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The Basis of Self-Knowledge

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Abstract I discuss the claim what makes self-knowledge epistemologically distinctive is the fact that it is baseless or groundless. I draw a distinction between evidential and explanatory baselessness and argue that self-knowledge is only baseless in the first of these senses. Since evidential baselessness is a relatively widespread phenomenon the evidential baselessness of self-knowledge does not make it epistemologically distinctive and does not call for any special explanation. I do not deny that self-knowledge is epistemologically distinctive. My claim is only that talk of its evidential baselessness is insufficient to account for its epistemological distinctiveness.

1

A familiar claim is that self-knowledge has a special authority.¹ In the Cartesian tradition the idea that self-knowledge has a special authority has been understood as the idea that knowledge of our own thoughts and sensations is infallible or incorrigible.² More recently, however, philosophers have become increasingly sceptical about the idea that much of our self-knowledge enjoys such Cartesian epistemic privileges. Instead, it has been proposed that what gives self-knowledge its special authority and makes it epistemologically distinctive is the fact that it is

¹ See for example, McDowell (2006, p. 92): ‘Self-knowledge has a special authority’.

² There is much more on the transition from a Cartesian conception of self-knowledge to one than places the emphasis on baselessness or ‘immediacy’ in Moran (2001, pp. 1–35).

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*baseless or groundless.*³ There is more than one way of understanding the notion of baselessness but the standard account says that what it is for an item of knowledge to be baseless is for it not to be based on any evidence. One question, therefore, is whether it is true that any of our self-knowledge is baseless in this or any other philosophically interesting sense. For example, is my knowledge that I am now in pain or that I see a computer screen before me really baseless?

Even if some self-knowledge turns out to be baseless a further question is whether this makes it fundamentally different from other kinds of knowledge.⁴ That depends on which other kinds of knowledge self-knowledge is being compared with. Suppose that I know that I am in pain and that you also know that I am in pain. One thought is that while *my* knowledge that I am in pain is baseless *your* knowledge of the same fact couldn't be baseless. You need evidence, I don't. Another contrast might be between a person's self-knowledge and her knowledge of non-psychological reality. If I know that the laptop on which I am typing these words is dusty then this is knowledge of an aspect of non-psychological reality. One suggestion might be that authoritative self-knowledge is baseless in a way that this kind of non-psychological knowledge could not be.

Is it true that self-knowledge is different in these ways from knowledge of other minds and from non-psychological knowledge? Clearly, this question doesn't arise if it is not true that any self-knowledge is baseless. In that case, the fact that knowledge of others and non-psychological knowledge isn't baseless either wouldn't be enough to make self-knowledge epistemologically distinctive. Another way in which baseless self-knowledge might turn out not to be distinctive is if there are examples of baseless knowledge of others or baseless non-psychological knowledge. This would still leave it open that self-knowledge is epistemologically distinctive in other ways but just pointing out that it is baseless wouldn't be enough to pin down what is special about it.

I'm going to argue as follows: first, in Sect. 2, I'm going to distinguish between two notions of baselessness, *evidential* and *explanatory* baselessness. To make this distinction vivid, and prepare the ground for what comes later, I will argue that some of our perceptual and testimonial knowledge of non-psychological reality is evidentially baseless without being explanatorily baseless. Next, in Sect. 3, I will argue that while some self-knowledge is evidentially baseless, none of it is explanatorily baseless. The controversial claim here is the denial of explanatory baselessness. The implication of this denial, together with the suggestion that some perceptual knowledge is evidentially baseless, is that the notion of baselessness is of limited help in understanding what makes self-knowledge special. This is not to say

³ McDowell claims that 'the special authority of self-knowledge consists in its not needing a basis' (2006, p. 92). Wright describes phenomenal avowals—self-ascriptions like 'I have a headache' as groundless. That is, 'the demand that somebody produces reasons or corroborating evidence for such a claim about themselves—"How can you tell?"—is always inappropriate. There is nothing they might reasonably be expected to say. In that sense, there is nothing upon which such claims are based' (1998, p. 14).

