

Holding non-transparent (and epistemically virtuous) beliefs

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Transparency is commonly held to be a property of anyone's beliefs: it is enough for me to examine an issue to establish my own beliefs about it. Recent challenges to the privileged first-person authority over the content of one's own beliefs can undermine the claim that all of one's beliefs are transparent to oneself. This, in turn, has a number of consequences that the first part of this paper considers in terms of some variations of the Moore's paradox. The second part of the paper considers cases in which someone, in the process of acquiring and managing her beliefs, pays excessive attention at how reliable (or empirically adequate, or coherent, or widely accepted) her beliefs are when considered from a third-personal point of view. These cases can show how beliefs that are formed in a way that is insufficiently first-personal relate to beliefs that are not transparently accessible to those who hold them.

1. The widely assumed transparency of one's own beliefs to oneself seems to be an important element of the way we argue and endeavor to persuade by offering reasons. Reasons, often, are effective because they make our conversant see that such and such is the right (or adequate, or true, or appropriate) belief to hold about the matter and, once convinced that this is the belief she ought to hold, she will soon end up holding it. Transparency is important here because it enables one to complete an inference from what I take to be the case to what I take to be what ought to be believed and then to what I believe. As Edgley (1969) once pointed out, this cannot mean that the right answers to the questions "what is the case?" and "what do I believe?" are the same but rather that I don't have to consider my own belief set (or whatever other mental state) in order to determine what I believe (about whatever topic). Other people's beliefs, by contrast, are not transparent to me—I do have to consider other of their mental states in order to determine what they believe about anything. Transparency makes one's own beliefs accessible to a first-personal enterprise of establishing what one ought to think about something following an investigation concerning how things are. This (transparent) investigation, to which one's other beliefs (and one's other mental states) are irrelevant, is taken to constitute the last authority for one to establish what it is that she believes. There is no competing or overriding account of my own beliefs that can compete with my first-personal commitment followed by my transparent investigation of the matter. Transparency is what makes the world close to my beliefs by ensuring that they are responding to the world: they could be wrong but they are acquired with the best of my knowledge. Transparency would be a reason for one to "mistrust one's senses, but not one's own belief" (Wittgenstein, PI, II, x). My senses can fool me in a sense that my beliefs, all transparently acquired, cannot do: my beliefs are the best measure available to me of what I take (and should take) the world to be.

There have been several recent attacks on the idea of a privileged first-person authority and therefore to the claim that my first-personal take on my mental life is the last word. Wittgensteinian suspicions concerning the intelligibility of some private states and events have been extended by Putnam (1975) and Burge (1988), among others, who have been arguing that one has limited authority over the meanings of the words that one utters and cannot determine the contents of one's own thoughts without appeal to the community and the environment around. Others, with Davidson (1990, 1991), have argued that my

knowledge of my own mental states hinges on my knowledge of other parts of the world—physical objects and events and people’s minds. Failures of first-person authority have far-reaching consequences that revolve around the idea that one could be more or less oblivious to what is going on in one’s mind. If the privileged authority of the first person over what is believed is fully dropped, I could be wrong about what I avow to be what I believe. My first-personal access to my own beliefs are at most a tentative account and could be overtaken by a better, more worked out one which could be put forward by anyone including... myself. I could myself put forward an account of my beliefs that are third-personal and does not take into consideration whatever I avow. I could therefore determine what I believe making use of a third-person procedure such as an effort to best explain my own behavior. I could, for example, discover that I believe I am being followed by noticing I often look back and considering that a belief that I am being followed would appropriately explain this recurrent behavior. One way to make clear the predicament one is in when first-person authority is no longer considered as the last authority and other, third-person accesses to one’s beliefs are equally credible is to present versions of the Moore-paradoxical claims. In those claims, my beliefs contrast with what I take to be the case and an impression of paradox follows.¹

In order to spell this out I need to consider some variations of the claim that first-person authority is not the last word. Surely, failures of the privilege of first-person access admit degrees: it can be claimed merely that avowals are sometimes insufficient to establish everything one believes (or desires, or fears); in circumstances where first-person access is silent, one could appeal to third-person procedures. This weaker version of the claim that the first-person access fails to have all the authority over my beliefs (and other mental states) can be correlated to the following version of the Moore-paradoxical claims (that I shall call MI for Moore Ignorance):

(MI) I don’t believe p, but p.

