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What Asymmetry? Knowledge of Self, Knowledge of Others, and the Inferentialist Challenge

1

Many philosophers are struck by what Paul Boghossian describes as a ‘profound asymmetry between the way in which I know my own thoughts and the way in which I may know the thoughts of others’ (1998: 151). One popular way of describing this asymmetry is to say that:

(ASYMMETRY) Knowledge of one’s own thoughts is normally direct whereas knowledge of the thoughts of another person is normally indirect.

‘Direct’ in this context is usually taken to mean ‘non-inferential’ or ‘not based on evidence’.¹ ‘Indirect’ knowledge is inferential knowledge or knowledge that is based on evidence. I will have more to say below about the correct interpretation of the ‘normallys’ in ASYMMETRY. The key point, however, is that self-knowledge and knowledge of others are ‘categorically different in kind and manner’ (Moran 2001: xxxi). ASYMMETRY is one way, though not the only way, of giving expression to this supposed categorical difference.

ASYMMETRY raises a large number of questions which need to be answered before the task of assessing this thesis can begin. Here are three:

1. What is the scope of ASYMMETRY?
2. What type of asymmetry is at issue in ASYMMETRY?
3. What is the status of ASYMMETRY?

There are more or less ambitious interpretations of ASYMMETRY depending on how these questions are answered. In this paper I’ll be suggesting that if ASYMMETRY is understood as many philosophers understand it then this thesis is far more problematic than they suppose. ASYMMETRY is only plausible on a narrow and limited reading. On the more ambitious readings that one finds in the philosophical literature there is good reason to be sceptical.

Question 1 is partly a question about how to interpret the reference to ‘thoughts’ in ASYMMETRY. On a narrow interpretation, a thought is the act of entertaining a particular proposition. On this interpretation, thoughts are occurrent *thinkings*, and what is normally direct is your knowledge that you are thinking a given thought as you think it. On a broad interpretation, thoughts include standing attitudes – your beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and certain emotions. Standing attitudes aren’t mental events, and you can have them even when you aren’t actively entertaining them. Another interpretive issue is how to understand the notion of evidence. What kind of evidence is at issue in claims about whether a given kind of knowledge is or isn’t based on ‘evidence’? Evidence certainly includes *behavioural* evidence, but there is also the view that knowledge of one’s own thoughts is not based on *any* evidence, ‘behavioural or otherwise’ (Moran 2001: 11).

The possibility of interpreting both ‘thoughts’ and ‘evidence’ differently generates several different possible interpretations of ASYMMETRY. Question 2 generates even more complications. One type of asymmetry that might be at issue is psychological. Another type is epistemological. This is a reflection of the fact that the distinction between ‘inferential’ and ‘non-inferential’ knowledge can be read psychologically or epistemologically. Proponents of ASYMMETRY don’t always make it clear which reading they have in mind. In theory, this might be because they reject a sharp distinction between epistemological and psychological factors but this isn’t the explanation in every case. Even proponents of ASYMMETRY who clearly accept such a distinction slide between epistemological and psychological claims.

Question 3 draws attention to the fact that ASYMMETRY can either be understood as some kind of datum, or as a proposition whose truth has to be established by philosophical theorizing. On the former reading, ASYMMETRY is where philosophical accounts need to begin, and constitutes an initial constraint on philosophical theorizing about self-knowledge and knowledge of others. On this view, it is a requirement on philosophical accounts of self-

knowledge that they either accept ASYMMETRY or else explain why this thesis should be rejected; the burden is on opponents rather than proponents of ASYMMETRY because this thesis captures how self-knowledge and knowledge of others both *seem*. On the alternative reading, ASYMMETRY represents the conclusion of philosophical reflection rather than a point of departure for philosophical reflection.

It should be clear by now that there isn't just one ASYMMETRY thesis. Many different things can be meant by saying that knowledge of one's own thoughts is normally direct whereas knowledge of someone else's thoughts is normally indirect. This means that it doesn't make sense to ask whether ASYMMETRY is correct. It depends on which particular version of this thesis is in question. Is there nevertheless such a thing as the 'standard' philosophical reading of ASYMMETRY? That seems doubtful since there are almost as many interpretations of ASYMMETRY as there are philosophers who write on this topic. Nevertheless, here are some generalizations for which there is good textual evidence:

- a. There are influential versions of ASYMMETRY in the philosophical literature on which this thesis has what might be called *wide scope*. On this reading, 'thoughts' include standing attitudes, and ASYMMETRY isn't only concerned with whether knowledge of occurrent thinkings is direct or indirect.²
- b. Many, if not most, philosophical proponents of ASYMMETRY endorse both psychological and epistemological versions of this thesis. The latter is often seen as primary, though the arguments given for ASYMMETRY (where arguments are given) support psychological rather than epistemological versions of this thesis.
- c. Philosophers who endorse ASYMMETRY tend to regard it as a datum rather than as a claim that has to be argued for. From the fact that a claim doesn't have to be argued for it doesn't follow that it can't be argued for, but ASYMMETRY may be seen as more compelling than any arguments that could be given for it.

My aim here is to argue against a wide scope version of ASYMMETRY. I'll argue in section 2 that the truth of ASYMMETRY is not a datum, and that standard philosophical arguments for ASYMMETRY are inconclusive. The problem is not with the suggestion that knowledge of another person's thoughts is indirect but with the idea that knowledge of one's own thoughts is normally direct. In section 3 I will give some positive reasons for thinking that knowledge of our own thoughts is normally indirect, epistemologically and perhaps also psychologically. In section 4, I will consider the suggestion that knowledge of the thoughts of another person can be, and often is, direct because we can, and often do, see what someone else thinks. I reject this suggestion because even if it is possible to see what another person thinks this kind of perceptual knowledge is inferential. 'Perceptual' and 'inferential' are not contraries, and the only defensible position in this area is that knowledge of our own thoughts and knowledge of someone else's thoughts are both indirect. No doubt there *are* asymmetries between self-knowledge and knowledge of others, but ASYMMETRY isn't the best way of capturing or characterizing these asymmetries.

