

Infallibility Naturalized: Reply to Hoffmann

T. PARENT[†]

ABSTRACT

The present piece is a reply to G. Hoffmann on my infallibilist view of self-knowledge. Contra Hoffmann, it is argued that the view does not preclude a Quinean epistemology, wherein every belief is subject to empirical revision.

1. Expository

Hoffmann (2011) attacks infallibilist views of self-knowledge, including the infallibilism from Parent (2007). Here, I wish to offer a brief reply. However, the issues have interest beyond this local dispute. For example, they motivate a kind of ‘fallibilism about infallibilism’, and advance the idea of ‘a priori yet empirically defeasible’ knowledge. For my part, there is also special intrigue in Hoffmann’s pitting a Quinean naturalized epistemology against infallibilism, since I also find Quine’s epistemology appealing. Yet infallibilism can look out of place in a naturalistic picture – it seems to posit a ‘supernatural’ or ‘God-like’ access to our own mental states. Nevertheless, I will argue that Hoffmann does not demonstrate any problem here for infallibilism.¹

Throughout, let us limit talk of ‘judgements’ and ‘thoughts’ to *occurrent* judgements and thoughts (vs. standing or dispositional ones). The issue then concerns the supposed infallibility of self-directed, second-order judgements concerning which first-order contents are being thought (henceforth, just ‘second-order judgements’). The infallibilist view, as propounded by Burge (1988) among others, holds that:

(INF) Necessarily, if a subject judges that she thinks *p*, then she thinks *p*.

Thus the view implies that necessarily, if I judge that ‘I am thinking that writing requires concentration,’ then I really am thinking that. However, five notes of clarification are in order.²

[†] Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA; Email: parentt@vt.edu

¹ One of Hoffmann’s objections I shall note here only; it is the Wittgensteinian claim that assertion or judgement requires the possibility of being incorrect. It is not clear to me, however, what the reasons are for this. After all, there are other cases where this dictum seems violated, e.g. ‘I am now speaking’, ‘Language exists’, ‘This sentence is a sentence’, etc.

² There are three additional clarificatory notes which are less urgent. For one, the indexical ‘I’ in statements like ‘I am thinking that writing requires concentration’ is seen as an

First, the restriction to occurrent thinkings allows us to avoid counter-examples involving Freudian repression and such. Second, (INF) should not suggest that we are infallible about the *entire* contents of our mind at a given time; the infallibility is limited to a sole, co-occurrent thought. Third, on the current usage to ‘think’ that *p* is not necessarily to believe that *p*. To ‘think’ that *p* is to token a mental state with the content *p*, but it does not require any particular *attitude* toward that content. (Any occurrent propositional attitude thus counts as ‘thinking’, e.g., judging that *p*, hoping that *p*, doubting that *p*, etc.) Fourth, although I call (INF) a thesis about ‘knowledge’, I want to remain neutral on whether infallible judgements are genuinely *known*. (I wish to avoid “S knows that *p*” disputes.) Though one should at least admit that an infallible judgment can be *doubted*, e.g., when the subject is unaware of the infallibility.

Fifth, “Necessarily” in (INF) expresses a relatively weak kind of modality (certainly weaker than logical necessity). It expresses a kind of *nomological* necessity, since it concerns truth in worlds where a specific psychological law holds.³ The relevant law is explicit in the argument for (INF). The argument itself is best presented via an example – consider for instance the second-order judgement expressed as:

(W) I am thinking that water is wet

Parent (2007) defended the infallibility of such a judgement by appeal to a minimal law about *compositionality*. The law is minimal since it describes only one compositional feature of a second-order judgement, viz., that it is composed inter alia of the first-order thought. Qua law, this means that the first-order thought “water is wet” is literally an ineliminable *part* of the (W)-judgement.⁴ The occurrence of the judgement thus necessitates the occurrence of the first order thought – and the occurrence of the thought is precisely what the

essential indexical in Perry’s (1979) sense. For another, although Burge’s infallibilism arose in the context of his content externalism, (INF) and the compositionality argument (below) are themselves neutral on externalism, or so I have argued (Parent 2007, p. 418). Third, I take it that (INF) is not affected by the data of Schwitzgebel’s outstanding (2011) book. Schwitzgebel is largely concerned with errors in introspecting one’s own *phenomenal* states. (“When your eyes are closed, what do you see?” “Do you have a constant tactile experience of your feet in your shoes?”) But phenomenal states per se are not the concern here. (Even if they were, I would argue his data tell against something like the converse of (INF) rather than (INF) itself.)