In this version, I claim ignorance about p and, at the same time, I take p to be the case—presumably because I have some reason (for example, another source of information) to take it to be the case. A stronger version (Moore Error) could be correlated to a stronger version of the claim that first-person authority is fallible:

(ME) I believe not-p, but p.

The two versions of fallibility of the first-person authority could then be expressed through these two claims:

(CMI) I fail to avow the belief that p while attributing to myself the belief that p.

(CME) I avow the belief that not-p while attributing to myself the belief that p.

Both claims express failures in the authority of a first-person access to my beliefs and the second indeed holds that it could be corrected by a third-person approach. In both cases, what I take through avowals to be my belief about something is not the last word about what I actually believe. In both cases my reflected investigation of the world is not enough to establish what I believe (or fail to believe); there could be beliefs of mine that could be only accessible by means of a third-person procedure. In the case of CME, we have diverging accounts of what I believe: only further (perhaps specific) considerations could help to establish (and make up my mind about) what, p or not-p, in fact I believe.

¹ The connection between first-person authority and the Moore’s paradox is clearly presented in Moran (2001). Some of the distinctions I draw in the next paragraph—chiefly the one between the ME and the MI versions of the paradox—were suggested to me by Manuel Garcia-Carpintero.

Failures of transparency could follow from failures in first-person authority concerning beliefs expressed by claims as CME (and to some extent as CMI). If CME holds, I have transparent access to what I avow as my beliefs but transparency can be overruled by other considerations related to other beliefs (or other mental states) that I hold and that had to be taken into account in order to attribute beliefs to me (in a third-personal manner). Transparency is a feature of beliefs that are acquired through a process of examining how things are that should last until something else manages to persuade me. If (some of) my beliefs are not accessible by me in a first person manner, they could fail to display this transparency. Such a failure could be expressed by saying that for some of my beliefs I cannot infer what I (fully and on reflection) take to be the case and there could be cases where what I take to be the case is not enough to determine what I believe (or, perhaps, not even what I ought to believe). Transparency is important here because it enables me to complete an inference from what I take to be the case to what I take to be what ought to be believed and then to what I believe. CMI also entails some failures of transparency: some of my beliefs can fail to display transparency because I cannot acquire them (nor can I access them) by a first-person investigation of the world—when this investigation proves to be insufficient, I can appeal to other strategies to determine what I believe. With CMI, I cannot infer from what I believe to what I take to be the case—on reflection and on sufficient (by my own standards) investigation. Some of the consequences of these failures could be quickly appreciated if we consider our efforts to persuade. I can fail to persuade you of something solely because there is something in your mental set-up that would be incompatible with the beliefs I'm trying to make you acquire (by giving as many good reasons as possible). In a scenario where CME is possible, I could, at most, persuade you to avow some beliefs; that is, you could end up having first-personal access to whatever I am giving you reasons to believe while still stopping short of believing it. If we use an example reminiscent of Evans (1982: 225), I could be persuaded to avow that there will be a war but for some reason to do with my further beliefs, fears or desires I cannot believe anything but that there won't be a war. In the CMI scenario, I can still say that I cannot establish that there will be a war by investigating the world but I cannot help believing that there won't be a war. I establish my belief by looking at, say, my behavior, or my other expressed beliefs, desires etc and this evidence eventually completes what is accessible of my beliefs through avowals.

