

October 13, 2016, 24.501: Bar-On on Neo-Expressivism

Avowals

1. Avowals are (to a first approximation) non-observational mental self-ascriptions of current (occurrent?) mental states:
 - a. 'I have a headache'.
 - b. 'My feet are sore'.
 - c. 'I'm tired'.
 - d. 'I believe that there are an odd number of stars'.
 - e. 'I am frightened of that dog'.
 - f. 'I want an ice cream cone with sprinkles and ... and ...'.
2. Avowals can be made aloud or silently.
 - a. Question: Are there both occurrent and standing avowals, as there are occurrent and standing desires? Do I dispositionally avow that I am frightened of mice? Or are all avowals occurrent?

Self-Knowledge

3. Avowals are epistemically interesting.

[A]vowals appear to be [...] 'groundless': they are seemingly made on no epistemic basis, and it would normally be considered out of place to ask of a person issuing an avowal for reasons or justification. Yet avowals enjoy a *special security*: except under special circumstances, avowals are not subject to correction and are taken at face value. Whereas it seems that other pronouncements are only as secure as their epistemic basis, avowals appear remarkably secure *even though* they are apparently made on *no* epistemic basis [Bar-On 2012, p. 164].

4. Are avowals *absolutely* secure?
 - a. Wright thinks that *phenomenal* avowals are absolutely secure, and that *attitudinal* avowals are not:

[Phenomenal avowals] are *strongly authoritative*. If somebody understands such a claim, and is disposed 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 [Wright 1998, p. 14] [...]

- b. That cannot be quite right. Consider: 'I am frightened by that dagger', as said MacBeth.
 - i. Maybe 'narrow' phenomenal avowals?

- c. Bar-On gives the example of someone in a dentist's chair falsely avowing a toothache, without any tooth pain, in anticipation of some future tooth pain.
5. One alleged explanation the interesting epistemic aspects of avowals is Cartesian.

According to it, the explanation of the special marks of avowals is that 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. If we assume our hero to be perceptually competent, and appropriately attentive, his claims about the patterns of shape and colour within will exhibit analogues of the marks of phenomenal avowals [...] In brief, this—Cartesian—response to the problem of avowals has it that the truth-values of such utterances are non-inferentially known to the utterer via her immediate awareness of events and states in a special theatre, the theatre of her consciousness, of which others can have at best only indirect inferential knowledge [Wright 1998, p. 22-23]

- 6. Both Wright and Bar-On seem to think that Cartesianism works *only if* avowals are absolutely secure.
- 7. Allegation: Fallibility plus Cartesianism makes four false predictions: that avowals are not groundless, that avowals can be in error through misascription, that avowals are alienable, that avowals are transferable. Perhaps it also predicts that avowals
- 8. Why do fallibility and Cartesianism predict that avowals are groundless?
 - a. Roughly, because we want some reason to think that we are in the good case.
- 9. Perception is not (always) groundless
 - a. There is a tree before me. — How can you tell? Why do you think that? — It seems that there is a tree before me.
- 10. But avowals seem like they are:
 - a. It seems that there is a tree before me. — How can you tell?# Why do you think that?# It seems that it seems that there is a tree before me.
- 11. *Question:* Are avowals (always) groundless? Are they so in a special way that calls out for explanation?
- 12. Why do fallibility and Cartesianism predict that avowals can be in error through misascription? Because I mistake the mental state on the Cartesian theatre.
 - a. A judgment is immune to error through misidentification when, if the statement is defeated, none of the grounds for holding it are still grounds for holding its existential generalization.

- b. A judgment is immune to error through misascription when, if the statement is defeated, none of the grounds for the ascription are still grounds for holding an existential ascription.
13. *Question*: Are avowals (always) immune to identity through misascription? Are they so in a way that calls out for explanation?
- a. I'm angry. No, I'm tired.
 - b. I'm frustrated. No, I'm hungry.
 - c. I'm hungry. Wait, no I'm not.
14. What is alienability?

[Avowals are,] in a certain sense, *inalienable*. There is no such thing as showing oneself chronically unreliable in relation to the distinctive subject-matter of attitudinal avowals. I may have such poor colour vision that you rightly come to distrust my testimony on matters of colour. I may, unwittingly, have a very bad memory, and, learning of this, you may rightly come to a state of wholesale suspicion about my testimony on matters of personal recall. But no corresponding wholesale suspicion concerning my attitudinal [or phenomenal] avowals is possible [Wright 1998, p. 17-18].

15. Does fallibility plus Cartesianism predict alienability?
- a. Not obviously.
16. Is it coherent to imagine someone who is 'chronically unreliable' about what they believe and desire? About whether they are dizzy? About whether they feel ill?
17. What is transferability? Two kinds, epistemic and semantic.

One very important realization to that end is that nothing short of full-blown Cartesianism can explain the asymmetries in *anything like the same way*—there can be no scaled down observational model of self-knowledge which preserves the advantages of the Cartesian account while avoiding its unaffordable costs. The problem is that the kind of authority I have over the avowable aspects of my mental life is not transferable to others: there is no contingency—or, none of which we have any remotely satisfactory concept—whose suspension would put other people in a position to avow away on my behalf, as it were. [Wright 1998, p. 25]

In particular, I do not think that we have any satisfactory concept of what it would be to be in touch with others' mental states *telepathically* [Wright 1998, fn #11].

18. Does Cartesianism plus fallibility predict transferability?

(Simple) Avowal Cognitivism

19. The meanings of avowals are not special; they are very much like the meanings of ascriptions of masses and shapes.
- a. When I sincerely avow, 'My feet are sore,' I express my belief that my feet are sore.

20. What I mean when I avow, 'My feet are sore', is what you mean when you say 'Jack's feet are sore' (modulo modes of presentation).

Non-Cartesian Forms of Avowal Cognitivism

21. Interpretation and alienability

22. Self-View of mental goings on and non-transferability

23. The Default View