some) perceptual knowledge is not known on the basis of evidence, but it is acquired by a substantive means or method (e.g., vision).

Does strong-baselessness entail groundlessness? Not according to Smithies, who thinks that someone who feels a pain has phenomenal evidence for the proposition that she feels a pain. (He also extends this view to states that are not phenomenally conscious, like beliefs, which Smithies thinks are constitutively connected to phenomenal consciousness. In the case of beliefs, Smithies argues that they are “dispositions to cause phenomenally conscious judgments” [2019: 175].)

If a known claim is groundless, could it nonetheless be arrived at by inference? Perhaps: Byrne (2018) defends a view of self-knowledge of precisely this sort. In the simplest case, knowledge that one believes that p is acquired by inference from the single premise that p : p , so I believe that p . Since Byrne accepts Williamson’s equation of knowledge with evidence (2), he thinks that in the case where it is false that p , one may acquire knowledge that one believes that p by inference from no evidence at all. And even in the case when one knows the premise of the inference (i.e., when one knows that p) this is not the explanation of why one knows the conclusion.⁵

Inferentialism

A more straightforward position is to agree with Byrne that introspection is inferential but deny that it is groundless. According to *inferentialism*, self-knowledge is acquired by inference from (factive) evidence (Cassam 2014: 160–1). One starts with some knowledge, performs some theoretical reasoning, and (when things go well) ends up with knowledge about one’s mental life.

But what could the evidential starting point be? On a hardcore Rylean view (dubiously Ryle’s), one starts with evidence exclusively about one’s behavior, but this is surely far too crude. Lawlor gives a more realistic picture of self-knowledge as an “inference from internal promptings”, taking knowledge of one’s desires as the flagship example:

Katherine starts noticing her experiences and thoughts. She catches herself imagining, remembering, and feeling a range of things. Putting away her son’s now-too-small clothes, she finds herself lingering over the memory of how a newborn feels in one’s arms. She notes an emotion that could be envy when an acquaintance reveals her pregnancy. Such experiences may be enough to prompt Katherine to make a self-attribution that sticks. Saying “I want another child”, she may feel a sense of ease or settledness.

(Lawlor 2009: 57)

This is a useful corrective for those who think that introspection rarely or never involves inference. (See also Carruthers 2011; Paul 2018.) However, the evidential base is just more self-knowledge or introspective evidence, specifically knowledge of experiences, thoughts, imaginings, rememberings, feelings and emotions. Where does this introspective evidence come from? That question need not bother Lawlor, who confines her discussion to knowledge of desire and anyway concedes that there are other routes to knowing what one wants.

Cassam, though, thinks that the “inferentialist’s position is far stronger than Lawlor’s discussion suggests” (Cassam 2014: 144). He begins by defending a version of inferentialism on which “knowledge of our own attitudes can be, and indeed is, a form of inferential knowledge” (124). Cassam takes the relevant “attitudes” to be (non-occurrent) states like believing that Saturn has rings or intending to wash one’s hands; occurrent “internal promptings” are excluded. He elaborates:

suppose you know that you have a certain attitude A and the question arises how you know that you have A. In the most straightforward case you know that you have A insofar as you have access to evidence that you have A and you infer from your evidence that you have A. As long as your evidence is good enough and your inference is sound you thereby come to know that you have A. On this account, the idea that self-knowledge is inferential is closely related to the idea that it is based on evidence.
(138)

What are the internal promptings in the case of believing that Saturn has rings? Cassam suggests that the “occurrent judgement” (161) that Saturn has rings will do the trick. One reason for doubting this account is that “judgment” is something of a philosophical term of art. “Do you believe that Saturn has rings?” is a completely ordinary question, unlike “Are you judging that Saturn has rings?” Philosophers who think there are introspectible acts of judging take them to be the mental analog of assertion. “Judging that Saturn has rings” is an inward saying-to-oneself that Saturn has rings. Given this explanation of the terminology, it would not be obviously wrong to answer no to the second question and yes to the first. This is puzzling if the standard way of knowing that one believes that Saturn has rings is by inference from the known premise that one is judging that Saturn has rings.⁶ In any case, this account is silent on how one knows that one is judging that Saturn has rings. Could that knowledge be based on evidence? It is not clear what the evidence could be. But if one’s knowledge that one is judging that Saturn has rings is not based on evidence, why can’t one know in a similar evidence-free way that one believes that Saturn has rings?

This is something of a dilemma, and Cassam is inclined to take the first horn, going on to defend a stronger form of “inferentialism about self-knowledge of standing attitudes and internal promptings” (Cassam 2014: 170). This is not quite as strong as it could be, since Cassam’s account is not intended to cover states like feeling an itch or seeing the moon. But Cassam does suggest that any self-knowledge in the evidential inputs to the relevant inferences can ultimately be discharged.