Do we have to give up the idea that beliefs are transparent? Moran (2006) argues that transparency is rather a norm than a description of our common practice concerning our beliefs. Our beliefs, he insists, ought to be transparent so that we can take them to be responding to the world (to the best of our knowledge and relevant abilities). Further, we can argue that not all my beliefs can fail to be transparently accessible—at least some of my beliefs have to be avowed, otherwise there will be little sense in saying that those beliefs are in any sense mine. Suppose all my beliefs—including beliefs like 'I believe this belief can explain my behavior'—are accessible solely in a third-person manner; there will be no way for me to say anything further than that those beliefs are somehow connected to my body (assuming I have further reasons to assert that this body is mine). It seems that the rules of ascribing beliefs to people presuppose that at least some of my beliefs are, in principle, accessible in a first-person manner. Then, in a CME scenario, we can take some of my beliefs not to be avowed (or even capable of being accessible through avowals) but only in a background of avowed beliefs that determine the belief-set I happen to own. Beliefs are understood as items that are owned by people; owning involves accessibility in

a way that is somehow privileged. That at least some of my beliefs are to be accessible in a first-person manner (and transparently) seems to be a limit to a drive towards a deflated notion of first-person authority. That our beliefs ought to be transparently accessible is a requisite of (rational) persuasion and, at the same time, what makes more accepted ideas seem more worthy: they have been scrutinized through different perspectives. This last point, however, deserves a somehow careful examination.

2. Our perspective on how things are seems to be inevitably shaped by values and practices that we have acquired in our communities. An issue akin to that of the requisite transparency of my beliefs is that we can end up excessively sensitive to the way others describe our actions and thoughts. Bernard Williams has aired the suspicion that “thinking about your possible states in terms of the virtues” is “to think about the way in which others might describe or comment on the way in which you think about your actions, and if that represents the essential content of your deliberation, it really does seem a misdirection of the ethical attention [...]”. The idea is that if too much attention is paid to how one’s action would be perceived from the outside—from a third-personal perspective—it would somehow taint a moral act. One could, for example, be motivated by an attempt to look modest or courageous in the eyes of somebody else (or in one’s own eyes while observing one’s own action) instead of looking at the world with courageous or modest eyes and acting accordingly. It is one thing to act moved by a virtuous way of seeing the world and another to act guided by models of virtuous action. Of course one has to learn, at some point, how to see the world in a virtuous way and that would most likely involve looking at virtuous actions in order to acquire the capacity to spot in the world the salient features that would guide a virtuous judgment. Still, according to Williams’ thesis, an action guided by an attempt to be virtuous—and that, therefore, sees virtue from an external point of view instead of seeing the world through virtuous eyes—is not fully morally adequate because it is not first-personal enough. This can be understood as a consequence of the asymmetries between how I evaluate my own action and how I evaluate somebody else’s: it is morally fine to judge other people in terms of how virtuous their actions are but it may not be so to judge one’s own action likewise because evaluation can taint one’s motivation and therefore action itself. Williams—in a vein that often resembles Sartre’s notion of bad faith—believes that we can consider an action from the moral point of view in terms of how much first-personal it is.

If Williams is right about moral judgments, we can apply the idea that mental content is sometimes not as first-personal as it should be to beliefs in general. We can start out by considering epistemic (or doxastic) virtues, instead of moral virtues. Consider a case of someone that, in the process of acquiring and managing her beliefs, pay excessive attention at how reliable (or empirically adequate, or coherent, or widely accepted) her beliefs are when considered from a third-personal point of view. The suspicion is that she can be misdirecting her capacity to have a third-personal access to her beliefs. We surely judge anybody’s beliefs in terms of their virtues—in terms of features that we use to evaluate their justification or their likelihood to be true—and this is at least one way to assess somebody else’s beliefs. Since other people’s beliefs are not transparent to me—I cannot establish their beliefs by just looking at the world—it is open to me to consider the epistemic quality of their beliefs from an external point of view. In our case just above, however, the person who pays excessive attention to the epistemic qualities of her beliefs can be neglecting the transparency that is open to her as a resource to establish her own

beliefs. She will then be paying too much attention to the standards of evaluation for beliefs (that maybe she is ready to recommend and further to maintain) to an extent that would neglect her capacity to examine the world from the perspective of her beliefs; in this sense she can end up holding beliefs that are not first-personal enough - she could have a measure of what we can describe as an epistemic bad faith.²

