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# Privileged Access

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*John Heil*

## Epistemic Privilege

Philosophical tradition has it that one's own mental life enjoys a privileged epistemic standing. I know my own states of mind immediately and with confidence. You may discover what I am thinking, of course, but you are liable to err in your assessment of my thoughts in ways that I cannot. Asymmetry of access evidently lies close to the centre of our conception of mentality. A theory of intentionality that failed to square with this aspect of the mental must be regarded with suspicion. What, however, are we to make of the notion of epistemic privilege?[1]

Descartes promoted the view that access to one's own mental states is infallible and incorrigible. In the third *Meditation*, for instance, he remarks that '...for certainly, if I considered the ideas only as certain modes of my thought, without intending them to refer to some other exterior object, they could hardly offer me a chance of making a mistake'. Conveniently, *ideas* – that is, generic mental contents considered just in themselves, and not as representatives of outer things – have all and only the properties we take them to have.

For most of us, however, there are times when we are uncertain what we really want or believe. We are prone to myriad forms and degrees of self-deception. Infallibility with respect to mental requires that whenever we exemplify a given mental property we know that we do so. But the ease with which we engage in talk of repression and the unconscious, together

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[1] The concept of privileged access is discussed usefully and at length in Alston (1971).

with our willingness to admit that we can fail to know our deepest preferences and opinions, suggest that infallibility is not part of the ordinary conception of mentality. Similar considerations tell against incorrigibility, the doctrine that beliefs we harbour concerning our own states of mind cannot fail to be true. If our aim is to capture some plausible conception of privileged access, then, it seems likely that both infallibility and incorrigibility are best left behind.

## Direct Knowledge

One aspect of epistemic privilege is manifested in our conviction that we possess a capacity to ***know directly*** the contents of our own minds. Direct knowledge, I shall suppose, is knowledge not based on evidence. This cannot be all there is to privileged access, however. It is unlikely either that the scope of direct knowledge is limited to one's mental states, or that one's mental states are knowable only directly. In general, whatever can be known directly could be known as well on the basis of evidence. I know, perhaps, at least some of my own mental states directly. Your knowledge of them is indirect, mediated by your observation of what I say and do. Like you, however, I may know nothing of certain of my states of mind. And to the extent that I know my unconscious thoughts, I know them exclusively on the basis of evidence, evidence perhaps supplied by others – most especially by those who are acute observers of my behaviour.

It is important to be clear on what is and is not required for something to be directly known. The directness in question is, of course, epistemological, not causal. Direct knowledge is not to be confused with Russellian ***knowledge by acquaintance***. What I know by acquaintance I know directly. But what, if anything, I can know directly is a contingent matter. My knowledge that a certain shrub is a Toyon may be based evidence concerning the shape of its leaves, the character of its bark, and the colour of the blossoms it produces. If you are a botanist, your knowledge may, in contrast, be direct. I can know directly what a blind person knows only by inference. If mute creatures can be said to possess knowledge, then some of these – pigeons, for instance, or honeybees – can know directly things I know exclusively on the basis of evidence.

Although, in general, claims to direct knowledge can be supplemented by appeals to evidence, this seems not to be so when the object of knowledge are one's own mental states. I may know directly that I harbour some thought, or I may know this only indirectly, perhaps by means of some elaborate process of self-analysis. When my knowledge is direct, however,



it is unlikely that, when prompted, I could produce relevant supporting evidence. Compare this with the case of a botanist who can tell at a glance that the shrub I am looking at is a Toyon. If I express doubts, the botanist can appeal to evidence of the sort I should need were I to make the identification.[2]

The asymmetry exhibited by such cases is undoubtedly important. It is difficult, however, to know what to make of it. I know directly – without evidence – that the vegetables I am eating are green and that my legs are crossed as I sit at my desk. If you insist that I produce evidence, I should not know what to do beyond indicating the items in question. It will not do, then, to imagine that privileged access can be explicated simply by an appeal to what can be known directly. The relation is not nearly so straightforward.

Is it, then, merely a contingent fact about my own mental states that I can know them directly? Although it is contingently true that on a given occasion I know myself to be in a certain mental state, it is plausible to suppose that such states are ***essentially*** such that they are directly knowable by agents to whom they belong. This may seem too weak to be helpful. After all, things other than states of mind can be known directly.[3] It is nevertheless, not obviously an essential property of such things that they are directly knowable.