⁴ Why only some self-knowledge? Because even those who claim that the special authority of self-knowledge consists in its being baseless are prepared to grant that some self-knowledge is not baseless. For example, they do not deny that sometimes one relies on evidence to determine what one believes or desires. See Wright (1998).

that self-knowledge is not epistemologically distinctive or that it is sensible to regard it as a form of perceptual knowledge. The claim is, rather, that what makes self-knowledge special can't just be its supposed baselessness. On one conception of baselessness self-knowledge isn't baseless while on another it is far from unique in being baseless.⁵

Even if the fact that some self-knowledge is evidentially baseless isn't sufficient to distinguish it from all non-psychological knowledge isn't it at least sufficient to distinguish it from knowledge of other minds? When self-knowledge is described as having a special authority isn't the key contrast supposed to be with knowledge of other minds rather than with non-psychological knowledge? Even if this suggestion is correct, it assumes that knowledge of other minds is not evidentially baseless. In Sect. 4 I will scrutinize this assumption. If even knowledge of other minds can be evidentially baseless then this puts further pressure on the idea that what makes self-knowledge special is the fact that some of it is evidentially baseless. Clearly, self-knowledge is epistemologically very different from knowledge of other minds but a better account is needed of what this difference consists in.

Those who see authoritative self-knowledge as baseless often go on to ask how this is possible.⁶ What gives this 'how possible' question its bite is the assumption that it is a general truth about knowledge that it always requires a basis. If this assumption is correct then how can self-knowledge be baseless? Indeed, if so-called self-knowledge is really baseless can it even be correct to think of it as a kind of *knowledge*? Given the distinction between the two notions of baselessness we can now see how to approach these issues. I will argue in Sect. 5 that if the question is: 'How is it possible for self-knowledge to be explanatorily baseless?' then the short answer is 'It isn't possible'. If, on the other hand, the question is: 'How is it possible for self-knowledge to be evidentially baseless?' then the way to deprive this question of some of its force is to point out that self-knowledge isn't unique in being evidentially baseless. If evidential baselessness is a relatively commonplace phenomenon then the evidential baselessness of some self-knowledge doesn't call for any *special* explanation.

2

Here is one attempt to capture the sense in which some self-knowledge is, in my terms, evidentially baseless:

⁵ It might be suggested that the relevant difference between self-knowledge and non-psychological knowledge is that the former, but not the latter, is *typically* baseless. One problem with this is that it is false that self-knowledge is typically explanatorily baseless. Indeed, as argued below, it is doubtful that any knowledge is baseless in this sense. What seems right is that self-knowledge is typically baseless in the evidential sense. It is much less plausible that non-psychological knowledge is typically evidentially baseless so this might be a way of distinguishing self-knowledge from non-psychological knowledge in respect of baselessness. On the other hand, this manoeuvre won't serve to distinguish self-knowledge from many specific kinds of non-psychological knowledge. For example, perceptual knowledge is non-psychological but typically evidentially baseless.

⁶ See, for example, Wright (1998, p. 22).

[A] person can know of his belief or feeling without observing his behaviour, or indeed without appealing to evidence of any kind at all.... The claim that introspective awareness is not inferred from observational evidence is what is usually intended by the claim that it is "immediate". As a claim about the mode of awareness, this just means that such judgements are not inferred from anything epistemically more basic (Moran 2001, p.10).

The basic contrast here is between evidence-mediated knowledge and knowledge that is not so mediated. Evidentially baseless knowledge is knowledge that is not evidence-mediated, that is, knowledge that is not inferred from observational evidence or, indeed, from anything epistemically more basic. But can there be knowledge that is *based* on observational evidence without being *inferred* from observational evidence? If so then one might be reluctant to classify it as evidentially baseless even if it is not, in Moran's sense, evidence-mediated. The significance of this issue will become clearer shortly. For the moment, however, let us ignore this potential complication and continue to work with the idea that evidentially baseless knowledge is knowledge that is not inferred from anything epistemically more basic.

