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A Discussion About Self-Knowledge

Self knowledge and one's own thoughts have typically been thought of as having some sort of innate property. Both Rey and Carruthers are highly skeptical of this view and believe that there is interpretation on one's own part to determine one's own thoughts and feelings. However, the differences of their arguments are centered around what facilities and resources a person has at their disposal to interpret their own thoughts. While Carruthers believes we, as humans, have the bare minimum at our disposal, Rey proposes that a person has, "some privileged access to some mental propositional attitude states" (Rey 2011). Due to the agreement between these two about the interpretive nature used to obtain knowledge about our own thoughts, some there are some propositions which we will assume true for the sake of the argument. .

The idea that we can be more certain about our own thoughts than the thoughts of others appears to make some intuitive sense, and appears to be the status quo among philosophers (Carruthers 1 2011). The issue which both Carruthers and Rey agree upon is that this viewpoint appears flawed. There is data to suggest that people can and will confabulate about their thoughts (Carruthers 1 2011, Rey 2011). What has been proposed instead is that humans make the same assumptions about themselves and their thoughts much like they do when assessing the thoughts of others. This has been supported by various experiments in the field of cognitive science. These studies look at additutes which people have about certain topics, their feeling of responsibility for such attitudes and how they react to persuasion about these topics. As Carruthers states:

“Numerous psychological studies demonstrat[e] people's willingness to *confabulate* about their own current or very recent thoughts, attributing thoughts to themselves that we have every reason to believe they never entertained and making errors in self-attribution that directly parallel the errors we make in attributing thoughts to other people” (Carruthers 2011a: page 2)

There have been studies where people have been placed in situations where they must make a conclusion about their own thoughts given different contexts. The example used to defend this idea is a study involving asking participants for their viewpoint on a controversial topic. Each participant then had to write an opposing stance on the topic chosen. The conclusion of the study found that those who believed that they defended an opposing position willingly had diminished support for their original stance, compared to those who felt they were forced to support the opposition. This viewpoint about our ability to measure and make sense of our own thoughts, can be assumed the basis for the following discussion. What is up for debate is the idea that people do interpret their own thoughts and feelings in fundamentally different ways than when they interpret those of others. The difference of this interpretation is based upon the believed resources available to a person, not particularly the method.

One position about the theory of knowledge of thought is that humans have Interpretive Sensory-Access (ISA) when drawing their conclusions about their thoughts. Carruthers puts it best when he claims there is only one “mindreading facility.” This mindreading facility is a mental facility used when obtaining knowledge about thoughts, of both others and our own (Carruthers 2011a). The important part about this position is that the theory can make sense of and predict when there is a mistake made while accessing one’s own thoughts. The position may have a very strong evidential basis, however, if it is proven that “duel data,” that is data which is obtained from some “privileged access,” does exist then the theory will fall apart. Any opposing argument to the ISA theory simply has to prove that such “duel data” does exist.

A duel methodist would argue with the ISA theorist about what resources we have at our disposal when assessing our own thoughts. Rey introduces the idea of a TAGS model which states that a person uses a tagging system to organize their thoughts and feelings (Rey 2011). This seems to imply that the nature of this tagging system is inherent to humans. Additionally tagging implies that we use a different mental facility when interpreting our own thoughts. It is pointed out by Rey that if we did not have access to information others did not, there is insufficient data to explain the reliability that comes with much self-ascribing (Rey 2011). The important thing to note is that TAGS does not claim that ISA is completely incorrect; instead it argues that the ISA theory is incomplete and that people need tags to assess their thoughts. The TAGS model make a very strong intuitive argument, which can explain the cases of confabulation which lead to the ISA hypothesis. However if the duel methodist cannot adequately prove the existence of, or the need for dual data, then the TAGS model ceases to hold sway.

