

Bar-On, Dorit *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004) xiii + 449.

This book is about avowals, or a particular subset of what Ryle called “unstudied talk” about oneself, which employs (in Ryle’s words) “explicit interest phrases” like “I want...”, “I hope...”, “I intend...”, “I dislike...”, “I am depressed”, “I wonder”, “I guess”, and “I feel hungry”.¹ One striking feature of avowals, noted by Ryle, is that they seem to enjoy a special kind of security from epistemic assessment or criticism. “How do you know?” or “I think you must be mistaken” or “You have been careless in your observations” do not make sense as rejoinders to avowals. And yet they are plausible rejoinders to their “semantic cousins”: e.g., non-avowal ascriptions such as “She is in pain” (said by you about me) or “JT is in pain” (said by either of us about me) or “I am in pain” said by me on the basis of observing my frowning face in the mirror or on the basis of observing myself limp, or (perhaps) even “I was in pain” said by me about a moment in the past. What protects the avowal from epistemic assessment or criticism? Here’s Ryle’s answer:

*If the avowal [“I feel depressed”] is to do its job, it must be said in a depressed tone of voice; it must be blurted out to a sympathizer, not reported to an investigator. Avowing “I feel depressed” is doing one of the things, namely one of the conversational things, that depression is the mood to do. It is not a piece of scientific premises-finding, but a piece of conversational moping. That is why, if we are suspicious, we do not ask, “Fact or fiction?” or “True or false?”, “Reliable or unreliable?” but “Sincere or shammed?”. The conversational avowal of moods requires not acumen, but openness. It comes from the heart, not from the head. It is not discovery, but voluntary non-concealment.*²

And later, noting that while people can be reticent or hypocritical, Ryle urges that nonetheless reticence and hypocrisy are learned behaviours.

*In a certain natural sense of ‘natural’ the natural thing to do is to speak one’s mind, and the sophisticated thing to do is to refrain from doing this, or even to pretend to do this, when one is not really doing so.*³

Dorit Bar-On’s thought-provoking book - though it does not include these passages from Ryle - develops the idea (inherited from Wittgenstein) that in avowing, we speak our minds.

....avowing “I am hoping it doesn’t rain” is like saying or thinking “It doesn’t rain” hopefully. On the present proposal, the point of

¹ *The Concept of Mind*, (Penguin Books, London, 2000), 175.

² *Ibid.*, 99

³ *Ibid.*, 172

avowing an intentional state is not to provide a descriptive report of it, but rather to share it, or air it, or give it voice, or just to 'vent' it. (220)

However,

[u]nlike the person who grunts, or smiles, [the avower] is *speaking* her mind - that is, she is using articulate verbal means to express her state of mind. (262)

It is because avowers use articulate verbal means to express their states of mind that Bar-On thinks her "neo-expressivist" treatment of avowals will also accommodate - besides "epistemic asymmetry" - the "semantic continuity" that allows avowals to share the truth-conditions and participate in logical inferences with other (e.g., first and third-personal) non-avowed ascriptions that identify an individual and attribute to her a mental condition. Bar-On develops her neo-expressivist account in order to explain avowals' immunity from various kinds of errors, as well as their presumptive truth. Her account goes beyond a "simple" expressivism which assimilates avowals to natural expressions. Bar-On's neo-expressivism holds that

avowals are similar to natural expressions in terms of the acts that avowing subjects perform; but their products are different. Avowals as products have semantic structure. Of the product of an act of avowing (i.e., a self-ascription of a present mental state) we can say that it expresses [in the semantic sense] the proposition or thought that the subject is in a certain state. For the avowal-as-product is a conventional representation of that thought. And a component of it - viz., the mental term - conventionally represents the relevant mental state. Not so in the case of natural expressions. (255)

The accommodation of "epistemic security" together with the preservation of "semantic continuity" are the main desiderata of the account, but the author also hopes to show that avowals' special security is fully consistent with a robustly realist view about the nature of mental states and with the idea that the avower has privileged and genuine knowledge about the states she avows. (It is this combination of views that I find most puzzling, as I shall explain at the end.)

