

In defence of an argument for Evans's principle: a rejoinder to Vahid

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In (2004) I gave an argument for *Evans's principle*:

Whatever justifies me in believing that p also justifies me in believing that I believe that p .

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namely:

- (1) All circumstances that justify me in believing that *p* are circumstances that tend to make me believe that *p*.
- (2) All circumstances that tend to make me believe that *p* are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that *p*.
- (C) All circumstances that justify me in believing that *p* are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that *p*.

Hamid Vahid (2005) raises two objections against this argument. I show that the first is harmless and that the second is a non sequitur.

Vahid's first objection is that the argument proves too much. He observes that having derived (C), we may construct a different instance of the argument starting with the premise that

- (1') All circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that *p* are circumstances that tend to make me believe that I believe that *p*

and which concludes

- (C') All circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that *p* are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that I believe that *p*.

This result is not unwelcome. But by iterating this procedure to construct a valid sorites of any arbitrary length, then if my original argument is sound, it follows that

- (C'') All circumstances that justify me in believing that *p* are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that ... I believe that *p*.

Vahid thinks that (C'') is highly implausible, since there will be beliefs of arbitrarily many orders that are 'impossible to entertain' (2005: 340). He claims that (1') 'would be true for precisely the same reason that Williams offers in support of the first premiss of the original argument' (2005: 339). Whether this claim is true depends upon whether (1') refers to conscious occurrent beliefs. There is no disagreement over (1). Given that my apparent perceptions of rain are reliably connected with rain, they justify me in thinking that it is raining. They are also reliably connected with my belief that it is raining. This is the sense in which 'seeing is believing'. So (1) is plausible.

On my account, what justifies me in believing that I believe that it is raining is again just my apparent perceptions of rain; my apparent perceptions of rain tend to make me believe that it is raining, just as drinking brandy tends to make me go red in the face. So seeming to see rain provides me with inductive justification for thinking that I hold this belief,

just as drinking brandy provides me with inductive justification for thinking that I am red-faced.

However, these apparent perceptions of rain are not reliably connected with a *conscious* belief that it is raining. When I step outside into rain, I normally acquire the belief that it is raining, but without thinking the occurrent thought that I have this belief. This is the typical scenario for perceptual beliefs; in watching a sunset, I am normally unaware of a multitude of rapidly changing beliefs. What *is* true however is that my apparent perceptions of rain are reliably connected to my *disposition* to believe that I hold the belief that it is raining. In answering the question 'Is it raining?' with a sincere 'Yes', on the basis of seeming to see rain, I am committed to answering 'Yes' to the question 'Do you believe that it is raining?' and thereby committed to answering 'Yes' to the question 'Do you really think that you believe that?' and so on.

Read in this sense, (C'') is plausible. My apparent perceptions of rain may justify me in thinking that it is raining, but do not justify me in thinking that I hold occurrent conscious beliefs of arbitrarily many orders. But what they do justify is my disposition to form such beliefs under appropriate circumstances, such as being asked whether I believe that it is raining, being asked whether I believe that I believe that it is raining, and so on. So either the reasons that support my original argument fail to support (1') or (C'') is welcome.

Vahid's second objection is that (2) must be modified in a way that begs the question:

Let us focus only on the claim that my perceptions of rain justify me in believing that it is raining. This is a plausible claim in view of the fact that such circumstances (e.g. perceiving rain), being reliably connected to the corresponding beliefs, are justification-conferring. In (2), however, Williams is interested in circumstances that tend to induce beliefs in us *and these two sets of circumstances are not identical*. Quite often circumstances that dispose one to form a belief fail to be justification-conferring. However, since Williams's *reasoning proceeds in terms of justification-conferring circumstances* (which is what makes his claim that our perceptions of rain justify our belief that it is raining plausible), one has to rephrase (2) accordingly.

(2*) Justification-conferring circumstances that tend to make me believe that *p* are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that *p*. (2005: 340, my italics)¹

¹ My claim was not that my apparent perceptions of rain justify my belief that it is raining by being reliably connected to that *belief*, as suggested by this passage, but rather by being reliably connected to *rain* (2004: 350).

But now (2*) entails (C), rendering the argument question-begging.

This objection may be summarized: circumstances that justify me in believing that p are not identical to circumstances that tend to make me believe that p . But the argument proceeds in terms of circumstances that justify me in believing that p , so (2) must be modified to (2*).

But how is this conclusion supposed to follow? Of course, the converse of (1) is false. Not all circumstances that tend to make me believe that p are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that p . Coming in to land might tend to make me believe that the plane is about to crash without justifying my belief. But this does not mean that (2) must be modified to (2*). Since my argument is valid, (2) needs modification only if it is false, but (2) is plausible as it stands. Circumstances that *tend* to make me believe that p are circumstances that *ipso facto* count as inductive justification for thinking that I believe that p , whether or not I would be justified in believing that p . As a regular but nervous flyer, finding myself coming to land once again justifies me in believing that I have the belief that the plane will crash, despite the fact that my first-order belief is unjustified. Of course, I don't have to think, 'Whenever we come into land, I usually believe that the plane will crash. We are again coming into land, so I probably believe this again.' But this is beside the point, which is that the inductive justification is still available. Therefore Vahid has provided no reason to modify (2).²

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References

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