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Speaking My Mind. Expression and Self-Knowledge
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I am the world's leading expert on the current contents of my left pocket (a handkerchief, some change). I can also lay claim to being the world's leading expert on the contents of my mind – if I say that I think it is too warm in here, I can be assumed to be right about this. But the two cases are perhaps only superficially alike. No one else knows much about the current contents of my pockets, because no one else has checked my pockets. If someone else were to go through the steps needed to check my pockets, she would know as much as I do about their contents. The persons checking my pockets could find out that I had made a mistake – perhaps I had overlooked a subway ticket. The steps required for finding out such things are essentially the same as the steps I have to take (insert hand, empty pocket, check contents). This does not hold for the contents of my mind. My claim to know what I am thinking right now seems to be of a different kind, when compared with my knowledge of the contents of my pockets. My thoughts are mine, and I have a special relation to them. This relation seems to be special in many ways. Perhaps even the idea of being an *expert* on the contents of one's own mind is misguided; perhaps the analogy with ordinary experts is misleading – there seems to be nothing like getting better and better at judging something that is there for the experts to judge. Perhaps the whole idea of there being something *there* to be an expert about is wrong. When trying to come to grips with questions concerning the first person, we quickly get entangled in a whole bunch of tricky issues, issues that have occupied philosophers at least since Descartes. Descartes' particular views on what there is to know about the contents of my own mind, and how I could come to be so good at this, have to a great extent set the agenda for virtually all later discussions of the first person, even though there is a widespread agreement that Descartes got most things wrong.

Bar-On's new book on issues concerning the first person is a comprehensive, systematic and carefully argued treatment of virtually all the major current subjects in this area. The level of discussion is generally very high, and the book both demands and repays careful study. In view of the size of the book, and the complexities of the problems dealt with, even a pretty long review will only give a superficial taste of what is going on in the book. The book is not for the easily daunted or for the uninitiated. It will send most readers back to a decent library, in order to refresh or acquire knowledge of a great many ideas, concepts and thinkers. Descartes, Evans, Moran, Crispin Wright, Wittgenstein and Shoemaker are but a few (central) examples. They are all handled with fairness and argumentative skill. This book will be a natural starting-place for someone studying these issues. The book can also be used by advanced undergraduates.

The main task of the book is presented at p. 11: "My main task in this book is to provide an account assigned to avowals that respects both Semantic Continuity ... and Epistemic Asymmetry". Semantic Continuity means that there is some systematic connection between the uses of for instance "pain" in "I am in pain" and "He is in pain"; semantically, first-person avowals should be on a par with the usual employment of the terms. Epistemic Asymmetry is the "claim that there are genuine and important epistemic contrasts between avowals and their semantic cousins." (ibid.) Bar-On's strategy is as follows. First, there are a few natural observations we can make about our remarkable success in saying things about the contents of our own minds. We can normally be presumed to get things right when we say that we feel or think so and so. What accounts for this success? It seems that virtually every possible answer to this question has been tried at one time or another, from appeals to certain ultra-reliable epistemic faculties (as in Descartes), to saying that the appearance of extra reliability in reports about the first person just is an appearance; we are tricked by grammar into thinking that these utterances are reports about anything at all (Wittgenstein, on some readings). Bar-On strives to find a new take on these issues, taking *avowals*, the subject's own expressions of her point of view, having a normal form "I am in such and such

a mental state” as a point of departure. Bar-On formulates three questions that a satisfying treatment of the first person would have to sort out.

Short formulations of the questions are:

- i. Why are avowals so secure and rarely questioned?
- ii. What qualifies avowals as articles of knowledge at all, and why would such knowledge have a privileged status?
- iii. How can we have privileged non-evidential knowledge of our present states of mind?

In the first part, Bar-On presents and defends a set of desiderata that a theory of the first person’s avowals should meet (p.20, they reappear on p. 144). There are eight desiderata. In my somewhat shortened formulations, they are:

- D 1. We should explain the difference between avowals and ordinary epistemic assessments.
- D 2. We should explain avowals are so *secure*.
- D 3. This security appears to be non-negotiable, or “non-transferable”.
- D 4. The account should hold for both intentional and non-intentional avowals.
- D 5. Avowals should be handled as truth-assessable. Avowals are semantically continuous with other types of utterances featuring the same expressions.
- D 6. But avowals should not be made out as absolutely infallible or incorrigible.
- D 7. No appeals to a Cartesian dualist ontology.
- D 8. There should be room for the possibility that avowals represent privileged self-knowledge.

