

Shoemaker on self-blindness

1: Self-blindness and inner sense

One of Shoemaker's many insights is that the inner sense theory of self-knowledge fits very naturally with the possibility of self-blindness, just as the "outer sense" theory of environmental knowledge fits with the possibility of blindness, deafness, etc.

To be self-blind with respect to a certain kind of mental fact or phenomenon, a creature must have the ability to conceive of those facts and phenomena (just as the person who is literally blind will be able to conceive of those states of affairs she is unable to learn about visually)...And it is only introspective access to those phenomena that the creature is supposed to lack; it is not precluded that she should learn of them in the way others might learn of them, i.e., by observing her own behavior, or by discovering facts about her own neurophysiological states. (1994: 226)

The blind are as rational, intelligent, and conceptually competent as the rest of us—they merely lack a particular mechanism specialized for detecting states of their environment. If the inner-sense theory is right, then the mechanism specialized for detecting one's mental states could be absent or inoperative, while sparing the subject's rationality, intelligence, and conceptual competence. Such a subject would (presumably) lack the special kind of access to our mental states that normal subjects enjoy. But, according to Shoemaker, this condition—*self-blindness*—is not possible.

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2: The George-argument

Shoemaker has a number of arguments against the possibility of self-blindness. Here is the main one.

A *rational agent* is a "person with normal intelligence, rationality, and conceptual capacity" (236). To say that self-blindness is impossible is to say that, necessarily, any rational agent has the sort of privileged and peculiar access to her mental states that we typically enjoy.

What I shall be arguing, in the first instance, is that if someone is equal in intelligence, rationality, and conceptual capacity to a normal person, she will, in consequence of that, behave in ways that provide the best possible evidence that she is aware of her own beliefs...to the same extent as a normal person would be, and so is not self-blind. (236)

Suppose that rational agent George is self-blind. One might think that George's condition could be easily diagnosed, because he will sometimes say "It's raining but I don't believe it is", or the like. But, Shoemaker argues, he will not: George's rational agency "will be enough to make [him] appreciate the logical impropriety of affirming something while denying that one believes it" (237). George, then, will not betray his self-blindness in *this* way. Might he betray it in some other way? For instance, wouldn't George be flummoxed if asked "Do you believe that it's raining?" That takes us to step C, below, of Shoemaker's attempt to reduce to absurdity the hypothesis that George is self-blind (Shoemaker 1988: 34-45):

- A. Self-blind speaker George will recognize the paradoxical character of ‘*p* but I don’t believe that *p*’.
- B. Since George is a rational agent, this recognition will lead him to avoid Moore-paradoxical sentences.
- C. Further, George will recognize that he should give the same answer to ‘Do you believe that *p*?’ and ‘*p*?’.
- D. Continuing this line of argument: plausibly, there is “nothing in his behavior, verbal or otherwise, that would give away the fact that he lacks self-acquaintance” (i.e. the ordinary kind of self-knowledge of one’s beliefs) (36).
- E. If George really is self-blind, “how can we be sure...that self-blindness is not the normal condition of mankind?” (36).
- F. “[I]t seems better to take the considerations [above] as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that self-blindness [with respect to beliefs] is a possibility” (36).

Shoemaker then briefly argues that this sort of argument can be extended (with qualifications) to other states (45-8; see also Shoemaker 1994: 237).

Consider the following objection:

[T]here are conceivable circumstances in which the total evidence available to a man supports the proposition that it is raining while the total third-person evidence supports the proposition that he does not believe that it is raining... If George is self-blind, then in the envisaged circumstance he is going to be very puzzled. He knows that Moore-paradoxical sentences are to be avoided. Yet it will seem to him that such an utterance is warranted by the evidence... And now there will be something—namely his expression of puzzlement—that distinguishes him from the normal person. (Shoemaker 1988: 42)

Shoemaker replies that this case “is not really conceivable”:

There is a contradiction involved in the idea that the total evidence available to someone might unambiguously support the proposition that it is raining and that the total third-person evidence might unambiguously support the proposition that the person does not believe that it is raining. For the total third-person evidence concerning what someone believes about the weather should include what evidence he has about the weather—and if it includes the fact that his total evidence about the weather points unambiguously toward the conclusion that it is raining, then it cannot point unambiguously toward the conclusion that he doesn’t believe that it is raining. (43)

Is this reply correct? Suppose I am self-blind, and my evidence is this: (a) the cat has come indoors soaking wet; (b) the weather forecast is for rain; (c) I am going out without my umbrella, carrying important papers that will spoil if it’s raining. This evidence “points unambiguously toward the conclusion that it is raining”; it also points unambiguously toward the conclusion that I *don’t believe* that it is raining—if I knew someone *else* behaved in this way, I would reasonably conclude that she does not believe that it’s raining. (Assume that, somehow, I have determined that I dislike getting wet and ruining important papers.)

According to Shoemaker, this reasoning goes wrong because the evidence cited is not my *total* evidence: “the total third-person evidence concerning what someone believes about the weather should include what evidence he has about the weather”. Thus, I have *another* item of evidence to be weighed in with the rest, namely that my evidence about the weather is that the cat came in soaking wet, etc. And adding that item of evidence does indeed undercut the conclusion that I lack the belief that it’s raining—if I knew that someone *else* had evidence that pointed unambiguously toward the conclusion that it’s raining, then even if she walks out without an umbrella, that would not show that she doesn’t believe that it’s raining. Rather, it would suggest other hypotheses—perhaps that she doesn’t know where her umbrella is.

But what is it to “have evidence” about the weather? Presumably, it is (at least) to *believe* facts that confirm or disconfirm meteorological hypotheses.¹ What’s more, Shoemaker himself must think this, otherwise the objection he is trying to rebut would be a non-starter. If I don’t *believe* that the cat came in soaking wet, etc., it will not “seem to me” that the Moore-paradoxical sentence ‘It’s raining but I don’t believe that it’s raining’ is true, and so there will be no “expression of puzzlement” that distinguishes me from the normal person.

Thus, the fact that *my evidence* includes the fact that the cat came in soaking wet entails that I *believe* that the cat came in soaking wet. Hence, to insist that my total evidence should include what evidence I have about the weather is tantamount to assuming that I have knowledge (or true beliefs) about what I believe. But—since I am supposed to be self-blind—this is exactly what cannot be assumed. Even if we waive these difficulties in reaching step D, the rest of the argument is hardly plain sailing. Suppose that step D is secured: George, our allegedly self-blind man, behaves in every way like a man who has the ordinary sort of self-knowledge. Why are we supposed to agree that George really does have self-knowledge? Why hasn’t Shoemaker just outlined a strategy for *faking* self-knowledge? (Shoemaker himself, of course, is no behaviorist.)

Further, even we grant every step of the argument, and agree that George *does* have self-knowledge, that doesn’t obviously show anything about *us*. In particular, it doesn’t show that we have no faculty of inner-sense. Admittedly, if George has self-knowledge, then we—at least, those of us who are “rational agents”—could come by self-knowledge without deploying inner-sense. But—given the sophistication of George’s reasoning—why doesn’t this simply show that rational agents have a *backup* to their faculty of inner-sense? Here is a real-life example. Those with so-called red-green color blindness behave basically like those with normal color vision, but they exploit different cues to use terms like ‘red’ and ‘green’. They are so effective at doing this that usually they don’t realize they are color-blind until given special tests. (Color blindness was only discovered in 1798.) Even if we imagine that they can fake these tests too, that would not show that red-green color vision does not exist.

Exercise: Shoemaker (in effect) replies to this objection in 1994: 239-40; is his reply convincing?

¹ Something stronger is also plausible, namely Williamson’s E=K.

References

- Shoemaker, S. 1988. On knowing one's own mind. *Philosophical Perspectives* 2: 183-209. Page reference to the reprint in Shoemaker 1996.
- — —. 1994. Self-knowledge and "inner sense". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54: 249-314. Page reference to the reprint in Shoemaker 1996.
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