There is another use of the term 'basis' on which to talk about the basis on which one knows that P is to talk about how one knows that P . For example, a statement of the basis on which I know that Quine was born in Akron will explain how I know that he was born in Akron. Suppose I know that he was born in Akron because I read it in his autobiography. This will then count as the basis on which I know that Quine was born in Akron. On this account, to know that P *baselessly* would be to know that P without there being any substantive explanation of one's knowledge that P , that is, without there being anything illuminating that can be said in answer to the question "How do you know?". Call this *explanatory* baselessness.

The idea that some of our knowledge is baseless can be understood as the idea that some of it is explanatorily baseless. For example, it might be held that my knowledge that I am in pain is baseless in this sense because there is nothing illuminating that can be said about how I know. Indeed, it has been claimed that the question "How do you know that you are in pain?" is actually unintelligible.⁷ If this is so then it is difficult to see how there can be anything that deserves to be called the 'basis' on which I know that I am in pain. If my knowledge had a basis then presumably it would be possible to explain how I know by reference to it.

What, then, is the difference between evidential and explanatory baselessness? Consider, again, my knowledge that Quine was born in Akron. We have already seen that if I know that he was born in Akron because I read it in his autobiography then my knowledge isn't explanatorily baseless. There is a perfectly good answer to the question 'How do you know that Quine was born in Akron?'. But is my knowledge evidentially baseless? Is it inferred from anything more basic?⁸ It might be suggested that there is something more basic from which my knowledge is

⁷ This is Hampshire's (1979, pp. 282–283) view.

⁸ I take it that one proposition P is epistemically more basic than another proposition Q just if one can know or have a justification for believing that P without knowing or having a justification for believing that Q , but not vice versa.

inferred, namely, my knowledge or justified belief that Quine attests in his autobiography to his having been born in Akron. More generally, it might be held that testimonial knowledge is always at least implicitly inferential and therefore not evidentially baseless. However, as Audi correctly observes, testimony is:

a source of *basic* knowledge, that is, knowledge not grounded in other knowledge (or in justified belief of some other proposition). My knowledge that *P* need not be inferred from any premises nor based on a belief that *P* was attested to. The point that testimony is a source of basic knowledge distinguishes it from other nonbasic sources of knowledge such as inference.... The point also helps to explain why it is natural to consider testimony a basic source of knowledge, for it is typical of such sources that they yield noninferential knowledge (2002, pp. 79–80).

If testimony yields non-inferential knowledge then this supports the idea that my knowledge that Quine was born in Akron is, at least in Moran's sense, evidentially baseless.⁹ Since it isn't explanatorily baseless the lesson is that evidential baselessness isn't the same as explanatory baselessness. A piece of knowledge can be baseless in the first of these senses without being baseless in the second.

The claim that testimonial knowledge is non-inferential is highly controversial so it would strengthen the argument for separating the two notions of baselessness if it were possible to find less controversial cases of evidential without explanatory baselessness. Take my perceptual knowledge that the laptop on which I am writing these words is dusty. If any knowledge is non-inferential then perceptual knowledge is non-inferential.¹⁰ My knowledge that the laptop is dusty isn't inferred from anything epistemically more basic, and so is evidentially baseless, but isn't explanatorily baseless. There is a simple answer to the question 'How do you know

⁹ It might be objected that while testimonial knowledge is not inferential in Moran's sense there are other senses in which it is inferential. It might be argued, for example, that one can only acquire knowledge by testimony if one believes that one's informant is reliable, and that this makes testimonial knowledge inferential even if the latter belief is not consciously employed as a premise in reasoning. The correct response to this objection is to argue that the relevant condition on the acquisition of testimonial knowledge is that one does *not* believe, and has no reason to believe, that one's informant is *unreliable*. The fact that one's knowledge depends on the *absence* of a certain belief is not sufficient to make one's knowledge inferential. Indeed, even if a particular belief, say the belief that *P*, depends for its justification on the *presence* of some further belief, say the belief that *Q*, it *still* does not follow that the belief that *P* is inferentially justified. It depends on what kind of dependence is at issue, specifically, on whether one's justification for believing that *P* comes from one's justification for believing that *Q* or whether one's justifiably believing that *Q* is just a background enabling condition for one to be justified in believing that *P*. In the latter case, one's justification for believing that *P* might still qualify as non-inferential.