2

Many philosophers who accept ASYMMETRY do seem to regard it as a datum that knowledge of one's own thoughts is normally direct. Consider how such philosophers respond to Ryle's inferentialist account of self-knowledge.³ Ryle is represented as holding that knowledge of one's own thoughts is inferred from behavioural evidence and therefore not different in kind and manner from knowledge of another person's thoughts. This view gets rejected out of hand on the grounds that it fails to respect the ASYMMETRY. For example, Davidson declares bluntly that 'Ryle was wrong' since 'it is seldom the case that I need or appeal to evidence or observation in order to find out what I believe; normally I know what I believe before I speak or act' (2001: 15). In his discussion, Boghossian berates Ryle for defending the indefensible, that is, the view that 'there is no asymmetry between first-

person and third-person access to mental states' (1998: 152). Neither author sees much need to argue for the existence of such an asymmetry, and both clearly regard ASYMMETRY as an intuitively compelling starting-point from which the falsity of inferentialist accounts of self-knowledge can safely be inferred.

Are such critics of inferentialism making an epistemological point, a psychological point, or both? Before this question can be answered an account is needed of the distinction between epistemological and psychological directness.⁴ Let's assume there is a justification condition on knowledge: to know that P you must be justified in believing that P. Then your knowledge is non-inferential and in this sense direct just if your justification for believing P is non-inferential. In contrast, your knowledge is inferential and in this sense indirect just if your justification is inferential. On an epistemological reading the issue is what kind of epistemic support you have for P, and not whether you arrived at P by inferring it from other propositions you believe. Whether you infer that P in the latter sense is only relevant to whether your knowledge or justification is inferential in a *psychological* sense. For your knowledge that P to count as non-inferential in an *epistemological* sense it must be the case that your *justification* for believing P does not come from your justification for believing other propositions. If your justification for believing P comes in part from your justification for believing other propositions then both your justification for believing P and your knowledge that P are epistemologically inferential, regardless of whether they are also psychologically inferential.

As Pryor observes, the fact that other beliefs are required for you to *form* or *entertain* the belief that P doesn't entail that your justification to believe that P is epistemologically inferential.⁵ Suppose that Q is another belief you need to have in order to form or entertain the belief that P. In principle, your justification for believing P could still be non-inferential in the relevant sense or, in Pryor's terminology, 'immediate', as long as your justification for

believing P doesn't *come from* your justification for believing Q. As long as your justification for believing Q isn't the *source* of your justification for believing P then it can be true *both* that you couldn't believe P without also believing Q *and* that your justification for believing P is epistemologically non-inferential. In this scenario the role of your justification to believe Q would not be to mediate your justification to believe P. In contrast, if your justification for believing Q is, at least in part, where your justification for believing P comes from then your justification for believing P is inferential. For this would be a case in which your justification to believe P would be mediated by, and originate in, your justification to believe another Q.

In these terms, is it a datum that knowledge of one's own thoughts is normally non-inferential? Immediately after noting the 'profound asymmetry' between how I know my own thoughts and how I know other peoples' thoughts Boghossian writes:

The difference turns not on the epistemic status of the respective beliefs, but on the manner in which they are arrived at, or justified. In the case of others I have no choice but to *infer* what they think from observations about what they do or say. In my own case, by contrast, inference is neither required nor relevant' (1998: 151-2).

This passage, which is by no means unrepresentative, is a mix of psychological and epistemic considerations. The first sentence is hard to understand since a difference in how beliefs are justified *is* a difference in their epistemic status. How beliefs are arrived at is a psychological issue, and what Boghossian says in the quoted passages suggests that this is his main concern. He dismisses the suggestion that knowledge of our own thoughts is inferential on the grounds that 'it runs counter to all the relevant appearance' (1998: 152) and illustrates his point using this example: 'You think: Even lousy composers sometimes write great arias. And you know, immediately on thinking it, that this is what you thought' (ibid.). In this example, which I'll call LOUSY COMPOSERS, it is 'contrary to appearance and the canons of epistemic practice' (ibid.) to construe your knowledge as inferential.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a ‘datum’ as a ‘thing known or granted’, an ‘assumption or premise from which inferences may be drawn’. This seems a fair description of how philosophers like Boghossian view the directness of self-knowledge. Their idea seems to be that self-knowledge appears direct, and that this makes it a suitable starting-point for philosophical discussions of the nature of self-knowledge. Of course, premises that appear correct might subsequently be overturned by philosophical argument, but no such argument is needed to show that self-knowledge is *seemingly* direct. It’s simply a matter of attending to the phenomena, of taking appearances at face value. The same goes for knowledge of other minds. Going by appearances, there is no possibility of knowing what someone else thinks other than by inference from behavioural evidence.

This attempt to present ASYMMETRY as a datum is unconvincing. Here are some issues:

- i. Even if inference isn’t normally the manner in which we *arrive* at knowledge of our own thoughts, this has no bearing on whether knowledge of our own thoughts is, or appears to be, *epistemologically* direct. Boghossian’s datum is psychological rather than epistemological, and questions about where our justification for beliefs about our own thoughts comes from can’t be answered, even provisionally, by attending to the phenomena; it isn’t built into the phenomenology of self-knowledge that it is non-inferential in an epistemic sense, and it isn’t clear what it would be for self-knowledge to ‘appear’ direct in this sense.
- ii. Like many philosophers, Boghossian seems to assume that the only kind of inference is conscious inference. In other words, he assumes that if S isn’t conscious of inferring that P then inference isn’t the manner by which S comes to believe that P. But inferences needn’t be conscious, and if unconscious inference is the means by which you come to know your own thoughts it won’t necessarily appear to you

that that is so. It isn't always obvious to us when our knowledge is inferential and the constant emphasis on how things 'appear' begs the question against the view that knowledge of one's own thoughts is arrived at by unconscious or unnoticed inferences and is inferential in this sense.