These desiderata have much to recommend them (and some are perhaps very obviously attractive), but meeting them all is a tall order. But is it impossible to fulfill all of the above desiderata? Most (all?) earlier theories of the first person have given up or violated one or other of the desiderata, but according to Bar-On, there is a way of meeting them all. In the process of showing this, the desiderata are motivated and explained further, and it is also argued that other theories about the first person fail precisely in violating the desiderata. Towards the end of the book, the author sets out to see how well the desiderata have been accommodated in the final theory.

The book is packed with arguments, most of which are quite persuasive, and it is also very carefully argued, perhaps to a fault. Sometimes the discussions get too long and a reader could lose track of where the discussion is heading. There is also some repetition, which makes the book unnecessarily long. The repetitions will no doubt be helpful to someone who is not set on reading the entire book, however, so they do fulfil a purpose.

The main thought in the book is that we speak our minds – when we avow that things are such and such with us, we *express* ourselves, we give voice to our inner workings. This is a kind of expressivism, somewhat inspired by Wittgenstein, but the author takes great care to avoid the usual difficulties with an expressivist view of avowals (mainly variations of the Geach-Frege point about assertions). Ordinary expressivism will not have Semantic Continuity for avowals, but Bar-On’s theory will, so the term *neo-expressivism* is no misnomer. I express myself by avowing that things are thus-and-so with me.

But what, more precisely, is it to express oneself in this sense? The discussion in chapter 7 characterizes several different senses of expressing oneself. To avow something is to give voice to how things are with one, to make oneself visible to others in a certain respect. Expressing oneself is making one’s self, one’s mind, visible to others. This is not the same as traditional behaviorism, however. Expressing oneself in some particular way is neither necessary nor sufficient for being in a certain intentional state, so the state cannot be identified with, or reduced to, the overt

expression of being in the state (p. 421). The notion of expressing at work here is something that is not readily captured by the ordinary understanding of materialism. It is also held that this conception of expression is a kind of commonsense theory (424). The things expressed are “conditions the subjects are in, not states that are in the subjects” (ibid.). Bar-On admits that this distinction between conditions-the-subject-is-in and states-that-are-in-the-subject is somewhat unexplained to date, but sketches a way in which it is consistent with a materialist ontology.

Some of these ideas may be a bit tentative and underdeveloped, but they do make good sense. They also seem to be quite close to McDowell’s views. McDowell also sees expressive behaviour as making the conditions of the subject perceivable by other (suitably equipped) people. McDowell also rejects the form of materialism that thinks of the mental as something that can be captured from a third-person point of view. There is also a kind of disjunctivism for self-knowledge (though not for perception). So there may be a great deal of overlap with McDowell’s position, and this should have gotten a more extended treatment.

Bar-On closes the book with the following words:

Speaking my mind is something I am in a unique position to do. Only I can express, or give voice to, my own present states of mind. And it is only states of my mind that I can express, or give voice to. Bodily conditions such as having high blood pressure, a raised arm, or a weak heart are not conditions one can speak from. I can speak my mind, but I cannot speak my body.

In the end, it is perhaps with this, rather than Cartesian incorrigibility, that our search for an epistemic mark of the mental should rest. (p. 428)

All this is fine, and not just a rhetorical flourish. No one else speaks my mind in the way I speak my mind. To this reader, there may still be a lingering sense of mystery when finishing the book, however. Why is it that I can express myself and no one else, why is it that I can express my mind but not my body – have all the remaining problems been handled? The expressivism developed here gives a direct response to some of the desiderata above, such as D2 and D3, since the connection between the thing expressed by an avowal and the person avowing is so tight, but at least to me, there is still something mysterious here. How can the relation be of such a tight kind?

To sum up, Bar-On’s book is a very well executed and argued book, which is a useful and important contribution to a difficult field.

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