

Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge

by Dorit Bar-On

Self-ascriptions of mental states, whether in speech or thought, seem to have a unique status. Suppose I make an utterance of the form “I have a terrible headache”. This is a self-ascription of a mental state. It is true or false, depending on whether I am indeed having a terrible headache or not, which is a contingent matter. However, when self-ascriptions like this are made from a first person perspective, they seem to have two quite special features. The first feature is that they are resistant to ordinary forms of epistemic evaluation: We do not expect, for instance, that someone making the above-mentioned utterance will be able to provide us with reasons in support of her claim. We normally do not challenge those self-ascriptions either. The second feature is that such self-ascriptions are normally assumed to be true. Let us call self-ascriptions of mental states made from a first person perspective ‘avowals.’ Dorit Bar-On’s main project in *Speaking my Mind* is precisely to account for these special features of avowals.

Bar-On distinguishes the issue of what makes avowals special (in the above sense) from the issue of whether avowals articulate self-knowledge and, if so, what the source of this knowledge is (pp. 11-12). For most of the book, Bar-On focuses on the first issue, and her aim seems to be to account for the special status of avowals without taking any definite stand on whether they articulate self-knowledge or not. Some readers may be puzzled by this strategy. For it may seem that this project gets the explanatory order of things wrong. Shouldn’t an account of the special status of avowals depend on an account of self-knowledge? Avowals, one might think, are (or express) beliefs that are especially justified. Find out what makes that kind of epistemic justification special, and you will have an explanation of the special status of avowals. This line of reasoning, Bar-On thinks, exhibits a prejudice. The prejudice, shared by ‘epistemic approaches’ to avowals, is that the special status of avowals must be due to some special basis on which they are epistemically grounded

or some epistemic method that has been used to produce them (pp. 18-19). We should not try to prejudge the question of whether this is true or not, Bar-On thinks, when we try to explain the special status of avowals.

Thus, what Bar-On seeks is an explanation of the special status of avowals that does not rely on our making those avowals on some special epistemic basis and it does not rely on our using some privileged method to issue them. At the same time, she wants an explanation that preserves the intuition that avowals are the sort of thing that can be true or false. This rules out 'grammatical' approaches, such as simple expressivism (pp. 228-240). According to simple expressivism, what makes an utterance of the form "I have a terrible headache" resistant to both correction and the challenge to produce reasons is that, basically, it expresses that headache the way a moan would and, therefore, it is not the kind of thing that can be epistemically evaluated. This sort of approach does not sit easily with the intuition that avowals have truth-conditions. So Bar-On's goal is to find an account of avowals that, unlike epistemic approaches, does not rely on avowals being made on an epistemically privileged basis but, unlike grammatical approaches, squares with the intuition that avowals have truth-conditions. The project is definitely as challenging as it is interesting.

The key to the problem is meant to be the notion of expression. Bar-On distinguishes (pp. 251-264) avowals as acts (the act of ascribing a mental state to oneself) from avowals as products (the utterance or thought whereby the mental state is ascribed to oneself). And she tries to distance herself from both epistemic and grammatical approaches by shifting emphasis from the act side to the product side of avowals and *vice versa*. As products, avowals have truth-conditions because, in a certain sense, they express propositions. They express propositions in that they are representations of them. (Thus, the sentence "I have a terrible headache" stands for a certain proposition in virtue of certain conventional linguistic rules.) As acts, they are not a matter of attending to reasons or evidence, neither do they amount to putting a certain epistemic method to work. Avowing a given mental state amounts

to intentionally 'speaking from' it or, as it were, 'venting' it. In that different sense, avowals express the mental states that we self-ascribe by issuing those avowals. This 'speaking from' relation is supposed to be unmediated by appearances or doxastic states. This is why requests for reasons do not normally apply and this is why correction is rare as well (p. 263). Normally, when I utter "I have a terrible headache", I am not describing my state. I am showing you that I am in such a state. Thus, it is not strange that you do not feel inclined to ask me for reasons in support of my claim. Similarly, you would normally take an utterance of that kind to be an avowal of my headache. And your taking my utterance to be an avowal of my headache means that you are taking that piece of behavior to be showing you the headache in question. So it is not strange that, normally, you assume an utterance of that kind to be true (pp. 316-317). Nevertheless, the fact that avowals as acts consist in this direct expressive relation is, Bar-On claims, consistent with the fact that, as products, avowals do have truth-conditions. This is how you get an explanation of the special status of avowals that is neither epistemic nor grammatical.