Ryle considers the phenomenon of avowals or "unstudied talk" as part of the wider topic of self-knowledge. (He argues that the self-ascriber and other-ascriber are in a similar position when it comes to knowing or finding out about the former's moods, inclinations, and frames of mind.) But insofar as Bar-On is interested in the topic of self-knowledge, it is restricted here to her account of the special security of avowals. Although she admits that authorship or "construction", endorsement,

commitment, and the like, can play a role in the larger topic of self-knowledge, she maintains that these features cannot help us to understand the epistemic protection (nor presumably the “aptness” for knowledge) enjoyed by avowals (phenomenal as well as intentional) - a security that does not protect the avowals against charges of error *tout court* - but only of a specific kind of epistemic error.

Bar-On takes her nemesis to be the same as that of Wittgenstein (and Ryle): the Cartesian “inner theatre” model of mental states that would diagnose the special security of avowals as a form of inner perception. In one of the best discussions I have read of (one aspect of) Wittgenstein’s polemic against the possibility of a private sensation language, Bar-On sets the stage for a different, not only non-Cartesian, but *non-epistemic* account avowals’ special security.

There are two kinds of security that Bar-On alleges for avowals. One who avows is protected from criticism for failing to identify the referent of “I” because, (to use Wittgenstein’s expression) the possibility of error has not been provided for.⁴

But, according to Bar-On, one is also protected from criticism (in the case of genuine avowals) for having mistaken the kind of attitude one avows (desire, need, want, hope, etc.) as well as the intentional object or content of the avowal (when there is one - say, that it is a meal that I desire, say, rather than a walk in the country). One is protected from epistemic criticism when one avows not only for failure to refer but also for failure to identify the attitude, the intentional object, or the propositional content (“intentional content”), because one’s act of avowing does not purport to be the discovery or the homing in **of** something which requires any epistemic effort on the part of the avower.

Bar-On is quite explicit that the kinds of epistemic security that attend avowals do not protect it against all kinds of error. On her account a person can make mistakes (“expressive mistakes”) both about the kind of state she is in and also about its intentional content. But this won’t be because 1) the world has let her down (i.e., she is not subject to “brute error”) or because 2) some recognitional or identificatory capacity is deficient. No epistemic method has failed her; or, as she sometimes puts it, a self-ascription does not rest, epistemically, on a “judgment of appearances” regarding the bearer of the self-ascribed state, the presence of character of the state, or its intentional content.

It might be useful to consider an example. “I”-ascriptions that are immune to error through misidentification such as “I see a Schipperke”

⁴ Wittgenstein said “No error is possible because the move which we might be inclined to think of as an error, a ‘bad move’, is no move of the game at all.”... “It is impossible that in making the statement ‘I have toothache’ I should have mistaken another person for myself, as it is to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me.” *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York, Harper & Row, 1958), 67.

(made in the normal way) may be corrected on the grounds that I have mistaken a Spitz for a Schipperke. But they are protected from my having misidentified the subject. It makes no sense to say "Someone sees a Schipperke, but is it I?" Nonetheless, even as I am protected from recognitional or identificatory errors because no recognitional or identificatory capacity comes into play (in the case of avowals), I still succeed in saying something *about* myself; in particular, in ascribing a property or state to myself - argues Bar-On - I can be said to tell or to know that it is I who is in the state or who exemplifies the property. It is the absence of a recognitional judgment that "someone is me" that makes certain "I"-ascriptions immune to error through misidentification. Similarly, the absence of recognitional judgment makes certain "I"-ascriptions immune to error through mis-ascriptions. I can succeed in ascribing a state or property to myself and when I do I can be said to tell or to know that I am in that state or exemplifying that property. I may be wrong: my avowals can be subject to *expressive errors*. I can, for instance, avow being bored when I am not. But with expressive failures, I express a product (a semantically articulate representation that conventionally signifies that I am bored) which is inappropriate, or false, of the present condition to which I (attempt to) give vent. Bar-On denies that it makes sense for me to ask (in cases of avowals) "I'm feeling something about my present circumstances, but is it boredom?" or "I'm feeling bored but is it upon reflection of my present circumstances or is it about something else?"