iii. LOUSY COMPOSERS is clearly a case in which what is at issue is knowledge of an occurrent thought rather than a standing attitude. As such, this example doesn't support the idea that we have direct knowledge of our standing beliefs and desires, let alone explain how such a thing is possible.

iv. The only evidence Boghossian considers in relation to self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds is behavioural evidence. For example, in LOUSY COMPOSERS he argues that knowledge of the occurrent thought 'could not have been inferred from premises about your own behaviour because that thought could not yet have come to have any traction on your behaviour' (1998: 152). Perhaps that is so but this has little to do with whether inferences from other kinds of evidence might be the basis on which you know your occurrent thoughts standing attitudes. Evidence can be, but needn't be, behavioural.

In short, there is nothing in Boghossian's discussion which justifies his taking it to be a datum that knowledge of our standing attitudes is epistemically direct. There may well be a presumption that knowledge of our own occurrent thoughts isn't *arrived at* by *conscious* inferences from *behavioural* evidence but this is a much more limited thesis. If the issue is whether self-knowledge of standing attitudes is epistemologically direct then that is an issue which can only be resolved by argument. It isn't a datum that wide scope self-knowledge is epistemologically direct, and the suggestion that it is direct looks should be the *conclusion* of a philosophical theory of self-knowledge rather than its starting point.

It might seem that I have been unfairly targeting Boghossian in my discussion and that the various problems with his view which I have identified aren't necessarily problems with ASYMMETRY *per se*, or with its self-knowledge component. This is, of course, quite true but Boghossian's discussion is representative of many other philosophical discussions of self-knowledge. Davidson and Moran, to mention two other influential other names, are no less committed to ASYMMETRY and no less inclined to proceed as if ASYMMETRY is blindingly obvious. Admittedly Moran is clearer than Boghossian on some key issues. His concerns are plainly epistemological, and there isn't much doubt that for him knowledge of our thoughts includes knowledge of our standing attitudes. There is a certain amount of flip flopping over whether self-knowledge is only supposed to be independent of behavioural evidence or independent of any evidence. But one thing is perfectly clear: for Moran, as for Boghossian and Davidson, the ASYMMETRY is given and the challenge is to develop a story about self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds which does justice to it. There is no serious attempt to argue for ASYMMETRY, and that is my objection to these accounts. It's not even clear what ASYMMETRY is saying, let alone whether what it is saying is correct. The right to assert ASYMMETRY needs to be earned by philosophical argument.

One reaction to this might be to ask: why does it matter whether ASYMMETRY represents a datum or the conclusion of an argument? Surely all that counts is whether this thesis is correct. From this perspective, it is irrelevant whether ASYMMETRY is a theory-driven conclusion or a datum on the basis on which theories of self-knowledge are built. In my view, this dismissal of questions about the status of ASYMMETRY is ill-advised. Philosophical theorizing has to start somewhere and it's an important question whether ASYMMETRY is a mandatory starting-point for philosophical reflection on self-knowledge. If it is then that stacks the deck against inferentialism about self-knowledge, the view that

self-knowledge is normally inferential. If not, and there is no prejudice against inferentialism, then it is an open question whether ASYMMETRY should ultimately be accepted or rejected.

In the next section I'll directly address the question whether it is true that knowledge of our own thoughts is normally direct. I will discuss a range of cases in which knowledge of our standing attitudes is *indirect*, both epistemologically and psychologically. My contention is that such cases aren't abnormal, and that this is a reason to be sceptical about the first half of ASYMMETRY, that is, its conception of self-knowledge. Section 4 will be about whether there are reasons to be sceptical about the second half of ASYMMETRY, that is, the thesis that knowledge of other minds is normally indirect. My contention will there are good reasons to endorse this thesis.

3

Consider this example from Krista Lawlor, about a woman called Katherine who is struggling to answer the question "Do I want another child?". This is Lawlor's account of how Katherine deals with the question:

Katherine starts noticing her experiences and thoughts. She catches herself imagining, remembering, and feeling a range of things. Putting away her son's now-too-small clothes, she finds herself lingering over the memory of how a newborn feels in one's arms. She notes an emotion that could be envy when an acquaintance reveals her pregnancy. Such experiences may be enough to prompt Katherine to make a self-attribution that sticks. Saying "I want another child", she may feel a sense of ease or settledness (Lawlor 2009: 57).

Lawlor's idea is that if Katherine's self-attribution sticks, that is, if she experiences a sense of ease when she says "I want another child", then she has an answer to her question. She can infer that she wants another child. Her imaginings, fantasies and yearnings are further data from which she can infer that she wants another child. Such internal states are what Lawlor

calls ‘internal promptings’ and the example suggests that Katherine’s knowledge that she wants another child, is both psychologically and epistemologically inferential. Katherine *arrives* at her knowledge that she wants another child by consciously inferring her desire from her internal promptings, and her belief that she wants another child is *justified* by those internal promptings or by her beliefs about them. These promptings serve as *evidence* that she wants another child, and she knows that she wants another child on the basis of this evidence. There is no plausible sense in which her self-knowledge is ‘direct’.⁶

I’ve said that Katherine’s belief that she wants another child is justified by her internal promptings or by her beliefs about them. Which is it? Katherine’s justification is inferential only if her belief that she wants another child is justified by other *beliefs* of hers. Since internal promptings aren’t beliefs, this seems to open up the possibility that her justification for believing she wants another child is non-inferential even though this belief is justified by her internal promptings. The issues here are complex but there are two things to say about this. First, as I’ve noted, her internal promptings would still be serving as *evidence* that she wants another child, and so her knowledge that she wants another child would still qualify as ‘indirect’ if ‘direct’ knowledge is understood as knowledge that isn’t based on any evidence. Second, it is arguable in any case that Katherine’s beliefs about her internal promptings *are* playing a role in justifying her belief that she wants another child. In the case in which she feels what could be envy when an acquaintance reveals her pregnancy it is Katherine’s belief that what she feels is indeed envy that is doing important justificatory work. If she is not justified in believing that what she feels is envy then she isn’t justified in concluding on the basis of this feeling that she wants another child. Internal promptings aren’t self-interpreting and it is only on reflection that they reveal Katherine’s desire for another child. This process of reflection issues in *beliefs* about her internal promptings and it is partly on the basis of such beliefs that Katherine comes to know what she really wants.

