

## Cassam on inferentialism

### **1: Inferentialism**

As Cassam says, it is commonly assumed that self-knowledge is typically *non*-inferential. In chapter 11, he defends inferentialism about “intentional” states like belief, hope, and desire:

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. (Cassam 2014: 138)

N.B. Cassam thinks that Moran’s view is (best interpreted as) inferentialism, the pertinent inference for belief being: I ought rationally to believe P, so I believe P.<sup>1</sup> (We’ll get to this later.) In any case, Cassam’s inferentialism is quite different.

### **2: The argument by elimination**

Boghossian’s trilemma:

knowledge of our own attitudes can only be:

1. Based on inference.
2. Based on inner observation.
3. Based on nothing. (141)

It can’t be (2) or (3), so it must be (1). (According to Cassam, Moran should find this argument congenial.)

Cassam’s case against (2):

Armstrong’s view...makes introspection out to be fundamentally no different, epistemologically or phenomenologically, from clairvoyance. What I mean by clairvoyance is the kind of thing Laurence Bonjour has talked about over the years. For example, there is the case of Norman who, for no apparent reason, finds himself with beliefs about the President’s whereabouts; Norman has neither seen nor heard that the President is in New York but believes that the President is in New York, and his belief is reliable. Even if it’s right to describe Norman as ‘knowing’ that the President is in New York his knowledge is very different from ordinary perceptual knowledge. When you know that the President is in New York by seeing him in New York you are *aware* of the President, and your knowing requires a degree of cognitive effort, even if it’s only the minimal effort of looking and paying attention to where the President is. In contrast, Norman is not aware of the President and his belief is not the result of any cognitive effort on his part. The belief that the President is in New York simply comes to him; he has

Cassam, Quassim. *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford University Press, 2014.  
© Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Boghossian, Paul. Content and self-knowledge. *Philosophical Topics* 17: 5-26. 1989.  
© Philosophical Topics. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

---

<sup>1</sup> As SP pointed out, this view looks like a version of Ryleanism, since the method works for others if it works at all: You ought rationally to believe P, so you believe P.

no justification for believing that the President is in New York and no idea why he believes this or how he could possibly know where the President is.

...perceptual knowledge is strikingly different from clairvoyant ‘knowledge’ so it doesn’t exactly help the perceptual model to say that self-knowledge is like clairvoyance. If perceptual knowledge that P requires you to be conscious that P as well as a degree of cognitive effort then the net effect of admitting that Norman’s knowledge that he believes the President is in New York is epistemologically and phenomenologically on a par with his knowledge that the President is in New York is to suggest that his self-knowledge is *not* perceptual. It lacks some key features of ordinary perceptual knowledge and only comes out as ‘perceptual’ on an impoverished view of perceptual knowledge which has very little going for it. (134-6)

True, Armstrongian self-scanning doesn’t fit the stereotype of perception (in particular, it’s not a version of what Shoemaker calls the ‘object perception model’). But at the very least it is somewhat perception-like—it is a *detection mechanism*. Let’s grant that it’s not “inner observation” in the intended sense. Why hasn’t Cassam only shown that we need to add *another* option: 4. Based on Armstrongian self-scanning?

Cassam’s case against (3):

self-knowledge can’t be based on nothing unless it is cognitively insubstantial, like knowing that I am here now. However, as Boghossian points out, there are plenty of indications that self-knowledge is not cognitively insubstantial: one can decide how much attention to pay to one’s thoughts, some adults are better than others at reporting on their inner states, and self-knowledge is fallible and incomplete. It’s natural to understand the difference between getting it right and failing to do so with regard to our own attitudes as ‘the difference between being in an epistemically favourable position with the relevant evidence—and not’ (Boghossian 1998[1989]: 167). On this account of the fallibility and incompleteness of self-knowledge the door is wide open to viewing self-knowledge not just as cognitively substantial but as inferential. (141-2)

Even if we ignore the possibility of (4), why is the view that self-knowledge is “cognitively insubstantial” the only alternative to (1) and (2)? See also Boghossian 1989, section III. Exercise: what does Boghossian mean by ‘based on nothing’? Does his argument against (3) work?

### 3: The argument by example

Knowing what one wants as an “inference from internal promptings”:

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; N.B. Lawlor herself thinks this is only one route to knowing what one wants.)

Cassam, Quassim. *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

© Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Lawlor, Krista. Knowing What One Wants. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79: 47-75. 2009.

© *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

A useful corrective, but: (a) the evidential base is just more self-knowledge (including knowledge of intentional states): experiences, thoughts, imaginings, remembering, feelings, emotions, and (b) doesn't happily fit knowledge that (e.g.) one *believes* that Griffin is 6, one *knows* that Griffin is 6, or that one *sees* Griffin. Cassam addresses these points later. (As discussed in class, one could take Katherine's evidence to bear on what she rationally should want, rather than as uncovering a desire that she has already.)

#### 4: The argument by experiment

Cassam cites some experiments supporting Self-Perception Theory, Ryleanism's equivalent in psychology. But the upshot is relatively weak:

Clearly, none of this amounts to a proof of inferentialism, not least because SPT is itself a controversial view among social psychologists. However, Bem's discussion does call into question some of the bolder pronouncements of philosophers about the Rylean view. (148)

#### 5: Objections and replies

A. Inferentialism can't account for the epistemic asymmetry ('the Asymmetry') between knowledge of oneself and knowledge of others.

