

Crispin Wright, “Self-Knowledge: The Wittgensteinian Legacy” (1998)

Avowals: authoritative, non-inferential self-ascriptions of mental phenomena.

Phenomenal avowals: avowals of qualitative phenomena that are not content-bearing. Necessarily:

- *Groundless*: the demand for reasons is always inappropriate.
- *Strongly authoritative*: they must be accepted as true, unless the subject’s sincerity or conceptual competence is in doubt.
- *Transparent*: normally, the subject cannot be ignorant or in doubt about the truth of an avowal.

Attitudinal avowals: avowals of attitudes with intentional content.

- Also groundless and transparent, but only *weakly authoritative*: comprehensive unreliability is impossible.

The Cardinal Question: what explains and justifies these marks of avowals? *How is it possible* that we could have this special kind of authority to speak our own minds?

- Traditional sources of knowledge: (1) a priori (?); (2) observation; (3) inference; (4) testimony.
- Wright: it can’t be any of these, so there must be no explanation (**Quietism**). It’s simply a constitutive feature governing the acceptability of avowals in our socio-linguistic practice.

The Observational Model: avowals are reports of inner items that exist independently of the report, but that the thinker is in a unique position to “sense” (or with which she is uniquely acquainted). Against this:

A. Wittgenstein’s “private language” argument (purportedly) addresses phenomenal avowals:

1. For ‘S’ to stand for a *recurring* sensation (not ‘whatever is going on with me right now’), it would have to have some semantic content that allows for both correct and incorrect applications.
2. This semantic content would have to be generated by a semantic intention that ostensively defined ‘S’ in a way that is independent of the private linguist’s later impression of what is correct.
- 3(a). This isn’t possible. Nothing the linguist can do by way of attending to the ‘something’ could succeed in determining a correct way to use ‘S’ going forward, independently of how she is later inclined to use ‘S’.
- 3(b). It is possible, but nothing could constitute a fact of the matter as to whether the linguist has retained a grip on her original intention or departed from it, other than what she proceeds to do.

B. The “not a mental process” objection addresses attitudinal avowals:

1. Attitudes with intentional content bear internal relations to subsequent behaviors.
2. Nothing that can come before the ‘mind’s eye’ could put the thinker in a position to identify those internal relations (cf. the sunburned arm).

Possible alternative: expressivism? But this fails to explain why we continue to have privileged access even when nothing is being expressed.

Conclusion: “this language game is played.”

Questions:

1. Can we meet McDowell's challenge to explain why the Cardinal Question actually poses a philosophical difficulty? Or do you think he's right that we have no special reason to think baseless epistemic authority is NOT possible?
2. Is Wright too quick to embrace Quietism (however uneasily)? Are there other genuinely explanatory possibilities that he fails to consider?
3. Do we agree with Wright that there is a special problem with attitudinal avowals – that there is no such thing as “phenomenal intentionality?”

References

Crispin Wright, “Self-Knowledge: The Wittgensteinian Legacy,” in *Knowing Our Own Minds*, Crispin Wright, Barry Smith, and Cynthia Macdonald, eds. OUP, 1998.

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