One reaction to this example might be to say that we are only happy to think of it as a case of indirect self-knowledge because it is an example of what might be called ‘substantial’ rather than ‘trivial’ self-knowledge.⁷ As I’ve argued elsewhere, the distinction between trivial and substantial self-knowledge is a matter of degree.⁸ Substantial self-knowledge is error-prone, requires cognitive effort and, as Schwitzgebel puts it, ‘tangles with a person’s self-conception’ (2012: 191).⁹ In contrast, trivial self-knowledge is not error-prone, requires minimal cognitive effort and doesn’t tangle with a person’s self-conception. An example of trivial self-knowledge is your knowledge that you believe that it is raining. With trivial self-knowledge there is little at stake. It might make a practical difference whether you know that it’s raining but not whether you know that you *believe* that it’s raining. In contrast, knowing whether she wants another child is likely to make a huge practical difference to Katherine.

With a distinction between substantial and trivial self-knowledge in place it would be open to proponents of ASYMMETRY to concede that substantial self-knowledge is normally indirect while continuing to deny that the same is true of trivial self-knowledge. This would represent a significant weakening of ASYMMETRY since up to this point there has been no indication that knowledge of one’s own standing attitudes is normally direct only in cases of trivial self-knowledge. However, the key claim is that *even trivial self-knowledge is normally inferential*. The difference between substantial and trivial self-knowledge is not the difference between inferential and non-inferential knowledge. So the next question is this: what is the case for saying that even intuitively trivial self-knowledge is normally inferential?

Suppose that P is the proposition that it’s raining and the question is whether I believe that P. How is this question to be answered? Gareth Evan’s promising suggestion is that the question whether I believe that P is to be answered by answering the question whether P. The question whether I believe that P is in this sense ‘transparent’ to the question whether P, and I will refer to Evans’ proposed method for answering the question whether I believe that P as

the Transparency Method (TM). The key question raised by TM is this: how is it possible for a person to answer the question whether they believe P by answering the question whether P?¹⁰ Alex Byrne and Richard Moran are among the many philosophers who have attempted to explain and develop Evans' proposal, and their accounts are worth looking in some detail since they both help to explain – in Moran's case unwittingly- why trivial self-knowledge that is acquired by using (TM) must be inferential.

It doesn't follow immediately that all trivial self-knowledge is inferential since there may be ways of gaining trivial self-knowledge without using TM, or there could be ways of understanding TM that don't imply that it only yields inferential knowledge. But I'll suggest that non-inferentialist alternatives to the transparency approach are unattractive and that the most plausible explanations of TM imply that it can only give us inferential self-knowledge. The upshot is this: if using the method Evans describes is how we 'normally' acquire trivial self-knowledge then that puts further pressure on the idea that self-knowledge is normally direct.

Starting with Byrne, suppose I answer the question whether it's raining by looking out of the window and observing the rain. I conclude that it is raining. How am I supposed to get from this conclusion to knowing that I *believe* that it's raining? Byrne's proposal is that the next step involves 'an *inference from world to mind*' (2011: 203). The inference in question is a 'transparency inference' and proceeds in accordance with the following 'doxastic schema':

p

I believe that *p*

Inferences in accordance with this schema look invalid so how can they possibly yield self-knowledge?¹¹ Byrne argues that the doxastic schema is strongly self-verifying in this sense: 'if one reasons in accord with the doxastic schema, and infers that one believes that *p* from the premise that *p*, then one's second-order belief is *true*, because inference from a premise

entails belief in that premise' (2011: 206).¹² In addition, transparency reasoning also yields second-order beliefs that are safe, that is, ones could not easily have been false. According to Byrne, the only sensible conclusion from these considerations is that reasoning in accordance with the doxastic schema is knowledge-conducive.

This proposal raises many questions about its adequacy but one thing that is clear is that for Byrne knowledge of one's own beliefs is inferential. There is an *inference* from world to mind and it is not in question that *if* such inferences are really knowledge-conducive the knowledge in question is inferential. The difficult issue is whether transparency inferences as Byrne understands them *are* knowledge-conducive. From the standpoint of someone making the transition from p to 'I believe that p' it needs to be intelligible how the premise of the inference can supply a reason for the conclusion and it is arguable that this is not something that Byrne's proposal satisfactorily explains.¹³ There is much more to be said about all this but for present purposes further discussion of Byrne is unnecessary. If the aim is to have self-knowledge come out as inferential then Byrne's proposal is of little use.

Turning next to Moran, his approach is of particular interest here because, unlike Byrne, he insists that the self-knowledge acquired by employing TM is *non-inferential*. He agrees with Evans that it is possible for a person to answer an 'inward-directed' question ('Do I believe that it's raining?') by answering the corresponding 'outward-directed' question ('Is it raining?'). Unlike Evans, Moran tries to explain *how* this is possible, given that the two questions have different subject-matters. This is Moran's explanation:

I *would* have a right to assume that my reflection on the reasons in favor of rain provided an answer to the question of what my belief about the rain is, if I could assume that *what* my belief here is was something determined by the conclusion of my reflection on those reasons. An assumption of this sort would provide the right sort of link between the two questions (2003: 405).

