

Wright and McDowell on Wittgenstein and inner sense

1: Inner sense

The inner sense theory (in its contemporary Armstrong-Churchland form) sounds like scientifically enlightened common sense:

A novelist or psychologist may have a running awareness of her emotional states that is far more penetrating than the rest of us enjoy. A logician may have a more detailed consciousness of the continuing evolution of his beliefs...

...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. The mechanisms themselves are presumably innate, but one must learn to use them: to make useful discriminations and to prompt insightful judgments. Learned perceptual skills are familiar in the case of external perception. A symphony conductor can hear the clarinets' contribution to what is a seamless sound to a child. An astronomer can recognize the planets, and nebulae, and red giants, among what are just specks in the night sky to others. A skilled chef can taste the rosemary and shallots within what is just a yummy taste to a hungry diner. And so forth. It is evident that perception, whether inner or outer, is substantially a learned skill. Most of that learning takes place in our early childhood, of course: what is perceptually obvious to us now was a subtle discrimination at eight months. But there is always room to learn more.

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: 120-22)

However, according to Wright:

The privileged observation explanation [of "first-third person asymmetries in ordinary psychological discourse"] is unquestionably a neat one. What it *does* need philosophy to teach is its utter hopelessness. (Wright 2000: 24)

Wright is officially talking about the industrial strength Cartesian version of the inner sense theory, but it's clear he thinks the modern descendant is equally hopeless.

2: The three marks of avowals

An *avowal*, in Wright's terminology, is a "non-inferential self-ascription"; *phenomenal* avowals "comprise examples 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" (14); the contrast being with "attitudinal avowals" (15). Phenomenal avowals have the following three marks:

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First, 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.

Second, they are *strongly authoritative*. If somebody understands such a claim, and is disposed sincerely to make it about themselves, that is a guarantee of the truth of what they say. A doubt about such a claim has to be a doubt about the sincerity or the understanding of the one making it. Since we standardly credit any interlocutor, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, with sincerity and understanding, it follows that a subject’s actually making such a claim about themselves is a criterion for the correctness of the corresponding third-personal claim made by someone else: my avowal that I’m in pain must be accepted by others, on penalty of incompetence, as a ground for the belief that I am.

Finally, phenomenal avowals exhibit a kind of *transparency*. Where P is an avowal of the type concerned, there is typically something absurd about a profession of the form, ‘I don’t know whether P’—don’t know whether I have a headache, for instance, or whether my feet are sore. Not always: there are contexts in which I might be uncertain of a precondition—for instance, whether I have feet. But in the normal run of cases, the subject’s ignorance of the truth or falsity of an avowal of this kind is not, it seems, an option. (14-5)

N.B. Wright’s use of ‘transparency’ is non-standard.¹ The Cartesian inner sense theory is then presented as:

the explanation of the special marks of avowals [...] they are the product of the subject’s exploitation of what is generally recognized to be a position of (something like) *observational privilege*. As an analogy, imagine somebody looking into a kaleidoscope and reporting on what he sees. No one else can look in, of course, at least while he is taking his turn. (22)

As Wright says, “The analogy isn’t perfect by any means”, but this makes it hard to see how this “explanation” could be at all tempting, because ordinary observational reports exhibit *none* of these marks (apart from half of the first, the non-inferential bit; see McDowell, below).

3: The three marks and the Armstrong-Churchland theory

Precisely because of the last point, if Wright is correct about the second and third marks, the contemporary version of the inner sense theory is *wrong*. (Compare smoke detectors, etc.) So, is he correct?

Strong authority can be put as follows (‘In’ is for *Infallibility*):

In^A Necessarily, if S avows, with sincerity and understanding, ‘I am in phenomenal state M’, then she is in M.

(Set aside cases where I am wrong that I have feet, etc.—see 15.)

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¹ We’ll get to the standard use shortly. Enigmatic hint: it is illustrated by Wright’s example of Emma.

Everyday counterexamples. Someone who suffers from ringing in the ears (tinnitus) might be cured of her condition. Fearful that it might recur, when she hears buzzings and hissings in her external environment, which are in fact readily discriminable from the apparent buzzing and hissing “in the ear” distinctive of tinnitus, she is disposed to judge that her condition has recurred, and that her ears are again ringing. When she realizes that the buzzing and hissing are produced by a nest of bees and a knot of snakes, she withdraws her judgment and admits to an error.

Pathological cases. Naively, one would not have thought it possible for someone to believe that he is dead, or that what is manifestly his own hand is the hand of someone else, or (of particular relevance to the present issue) that he can see even though he is in fact blind, or hear even though he is deaf. But such cases are actual. There appear to be very few limits on the absurd things people can believe, given the right sort of neurological damage.

Burge counterexamples.