This, however, even if correct, is scarcely illuminating. We have noted already that my enjoying privileged access cannot be a matter of my knowing ***all*** of my thoughts directly. Nor can it be that, for every thought I ***do*** know myself to possess, my knowledge of it is direct. Once we embrace a modest view of epistemic privilege, however, we encounter immodest prospects. If, for instance, it is possible that I fail to know ***some*** of my thoughts directly, then might not I fail to know most (or ***all***) of them directly – or, indeed, fail to know them ***at all***, directly or otherwise? The possibility seems ridiculous. Once it is admitted that I might fail to know some of my thoughts, however, what entitles me to suppose that I am, in general, in a better position than others to assess their character? The supposition apparently requires that I be aware of two classes of thought –

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[2] Evidence thus produced would bear on the character of the botanist's knowledge *claim*. It need not, however, figure in his *knowing*.

[3] I mean by this that if they are known, they can be so known. The claim is not that we in fact possess knowledge, only that, if there is knowledge, some of it is direct. For stylistic reasons I shall omit the qualification in what follows.

those I do and those I do not know about – and that I recognize the latter class to be much smaller than the former. But of course I cannot compare two classes, one of which is known to me and the other of which I am ignorant.

Consider now my knowledge of ***your*** thoughts. This is not, in typical cases, direct. Nevertheless it is at least conceivable that I could come to know your states of mind directly, without, that is, inferring them in the usual ways. I might, for instance, be wired to you in such a way that I share your nervous system. Science fiction aside, most of us learn to read the thoughts of colleagues and loved-ones just as a botanist learns to read the flora of the surrounding countryside. Given a measure of ignorance about my own thoughts, then, it is conceivable that I could know your mind better than my own.[4]

A characterization of privileged access based exclusively on what is directly known is anaemic, hence unsatisfactory: I know some of my thoughts directly (but know some of them only by inference); I know some of your thoughts by inference (although there is nothing to prevent me from knowing some of them directly). Asymmetry survives only quantitatively: the proportion of my thoughts that I know directly appears invariably to be greater than the proportion of yours I know directly. One may, however, wonder why there could not be cases in which the proportion is reversed. Something has gone wrong surely. A conception of privileged access that takes us along our present path must somewhere have taken the wrong turning. We should do well, then, to backtrack and look more carefully at the terrain.

## Direct Knowability and Intentional Content

Intentional states, by and large, exhibit two components, a particular content and an attitude or disposition of some sort toward that content. In the case of beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes, content is specifiable sententially and attitudes are characterizable as acceptings, withholdings, wants, and the like. Contents and attitudes can vary independently. This suggests that knowledge of intentional states incorporates a pair of distinguishable aspects, one pertaining to the content of the state, the other to its place in an agent's psychological economy. It suggests, as well, that in so far as we can be wrong about such things, we can be wrong

[4] Thus breathing new life into the old joke about two behaviourists meeting on the street. One says to the other: 'You're fine, how am I?'



in different ways – as when we fail to get the attitude right while being clear about the content, or grasp the attitude but misapprehend its object. And if we can be mistaken about each, it must be possible as well to be in the dark about both at once.

Until recently, doubts about infallible and incorrigible access to mental items have mostly been focused on considerations of the attitudes involved. A climber may wonder whether he really ***believes*** that his rope is safe or merely ***hopes*** that it is. He is, however, unlikely to be similarly puzzled about the content of the thought that concerns him. One may wonder whether such puzzlement is intelligible. Perhaps it is. A physicist reflecting on his belief that elections carry observers with them into superposition may do so without having any very satisfactory conception of what this comes to.[5]

Psychological theorizing in this century has provided ammunition for sceptics about attitudes. Recent work in the philosophy of mind may abet another sort of sceptic, one who doubts that we ever know for certain the ***contents*** of our own states of mind. For reasons I shall take up presently, the most promising accounts of mental content lend themselves to this form of radical scepticism. Before attempting to plumb those depths, however, we should be clear about what is included in the ordinary conception of privileged access.