This is hard to reconcile with Moran's insistence that the procedure he describes is a source of non-inferential self-knowledge. For me to know that I believe that it's raining it would have to be the case that I am justified in believing that I believe it is raining. And for my self-knowledge to qualify as non-inferential in the epistemological sense it would have to be the case that the justification for my second-order belief doesn't come from my justification for believing any other proposition. However, in Moran's account my justification for believing that I believe that it's raining derives in part from my justification for believing or assuming that my reflection on the reasons in favour of rain provide an answer to the question of what my belief about the rain is. I'll call this the *linking assumption*. It is my assumption that the inward-directed and outward-directed questions are linked in this way that makes it possible for me to discover the answer to the former by discovering the answer to the latter. By the same token, my belief that I believe it's raining wouldn't be justified, and so wouldn't amount to knowledge, unless I am *justified* in making or believing the linking assumption.

It seems, then, that my knowledge that I believe it is raining must be inferential in the epistemological sense if it is knowledge I have by using Moran's version of the Transparency Method. It must be inferential in this sense because the justification I have for my second-order belief comes in part from whatever justification I have for believing at least one other proposition, namely, the proposition that gives expression to the linking assumption. In fact, there is also a case for viewing the resulting self-knowledge as inferential in a psychological sense. After all, even if the answer to the outward-directed question is 'yes, it is raining', this is not yet an answer to the inward-directed question. It looks as though there needs to be some kind of mental *transition* (conscious or otherwise) from concluding that it's raining to concluding that I believe it's raining. How can this mental transition be anything other than an inference in the psychological sense?

To block this argument Moran would need to show that talk of a transition from one belief to another is misplaced. He would need to argue that while a person who uses TM must indeed be assuming that what he believes is determined by the conclusion of his reflection on his reasons, this assumption is not at all where his justification for believing that he believes that it is raining *comes from*. But why not? The point is not that there is no other possible role for the linking assumption. Perhaps some such assumption is required for one to be able to form the relevant second-order belief, and this leaves it open that one's justification for the second-order belief is non-inferential. However, this observation is not enough for Moran's purposes. What he needs to show, but fails to show, is that the linking assumption is playing no part in *justifying* the person's second-order belief. TM as Moran understands it certainly *looks* like it makes self-knowledge – even trivial self-knowledge – inferential, and I suggest that TM looks like it makes self-knowledge inferential because it *does* make self-knowledge inferential.¹⁴

As I've already conceded, this is not a knockdown argument against the first half of ASYMMETRY. All I have shown is that (trivial) self-knowledge isn't normally direct if its source is TM as Byrne or Moran understand this method. What about the possibility of other readings of TM or of acquiring trivial self-knowledge by means other than TM? For example, in his work Boyle is critical of inferentialist readings of TM and instead proposes what he calls a 'reflective' reading. Boyle's idea is that 'believing P involves tacitly knowing oneself to believe P' (2011: 227), and that there is therefore no *inference* from 'P' to 'I believe P'. The subject can instead be thought of as 'taking a different sort of step, from *believing P* to *reflectively judging* (i.e. consciously thinking to himself): I believe P' (2011: 229).

An altogether different approach to self-knowledge would be to give up on the idea of transparency and argue that by far the most effective way to get knowledge of one's own thoughts to come out as direct is to regard such knowledge as grounded in inner sense or

inner perception: you know by exercising your ‘inner sense’ that you believe that P, and the resulting self-knowledge is as immediate as perceptual knowledge generally. If directness is what you are after then it’s best to see perception rather than reasoning as the source of trivial self-knowledge. How can self-knowledge that is acquired by reasoning or inference possibly be ‘direct’? TM doesn’t help in the search for an explanation of direct self-knowledge since transparency reasoning is still reasoning, and if you have to reason your way to a conclusion then your knowledge of that conclusion is almost by definition *not* direct.

There isn’t the space to do justice to these suggestions so a couple of brief comments will have to do: with regard to the reflective approach to transparency, it is implausible that believing P involves tacitly knowing oneself to believe P. A person can have sexist or racist beliefs without realizing it, and the attribution of *tacit* self-knowledge in these cases is just a way of disguising the fundamental implausibility of the view. As for perceptual models of self-knowledge, there is little to be said for the idea that beliefs and other standing attitudes are objects of inner perception.¹⁵ In addition, I’ll argue below that the relationship between ‘perceptual’ and ‘inferential’ is such that there is no easy transition from ‘self-knowledge is perceptual’ to ‘self-knowledge is non-inferential’.

To sum up the discussion so far, the first half of ASYMMETRY says that knowledge of our own thoughts is normally direct and I’ve now given two examples in which knowledge of one’s own standing attitudes is indirect.¹⁶ One is an example of substantial self-knowledge and the other an example of trivial self-knowledge. There remains the option of arguing that my examples aren’t ‘normal’, but this seems a little desperate if the point is to defend ASYMMETRY. On one reading, ‘normally’ is a purely statistical notion. In this sense, to say that self-knowledge is ‘normally’ direct is to say that it is *usually* direct, or *for the most part* actually direct. On a different reading, to say that self-knowledge is ‘normally’ direct is to imply that indirect self-knowledge is somehow deviant or aberrant, regardless of how

common it is. However, it's arguable that the examples I've been discussing aren't unusual or unrepresentative of how self-knowledge is actually acquired. Nor is there any good reason to suppose that self-knowledge acquired by inference from internal promptings or use of TM is aberrant.¹⁷ Self-knowledge acquired in these ways is, I contend, both 'normal' (in both senses) and indirect.