What many people believe is that there is some certainty present in the assessment of our own thoughts that is not present in the assessment of others. The ISA theory claims otherwise. ISA claims that people do not have a secondary inward facing facility, rather a singular outward facing facility that we direct inwards towards ourselves. It is important to point out that while the ISA theory claims there is only one facility, it does not mean this facility acts exactly the same when confronted with internal analysis compared to external analysis (Carruthers 2011b). This is due to the language and context aspect of the ISA theory. When a person is attempting to convey their ideas directly to other people they must do so through some sort of language, spoken or otherwise. When the receiver of a message encounters an ambiguity in the expression of the sender’s thoughts, either the facility itself or another process triggered by the facility, may initiate a second pass. The purpose of this is to obtain a more in depth analysis of the sender’s message. This process helps clarify the message to the receiver. When interpreting our own thoughts however, we seem to be mostly oblivious to the vagueness of our own inner dialog (Carruthers 2011a). This could be attributed to the fact that the structure of the interpretation process allows for short circuiting when dealing with ourselves as Carruthers states. Carruthers believes that our intuitions of our thoughts are derived from the following two inference rules:

- (1) One thinks that one is in some mental state M
- (2) One thinks that one is not in some mental state M

(Carruthers 2011a)

These two rules account for how we account for our self knowledge but not the origin. I propose a slightly different reason which could potentially explain an origin for such ascriptions. It is worth considering that how we use our inner dialogue could potentially answer the question as to how we obtain self-ascriptions.

It is plausible that our inner dialog is not structured in quite the same way as that of our outer dialog, making it hard for us to determine if ambiguity exists. Whenever we wish to express an idea or contemplate a question, it would seem unlikely and highly inefficient if we are structuring full and complete dialogue in our heads for each and every response we come up with. It seems more likely we deal with fragments of inner dialogue at a time rather than full complete thoughts. For an exaggerated example, consider if I asked the question, “what causes a ball to fall when it is dropped?” The simple answer many would respond with would be gravity (gravity as a concept, not “gravity” as a string of characters). This idea of gravity is probably sufficient for one to move on to their next thought. However, take into consideration what exactly gravity is, that is, take the concept of gravity and not the term “gravity.” Gravity is a force which attracts all matter to another, the magnitude of which being directly proportional to the mass of the object. The earth is large enough that it exerts enough gravitational force to pull the ball downward towards the earth. The concept gravity seems to be the fragmented version of this much more complicated concept involving physics, distances and mass. It seems possible that our inner dialogue uses this “fragmentation” as a shortcut and thus causes us to make mistakes in our interpretation of our own thoughts. Whether this actually occurs or not would require more study. The important part of this proposal is that this is a learned skill rather than an innate one. Regardless of whether fragmentation or Carruthers’ processing rules actually are the root of mistakes, fragmentation does have a possibility of explaining how we obtain our ascriptions. This origin of ascriptions is questioned by the TAGS model.

The TAGS model advocates for the existence or need of a tagging system which gives some sort of privileged access to our own thoughts. Rey introduces what he calls “meditative cases.” These cases are situations where people find themselves lacking the external stimuli Carruthers claims people use when they are interpreting their thoughts and feelings. Such meditative cases include when one is meditating or merely lying in bed before they fall asleep with their eyes closed thinking about their day. Rey uses these meditative cases to demonstrate how we have insufficient data for making an assessment of our thoughts. In meditative states, a person does not have all the outwardly facing sensations or stimuli such as behavior they might otherwise have when interpreting the thoughts of another person. Due to Carruthers’ claims that all a person has is outward facing phenomena, this must suggest that a person in a meditative state must be less certain about their own thoughts and feelings than they usually are about other people’s (Rey 2011). This of course does not make intuitive sense; one is lying in bed about to go to sleep when an image of Paris pops into their head, followed by a confrontation with a neighbor followed by some other disconnected thoughts. Rey believes these thoughts must come with some ascriptions associated with them or else it should be difficult to determine ascriptions of these topics because one has no outwardly facing data here. In fact, Carruthers’ ISA theory does not seem to answer where ascriptions originate to begin with. I however, believe the aforementioned fragmenting accounts for the origin of ascriptions. In this case, the mental images one may have of Paris could be a fragment of the beautiful scenery. This could in turn be associated to the sensations one remembers when they previously were enjoying themselves. This fragmenting proposal may appear similar to the tagging system proposed by

Rey however there is one major difference: fragmenting utilizes learned sensations whereas tags seem to be innate to a person.