³ Talk of a ‘law’ is equivocal between a regularity in nature versus a *representation* of that regularity, e.g., in a psychological theory. It is the latter sense of ‘law’ that is intended throughout.

⁴ In Parent (2007), the part-whole relationship was put in terms of a language of thought, where WATER IS WET is the relative clause of I THINK THAT WATER IS WET. Yet as was noted, the compositionality argument does not require the LOT hypothesis (p. 418). Compositionality is a widely-agreed datum, regardless of how thought is physically realized.

judgement contends. So as a matter of law, the judgement is true whenever judged; it is infallible.⁵

2. Hoffmann's objections

Notably, the compositionality argument allows us to bypass immediately one of Hoffmann's concerns. Hoffmann (2011, p. 251) writes:

If we are correct, in reflecting on the warrant for a judgment regarding one's thoughts, the reflecting thought is distinct from the reflected thought. This gives rise to an epistemological lacuna that rules out the possibility of infallible a priori self justification. This is just to say, in a manner of speaking, that the logical locking thesis (or any thesis regarding the mechanics of the reference fixing of self referential judgments) is not . . . indefeasible.

The idea seems to be that, since there is a distinction between the first- and second-order mental states, it is possible for one to occur without the other. And that suggests that second-order judgements can misfire. (To be fair, the point targets *logical* infallibility in the first instance, yet the parenthetical remark suggests it is also meant to apply more widely.) It is uncontroversial that there is a difference between first- and second-order states. Nevertheless, it may just be *impossible* for a second-order judgement to occur *sans* the first-order thought. Indeed, that is what the compositionality law states (assuming 'impossible' expresses the relevant modality).

However, the quoted passage might not be challenging infallibilism as such, but rather a priori infallibilism. This is the view that "a wide range of both (i) analytic and (ii) synthetic a priori propositions can be infallibly or absolutely justified, i.e., justified to a degree that guarantees their truth and precludes their falsity" (Ib., p. 241).⁶ But if the focus is here, then as Hoffmann recognizes, the present author's view is not of concern. The compositionality argument does not justify judgements a priori. It rests on a psychological hypothesis that is empirically falsifiable; it is thus uncongenial to a Cartesian, hoping to justify (INF) purely a priori.

Nevertheless, my (2007) paper allowed that a Cartesian might somehow *introspect* the compositionality of second-order judgements, and justify (INF) 'a priori' in that manner.⁷ Hoffmann notes this about the view, yet still concludes

⁵ In the (2007) paper, there was a misleading implication that the compositionality argument vindicates the "logical locking" between second- and first-order thoughts, as described by Burge. But in fact, the locking is a nomological locking, not a logical one. (This comports with my rejecting Burge's self-reference account of the locking; self-reference plausibly would make the locking a logical or conceptual affair.)

⁶ To be clear, I would not want to say that second-order judgements are infallibly *justified*. On the present view, the infallibility does not pertain to the justificatory grounds of the second-order judgement; it instead pertains to the second-order judgement itself. See n. 9 also.

⁷ This concession is not merely a courtesy to the Cartesian. In reply to Brown (2004),

that “Parent’s position regarding infallible self justification obliquely reveals . . . that infallible self justification cannot be purchased a priori” (2011, p. 251). Possibly, Hoffmann meant only that my view is a kind of testimonial to the difficulties of defending the a priori.⁸ But, as formulated, his statement is unexpected. For if my view does not rule out a priori justification, how is it shown impossible?

Perhaps Hoffmann here implicitly relies on a Quinean naturalized epistemology that we share. I did not invoke such an epistemology in the (2007) paper; regardless, if we are comrades for Quine, does this compel rejection of all forms of the a priori?