It is important to note that Cassam’s strong form of inferentialism can help itself (as he notes) to background knowledge of “current circumstances, current or recent behaviour” (165)—as Lawlor’s example brings out, one’s personal history is highly relevant to whether one wants another child. Even knowledge of one’s “current or recent mental life” (165) can

be admitted, provided that this is not simply retained or presently acquired self-knowledge of the sort Cassam is trying to explain.

But it is open to question whether the pertinent kind of self-knowledge can be entirely purged from the evidence base. Cassam emphasizes that “internal promptings” need some interpretation before they clearly point in one direction or another: background knowledge is needed “to make sense of your internal promptings and attach a specific significance to them” (165). But before the interpretive process can go to work we need to *know* that we have those internal promptings, which include “inner speech, emotions, feelings, and mental images” (161). Some of these are paradigmatically psychological—pangs of jealousy or feelings of fear, for instance. Interpretation could begin with something less committal: one knows that one either feels fear or anxiety, for instance. But if these sorts of starting points cannot be eliminated then the inferential account will have to downsize its ambitions.

On the other hand, some internal promptings aren’t straightforwardly psychological: a “mental image” of the SpaceX Dragon or a sotto voce utterance in inner speech of “Nuke Mars” should be distinguished from the psychological episodes of *visualizing* the SpaceX Dragon or *uttering* “Nuke Mars” in inner speech. (More obviously, one should distinguish the SpaceX Dragon from *seeing* the SpaceX Dragon.) If there really is such a thing as a “mental image” of the SpaceX Dragon, which one is aware of when visualizing that spacecraft, then knowledge of *it* is not thereby knowledge of one’s psychology. But it is highly controversial whether there are any “mental images” of this sort. (There might be image-like mental representations in the brain, but these are not the objects of awareness.⁷) If the relevant internal promptings turn out to be illusory, then the idea that they provide (known) evidence is illusory too.⁸

On a Cartesian picture of epistemology, the evidential buck stops at psychology. Tracing the chain of evidence back terminates in appearances, experiences, intuitions, phenomenally individuated mental states or something of the sort. In other words, knowledge of one’s “external” physical environment rests on a foundation of psychological evidence.

What about knowledge of one’s “internal” mental environment—appearances and their ilk? On contemporary phenomenal conceptions of evidence, that rests on a foundation of evidence too: the evidence that one is being appeared to thusly is the appearance itself. But on a more traditional—and arguably better motivated—conception of evidence, on which one’s possession of evidence E allows one to *reason from* E, knowledge of appearances is groundless. There is at least one kind of self-knowledge that rests on no evidential foundation.

Many epistemologists abjure the Cartesian picture. They reject phenomenal evidence and also deny that inferential knowledge must ultimately begin with psychological evidence. The view that self-knowledge is always achieved by inference from *non*-psychological evidence is hard to maintain, in which case we again get the result that some self-knowledge rests on no evidential foundation.

The upshot is that Cartesianism, whatever its other failings, had an important insight. Some knowledge of our present mental lives is acquired without evidence.

Notes

* Thanks to Maria Lasonen-Aarnio for comments.

1 The quotation from Ryle has a prefixed qualification: “in principle, as distinct from practice”; see also Ryle 1949: 155.

- 2 This is not a plausible interpretation, however: see Tanney 2015, sect. 10 and Byrne 2018: 12.
- 3 On philosophical conceptions of experience, see Byrne 2009. Smithies's version of the experiential view is that "your evidence is exhausted by the phenomenally individuated facts about your current mental states" (2019: 210), which makes evidence propositional.
- 4 As Smithies is of course aware, his view conflicts with Williamson's claim that no non-trivial conditions are "luminous" (Williamson 2000: ch. 4; see Smithies 2019: 156).
- 5 For criticism see, e.g., Boyle 2011. For a related account, see Fernández 2013. Gertler 2021 is a useful survey of different theories of self-knowledge.
- 6 For accounts along similar lines, see Peacocke 1998, Pitt 2004, Silins 2011; cf. Smithies 2019: 180. For criticism see, e.g., Boyle 2015. On judgment in general see, e.g., Soteriou 2013: ch. 10, Smithies 2019: 140; as Cassam notes, "it is harder to know [what it is to judge that p] than one might think" (2014: 169). For a parallel inferential account of knowledge of one's intentions, with "deciding to ϕ " replacing "judging that p " see Paul 2012.
- 7 See, e.g., Tye 1991.
- 8 For an inferential account that appeals to just such illusory evidence to explain self-knowledge of episodic memory, thought and imagination (and which is therefore an etiolated kind of inferentialism), see Byrne 2018: ch. 8.

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