Two points bear emphasizing. First, direct knowability of mental states holds, if at all, only for 'occurrent' states, those entertained at the time they are considered, and not, say, for those once, but no longer, possessed. My access to repressed states of mind or to those present only at some earlier time may be highly indirect. Second, beliefs we have about mental states and processes are neither infallible nor incorrigible. I may fail to know, directly or otherwise, what thoughts I harbour. And I may err in various ways in assessing their character. A plausible conception of direct knowability requires only that my mental states and processes be essentially such that they are directly knowable by me, not that they are in every case directly known.

Some such conception of direct knowability is required by our ordinary notion on mentality. We can accept this, I think while remaining agnostic about its realization, whatever it may be in virtue of which it obtains when and if it does obtain. Direct knowability constrains accounts of intention-

[5] Tyler Burge has argued that such cases are common. See, e.g., Burge (1986).

ality weakly but non-trivially. The point may be illustrated by reflecting on externalist theories of mental content.

## Scepticism About Content

To focus the discussion, let us consider one important class of cognitive system, a class incorporating the capacity for something like *self-awareness*.[6] I have in mind systems capable of second- as well as first-order intentionality. Systems of this sort might, for instance, entertain beliefs about their own beliefs, desires, and intentions. More generally, such systems are capable of harbouring intentional states that include in their content the content of other intentional states. Self-awareness, when it is veridical, affords direct knowledge of mental contents.

Ordinary human beings count as self-aware systems in this sense. Whether other, non-human, creatures might achieve self-awareness is controversial. Differing intuitions concerning the reasonableness of ascribing intentional properties to mute creatures, or to computing machines, or thermostats, hinge partly on differences in one's willingness to regard systems lacking in self-awareness as properly intentional at all. The notion that a system possesses first-order intentional states only if it recognizes (or is capable of recognizing) its possession of these states is interesting and worth exploring in detail.[7] I shall be concerned here, however, only with the *phenomenon* of self-awareness. My immediate aim is to show that one may consistently accept a relational or externalist explication of intentional content and retain the conviction that access to one's own states of mind is epistemically privileged.

[6] I shall use the express 'self-awareness' in what is perhaps a non-standard way. I am concerned here only with the capacity to 'introspect' on mental states and goings-on, not anything more elaborate. I shall not address, for instance, the ability sometimes ascribed to human beings to focus inwardly on an ego, self, or other mental substrate.

[7] It meshes, certainly, in obvious ways with the notion that mental goings-on are essentially directly knowable. See, e.g., Searle (1985); and Davidson (1984). Searle and Davidson differ importantly, however. Searle emphasizes the role of *consciousness*; Davidson focuses on the capacity for entertaining thoughts in which beliefs figure, thoughts about thoughts. The latter capacity is neither necessary nor sufficient for the possession of consciousness as it is ordinarily understood. Conscious thoughts are not – or not typically – thoughts about thoughts; and if first-order thoughts can be unconscious, there is nothing to prevent thoughts about thoughts from being similarly unconscious.



The matter is important, I think, because the conviction that intentional content must depend on environmental circumstances of agents whose states possess that content appears to eliminate entirely the possibility of privileged access. We are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, when we consider introspection, it seems patent that we have something like a direct Cartesian entrée to the contents of our own thoughts. We have seen that this need not be taken to imply that we are infallible or incorrigible concerning the mental. It requires only that to the extent that we do comprehend our own thoughts, we typically do so directly – that is, without relying on inference or evidence. On the other hand, if we suppose that the content of a given state of one's mind is determined in part by complicated features of one's circumstances, features of which one is mostly unaware, it would seem that, in order to grasp the content of that state, one would first have to get at those external circumstances.

The prospect is doubly unsettling. First, it seems to oblige me to base beliefs about the contents of my own thoughts on evidence. This flies in the face of the ordinary conviction that our knowledge of such things is, on the whole, epistemologically direct, not founded on evidence. Second, if beliefs I entertain about my own states of mind depend on evidential backing, then I might, with fair frequency, *make mistakes* about those states. I might have evidence, for instance, that a particular belief I harbour is the belief that *p*, the belief, say, that snow is white. But I could be wrong. My belief *might*, for all I know, be a belief about something altogether different – that the sky is blue or even that snow is *not* white. My getting its content right apparently requires that I get the determinants of that content right, and, so long as these are epistemically mediated, I may easily fail to do so. Worse, I seem open to sceptical worries about whether I am *ever* right about the content of my own thoughts.