¹⁰ The perceptual knowledge that is at issue here is perceptual knowledge of non-psychological reality. The thesis that this kind of knowledge is non-inferential might be disputed on the grounds that its acquisition depends on the premise that one's senses are not malfunctioning. My response to this worry is the same as my response in note 9 to the parallel worry about testimonial knowledge: the acquisition of perceptual knowledge depends on one *not* believing that one's senses are malfunctioning. Philosophers used to think that perceptual knowledge is inferred from non-inferentially known premises about one's own sensory experiences. As Stroud has convincingly argued (see Stroud 2000) this makes it impossible to see how perceptual knowledge is possible at all. If perceptual knowledge is possible at all then it must be non-inferential.

that your laptop is dusty?'. The simple answer is 'I can see that it is'.¹¹ This is not to say that in order to have perceptual knowledge one must know that perception is the source of one's knowledge. Perhaps some non-human animals have perceptual knowledge of the environment without knowing how they know that perception is the source of their knowledge. The point is, rather, that if a creature's knowledge of some proposition is perceptual then there is an answer to the question 'How does it know?', whether it knows the answer or not.

A natural response to these arguments would be to protest that what they show is not that perceptual and testimonial knowledge are evidentially baseless but that Moran's account of evidential baselessness is no good. After all, if I know that my laptop is dusty by seeing that it is then I surely do have and depend on evidence that my laptop is dusty, the evidence of my senses. This is so whether or not one wants to say that perceptual knowledge is inferential. Equally, if I know that Quine was born in Akron by reading that he was in his autobiography then there is an obvious sense in which I have and depend on evidence for the claim that Quine was born in Akron, regardless of whether my knowledge is inferential. My evidence is Quine's autobiography or, if one prefers, what he says in his autobiography.

This response brings into focus a crucial question that I have so far avoided: what exactly is 'evidence'? This is a large question to which there isn't a quick or simple answer but it is surely right that 'the root notion of evidence is that of something which serves as a reliable sign, symptom, or mark of that which it is evidence of' (Kelly 2006). It is in this sense of 'evidence' that, say, smoke is evidence of fire or that Koplik's spots are evidence of measles. More precisely, if *A* is evidence of *B* then *A* indicates *B*; that is, given *A* one might reasonably expect *B*.¹² *A* can, in this sense, indicate *B* or be evidence for *B* without guaranteeing or entailing *B*. Smoke can be evidence of fire even if, contrary to the old saying, there can be smoke without fire.

Now consider the case in which I see, and thereby know, that my laptop is dusty. The first thing to notice is that I cannot see that my laptop is dusty if it isn't dusty. The point is that this kind of seeing is *factive*. If it cannot fail to be the case that *P* when one sees that *P* then one might conclude that seeing that *P* doesn't just indicate that *P*. It doesn't just indicate that *P* or provide one with evidence that *P* because it entails *P*. This is what Austin (1962, p. 115) is getting at in his remark that when a pig comes into view 'its coming into view doesn't provide me with evidence that it's a pig, I can now just see that it is, the question is settled'. Buckets of pig food would be evidence of porcine presence because the presence of buckets of pig food indicates the presence of a pig. Yet pig food can be present without any pig being present. In contrast, the visible presence of a pig isn't an *indication* of its presence and does not leave it open that there is no pig in the vicinity. One might say, therefore, that when one knows that *P* by seeing that *P* one's knowledge is evidentially baseless even if it is based on observation. Being based on observation,

¹¹ How can the simple answer be informative given that to see that *P* is to know that *P*? Because the answer identifies one's specific way of knowing. The fact that 'I see that *P*' entails 'I know that *P*' is not a reason for thinking that 'I see that *P*' is not a satisfactory answer to 'How do you know that *P*?'. How would an answer that leaves it open that one doesn't know that *P* be any more satisfactory?

¹² This is roughly the notion of indication that figures in Travis (2004).

which observational or perceptual knowledge must be, isn't the same as being based on observational *evidence*.

