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## Moore's paradoxes, Evans's principle and self-knowledge

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I supply an argument for Evans's principle that whatever justifies me in believing that  $p$  also justifies me in believing that I believe that  $p$ . I show how this principle helps explain how I come to know my own beliefs in a way that normally makes me the best authority on them. Then I show how the principle helps to solve Moore's paradoxes.

### 1. Moore's paradoxes

Moore observed (1942: 543) that to assert, 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' would be 'absurd'. The paradox is that this absurdity persists despite the fact that what I say about myself might be true. Moore did not notice that it is no less absurd of me to silently *believe* such a possible truth. So a natural resolution is to explain the absurdity of the belief in a way that identifies a contradiction-like phenomenon but not with its content. The absurdity of Moorean assertion can then be explained in terms of the fact that such an assertor expresses an absurd belief (see Williams 1994: §6, 1996: §7 and 1998: §7).

Moore also observed (1944: 204) that to say, 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' would be likewise 'absurd'. Unlike his first example, that has the omissive form

$p$  & I don't believe that  $p$ ,

this has the commissive form,

$p$  & I believe that not- $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

This difference between the commission of a specific mistake in belief and the omission of specific true belief is inherited from that between atheists and agnostics.

### 2. Evans's principle

Gareth Evans observes that

If someone asks me 'Do you think there is going to be a third world war?' I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question 'Will there be a third world war?' ... We can encapsulate this procedure for answering questions about what one believes in the following simple rule: whenever you are in a position to assert that  $p$ , you are *ipso facto* in a position to assert 'I believe that  $p$ '. (1982: 225–26)

Assertions may be insincere, notably when they are lies. So Evans's observation is best put as the rule that whenever I am in a position to sincerely assert that  $p$  then I am in a position to sincerely assert that I believe that  $p$ . This yields the principle that

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

<sup>1</sup> Formalizing 'I went to the pictures last Tuesday but I don't believe that I did' as ' $p$  &  $\sim Bp$ ' turns 'I believe that he has gone out, but he has not' into ' $Bp$  &  $\sim p$ '. This commutes to ' $\sim p$  &  $Bp$ ', which may be represented as ' $p$  &  $B\sim p$ '.

Evans provides no reason for accepting this principle. But a simple argument for it is:

Circumstances that justify me in believing that *p* are circumstances that tend to make me believe that *p*.

Circumstances that tend to make it the case that I believe that *p* are circumstances in which I am justified in believing that I believe that *p*.

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Circumstances that justify me in believing that *p* are circumstances that justify me in believing that I believe that *p*.

The first premiss is plausible. For example, given that my apparent perceptions of rain are generally reliable, they justify me in thinking that it is raining. Such apparent perceptions of rain also tend to make me believe that it is raining. This is the sense in which ‘seeing is believing’. The second premiss is also plausible. For my apparent perceptions of rain are also reliably connected with my coming to believe that it is raining. So my apparent perceptions of rain justify both my belief that it is raining and my belief that I believe that it is raining in virtue of different sets of reliable connections.

This argument would hold for any form of justification. For example, if my seeming to remember that it rained yesterday justifies me in thinking that it indeed rained yesterday then that is because my apparent memories are generally reliable. The very same basis justifies me in thinking that I believe that it is raining because seeming to remember that it rained yesterday is reliably connected with my coming to believe that it rained yesterday.

The account also explains why I am normally the best authority on my own beliefs. Suppose that you and I are both standing at the window looking at the weather. In deciding whether I believe that it is raining I simply decide whether it is raining. I may justifiably decide this on the basis of my apparent perception of rain. But your apparent perception of rain will not justify you in thinking that *I* believe that it raining. Instead, you need to observe my verbal and non-verbal behaviour (as when I unfurl my umbrella or say ‘It’s raining’) and then make an inference to my belief that counts as the best explanation of my behaviour. Alternatively, you may observe me observing the rain and then infer by analogy that since you have come to believe that it is raining then so have I. In either case you are liable to mistakes in observation. In the first case you may mistake my tendency to play with my umbrella as a sign of interest in the weather or mishear my question ‘It’s raining?’ as an assertion of rain. In the second case you may mistake falling water from a hidden sprinkler for rain or mistake my daydreaming at the window for my observation of weather.

By contrast, I need only observe the weather. Nor do I need to make any inference at all. So you are liable to error in ways that I am not. Of course I may mistake falling water for rain. But in the second case that mistake would not undermine my justification for correctly ascribing to myself the belief that it is raining.