Reflections on such things produce a variety of responses. Thus, one may be inclined to reject out of hand any conception of mentality that leads in this direction. If there are any intentional states with content, these must be, typically anyway, self-intimating, our access to them direct and unproblematic. In contrast, one may regard these consequences not as counter-examples to the theory in question, but as interesting, though perhaps startling, *discoveries* about the epistemic status of states of mind. They force us to abandon discredited superstitions about access to our

own thoughts.[8] Alternatively, we may follow Putnam and embrace anti-realism hoping thereby to salvage self-awareness and disarm the sceptic.[9]

It is possible, however, to reconcile direct access to mental content with both externalism and common-sense realism. At least this is what I shall contend. An ulterior motive stems from a conviction that it is important to make a place for intentional contents as legitimate psychological *phenomena*, *data*, items about which one might reasonably expect theories of intelligent behaviour to have something to say.

## Externalist Accounts of Content

Let us begin by pretending that the contents of one's mental states are determined, not by intrinsic features of those states, but by their *circumstances*, by goings-on external to them. We may suppose, further, that the circumstances in question include a good deal that is outside the agent to whom the states belong. Let us call theories that explicate intentionality this way *externalist* theories.

Imagine, then, that some particular mental state of mine, *M*, has the content that *p* in virtue of the obtaining of some state of affairs, *A*, that includes states or events outside *M*, occurrences in my environment. On a very simple externalist theory *M* might have the content that *this is a tree* in virtue of being caused in me by a tree. Here the state of affairs, *A*, *M*'s being caused by a tree, has, as it were, one foot inside me, in *M*, and another anchored in the outside world. Of course different versions of externalism will provide different accounts of *A*, whatever it is in virtue of which states of mind have their particular content. In some instances *A* will be a causal relation of a certain sort. In others it might be something else entirely.

Suppose now that I pause to consider the content of *M*, I *introspect* on my own state of mind. Let us dub this introspective state *M'*, and let us call the external state of affairs in virtue of which *M'* has whatever content it has, *A'*. What can be said about the content of *M'*? Is it plausible to suppose that its content *includes* that of *M*, my first-order mental state? And, even if this is so, is there any reason to think *either* that *M'*s content, whatever it is, could be accurately preserved in my introspective thought, M',

[8] See, e.g., Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*, Cambridge, Bradford Books/M.I.T. Press, 1984.

[9] See, e.g., Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge, University Press, 1981, ch. 1. See also J. Heil (1988).



*or* that my access to the content of *M* could be in any sense epistemically *direct*?

It might seem at first blush that access to the contents of first-order states like *M* would necessitate my somehow coming to recognize the obtaining of states of affairs like *A*, those responsible for first-order content. In our simplified example this would mean that for me to come to know that *M* was a state with the content that *this is a tree*, I should first have to discover that *M* was *caused by* a tree. This is not something I could discover simply by getting at *M*. I should need, it seems, *evidence* about the circumstances in which *M* was produced, evidence that could easily fall short of conclusiveness. Thus, even if I happened to be right about what caused *M*, hence about *M*'s intentional content, my access to that content would hardly be direct or privileged. It would be based on clues I assembled, and inferences I drew from these. In general, my beliefs about the content of my own thoughts might depend on the results of delicate tests and experiments.

It goes without saying that, under these circumstances, I might err in identifying the cause of *M*, hence err in my assessment of *M*'s content. And in cases where I did not take the trouble to investigate the aetiology of my thoughts, my beliefs about their contents would be scarcely more than shots in the dark. After all, if externalism were true, one could not discover a state's intentional properties merely by inspecting that state. A particular mental item, just in itself, might have any content whatever, or none at all.

## Externalism without Scepticism

The emerging picture belies the ordinary conception of self-awareness. More seriously, we have seen that it portends an especially pernicious form of scepticism. A traditional sceptic seeks reasons for supposing that the world is as we think it is. We appear now to be faced with the prospect of a nastier sceptic, one who questions the presumption that we think what we think we think.[10]

[10] Similar concerns have been voiced by Donald Davidson whole position on this matter is discussed below. See, e.g., Davidson (1987). Difficulties one encounters in attempting to formulate a coherent version of scepticism about the contents of one's thoughts suggest, in any case, underlying incoherencies in theories of content inspiring such scepticism.