In the case of acquiring beliefs, as in the case of guiding moral action, one should have epistemic virtues somehow in the eyes that, by looking at the world, acquire beliefs. If this extension of Williams' point is correct, at least as far as the acquisition of beliefs is concerned, the talk of justification (or of epistemic or doxastic virtues) belong in a third-personal perspective. In our education, of course, we get our capacity to acquire beliefs tuned to what is deemed justified or otherwise likely to be true but this process eventually is expected to become first-personal and part of our own transparent access to our beliefs—our own way to look at the world. In some sense also, neglect of transparency (and of first-personal access) is also a neglect of responsibility for one's own beliefs; it is as if one is hiding behind what is taken to be (or indeed are) good beliefs instead of taking the responsibility of viewing the world from (epistemically) virtuous eyes. Beliefs acquired in this manner can fail to be a product of one's own perspective on things as that perspective was sacrificed to conform to accepted standards. The believer is then in the position of someone who is not moved by reasons but forge beliefs that manage to conform to them. Those beliefs could be said to have earned their acceptability at the cost of becoming less owned. Of course, beliefs acquired in this way cannot entirely bypass one's scrutiny. They are, like the cases of moral action Williams had in mind, only insufficiently first-personal. As such, it is often not straightforward to recognize them: insufficiently first-personal beliefs are acquired by believing the right thing and not what one is persuaded to believe. A measure of one's capacity to scrutinize the quality of a candidate belief is inadequately deferred to one's capacity to conform to what is prescribed; such beliefs are designed to avoid the risk to fail to conform to the endorsed epistemic (or doxastic) standards. In that sense, this is a case where a measure of one's authority and responsibility over one's beliefs is renounced. The danger of acquiring beliefs that are not first-personal enough is the danger of not seeing the world through one's own eyes but appealing instead to (one's understanding of) some external authority to determine what to believe. Neglecting transparent, first-personal access to beliefs and their acquisition can amount to disowning one's own worldview.³

When I comply to existing epistemic norms in order to acquire beliefs, I could end up with beliefs that fail to be transparent. Clearly, failures of transparency of this sort are different from those where (some of) my beliefs are accessible to me only by a third-personal route. Beliefs I acquire while complying to epistemic norms are still avowed by me while they fail to be sufficiently transparent. Here, we can attempt to describe what is going on by saying that the virtues I make use of fail to be fully owned by me. We can certainly imagine a scenario akin to CMI, call it CMI-V:

² The issue can echo some of the debates on epistemological externalism: an epistemically virtuous person does not need to know that her beliefs are, for example, justified. Maybe she shouldn't pay too much attention to how justified her beliefs are. It is enough to acquire justified beliefs.

³ Analogously, a worldview can be excessively owned, so to speak, and fail to be third-personal enough. See Bensusan & Brea 2006.

(CMI-V) I transparently examine the world and that fail to lead me to the belief that p while my accepted standards of epistemic virtue lead me to believe that p.

Epistemic virtues (and perhaps all kinds of epistemic norms) can impose beliefs on me that bypass my transparent perspective on how things are. When this happens, my scrutiny, failing to be sufficiently first-personal, does no more than endorse the verdict sanctioned by the (accepted) epistemic values: I have no transparently acquired view of the matter. A more controversial possibility is whether something analogous to CME could occur:

(CME-V) I transparently examine the world and that leads me to the belief that not-p while my accepted standards of epistemic virtue lead me to believe that p.

It is indeed doubtful whether one could ever entertain such state. The two above scenarios, nonetheless, could be useful to clarify my point concerning epistemic virtues. One holds beliefs that are insufficiently first-personal if one believes what follows from accepted standards of epistemic virtue in a manner that is rather closer to that of the continent than to what would rather describe as a virtuous person. An ethically continent person is someone who acts according to values or standards of virtue without being moved by them—she merely acknowledges the virtues and endeavor to comply. We can think of an epistemically continent person as someone who believes what is appropriate according to standards of epistemic virtues while failing to conclude anything (in the CMI-V case) or dismissing whatever is concluded (in the CME-V case) in a transparent investigation. The continent person holds beliefs that she fails to fully scrutinize in order to make them sufficiently hers—whatever the epistemic virtue of those beliefs, that virtue is not a sufficiently first-personal reason for her to hold the belief. Holding beliefs in this insufficiently first-personal manner could impair one's capacity to have a genuine perspective on things through a transparent investigation of the world around.

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