### 3. *Self-knowledge*

This account helps explain why whenever I come to know that  $p$  then I also tend to come to know that I believe that  $p$ . For an internalist, the normal case in which I come to know that it is raining by observing the weather through the window is a case in which I acquire the true belief that it is raining that is justified by my seeming to see rain. So I will tend to also acquire a justified true belief that I believe that it is raining and so will also tend to come to know that I believe that it is raining.

For an externalist, the normal case is that in which I acquire the true belief that it is raining such that had it not been raining then I would not have come to believe that it is raining. Since the genesis of my belief that it is raining is actually the same as that of my belief that I now hold that belief, namely my apparent perception of rain, it follows that had I not come to believe that it is raining then I would not have come to believe that I believe that it is raining. So again I will tend to come to know that I believe that it is raining. On causal variants, the normal case is that in which what makes it rain, namely the falling of water from clouds together with my reliable eyesight, is what tends to make me think that it is raining. So I will tend to acquire the true belief that I believe that it is raining, one that is again caused by the falling of water from clouds together with my reliable eyesight. So again I will tend to come to know that I believe that it is raining.

If I were incapable of acting on Evans's rule then I would be deeply irrational. For then I could never use a method immune to third person error. Nonetheless I may sometimes sensibly adopt your methods of justifiably ascribing beliefs to me. Suppose that you can tell from my boorish behaviour towards women that my sincere assertion, 'I don't think women are inferior' is false. After you say, 'But look at how you treat women!' I might start to observe my non-verbal behaviour and so discover my repressed belief. This discovery would represent a therapeutic insight into my lack of self-knowledge that should lead me to revise my beliefs for the better. Before the insight, I believed that women were inferior but did not believe that I held this belief. The most likely explanation of my self-blindness is that there was no justification for my prejudiced belief that women are inferior. For had it been available to me then that same justification would have been available to me for thinking that I hold the

belief that women are inferior. But now that I have recognized that I do hold that belief, I should look for justification for it. Finding none available, I should abandon my prejudice.

#### 4. *Solving Moore's paradoxes*

One highly plausible principle is that

Whatever justifies me in believing that ( $p \ \& \ q$ ) justifies me in believing that  $p$  and justifies me in believing that  $q$ .

Surely if my apparent perception of hot and humid weather justifies me in believing that it is hot and humid then that same apparent perception justifies me in believing that it is hot and also justifies me in believing that it is humid.

Now suppose that I believe that (it is raining but I don't believe that it is raining). Suppose too that I have justification for believing this. Then given the conjunctive principle above, I have justification for believing that it is raining. By Evans's principle, I enjoy the same justification for believing that I believe that it is raining. But by the conjunctive principle, I also enjoy precisely the same justification for believing that I *don't* believe that it is raining. This is logically impossible, because anything that justifies me in believing that something is the case renders me unjustified in believing that it is not the case and vice versa. Likewise from an externalist stance, any reliable method of acquiring the belief that  $p$  will be an unreliable method of acquiring the belief that *not-p* and vice versa. So to believe that I fail to believe the truth that it is raining is indeed irrational unless it leads me to revise my beliefs. The natural way to do so would be to give up my belief that I don't believe that it is raining.

To explain my absurdity in holding the commissive belief that (it is raining but I believe that it is not raining) we need the different principle that

Whatever justifies me in believing that  $p$  also justifies me in believing that I don't believe that *not-p*.

This new principle is independently plausible. Surely if my apparent perception of rain justifies me in thinking that it is raining, then it also justifies me in thinking that I don't hold the belief that it is not raining. Moreover it follows from Evans's principle, together with the assumption that I am minimally rational and reflective. If I am at all rational then I will recognize the fact that whatever justification I have for believing that  $p$  renders me unjustified in believing that *not-p*. By Evans's principle, whatever justification I have for believing that  $p$  is justification for taking myself to believe that  $p$ . But if I take myself to enjoy justification for holding the

belief that  $p$  and recognize that this justification renders me unjustified in believing that  $not-p$  then I should take myself as not believing that  $not-p$ .

Now suppose that I am justified in believing that (it is raining but I believe that it is not raining). Then given the conjunctive principle, I again have justification for believing that it is raining. By the new principle, this means that I enjoy the same justification for believing that I *don't* believe that it is not raining. But by the conjunctive principle, I also enjoy precisely the same justification for believing that I *do* believe that it is not raining. This is logically impossible, as we saw above. To believe that I mistakenly believe that it is not raining is indeed irrational unless it leads me to revise my beliefs. The natural way to do so this time is to give up my belief that it is not raining.<sup>2</sup>

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