This altogether bleak outlook is, however, founded on a fundamental mischaracterization of externalism. Consider again my second-order introspective state $M'$. We are supposing that externalism is correct, hence that the content of $M'$ is determined by some state of affairs, $A'$, that is at least partly distinct from $M'$. What, now, is to prevent $A'$ from determining an intentional content for $M'$ that ***includes*** the content of $M$? What, for instance, keeps our simplified theory from allowing that a causal relation of a certain sort endows my introspective thought with a content encompassing the content of the thought on which I am introspecting? The envisaged causal relation might plausibly be taken to include as a component the causal relation required to establish the content of the state on which I am introspecting, and it might include much more as well.

To see the point, it is important to keep in mind that externalist theories of the sort under discussion require only that certain conditions ***obtain*** in order for a given state to have a particular intentional content. They do not, or anyhow need not, require in addition that one know or believe these states to obtain.[11] Thus the content of $M$, that $p$, was determined by its being the case that $A$, not by my knowing or believing that $A$ obtains. In our simplified externalist theory, my thought concerns a tree because it was prompted by a tree, not because I know or believe it was so prompted. The same must be true for second-order states of mind. When I introspect, the content of my introspection will be determined by its being caused in an appropriate way, not by my discovering that it was caused in that way.

One may be suspicious of the last move. It might be granted that my introspective thought could be about my thought that $p$, without thereby granting that the content of my introspection includes the ***content*** of the introspected thought. Just as a thought of George Herman Ruth need not include the Sultan of Swat in its content, even though George Herman Ruth ***is*** the Sultan of Swat, so it seems perfectly possible for me to introspect my thought that $p$ without comprehending it as the thought ***that p***. If externalism were true, my introspections would seem ***typically*** to have

[11] An externalist theory that did so would incorporate an epistemic component. I doubt that anything is to be gained by such as emendation, but even if an epistemic condition is added the point at issue here remains unaffected provided we also allow the epistemic condition itself to be externally satisfiable, that is, provided we allow that I might know, for instance, that $p$ just in virtue of certain, possibly external, conditions obtaining. The matter is discussed in more detail in 'The Epistemic Route to Anti-Realism'. See also Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus*, § 4.002.



this character. This, at any rate, appears to follow from the view that the determinants of the content of an intentional state are external to that state.

It is possible, certainly, for me to entertain a second-order thought about the thought that $p$, without ***that p*** occurring as part of the content of the second-order thought. I may think, for instance, of a complicated idea I had yesterday, without having a very clear notion of what that idea included. Similarly, I may apprehend an expression of the thought that $p$ (in Urdu, say) without recognizing it to express the thought that $p$. The case we are considering, however, is the familiar one in which I introspect my own occurrent thought.

The contents of ordinary intentional goings-on, according to externalism, are determined by the obtaining of states of affairs that include components distinct from those goings-on. Contents, so determined, need not, and almost certainly will not, reflect important aspects of those external components. Similarly, the contents of introspective states need not, and almost certainly will not, reflect features of the external determinants of either those states themselves or the introspected states. My second-order introspective awareness of a particular intentional state can incorporate the latter's content without having to include (as part of ***its*** content) the conditions ultimately responsible for fixing the sense of the introspected thought. The content of ***both*** thoughts is generated externally. The content of second-order thoughts – introspections – would be determined, I have suggested, by a complex condition that included, perhaps, the condition responsible for the content of corresponding first-order states.

## Privileged Access and the Mind's Eye

I have been discussing externalist theories of content as though only these could motivate doubts about the possibility of privileged access. We worry that, if the determinants of content are not, or not exclusively, 'in the head', our access to content will be a chancy thing. But why should ***proximity*** be thought to matter? If the contents of one's thoughts were determined entirely by the state of one's brain, why should this fact alone make our access to them any less indirect or difficult? Nor is it clear that a Cartesian is in any better position to account for epistemic privilege. A thought's occurring in a non-physical substance does not, by itself, afford a reason for supposing that one's apprehension of it is unproblematic. Considerations of this sort suggest that worries about access to mental

contents associated with externalism are misplaced. Precisely the same worries can be generated for non-externalist, even Cartesian, theories. Difficulties arise, if at all, not from the external or relational character of whatever fixes content, but from some other source.