At this point the best bet for proponents of ASYMMETRY would be to insist that even if knowledge of our *standing attitudes* is inferential this leaves it open that knowledge of our *occurrent* thoughts is non-inferential. So perhaps the lesson of the discussion so far is that ASYMMETRY needs to be read with narrow scope, as a thesis about knowledge of occurrent thoughts rather than standing attitudes. However, even this is debatable. For example, in *The Opacity of Mind*, Carruthers makes a strong case that knowledge of one's own occurrent thoughts is 'almost always interpretive (and often confabulatory), utilizing the same kinds of inferences (and many of the same sorts of data) that are employed when attributing attitudes to other people' (2011: 162). If Carruthers is right about this then there is a problem with the first half of ASYMMETRY even if it is read as a claim about self-knowledge of occurrent thoughts. Anyway, even if knowledge of one's occurrent thoughts is normally direct, this is a much more limited claim than the one we started out with. When philosophers such as Boghossian, Davidson and Moran claim that knowledge of our own thoughts is normally direct they mean that knowledge of our standing attitudes, as well as our occurrent thoughts, is normally direct. This is the 'wide scope' reading of the first half of ASYMMETRY and the inferentialist challenge shows that a healthy dose of scepticism is the appropriate reaction to this component of ASYMMETRY.

4

What about the second half of ASYMMETRY? Does the claim that knowledge of the thoughts of another person is normally indirect fare any better? It seems that it does. After all,

a perfectly straightforward and ‘normal’ way of coming to know what someone else thinks or believes is to ask them. If I ask you where you think Napoleon was born you tell me he was born in Corsica then, unless I have some reason to doubt your sincerity, I thereby come to know where you think Napoleon was born. In cases like this it might be tempting to say that I *hear* your belief in your words and that my knowledge of your belief is in this sense ‘direct’. This temptation should be resisted. Talk of ‘hearing’ your belief is at best metaphorical, and I know you believe that Napoleon was born in Corsica only if I’m justified in believing on the basis of your utterance that this is what you believe. My justification is inferential and so, therefore, is my knowledge. Since inferential knowledge is indirect we do not here have a case in which I know ‘directly’ what you think.

Here is why my justification is inferential: I infer what you think from what you say. The inference needn’t be explicit but I’m only justified in believing that you think Napoleon was born in Corsica if I am justified in believing that you said that Napoleon was born in Corsica because this is what you believe.¹⁸ If I think you only said that Napoleon was born in Corsica because of a slip of the tongue or because you were trying to mislead me I would no longer be justified in believing that you believe Napoleon was born in Corsica. My knowledge of your belief is inferential, and the type of inference that is at issue here is inference to the best explanation: what you say is the evidence I have to go on, and the best explanation of this evidence is that you believe that Napoleon was born in Corsica. In Harman’s terms, my inference makes use of certain lemmas and for me to count as *knowing* where you think Napoleon was born these lemmas must be true : it must be true that ‘the utterance is there because it is believed’ (Harman 1965: 93).¹⁹

Here is a different line of attack on the second half of ASYMMETRY: while it is of course possible to know the mind of another person by inference from their utterances or

from their behaviour more generally, it's also possible to *see* and thereby *know* what they are thinking or feeling. Here, for example, are some common ways of talking:

He could see she was angry.

I could see he was in pain.

I can see what you are thinking.

It might be suggested that these are all cases in which knowledge of another person's state of mind is perceptual and thus non-inferential. As McDowell puts it in relation to the second example, 'we should not jib at, or interpret away' the common-sense thought that 'one can literally perceive, in another person's facial expression or his behaviour, that he is in pain, and not just infer that he is in pain from what one perceives' (1998: 305).²⁰

The idea that it is possible to see what someone else thinks or believes suggests the following Perception Argument (PA) against the second half of ASYMMETRY:

- (i) Knowledge of the thoughts of another person is normally perceptual.
- (ii) Perceptual knowledge is direct.
- (iii) Knowledge of the thoughts of another person is normally direct.

If PA works then we seem to be heading in the direction of what might be called REVERSE ASYMMETRY. This is the surprising thesis that it is knowledge of other minds that is direct and self-knowledge that is indirect.

In fact the Perception Argument doesn't work and the correct view of the matter is that the second half of ASYMMETRY is more robust than its first half. There are three issues here:

1. Do we ever literally see what another person thinks or believes or is such talk of 'seeing' only metaphorical?
2. Is our knowledge of another person's thoughts or beliefs *normally* perceptual?

3. In those cases (if any) in which we see what another person thinks or believes is the resulting knowledge direct, either psychologically or epistemologically?

With regard to 1, it is arguable that talk of seeing what someone else thinks is just a figure of speech, and that we should be wary of taking ordinary ways of speaking too literally. For a start, there are certain obvious differences between ordinary cases of perceptual knowledge – for example, seeing that another person is smiling- and perceptual knowledge of other minds. When you see that another person is smiling you see their smile, but when you ‘see’ what another person is thinking you presumably don’t see their thought.²¹ This difference might be deemed irrelevant but on what grounds? Instead, the fact that another person’s thoughts can’t be seen might be taken to show that it isn’t possible to know that they think that P by literally seeing that they think P, and that talk of ‘seeing’ in this context is loose and metaphorical.

With regard to 2, even if talk of ‘seeing’ is literal rather than metaphorical, it is a further question knowledge of another person’s thoughts is *normally* perceptual. If ‘normally’ is a statistical notion and the point of the first premise of the Perception Argument is to suggest that seeing is the usual means of coming to know another person’s thoughts then this premise is false: it’s far more common for us to acquire knowledge of what other people think by other means – for example, by talking to them. Perhaps, in that case, the point of (i) isn’t statistical but normative: seeing what another person is thinking is a legitimate, non-aberrant way of coming to know their thoughts. That may be so but this leaves it open that this way of coming to know is inferential, which brings us to 3 and the second premise of PA.