On this matter, two senses of ‘a priori’ should be distinguished. The ‘a priori’ justification I allowed has (INF) justified by *introspection*. In contrast, the a priori justification dismissed by Quine is *immune to empirical revision*; it is “strongly a priori” justification (Field’s 1996; 2005 term). (Quine: “Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics” (1951, p. 43).) The point, then, is that one can reject strongly a priori justification without rejecting introspective justification. One only need allow that introspection, too, is vulnerable to empirical correction.

So even under naturalized epistemology, Hoffmann has not discredited every sort of ‘a priori’ infallibilism. But he raises a further query: Does it make sense to justify *infallibilism* by a premise that is vulnerable to revision (a premise that is apparently fallible)? Early in his paper Hoffmann pushes this in a broad way, explicitly citing Quine on revisability. For present purposes, the objection is that since psychological laws are revisable, the compositionality argument cannot demonstrate that second order judgements are infallible or true ‘come what may’.⁹

There are two replies available here (though they may amount to much the same thing). First, we can distinguish *epistemic* or *doxastic* modality from the nomological modality expressed in (INF). Then, even if it is a psychological law that second order judgements are true, their truth need not be epistemically or doxastically necessary, relative to one’s current knowledge or beliefs. This allows second-order judgements to be doubted and revised (even rationally so, if the available evidence warrants it). But naturally, if a revision ever negates an *infallible* judgement, it replaces a truth with a falsity. Yet revision per se is not

Goldberg (2006) argues there is an advantage in allowing (W) to be justified by an introspective awareness of its self-verifying nature (see pp. 310–311). In other work, I develop Goldberg’s proposal further (Parent ms.)

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for *dialectica* for raising this point.

⁹ Hoffmann sometimes speaks of a second-order judgement being *infallibly justified*; other times, he speaks of *justifying the infallibility* of the judgement. The latter issue is what I address in the text above. If the former is at issue, then Hoffmann’s point can be granted: I agree that the compositionality argument is a fallible means of justification.

incompatible with infallibility. What is incompatible is infallibility with the possibility of a *correct* revision.

A second reply, rooted directly in Quine, starts with a little-known passage in “Intensions Revisited” (Quine 1977, p. 121):

Relative to a particular inquiry, some predicates may play a more basic role than others, or may apply more fixedly; and these may be treated as essential . . . [S]imilarly dependent on context [is] . . . the whole quantified modal logic of necessity; for it collapses if essence is withdrawn. For that matter, the very notion of necessity makes sense to me only relative to context. Typically it is applied to what is assumed in an inquiry, as against what has yet to transpire.

Quine’s point is that one can speak sensibly of what is ‘necessary’, relative to the assumptions held fixed in an inquiry. That is so, even though other inquiries can unfix those assumptions, and revise them in response to new evidence.¹⁰

What is necessary under one set of assumptions, of course, need not be absolutely necessary. Yet under standard psycholinguistic assumptions, it is not wrongheaded to say ‘A learnable language must be compositional.’ That is so, even knowing that linguistic compositionality is a revisable, empirical hypothesis. Similarly, the Quinean reply is that it makes sense to say ‘An occurrent second order judgement must be true,’ even if this takes some empirical contingencies for granted. In both instances, it is a case where a statement follows by necessity under some premises, though the premises themselves may well be contingent.¹¹

Under either reply, the infallibility of second-order judgements is not itself infallibly known.¹² Since the infallibility is premised on a revisable psychological law, the view is defeasible in the characteristic Quinean way. This alone does not rule out other ways one might conceivably know the infallibility, e.g., by introspective means. Though again, my preferred route is to cite compositionality as an empirical hypothesis, in coming to know (fallibly) the infallibility of second-order judgements.*

¹⁰ For further elaboration, see section 3 of Parent (2008).

¹¹ Plausibly, this may also be understood in terms of Lewis’ (1986) view, where quantifiers are restricted by context to a proper subset of possible worlds. It also calls to mind Lewis (1996), who emphasizes that some possibilities of error can be properly ignored in certain contexts, even though these possibilities may be relevant in other contexts.

¹² Though infallibilism *is* known infallibly if the relevant modality is nomological throughout. (If second-order judgements are infallible as a matter of law, then as a matter of law, infallibilism cannot be wrong.) But of course, above I just mean to be reiterating the epistemic non-necessity of nomological necessities.

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