EXTERNALISM AND FIRST-PERSON AUTHORITY

ABSTRACT. Externalism in the philosophy of mind is threatened by the view that subjects are authoritative with regard to the contents of their own intentional states. If externalism is to be reconciled with first-person authority, two issues need to be addressed: (a) how the non-evidence-based character of knowledge of one’s own intentional states is compatible with ignorance of the empirical factors that individuate the contents of those states, and (b) how, given externalism, the non-evidence-based character of such knowledge could place its subject in an authoritative position. This paper endorses a standard strategy for dealing with (a). The bulk of the paper is devoted to (b). The aim is to develop an account of first-person authority for a certain class of intentional states that is capable of explaining (1) why knowledge of one’s own intentional states is peculiarly authoritative, and (2) why such authority is compatible with externalism.

Externalism – the view that the intentional mental states of persons are individuation-dependent on objects and/or phenomena external to their bodies – is becoming increasingly popular in the philosophy of mind. Proponents and critics of the position are also becoming increasingly aware of the threat that first-person authority poses to it. In general, persons are presumed to be authoritative with respect to the natures and contents of at least some of their own intentional states. Such authority is almost universally thought to consist at least in part in the direct accessibility to subjects of their own states, in the sense that knowledge of those states is typically not based on evidence. This makes for an asymmetry between first and third-person knowledge of intentional states, since the latter is typically based on evidence. The asymmetry gives rise to at least two problems.

The first has specifically to do with externalism. If, as that position requires, the contents of intentional states are individuation-dependent on factors beyond persons’ bodies, then the question arises whether knowledge of one’s own intentional states requires access to those factors. If so, such knowledge would need to be based on empirical evidence. But first-person authority evidently rules this out.

The second does not have specifically to do with externalism but must be made intelligible in the light of it. It is that beliefs that are not based on evidence are not generally thought to be more reliable than ones that are. However, first-person authority seems toground a person’s authority precisely in the fact that it is not based on evidence.

These two problems are not often tackled at the same time by externalists in recent philosophical literature. Tyler Burge, for instance, has largely concerned himself with the first problem, whereas Donald Davidson has more centrally concerned himself with the second. However, both must be dealt with effectively if externalism is to be reconciled with first-person authority: the first, in order to reconcile the relational individuation of intentional states with the fact that one's knowledge of one's own states is not, and need not be, based on empirical evidence; and the second, in order to reconcile that fact with the fact that one's knowledge of one's own intentional states is indeed authoritative.

Why does it seem particularly difficult for an externalist to explain why first-person knowledge is authoritative? If it were to turn out that one's knowledge of one's own intentional states was no more authoritative than one's non-evidence-based knowledge of certain empirical facts beyond one's body, say, knowledge that the table visually present is brown, then there would be no special problem for externalism to explain. For knowledge of this kind does not give a subject an epistemic advantage over others. The problem arises for externalism because the authority one is generally presumed to have with regard to one's own intentional states is thought to be peculiar. What makes it so is that one's right to it is independent of knowledge of the empirical conditions that individuate intentional content. This conflicts with the intuition, which externalism apparently fosters, that others who have access to such conditions are equally, and perhaps better, placed to know the contents of a subject's intentional states than the subject. That subjects should actually be better placed than others to know what the contents of their own intentional states are in the absence of knowledge of those conditions seems inexplicable by externalists. In short, what needs to be explained by externalists is why the peculiarly authoritative knowledge that one has of one's own intentional states is compatible with ignorance of the empirical factors that help serve to individuate the contents of those states. And to succeed in this, both of the above problems need to be addressed.

I propose to take these problems up in the order in which they have been presented. Since I am largely in agreement with what is now becoming a standard strategy for dealing with the first, however, the bulk of the paper will be spent on the second. My aim is to develop, in broad outline, an account of first-person authority for a certain class of intentional states, namely, ones that are consciously present and entertained at the same time as they are thought about, that is capable of explaining (1) why knowledge of one's own intentional states is peculiarly authoritative, and (2) why such authority is compatible with externalism. Although this is