One might object that this attempt to argue for the evidential baselessness of perceptual knowledge fails because when *A* guarantees *B* that is merely a limiting case of *A* indicating *B*. From the fact that *A* can be evidence of *B* without guaranteeing *B* it doesn't follow that if *A* guarantees *B* then *A* isn't evidence of *B*. There is, after all, such a thing as conclusive evidence. It is at this point that we begin to see the force of the idea that knowledge that is based on observational evidence is inferential knowledge. For cases in which *A* is an indication of *B* are ones in which, to know of the presence of *B* on the basis of one's awareness of *A*, one needs to *conclude* or *infer* that *B* on the basis of *A*. This is so even if *A* guarantees *B*. For example, even if Koplik's spots are a sure sign of measles, to know that someone has measles on the basis that they have Koplik's spots is still to infer or conclude that they have measles on the basis of their Koplik's spots. The resulting knowledge is not evidentially baseless and would not be available to someone who doesn't know what Koplik's spots are or realize that they indicate measles.

It is in this respect that perceptual knowledge is different from paradigm cases of knowledge based on evidence. When one knows that *P* by seeing that *P* one does not infer or conclude that *P* on the basis of what one sees. The same goes for testimonial knowledge. I don't infer that Quine was born in Akron on the basis of what he says in his autobiography despite the fact that reading in his autobiography that he was born in Akron doesn't entail that he was born in Akron. What is so special about perceptual knowledge, and gives it a stronger claim than testimonial knowledge to be regarded as evidentially baseless, is that when one sees that *P* what one sees is nothing short of the fact that *P*. In this case, the question is settled *and* it is settled without the need for any inference. Furthermore, the sense in which the question whether *P* is settled by seeing that *P* is different from the sense in which the question whether someone has measles is settled by observing that they have Koplik's spots. Having Koplik's spots might be a sure sign of measles but 'S has Koplik's spots' doesn't entail 'S has measles'. The connection is nomological rather than logical, unlike the connection between seeing that *P* and *P*.

To sum up, the claim that perceptual knowledge can be evidentially baseless is supported by several different considerations: (1) when one sees that *P* the question whether *P* is settled, (2) seeing that *P* entails *P*, and (3) when one knows that *P* by seeing that *P* one does not infer or conclude that *P*. On its own, (1) is insufficient to distinguish perceptual knowledge from evidence-based knowledge since one can have evidence for *P* that settles the question whether *P*. In contrast, (2) and (3) imply that seeing that *P* is not appropriately described as providing one with evidence for *P* or as indicating that *P*. That is why the resulting knowledge is evidentially baseless even though it clearly isn't explanatorily baseless.

3

Now consider my knowledge that I am in pain. Is this knowledge evidentially baseless? Suppose that the basis on which I know that I'm in pain is that I can feel

that I am. Does this supply me with evidence that I am in pain? Surely not. Feeling that I'm in pain doesn't leave it open whether I am in pain. 'I can feel that I'm in pain' entails that I'm in pain. Indeed, it entails that I know that I am in pain. In Williamson's terminology, 'can feel that P ' is, like 'sees that P ', a *factive mental state operator*.¹³ Finally, when I feel that I'm in pain I do not infer or conclude that I'm in pain. My knowledge that I am in pain is non-inferential. In each of these respects, my knowledge that I'm in pain is evidentially baseless.

What about other kinds of self-knowledge? I don't know that I believe that Quine was born in Akron by feeling that I do (at least not in the sense in which I feel that I'm in pain) and sometimes one does establish what one believes on the basis of evidence. But whatever account is ultimately given of knowledge of one's thoughts or beliefs it must respect the point that 'we usually know what we believe (and desire and doubt and intend) without needing or using evidence (even when it is available)' (Davidson 1994, p. 44). Like knowledge of one's sensations, knowledge of one's propositional attitudes is typically evidentially baseless.

None of this should be especially controversial. A much more tricky issue is whether authoritative self-knowledge is *explanatorily* baseless. If it is, then this will be what distinguishes the epistemology of self-knowledge from, say, the epistemology of perceptual knowledge. The case for viewing knowledge of one's own sensations as explanatorily baseless is this: when I know that I am in pain, there is no answer to the question 'How do you know?'. According to Hampshire, for example, 'he who reports that he is currently experiencing a certain sensation cannot intelligibly be asked how he knows it' since this is one of those occasions on which the question 'How do you know?' is 'at least absurd, and perhaps unintelligible, as a question' (1979, pp. 282–283). This is a reflection of the fact that there is no such thing as 'the way in which one knows that one is in pain' and therefore no substantive explanation of one's knowledge. That is why this kind of knowledge is explanatorily baseless.