B. On an 'internalist' conception of epistemic justification inferentialism generates a vicious regress.

C. There are obvious counterexamples to inferentialism, cases which make it clear that inference is neither required nor relevant for self-knowledge.

D. Although inferentialism accounts for a certain form of self-knowledge, it doesn't account for ordinary self-knowledge; inferential self-knowledge is alienated self-knowledge. (149)

Reply to (A): different evidence in one's own case, but this doesn't amount to an interesting asymmetry.

Reply to (B): complicated. Here's Boghossian's statement of internalism: "According to internalism, if I am to be justified in believing that *p*, I must believe that *p* as a result both of my recognition that I believe that *q*, and that a belief that *q* justifies a belief that *p*" (1989: 9). Internalism is open to the charge of "over-intellectualising".

Reply to (C): purported counterexamples like knowledge of "occurrent thoughts" are not within the scope of inferentialism. (But it turns out in the next chapter that Cassam's inferentialism includes this case too.)

Reply to (D): "just because inferential or attributional self-knowledge *can* be of attitudes you don't identify with and can't endorse, it doesn't follow that this kind of self-knowledge *has* to be alienated in these ways" (157; cf. Byrne 2005: 86-7).

Reply to the reply to (D):

Even if I endorse the attitudes I ascribe to myself, there is a kind of alienation implied in the idea that I should need to discover them by inference. Consider a case of knowing that I believe that *p* by judging that *p*, and suppose for the sake of argument that Cassam's analysis of this case is sound. I consider whether *p* and reach the judgment that *p*. So some part of me has taken an affirmative stance

toward  $p$ —call him ‘MB *qua* judge’. But by hypothesis, there is another part of me, ‘MB *qua* believer’, whose stance on  $p$  might yet differ. We seem to have two points of view here: one which accepts that  $p$ , another which may or may not accept it. Now, such a division can arise within a person: what I judge when I consciously consider whether  $p$  may come apart from the attitude toward  $p$  reflected more broadly in my behavior. But Cassam’s inferentialism builds such a division into its characterization of even the most unproblematic case of attitudinal self-knowledge. It does not matter that the stance on  $p$  expressed in judgment may for the most part *coincide* with the stance embodied in belief. The point is that, even when the judging subject has settled on an answer to the question whether  $p$ , there is still (in principle) another question for her to settle, namely whether she actually believes that  $p$ .

Many contemporary philosophers are committed to this sort of picture of the epistemic relation between judgment and belief, but I think on reflection it should strike us as strange. Focusing on a case in which the subject judges out loud may help to bring out its strangeness. Let the subject consider whether  $p$  and express her conclusion aloud:

(1) Yes,  $p$ .

Now let her infer her own belief from this ‘external prompting’, and again express her conclusion aloud:

(2) I believe that  $p$ .

Assuming the subject is not alienated from her own belief, we would ordinarily take (2), like (1), to express *belief that p*. On the inferentialist analysis, however, this cannot be right. Whereas (1) may express belief that  $p$ , (2) relates to this belief only indirectly: it merely expresses the subject’s belief *that she believes that p*, which is based on evidence that she believes that  $p$ , but is not itself an unmediated expression of her first-order belief. So her assertion of (2) expresses, not an endorsement of  $p$  as true, but a (no doubt very well founded) hypothesis about herself. If she were fully clear about her own epistemic situation, she really ought to say to herself: ‘Yes,  $p$ , and so it is extremely likely that I believe that  $p$ , since my beliefs coincide with my judgment in most cases, and I’ve no reason to think this is an exception’. If I received this sort of report on someone’s beliefs, I should demand to speak to the believer herself, not just to her biographer, however well-informed she might be. (Boyle 2015: 343)

Since the inference is supposed to be from the premise that I *judge* that  $p$ , that is (or should be) the “external prompting”. So shouldn’t Boyle’s subject be saying ‘Yes, I *judge that p*, and so it is extremely likely that I believe that  $p$ , ...’? (Also the ‘extremely likely’ seems a bit unfair to Cassam, who thinks one can *know* that one believes that  $p$  by such an inference.)

Exercise: does Boyle’s reply to the reply succeed?

## 6: Inference all the way down

What about knowledge of “internal promptings”?

(a) There are in fact excellent positive reasons for thinking self-knowledge of internal promptings is inferential.

(b) The fact that self-knowledge of internal promptings is inferential doesn't generate a problematic regress. (162)

A two-step argument:

1. Access to internal promptings is interpretive.
2. Interpretive access is inferential.

The point of 1 is that what enables you to make sense of your internal promptings and attach a specific significance to them is your background knowledge of your current circumstances, current or recent behaviour, and current or recent mental life. (165)

But how does this address the worry? Let's grant we need some background knowledge to make sense of our "internal promptings". But before the interpretive process can go to work we need to *know* that we have those internal promptings, the significance of which is not immediately clear. And how do we know that?

Exercise: Cassam suggests that one route to knowing that one believes that *p* is to infer that from the premise that one judges that *p* (169-70; see the Boyle quotation above). Does he successfully deflect the objection that he has no account of how one knows the premise?

## References

- Boghossian, P. 1989. Content and self-knowledge. *Philosophical Topics* 17: 5-26.
- Boyle, M. 2015. Critical Study: Cassam on self-knowledge for humans. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23: 337-48.
- Byrne, A. 2005. Introspection. *Philosophical Topics* 33: 79-104.
- Cassam, Q. 2014. *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawlor, K. 2009. Knowing what one wants. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79: 47-75.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.805 Topics in Epistemology: Self-Knowledge  
Fall 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.