The culprit, according to Donald Davidson, is not externalism but a certain 'picture of the mind' in which beliefs about the contents of one's mental states are taken to be based on inward glimpses of those states or on the grasping of particular entities (***contents***, perhaps, or ***propositions***, or ***sentences in mentalese***). He recommends that we abandon the notion that knowledge of mental contents requires our inwardly perceiving in this way. Once we do so, we remove at least one of the reasons for supposing that externalism undermines privileged access.

Although our discussion has focused on propositional attitudes, it will be useful to reflect briefly on a distinct class of mental occurrence, the entertaining of visual images. I say to you: 'Form an image of your grandmother', and you comply. Suppose I now ask: 'How do you know that the image is of your ***grandmother*** – and not, say someone ***just like*** her?' The question is ill-conceived. It is not that you cannot be wrong about what it is you imagine. If the person whom you had been raised to regard as your grandmother were an imposter, then you would be wrong in supposing that the image you now form is of your grandmother. It is an image of an imposter. This however, seems not to be a mistake you make about the image. You mislabel that image because you are mistaken about your grandmother.

Imagining, at least in this respect, resembles drawing – as distinct from observing – a picture. In the course of a lecture on the battle of Borodino, you make *X*s on the blackboard to mark the location of Napoleon's forces and *O*s to mark the disposition of Kutuzov's army. I enquire: 'How do you know the *X*s stand for Napoleon's troops and not Kutuzov's?' The question misfires no less that the corresponding question about an image you form of your grandmother. You may be wrong in many ways about Borodino, of course, in which case you will be wrong in supposing that your diagram depicts things as they were on the day of the battle. But the diagram is yours, and there cannot be any question of its failing to mean what you intend it to mean. As an observer, my situation is different. I could well be wrong or confused about your *X*s and *O*s. The asymmetry here is instructive. You and I are differently related to what you have drawn. I am an observer and, like an observer, may err in understanding or describing what I see. You, however, are not, at any rate, not essentially an



observer. I must take your word concerning what you have drawn, not because you have a better, more proximate view of it, but because the drawing is yours.

The privileged status we enjoy with respect to the contents of our own minds is analogous. That is, in introspecting and describing our thoughts, we are not reporting episodes that appear before our mind's eye. Were that so, we should be at a loss to account for the privileged status such reports are routinely accorded. The access I enjoy to my own mental contents would be superior to what is available to you, perhaps, but only accidentally so. Its superiority would be like that I enjoy with respect to the contents of my trouser pockets.

Consider the following description of visual imagining:

> ...[V]isual images might be like displays produced on a cathode ray tube (CRT) by a computer program operating on stored data. That is, ... images are temporary spatial displays in active memory that are generated from more abstract representations in long-term memory. Interpretive mechanisms (the 'mind's eye') work over ('look at') these internal displays and classify them in terms of semantic categories (as would be involved in realizing that a particular spatial configuration corresponds to a dog's ear, for example).[12]

An account of this sort, whatever its empirical credentials, exudes an aura of implausibility at least in part because it promotes a conception of mental access that threatens to undermine epistemic privilege. If the conception were apt, then whatever asymmetry we find in the beliefs you and I have about your states of mind is purely fortuitous. If I could look over your mind's shoulder, then my epistemological position would be no different from yours as you gazed inwardly. Indeed I might see clearly what you apprehend only darkly.

Davidson holds that we are bound to misconstrue privileged access – what he calls first-person authority – so long as we persist in depicting the mind in this way.

> There is a picture of the mind which has become so ingrained in our philosophical tradition that it is almost impossible to escape its influence even when its worst faults are recognized and repudiated. In one crude, but familiar, version, it goes like this: the mind is a theatre in

[12] Kosslyn et al. (1979). A discussion of the liabilities of this conception of imagery may be found in Heil (1982).

which the conscious self watches a passing show ... The show consists of 'appearances', sense data, qualia, what is given in experience. What appear on the stage are not the ordinary objects of the world that the outer eye registers and the heart loves, but their purported representatives. Whatever we know about the world outside depends on what we can glean from the inner clues.[13]

Although Davidson's point is intended to apply, not to mental images, but to propositional attitudes, the moral is the same.