This argument for the explanatory baselessness of knowledge of one's own sensations is difficult to reconcile with the argument for its evidential baselessness. The latter argument relied on the possibility of knowing that one is in pain by feeling that one is. If this is correct then doesn't it follow that there is a substantive explanation of one's knowledge? Feeling that one is in pain is a way of knowing that one is, and far from being absurd or unintelligible the question 'How do you know that you are in pain?' has an obvious and straightforward answer: 'I can feel it' or 'I can feel that I am'. Given that this is so, there is no question of one's knowledge of one's own sensations coming out as an explanatorily baseless.

Those who want to defend the claim of explanatory baselessness will need to dispute the suggestion that it is really an explanation of my knowledge that I am in pain to say that I can feel that I am. One might argue, for example, that this is no explanation because, 'being in pain and feeling in pain are one and the same thing' (Shoemaker 1994, p. 128). In general terms the worry is that one cannot know that P

¹³ Factive mental state operators (FMSOs) like 'sees that' denote states, ascribe propositional attitudes to subjects, and are semantically unanalysable. In addition, if Φ is an FMSO then from ' $S \Phi$ s that P ' one may infer ' P ' and ' S knows that P '. For the idea that 'can feel' or 'could feel' is an FMSO, see Williamson (2000, p. 36).

by its being the case that P .¹⁴ Hence, if being in pain and feeling pain really are the same thing then feeling pain can't be regarded a way of knowing that one is in pain; it is not an explanation of one's knowledge to say that one can feel that one is in pain. Indeed, this is precisely where the analogy with perceptual knowledge breaks down. 'I can see that it is' is a genuine explanation of my knowledge that my laptop is dusty because seeing that my laptop is dusty and its being dusty are not one and the same thing. My laptop can be dusty whether or not I can see that it is. It is because there is, in this sense, some ontological distance between seeing that P and its being the case that P that seeing that P can be a way of knowing that P . Since there is no ontological distance between being in pain and feeling pain, feeling pain cannot be seen as a mode of epistemic access to one's pain or as something that can properly be appealed to in order to *explain* one's knowledge.

There are several ways of dealing with this argument. One would be to dispute the 'ontological distance' requirement on explanations of knowledge. Another possibility would be to question whether being in pain and feeling pain are one and the same thing.¹⁵ For present purposes, however, a much simpler point will suffice. The simpler point is that ' S feels pain' is not equivalent to ' S can feel that she is in pain'.¹⁶ Unlike the former, the latter ascribes a propositional attitude to S . To feel that one is in pain one needs the concept *pain*. To feel pain one does not need this concept. Presumably, there are many non-human animals that can feel pain but cannot feel *that* they are in pain. The latter is a more advanced cognitive achievement, just as seeing that my laptop is dusty is a more advanced cognitive achievement than seeing my dusty laptop.

If this is correct, then whatever one thinks about the relationship between being in pain and feeling pain, one should resist the suggestion that being in pain and feeling that one is in pain are one and the same thing. And if they are not one and the same thing then this leaves it open that feeling that one is in pain is genuinely a way of knowing that one is in pain. To put it another way, a sensible ontological distance requirement on knowledge explanations will not prevent 'I can feel that I am' from counting as a genuine explanation of my knowledge that I am in pain. So there is no question of my knowledge that I am in pain coming out as explanatorily baseless. The very same considerations that make it plausible that this kind of self-knowledge is evidentially baseless also make it plausible that it is not explanatorily baseless.

The idea that knowledge of one's own sensations is explanatorily baseless leads Wittgenstein to conclude that 'It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know that I am in pain' (1978, p. 246). The point of this remark is that if S

¹⁴ Thanks to Paul Snowdon for formulating this worry.

¹⁵ See Grahek (2007) for a defence of the idea that there is a distinction between feeling pain and being in pain. Grahek's discussion builds on some remarks in Dennett (1981).