People sometimes make mistakes about color ranges. They may correctly apply a color term to a certain color, but also mistakenly apply it to shades of a neighboring color...they give in when other speakers confidently correct them in unison. (1979: 100)

Imagine someone, Scarlett, who misapplies ‘red’ as Burge describes. Scarlett says ‘That is red’, looking at and demonstrating a reddish orange carrot in good light. Her utterance expresses her belief that the carrot is red; the carrot is not red, so she speaks and believes falsely. She also says ‘That looks red to me’, looking at and demonstrating the carrot. Her utterance expresses her belief that the carrot looks red to her; the carrot does not look red to her, but rather reddish orange, so she speaks and believes falsely. Since ‘That looks red to me’ should evidently be included on Wright’s list of phenomenal avowals, this is a counterexample to this instance of In^A:

In^{A(RED)} Necessarily, if S avows, sincerely and with understanding, ‘x looks red to me’, then x does look red to her.

Scarlett avows, sincerely and with understanding, that the carrot looks red to her, but it doesn’t.

Exercise: evaluate the reply that this is not a counterexample, on the grounds that Scarlett does not avow ‘That looks red to me’ with “understanding”. After all, Burge himself comments that this style of thought experiment crucially relies on the possibility of “attribut[ing] a mental state or event whose content involves a notion that the subject incompletely understands” (107).

“Transparency” (better: self-intimation) is something like this:

S-I^A Necessarily, if S is/is not in phenomenal state M, then S believes/knows that she is/is not in M (and so, assuming the appropriate linguistic capacities, is disposed to avow ‘I am in M’/‘I am not in M’).

Everyday counterexamples. Someone might fail to notice ringing in his ears because he was concentrating on writing a letter of recommendation (not absurd, at any rate)

Pathological cases. Arguably, something may look red to a blindsighter, despite his refusal to avow that it does. (N.B. Blindsight is a complex and controversial topic.)

Luminosity. The knowledge version of S-I^A (obtained by deleting ‘believes’ from ‘believes/knows’) is tantamount to the claim that phenomenal states (and their absences) are (in the terminology of Williamson 2000: ch. 4) “luminous”, against which Williamson mounts some serious arguments. Williamson’s criticisms depend on a feature of knowledge that is not shared by belief, so a retreat to the belief version of S-I^A is formally on the cards. But it is not very well motivated. To the extent that S-I^A is tempting, it is in its stronger knowledge version (which is the one Wright himself endorses). To see this, note that the initially tempting thought can be put this way. If I am in phenomenal state M then my avowal ‘I am in M’ is not merely true: rather, it is also *permissible* for me to avow ‘I am in M’, thereby *asserting* that I am in M. But, given the widely accepted thesis that it is permissible to assert P only if one knows P, the initially tempting thought amounts to the knowledge version of S-I^A.

4: Groundlessness and baselessness

One of McDowell’s main complaints is that Wright has conflated avowals being *groundless* (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’ (p. 14). 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)

So the inner observation model does not respond to the difficulty at all:

Suppose someone claims to have a philosophical problem that finds expression in asking: ‘How is it possible that our knowledge of our own inner lives is baseless?’ I am going to urge (section III below) that such a form of words fails to present us with any determinate philosophical difficulty; but for now the mere claim to have a difficulty that can be expressed like this will serve my purpose. If someone claims to have such a difficulty, it is *obviously* unhelpful to respond by giving a picture that merely leaves the baselessness out. But that is what the observational picture does. (48)

But what *is* baselessness? Distinguish two ways of taking ‘How can you tell?’ (or ‘How did you know?’): (a) By what *means* or *method* did you know? (b) By what *evidence* did you know? Example: how did you know that Bob was in his office? (a) by looking; (b) by the fact that his light was on. Baselessness corresponds to the first way, and groundlessness to the second.

Baselessness, first attempt:

The claim that p is *baseless* iff ‘By what means or method did you know that p?’ is “always inappropriate”.

But what does “inappropriate” mean? Obviously not *impolite*, but neither is the question odd in the manner of ‘Do colorless green ideas sleep furiously?’ Rather, “inappropriateness” seems simply amount to the fact that the question usually prompts ‘I don’t know’. (If you ask Churchland, he will be more forthcoming.) This gives us two versions of baselessness:

The claim that p is *weakly-baseless* iff ‘By what means or method did you know that p?’ can’t be (positively, knowingly(?),...) answered.

Note ‘baselessness’ is poor terminology, because the idea that it is *not known* what the “base” is, not that there isn’t one. The terminology is a better fit for:

The claim that p is *strongly-baseless* iff it is known that p and there is no means or method by which it is known.

Granting that avowals are weakly-baseless, this would hardly seem to be a problem. On the other hand, if avowals are strongly-baseless, surely *something* should be said to make this palatable. But we have been given no reason to think that they are strongly-baseless.

Q: what kind of baselessness does McDowell have in mind?

Aren’t the other two marks obviously puzzling? McDowell seems to accept that they *are* marks, yet does not discuss them. Q: why?

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