It appears that tags are not something one is taught, nor is it something they learn. If tags are indeed something learned, then the argument of self knowledge revolves around whether we pattern-match or interpret the sensations which we experience. Rey believes we tag our sensations allowing us to be more accurate when addressing our own sensations. This, Rey proclaims, sometimes requires us to have “privileged access” into our mind (Rey 2011). As Rey puts it:

TAGS is simply a defense of the possibility of *some* privileged access to *some* propositional attitude states. (Rey 2011: page 1)

If tags are indeed something we learn, it does not follow that we need privileged access. I propose that even if we learn “tags,” we still are interpreting the sensations and thoughts we have. If we are learning to associate certain feelings and sensations with a tag, it feels incorrect that we remember the every single sensation we experience and pattern match when we feel the sensation again. It also seems absurd that every feeling is exactly the same everytime we experience it. When one’s dog dies and when one’s father dies are two different experiences yet both may cause some feeling of grief. It feels incorrect that the feeling of grief for both is the exact same experience. There must be some interpretation on our part based on outward facing sensations. The other issue with pattern matching is one must have experienced the sensation beforehand in order to learn and store the tag. It is doubtful that many people have experienced their father dying twice, so there must be some sort of interpretation of what we are feeling. It follows that we are trying our best to match the sensation we are currently feeling to previous experiences we had and imagining how we felt at the time. By having tags be something learned and not innate, it loses any authoritative privileged access it seems to need to support Rey’s theory. Hence, it follows that tags must be innate to oneself.

When a tag is affixed to the result of some mental process, it would seem absurd that we are consciously aware of this tag being affixed to our thoughts. So the question arises, where did this tagging system come from; was it a byproduct of language or was it perhaps something else? Since the stronger argument comes when we assume that tags are innate, I find that there is no explanation as to how we know we are using this tag system. It seems quite intuitive that there is something which makes us feel sure we know what we are thinking. Supporters of the TAGS model must prove one of two things to prove its legitimacy: that tags exist or that there is a need for them to exist. With no definite proof such a system does exist, TAGS has been cornered to prove that humans need a tagging system. While Rey may have a possible scenario which a tagging system may be needed in the case of meditative states, I believe that there is one issue with meditative states which may undermine the TAGS model.

While both sides focus on what we have at our disposal to interpret our thoughts, neither really address the entropy of our mind. Are our thoughts ordered or chaotic, represented as part of our inner dialogue based around language or instead based entirely on sensations? I propose we don't take much into the account of randomness. Rey mentions randomness briefly in the context of meditative states however I think that our thought processes are more random than we believe them to be. I believe there is

a constant “chatter” going on in our head. Our ability to pinpoint or follow certain chatter chains is what our thoughts are. When we sit down and listen to ourselves think, we are cutting out or simply ignoring the chatter our brain deems superfluous. When you are having a conversation with a friend about their plans for the weekend it’s doubtful you’re going to pay attention to the chatter informing you that their shirt is red or that it’s raining outside. We do see and acknowledge that their shirt is red or that it is in fact raining outside, as both events are in our field of sight meaning our brain still picks up on this data. Yet it would be most annoying if all you could think about was the fact the sky is blue everytime you walked outside. It seems reasonable that our brain filters all this information and we are processing and interpreting what holds our attention while ignoring the rest. I am inclined to believe that if the TAGS model is correct then we normally do ignore our internal tagging system and rarely use it, if at all. I also believe that tags do not require the higher authoritative privileged access which the TAGS model claims it needs. If we assume that the we tag our thoughts, yet do ignore them so often, I see no reason for people to have such a system, much less a reason as to why we would have developed this system in the first place. With that in mind, if we take into account that our brain is random, then the ISA theory holds more sway than the TAGS model.

References

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