¹⁶ As Dretske points out, there is a difference between awareness of an armadillo, a thing, and awareness of the fact that it is an armadillo. The latter form of awareness is conceptual in a way that the former is not. If one fails to distinguish awareness of x with awareness that it is x 'one will mistakenly infer that simply being in pain (requiring, as I am assuming, awareness of the pain) requires awareness of the fact that one is in pain and, therefore, knowledge. Not so. I am assuming that if it really hurts, you must feel pain, yes, and feeling the pain is awareness of it, but this is the kind of awareness (thing-awareness) one can have without fact-awareness of what one is aware of—that it is pain—or that one is aware of it' (Dretske 2005, p. 60). My discussion is indebted to Dretske's.

knows that *P* there must be an answer to the question ‘How does *S* know?’ If there is no answer then, according to Wittgenstein, we should be sceptical about the idea that *S* genuinely knows that *P*; it can’t be that *S* ‘just knows’ without there being some specific way in which he knows. By identifying feeling that one is in pain as a genuine way of knowing that one is in pain one eases Wittgenstein’s worry about whether I can be said to know that I am in pain. On the other hand, the epistemology of self-knowledge, or at least of this particular form of self-knowledge, no longer looks very different from the epistemology of perceptual knowledge. Since we have evidential without explanatory baselessness in both cases we still lack an account of what makes self-knowledge epistemologically distinctive.

What about other kinds of self-knowledge, such as knowledge of one’s desires and other propositional attitudes? How do I know that I want to go to Italy this summer? One way is by deliberating, by weighing the pros and cons of going and deciding that this is what I want to do.¹⁷ If this is how I know that I want to go to Italy then my knowledge is not explanatorily baseless; the question ‘how do you know?’ has an answer. Clearly, a different account will need to be given of knowledge of other desires, desires that finds oneself with rather than ones that one arrives at by deliberation. Knowledge of one’s own beliefs is also a different matter. The question ‘How do you know that you believe that Quine was born in Akron?’ is hard to answer because we lack a ready-made word for the procedures or mechanisms that we employ to arrive at knowledge of our beliefs. In this respect, as well as others, knowledge of our propositional attitudes is different from knowledge of sensations like pain. But from the fact that we lack a ready-made word for our ways of knowing we should not conclude that there are no such ways. A plausible hypothesis about knowledge of our own beliefs is that we have and rely on monitoring mechanisms to determine what we believe.¹⁸ The resulting knowledge is not explanatorily baseless just because the nature of these mechanisms isn’t transparent to us.

To say that the epistemology of self-knowledge doesn’t look very different from the epistemology of perceptual knowledge in respect of the issue of baselessness is not to say that there aren’t other important differences between them or to imply that self-knowledge is a form of perceptual knowledge. Feeling that I’m in pain might be different in all sorts of epistemologically interesting respects from seeing that my laptop is dusty but the point is that we will not capture these differences just by focusing on the issue of baselessness. It is perhaps for this reason that more traditional accounts of what makes self-knowledge special have focused on its alleged infallibility or incorrigibility. Yet the suggestion that these are the epistemic

¹⁷ This is Hampshire’s account. He describes a case in which a man who doesn’t know whether he wants to go to Italy moves from his initial state of uncertainty to his knowing what he wants. According to Hampshire, the man’s process of thought is ‘properly characterized as deliberation’, where ‘deliberation is a process of thought that begins with uncertainty and is aimed at some conclusion, accepted by the subject, of the form “This is to be true of me”’ (1979, p. 289). Deliberating is a way of coming to know what one’s belief, desire or intention is to be.

¹⁸ For more on this hypothesis see Nichols and Stich (2003). They defend a monitoring mechanism (MM) theory of self-awareness the core claim of which is that ‘the MM is a distinct mechanism that is specialized for detecting our own mental states’ (2003, p. 163).

privileges that make self-knowledge special faces some serious challenges, the main one being that much less of our self-knowledge is infallible or incorrigible than has traditionally been supposed.