Speaking My Mind is impressive in its range, the detail of its argument, the clarity of writing, and especially in its cogent overviews of various related topics, including discussions and criticism of Anscombe, Shoemaker and Evans on the reference of "I"; externalism about content; and "transparency-to-the-world", and "no achievement" views of self-knowledge. Bar-On's development of expressivism - used to support the epistemic security of avowals as well as their presumption of truth - includes criticism of "simple" expressivist views that fail to accommodate semantic continuity; a rational reconstruction of how non-contentful natural expressions form a continuum with expressions whose products are semantically articulate; as well as a careful attempt to distance her fully cognitive (though non-epistemic) account from the traditional non-cognitivism that accompanies ethical expressivism. In the penultimate chapter, Bar-On defends her neo-expressivist account as one that will allow avowals to issue in genuine self-knowledge and in the final chapter she flirts with, but seems to me ultimately to offer reasons for rejecting, the idea that her account is consistent with functionalism or type-identity theories; indeed, her expressivist treatment presents these views with rather important challenges. And, because I shall end on a critical note, it is worth emphasizing here just how valuable this book should be for those working on self-knowledge (especially as the topic is situated within the contemporary philosophical literature), as well as for those interested in expressivism in its various domains.

One persistent qualm I had in reading the book was with Bar-On's description of her work as the development of an "account" of avowals (one that fares better than others for various reasons, e.g., as it applies to both phenomenal as well as intentional avowals). This way of putting it makes it seem as if avowals form a recognizable kind, which is independent of the description of their epistemic security she offers. They do not. Utterances of the form "I [*mental verb*] *P*" count as avowals only on certain occasions of the utterance and these occasions are not specified independently of the description and explanation Bar-On develops of the ways in which they are immune to error. For instance, if we can imagine an occasion in which it makes sense for me to say that I feel something, but wonder if what I feel is boredom, such a case turns out to be a (perfectly admissible) act of self-interpretation - though perhaps protected by some kind of immunity, not the kind that attends avowals, and thus not an avowal. So Bar-On's "account" of avowals, like an expensive bracelet, comes with its own safety-clasp: the view itself helps to fix the shape of the philosophical concept of avowal and thus is immune from criticism that it fails to explain various features of avowals, since features it cannot explain turn out not to fall within the extension of the concept. I thus think it is more appropriate to see the project as one that helps define the philosophical concept of "avowal", which we can then assess on those merits Bar-On claims for it.

But this brings me to a more serious issue: the merits Bar-On claims for her treatment of avowals. It is not only important for her argument that her account of avowals' security includes all avowals - intentional as well as phenomenal - but Bar-On also insists that her account be consistent with a "full blooded realism" about mental states and with the possibility that avowals represent privileged self-knowledge.

In order to see the difficulty with these aims, consider what we are to say about the utterance "I understand". If this utterance is an avowal, then what is it the avower can be credited with knowledge *about* when she says she understands? That she understands? But surely that depends on what she is claiming to understand. Often, whether someone understands something (say, the meaning of a word) is a matter of what she goes on to do with it (viz., in certain circumstances, whether or not she uses the word correctly). In saying she understands, then, is she making a conjecture about what she will go on to do? If so, then this is not something she can avow. For no one can know the future: any number of things might prevent her from using the word correctly.