The worry is that this account may explain too much. If avowing "I am in M" is a way of showing M, or making M available to perception, then it would seem that I cannot avow my being in M without actually being in M. Avowals are meant to be intentional acts. So motivation is needed for these acts. And it does not seem that Bar-On would want a subject's act of avowing that she is in M to be motivated by her judging, or recognizing, that she is in M plus her desire to show that she is in M. Instead, Bar-On claims, the 'rational cause' of a subject's avowing that she is in M involves the fact that she is in M. In fact, sometimes (in those cases Bar-On calls 'avowals proper'), the subject's being in M is all the motivation that the subject has when she avows being in M. Now, the difficulty is that if a subject's avowing that she is in M must be an intentional act to qualify as an avowal and the subject's motivation to perform that act must involve her being in M, then it is impossible for a subject to falsely avow being in M. This means that, if Bar-On's account of what makes avowals

special is correct, then our intuitions about avowals should give them an even more privileged status than they actually do: We should expect avowals to be infallible. But we do not.

What about the issue of whether avowals articulate self-knowledge? Bar-On defends the view that her explanation of the special status of avowals can accommodate the view that they articulate self-knowledge. To show this, she assumes, for the sake of the argument, that knowledge requires justified true belief and she tries to show that one can endorse her account of the special status of avowals while, at the same time, viewing avowals as true beliefs that are justified in some special way. The sense in which avowals can be seen as beliefs turns out to be quite minimal. According to Bar-On, a subject who avows being in a certain mental state M can be seen as believing that she is in M because she would hold the proposition that she is in M to be true. And, in addition, she is actually ascribing to herself her being in M (pp. 365-366). Just as minimal is the sense in which such a subject is warranted in believing that she is in M according to Bar-On. The subject is epistemically warranted in believing that she is in M simply through being in M (p. 390). Finally, our intuitions about the special character of the epistemic warrant associated to self-knowledge are meant to be captured by the fact that the warrant that avowals enjoy is quite unique: When a subject avows her being in M, her epistemic warrant to believe that she is in M turns out to be identical to the rational cause of her behaviour (identical, that is, to the state that motivates her to perform her avowal considered as act), namely, the self-ascribed state M (p. 391).

Unfortunately, Bar-On's attempt to make her account of avowals consistent with the view that avowals articulate self-knowledge gives rise to some significant difficulties. Suppose that avowals did articulate self-knowledge the way Bar-On describes. Suppose, that is, that if I avow being in M, then I am warranted in believing that I am in M for the reasons described in the paragraph above. Then, not only am I warranted in believing that I am in M, but my belief that I am in M is true as well. The reason is the following: Suppose that I am warranted in believing that I am in M when I avow being in M. My warrant is supposed to be identical to

the rational cause of my behavior. But the rational cause of my behavior must be M. (Otherwise, my act does not have the right rational cause to qualify as an avowal, as pointed out above.) Thus, my belief that I am in M is true. It follows that if my avowal is justified, then it is also true. Conversely, suppose that I am in M and I avow being in M. My being in M alone is supposed to entitle me to the belief that I am in M. Hence, if my avowal is true, then it is also justified. The upshot is that avowals are justified if and only if they are true. It seems, then, that Bar-On's treatment of self-knowledge ties truth and warrant too tightly together.

This is an extremely thought-provoking book and many lessons about self-knowledge can be learnt from it. Bar-On's illuminating discussions of immunity to error through misidentification, the puzzle of externalism and self-knowledge or the mind's transparency to introspection (to name just a few) are models of clarity, they are insightful and they are greatly enjoyable. But perhaps the most valuable lesson that we can learn from the book is that, in any investigation of self-knowledge, there seems to be a trade off between two things. On the one hand, there is the goal of explaining the immediacy of self-knowledge. On the other hand, there is the constraint of respecting, and accounting for, the possibility of occasional error and lack of epistemic justification. The former pulls us away from any sort of epistemic intermediary whereas the latter pushes us towards positing such intermediaries. If you want a nice illustration of this tension, or you are simply interested in self-knowledge, you should read this stimulating book.

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