If ‘direct’ means ‘non-inferential’ then the question raised by (ii) is this: why assume perceptual knowledge is non-inferential? One answer says that ‘perceptual’ and ‘inferential’ are contraries and that ‘S knows that P by perceiving that P’ entails ‘S knowledge that P is non-inferential’. Another answer says that although ‘perceptual’ and ‘inferential’ knowledge aren’t strictly contraries, there is nevertheless a contrast between perceptual knowledge and

inferential knowledge, in the sense that when a person's knowledge is described as 'perceptual' the implication or presumption is that their knowledge is not inferential. I reject both answers. 'Perceptual' and 'inferential' aren't contraries and there is no presumption that perceptual knowledge generally is non-inferential. Further, *if* knowledge of another person's thoughts is ever perceptual then such perceptual knowledge is also inferential. Whether perceptual knowledge is *always* inferential is a question I leave open.

An example might help: Marvin and Maria are an academic couple who go to conferences together. Over the years Marvin has become very good at 'reading' Maria. When she is listening to a talk she strongly disagrees with she has a special look of incredulity which Marvin knows only too well. On one occasion, having seen this look, Marvin says to Maria when the talk is over 'I could see exactly what you thought of that'. Marvin could have asked Maria what she thought but there was no need. He could see that Maria thought that the speaker was mistaken. Let's agree that Marvin could indeed 'see' this and thereby come to know Maria's thought about the speaker. Is Marvin's knowledge inferential?

The usual objection to regarding Marvin's knowledge as inferential in a psychological sense is that he isn't conscious of inferring what Maria thinks. From Marvin's perspective he 'just sees'. But this argument carries little weight unless it is assumed that all inference has to be conscious. Why couldn't Marvin's inference be so rapid and automatic that he does not notice it? Furthermore, even if Marvin's knowledge is psychologically direct, this leaves it open that it is epistemologically indirect. I claim that his knowledge is indirect in this sense because it is inferential in an epistemological sense. I take this to illustrate an entirely general point about so-called 'perceptual knowledge of other minds': epistemologically speaking, all such knowledge is inferential. Is this a special feature of this kind of perceptual knowledge or is it also the case that perceptual knowledge generally is inferential? I'll come back to this. First, let's consider why Marvin's knowledge of Maria's state of mind is inferential.

Let P be the proposition that Maria thinks the speaker is mistaken. Marvin knows that P because he sees that P. However, Marvin only knows that P by seeing that P if he is justified in believing that P. Where does his justification come from? If it comes from his justification for believing other propositions then it is inferential justification. But which other propositions might these be? If pressed to explain how Marvin can see what Maria thinks the obvious explanation is: 'by the look on her face'. But the look on Maria's face only tells Marvin what she thinks if he believes, and is justified in believing, that she looks that way because she thinks the speaker is wrong, and not because she is thinking of something else that has the same effect on her or because she is suffering from indigestion. So Marvin's justification for believing P comes in part from his justification for believing at least one other proposition, namely, the proposition (Q) that Maria looks that way because she thinks the speaker is mistaken. The role of Q isn't just to allow Marvin to *form* the belief that P. Q is helping to *justify* Marvin's belief that P. If Marvin isn't justified in believing Q then he isn't justified in believing P.

In this case, as in the case of my knowing by your words where you think Napoleon was born, the inferential justification that is at issue is best understood as a form of inference to the best explanation. Marvin infers the best explanation of the look on Maria's face and his belief that P is justified if his explanation is correct. This doesn't entail that his knowledge isn't perceptual since 'perceptual' and 'inferential' aren't contraries. If you are at all tempted to say that Marvin can see what Maria thinks then you shouldn't be deterred by the fact that his knowledge is inferential. To say that Marvin 'infers' the best explanation of the look on Maria's face might make it sound as though the claim is psychological but this need not be so. To talk about inference in this case is also to say something about the epistemic structure of Marvin's justification.

I've claimed that 'perceptual' and 'inferential' aren't contraries but what is the argument for this? The simplest argument is that there are plenty of cases in which, like the case of Marvin's knowledge of Maria's state of mind, a person's knowledge appears to be both perceptual and inferential and there is no compelling reason not to take appearances at face value. As I look into the oven I can see that the food is cooked but only in the sense that I infer that it is cooked from the bubbling I can see on the surface. Why assume that we have to choose in such cases between saying that my knowledge is perceptual and saying that it is inferential? Why couldn't it be both? If it really couldn't be both then, as Harman argues, we will have a hard time accounting for the possibility of so-called perceptual 'Gettier cases' such as the following: let P be the proposition that there is a candle ahead of you. Suppose that P is true, it looks to you as if P is true, and you believe that P is true. Now imagine that there is a mirror between you and the candle and what you can actually see is the reflection of a different candle off to one side. In this case your belief that P is true and justified but not knowledge. Why not? Because you infer that it looks to you as if there is a candle ahead of you because there is a candle ahead of you, and this belief is false.²²

Such examples aren't only a problem for the view that 'S knows by P by perceiving that P' strictly entails 'S knowledge that P is non-inferential'. They also call into question the idea that 'S sees that P' more implies or presupposes that S doesn't infer that P. It's true that in cases in which S sees that P, S doesn't *merely* infer that P. As McDowell notes, when you see the pain in someone else's face you don't 'just' infer that he is in pain. Equally, when Marvin sees that Maria thinks the speaker is talking nonsense he doesn't just infer that this is what Maria thinks. But even if you don't *just* infer that someone else is in pain, or Marvin doesn't *just* infer what Maria is thinking, that doesn't mean that inference isn't involved or isn't integral to the possibility of knowing by seeing what another person is feeling or thinking. It's true that we say things like 'I didn't infer that P, I could see that P', but these ways of

talking don't point to an essential contrast between seeing and inferring. The force of 'I didn't infer that P, I could see that P' is 'I didn't *merely* infer that P, I could see that P'.²³ What is seen to be so in such cases is also what is known to be so, and known to be so by perception *and* inference.