Bar-On recognizes a related difficulty for self-ascriptions such as "I am seeing a tree" which (on one understanding) is not an avowable state (e.g., on that understanding in which the truth of the claim depends on there being a real tree as opposed to one's merely having the impression of seeing one). But there are non-avowable uses of *all* intentional mental predicates: there are certain understandings of "understands", "intends", "hopes", "wishes", "believes", "wants", and so forth, in which what

counts as satisfying these predicates is, in the appropriate circumstances, something about which the subject's pronouncements are not authoritative, since it is something about which she can merely conjecture (such as what she will go on, given the appropriate circumstances, to do). (There is arguably a parallel story to be told about "phenomenal states" but I will not pursue this here.)

These facts - made familiar by Wittgenstein - indicate a problem for a certain construal of what is required of a "robust realism" for mental states. When it comes to understanding our practice of ascribing mental predicates, the Cartesian's favoured epistemic route via introspection is not the only path to encounter obstacles. Bar-On may be commended (following Wittgenstein and Ryle) for drawing our attention away from the picture in which the self-ascriber is thought to be taking a considered look inside her head and reporting on what she sees (on one understanding of what that might mean) and toward a picture in which she is rather expressing herself instead (whether by "natural behaviour" or by producing a semantically articulate, conventional representation). But if we say that in avowing, she is expressing her (antecedently existing) "state of mind", we are left with the same predicament that confronts the Cartesian. What state is this? The state of understanding? The expressivist picture is no better than the "inner theatre" model if both construe all uses of "I understand" (*qua* product) as the attribution of a kind of mental state or property. It is this construal that makes a mystery out of one important (if not paramount) use of the expression "understands": a use in which the condition that counts for the truth of that ascription (or for accepting it, justifying it, explaining what one means by it, etc.) is what the self-ascriber goes on to do - sometimes long after she says she understands. Again, that this future condition will obtain is *not* something she is in a position to avow.

But what are we to make, then, of the immunity from error of the use of the expression "I understand" - when it is a genuine avowal (thus protected from epistemic criticism) and *not* used as a conjecture about subsequent events? And how is this to be reconciled with its use when it is subsequent events that are decisive? This is the problem that exercised Wittgenstein from the early 1930s.

One of the chief difficulties we have with the notion of a general idea or with understanding a word is that we want it to be something present at some definite time, say, when the word is understood, and the idea we have is supposed to have consequences and to act as time goes on.⁵

Avowals' immunity from epistemic error is a mystery not just on the "reportive", "descriptive", or "epistemic basis"-view of our relation to our own minds. It is a mystery on any view that construes (say) understanding

⁵ *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932-1935*, Alice Ambrose, ed. (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, 1982), 85.

(on one important use of “understanding” - say, understanding a word) as something “static, a disposition in the mind...”, or “as if the use of a word is like pulling a thread from a bobbin: it is all there and needs only to be unwound.”⁶ But this seems perilously close to the “robustly realist” view that Bar-On seems to want her account of avowals to accommodate.

In the final chapter Bar-On touches on these problems in the context of considering some of the ontological ramifications of the view. Here, she (reluctantly) comes close to accepting that her neo-expressivism is incompatible with a functionalist/materialist account of the nature of mental states. “[T]he special status of avowals and first-person privilege [developed in the book] are ... not apt to be visible from the materialist point of view” (426). She tentatively suggests that we may avoid some of these problems if we consider mental predicates to name conditions of subjects (rather than states within them).

What we take the subject to express...are conditions the subjects are in, not states that are in the subjects. It is these conditions that are perceived [sic] by the seasoned users of mental terms in the learning situation. And it is these conditions to which their use of the relevant terms is keyed. The ordinary concept of a mental state, then, we might say, is the concept of a subject’s condition that is expressible in various characteristic ways, rather than the concept of a state inside the subject that has such-and-such typical (causes and) effects, or the concept of a brute disposition to display certain kinds of behaviour. (424)

But I do not see how this helps, since her “robust realism” seems to commit her to something like functionalism nonetheless. In defending neo-expressivism against the charge of “behaviourist irrationalism” she attempts to maintain the logical independence of the state expressed and the behaviour expressive of it. But she does not address the nature of the relation between the state expressed and subsequent (what she would agree to be non-expressive) behaviour. It seems her realism commits her to the view that, in using the predicate “understands”, we (or the subject) attribute(s) to the subject the state or condition of understanding of which her subsequent behaviour is a causal, contingent manifestation. If so, we again confront the difficulty that on those many uses (say) of “understands” in which what counts for truth is subsequent behaviour, the subject’s pronouncements do not enjoy distinctive security and cannot be considered to represent self-knowledge.