Most of us long ago gave up the idea of perceptions, sense data, the flow of experience, as things 'given' to the mind; we should treat propositional objects in the same way. Of course people have beliefs, wishes, doubts, and so forth; but to allow this is not to suggest that beliefs, wishes, and doubts are *entities* in or before the mind, or that being in such states requires there to be corresponding mental objects. ...Sentences about the attitudes are relational; for *semantic* reasons there must therefore be objects to which to relate those who have attitudes. But having an attitude is not having an entity before the mind; for compelling *psychological* and *epistemological* reasons we should deny that there are objects of the mind.[14]

Davidson is convinced that worries about privileged access can be dispelled provided we abandon the notion that our awareness of mental contents is best regarded as the apprehension of content-bearing entities or episodes. In the case of mental images, this requires that we let go of the traditional conception of images as pictures or picture-like copies of external things gazed at inwardly. In the case of beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes, we are to turn away from the notion that, in introspecting, we encounter propositions, mental sentences, senses, or contents.

If this were so, and I am inclined to believe it is so, then we should have a way of defusing worries about privileged access that might other-wise to be thought to arise from externalist or naturalistic accounts of mental contents. We should be able to see how something like a Cartesian entrée to the contents of one's own mind does not depend on the Cartesian conception of mental substance. Indeed the picture of introspection encouraged by that conception is precisely the source of the difficulties we have been considering.

[13] Davidson (1987, p 453).

[14] Davidson (1987, pp. 454–5).



## Concluding Remarks

Davidson's suggestion requires that we jettison the notion that content-bearing states of mind are usefully regarded as entities – Cartesian ideas, sentences in mentalese, neural inscriptions, pictures on an interior television screen. Such entities might exist. Indeed we may be obliged to mention them in ascriptions and descriptions of thoughts, images, and the like. The point, then, is not one issuing from considerations of parsimony. It is founded, rather, on the notion that the having of a thought or image 'is not the having of an object before the mind'.

...[I]f to have a thought is to have an object 'before the mind', and the identity of the object determines what the thought is, then it must always be possible to be mistaken about what one is thinking. For unless one knows *everything* about the object, there will always be senses in which one does not know what the object is. Many attempts have been made to find a relation between a person and an object which will in all contexts hold if and only if the person can intuitively and said to know what the object is. But none of these attempts has succeeded, and I think the reason is clear. The only object that would satisfy the twin requirements of being 'before the mind' and also such that it determines ... the content of a thought, must, like Hume's ideas and impressions, 'be what it seems and seem what it is'. There are no such objects, public or private, abstract or concrete.[15]

If we imagined that introspecting were a matter of inwardly scrutinizing a mental object, then we should have to suppose that our ability to appreciate the content of introspected thoughts depends on a capacity to 'read off' a thought's content from an inspection of the thought itself. Externalism poses obvious difficulties for such a picture. I have suggested, however, the non-externalist, even Cartesian, accounts of content are equally ill-suited to its requirements. We must understand theories of content as setting out conditions that agents must satisfy if they are to have contentful states of mind. Their satisfying these conditions need not be a matter of their recognizing them to be satisfied. This, I think is, or ought to be, uncontroversial. Anyone who questions it is faced with the spectre

[15] Davidson (1987, p. 455).

of regress: if my thought's having a particular content requires that I recognize the obtaining of certain conditions, then it requires my having some other thought with a particular content, one, namely, corresponding to this recognition. But of course, *this* thought would require its own corresponding recognition of the obtaining of appropriate conditions for *its* content, and we are off on a regress.[16]

If we are willing to allow the regress-blocking manœuver in the case of ordinary, first-order thoughts, there is no reason to balk at its application to second-order thoughts, introspections. Beliefs about the contents of one's own thoughts, then, need not be based on beliefs about whatever it is that fixes the contents of those thoughts. The contents of second-order thoughts are fixed, just as are the contents of first-order thoughts, by the obtaining of appropriate conditions.

This simple point will be difficult to appreciate, however, so long as we cling to what Davidson calls 'a faulty picture of the mind', a picture in which knowledge of the contents of one's thoughts is caricatured as a species of inner perception. The conception of the mind as a place where specialized mental objects are housed ceased long ago to carry philosophical conviction. It survives, however, at least implicitly, in conceptions of the access we have to our own mental contents. My aim has been to show that it need not.

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[16] An account of content with an epistemic component can perhaps avoid a regress, though only by incorporating a commitment to an externalist account of knowing, one that enables agents to know that something is so even when they are not, in the usual sense, justified in believing that it is so. see n. 11.



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