Is perceptual knowledge always inferential? Consider the following all too familiar argument: if my justification for believing P is inferential, and so comes from the justification I have for believing another proposition Q then we will have to account for my justification for believing Q. If that justification is also inferential then it looks as though we are on the way to an unacceptable regress. Some justification must be non-inferential, so the argument goes, and perception is a source of non-inferential justification. This 'regress argument' raises many questions but for present purposes a couple of observations will have to suffice. First, even if there has to be non-inferential justification, it is a further question whether *perception* is its source.²⁴ Second, for present purposes, it doesn't matter whether perceptual knowledge is always inferential. What matters is that (a) perceptual knowledge can be inferential (b) there are compelling examples of inferential perceptual knowledge and justification, and (c) if it really possible to know by seeing what another person thinks or believes then this would be a good example of perceptual knowledge that is also inferential and, in this sense, indirect.

Where does this leave the ASYMMETRY thesis? In a great deal of trouble. We have seen, on the one hand, that knowledge of our own standing attitudes is inferential and in this sense indirect. We have also seen knowledge of what another person thinks or believes is inferential and in this sense indirect regardless of whether this knowledge is conceived of as a form of perceptual knowledge. No doubt there are narrower readings of ASYMMETRY on which it has more going for it. For example, this thesis looks more plausible if 'thoughts' are understood as occurrent, and evidence is understood as behavioural. Behavioural evidence isn't normally the basis on which one knows one's own occurrent thoughts but it is arguable

that such evidence is the basis on which one knows the occurrent thoughts of another person. The point at which things start to go badly wrong for ASYMMETRY is when the plausibility of severely restricted versions of this thesis is taken to count in favour of less restricted versions.

Do the various problems with ASYMMETRY on a wide scope interpretation show that there are no epistemologically significant differences between knowledge of one's own standing attitudes and knowledge of another person's standing attitudes? Not at all. Although we sometimes rely on behavioural evidence in knowing our own attitudes we don't normally do so, even in cases of substantial self-knowledge.²⁵ In contrast, it is arguable that reliance on behavioural evidence is far more common when it comes to knowledge of other minds. For example, behavioural evidence isn't the primary basis on which Katherine knows that *she* wants another child, but she may have rely on behavioural evidence to know that her best friend wants another child. This suggests that as far as standing attitudes are concerned the difference between self-knowledge and knowledge of others is a difference between the kinds of evidence we rely on in the two cases. It is not the difference between knowledge based on evidence and knowledge based on no evidence, or the difference between non-inferential and inferential knowledge. It is not, in this sense, a categorical difference in kind and manner. So the lesson is this: when one comes across philosophical discussions which assume without any argument that there is a fundamental asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others the best response is to ask: what asymmetry?

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¹ Like most proponents of ASYMMETRY I'm going to assume for present purposes that 'non-inferential' and 'not based on evidence' come to the same thing, though it's not clear that this assumption is correct.

² Richard Moran is someone who defends ASYMMETRY on a wide scope reading. See Moran 2001.

³ See Ryle 1949.

⁴ My discussion in this paragraph and the next is heavily indebted to Pryor 2005.

⁵ Pryor 2005.

⁶ For further discussion of Lawlor's example see Cassam 2014: 143-5.

⁷ See Cassam 2014, chapter 3, for an explanation and defence of this distinction.

⁸ See Cassam 2014: 29.

⁹ In Cassam 2014, chapter 3, I suggest several other criteria for distinguishing substantial from trivial self-knowledge.

¹⁰ Frustratingly, Evans doesn't say. The philosophical importance of answering this question has been stressed by Richard Moran.

¹¹ According to Matthew Boyle, 'only a madman could draw such an inference' (2011: 227).

¹² It's not clear why Byrne thinks that inference from a premise entails belief in that premise. People who each logic classes are constantly running inferences from premises they don't believe.

¹³ This is essentially Boyle's objection to Byrne's proposal. According to Boyle, Byrne must either represent the subject as drawing a mad inference or else 'must admit that the real basis for judging herself to believe P is not the sheer fact that P, but her tacit knowledge that she believes P' (2011: 231). But then we are no further forward in explanatory terms.

¹⁴ The peculiarity of Moran's insistence that his version of the Transparency Method makes self-knowledge come out as 'immediate' and therefore non-inferential is also noted by Alex Byrne. See Byrne 2011: 208, footnote 10.

¹⁵ For further discussion and references see Cassam 2014, chapter 10.

¹⁶ Further examples are given in Cassam 2014, chapter 11, which contains several other arguments for inferentialism.

¹⁷ Moran argues that inferential self-knowledge is aberrant in the sense that it is alienated. But since he is a proponent of TM, and TM itself only delivers inferential knowledge this can't be right. I see no connection between arriving at self-knowledge by inference and being alienated with respect to mental states that are known about in this way. For example, Katherine's knowledge of her own desire for another child is inferential but that desire might still be one she fully identifies with and regards as an expression of who she is at this point in her life. See Cassam 2014: 156-8.

¹⁸ Here I follow Harman 1965: 89 and 1973: 21.

¹⁹ The implication of this argument is that my knowledge of your belief is inferential both psychologically and epistemologically.

²⁰ Another classic defence of the idea that our knowledge of other minds is perceptual rather than inferential is Dretske 1973. See also Wikforss 2004, Cassam 2007, Gomes 2009, Smith 2010 and McNeill 2012.

²¹ But see the discussion in Dretske 1973. Dretske argues that whether we can see other peoples' feelings and thoughts is 'irrelevant' (1973: 39) to whether it is possible to see what they think or how they feel.

²² This is Harman's proposal and example. See Harman 1973: 174. Harman's discussion assumes a 'no false lemmas' condition on knowledge.

²³ Here I again follow Harman. See his 1973: 177-8.

²⁴ If I infer that it looks to me as if there is a candle before me because there is a candle before me where does my justification for believing that it looks to me as if there is a candle before me? Not from another belief presumably, but I also don't perceive that it looks to me as if there is a candle before me. My justification in this case is neither inferential nor perceptual.

²⁵ For more about this see Cassam 2014, chapter 13.