There is no space to pursue the point, but here is an idea. Wittgenstein’s investigation of avowals such as “I understand” or “Now I can go on” is the study of a phenomenon that helps give rise to the idea - mistaken, in his view - that understanding is a “bobbin”-like state whose intrinsic nature is to be discovered: something static, a disposition in the mind, whose thread (i.e., its propositional content and all its applications) is all there

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83

and only needs to be unwound. (Changing “state within a person” to “a condition of the person” does not seem to change the problem deeply-rooted in this picture.) People who announce that they understand do *not* have *a priori* knowledge about what they will go on to do, though they are protected from epistemic criticism when they express their feelings or emotions (as they are when they describe their mental imagery).⁷ The lack of puzzlement (understood in one way), a feeling of relief, a mental image - perhaps of a picture, a map or a formula - are all genuine contenders for the description “mental states” (as opposed to ersatz “bobbin states”). They are also, importantly, the considerations one might point to in order to justify or explain some uses of “understands”.⁸ But this is not so for a large number of cases. And, for this large number of cases, it seems (to me) to make little difference whether *if* there is this kind of mental “accompaniment”, it is expressed with spontaneity or puzzled over with interpretive motives: for the occurrence of impressions or images such as these cannot be what we agree to (in these large number of cases) when we agree with someone that she understands. On certain uses of “...understands” (e.g., the meaning of a word) if there are occurrences such as these they are better described as symptoms of understanding. On these uses of “...understands” it is simply a mistake to think that what is said is made true by the existence of a mental state.⁹

If this is on the right track, then perhaps it points to a reason why some have wished to make a distinction between expressing a state of mind and making a self-or other-ascription. When I explain the use of a word to someone who has not heard it before and she says “I understand”, perhaps she is precisely *not* to be construed as using “understands” in the same way as (as semantically continuous with) what I do when, after testing her, I say that she understands. (Which is why we might say, with Ryle, that here she is speaking sincerely or truthfully, but demur from describing her as speaking the truth.) The “criteria” we are using, as Wittgenstein says, may be in this case completely different - though, on

⁷ Whether it so much as makes sense to describe this as representing *knowledge* is a moot point which I will not take up here.

⁸ When I ask my students during lectures if they understand, and I expect them either to nod or shake their heads, I may be asking if they are feeling puzzled (have the impression of puzzlement), in which case they are protected from criticism about whether they understand in this sense.

⁹ When I give my students marks on the basis of their understanding, I am not concerned about how they feel; what counts as understanding in this sense is how they do in their exams (and the students’ avowals are not authoritative as to whether they understand in this sense). The impression of clarity or lack of puzzlement (or, say, successfully explaining to others the gist of the lecture), however, might be taken as symptoms of understanding in the sense I am concerned about. There are also uses of “I understand” in which the utterance itself (and not the expressing or the reporting of some feeling or impression) is the only consideration that matters. On these occasions “I understand” works like “I promise” insofar as there is nothing *else* we can point to (except the utterance itself, as said on the particular occasion), that would give us a reason, justify, or explain our acceptance of it as legitimate or sincere (e.g., when a friend, in accepting your apology, says “I understand”). This kind of case really does seem to be one in which (as Crispin Wright says) avowals enter primitively into the language game.

good days, they coincide (the “condition” she avows is a symptom of, and possibly often accompanies, understanding in the sense I mean). Because if she is not conjecturing about what she will (in the right circumstances) go on to do, and she is, in avowing “I understand”, speaking from or expressing a genuine mental state or condition, then that is not the condition I speak of when I say she understands.

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