Where do we go from here? So far I have concentrated on the relationship between self-knowledge and some forms of non-psychological knowledge. What about the epistemological differences between self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds? This question is worth asking given that, as suggested above, those who talk about the special authority of self-knowledge seem especially concerned to distinguish self-knowledge from knowledge of other minds. The question is whether it would be correct to claim that it is the fact that some self-knowledge is evidentially baseless that at least serves to distinguish it from our knowledge of other minds if not from all of our non-psychological knowledge.

4

According to McDowell ‘what is special about self-knowledge is how it differs from knowledge of the same facts that others can have’ (2006, p. 92). Take the fact that I see that *P*. Knowledge on the part of others of this fact ‘has to be mediated by awareness of one’s behaviour, facial expressions and so on’ (*ibid.*). My knowledge of the same fact is not so mediated. This is not to say that I am infallible as to whether I see that *P* or that I am always better placed than others to know that I see that *P*. The claim is that for me to know that I see that *P* I don’t need to ‘advert to the sort of “outer” manifestations others need to advert to’ (*ibid.*). The same goes for knowledge of one’s thoughts and sensations. To know what I am feeling or thinking other people must rely on awareness of my facial expressions and behaviour. In this sense their knowledge is not evidentially baseless. To the extent that I know what I am feeling or thinking without relying on awareness of my facial expressions or behaviour my knowledge of the same facts is evidentially baseless.

On one reading, to say that knowledge of other minds has to be mediated by awareness of behaviour and facial expressions is to imply that the resulting knowledge is inferential. Yet it also needs to be acknowledged that our access to other minds can be much more direct.¹⁹ McDowell himself makes this point when he writes that sometimes what warrants the assertion that another person is in pain is

the detectable obtaining of the circumstance of that person’s being in pain: an instance of a kind of circumstance—another person’s being in pain—that is available to awareness, in its own right, and not merely through behavioural proxies, on some occasions, including this one, although, on other occasions, the obtaining of other instances can be quite beyond detection.... [W]e 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 he perceives’ (1998a, pp. 304–305).

¹⁹ I defend this view at much greater length in Cassam (2007a, pp. 155–187).

In such cases, it will be inappropriate to describe one's knowledge as 'mediated' by awareness of outer manifestations. Moreover, if one can literally *see* that someone else is in pain or sees that *P* then the resulting knowledge is evidentially baseless in the sense in which a lot of ordinary perceptual knowledge is evidentially baseless. That is, (1) when one sees that someone else is in pain that settles the question, (2) seeing that another person is in pain entails that he is in pain and (3) when one knows that another person is in pain by seeing that he is one does not infer or conclude that he is pain. True, if one were not aware of another's behaviour one would not be able to see that they are in pain but the role of awareness of behaviour in such circumstances is not to supply one with *signs* or *evidence* of another's state of mind. The position is rather that sometimes one's behaviour, facial expressions and so forth make one's state of mind *manifest* to others.

The point is this: starting from the idea that what is special about self-knowledge is how it differs from knowledge of the same facts that others can have it might be tempting to argue that the key difference is that self-knowledge is always non-inferential whereas knowledge of other minds is always inferential. However, in the first place it is false that self-knowledge is always non-inferential. Sometimes one does rely on evidence to figure out what one believes or desires.²⁰ Perhaps knowledge of one's own sensations is always non-inferential and, in this sense, evidentially baseless but it is not a general truth about self-knowledge that it is evidentially baseless. We have now seen that it is also not a general truth about our knowledge of others that it is always inferential. Given that knowledge of other minds can be evidentially baseless it cannot be that what makes self-knowledge epistemologically distinctive is the fact that it is evidentially baseless. Once again, evidential baselessness has turned out to be a more commonplace phenomenon than is commonly supposed.

One way of countering this argument would be to dispute the suggestion that our access to other minds is ever perceptual. Compare what happens when I "see" that some other person *S* is in pain with what happens when I see that my laptop is dusty. In the latter case, I see the laptop and I see the dust. In the former case I see *S* but not his pain. All I can literally see are signs or symptoms of his pain, from which I infer that he is in pain. Perhaps the inference is so rapid and natural that I don't notice it but my knowledge that *S* is in pain is still inferential. The objection, then, is that talk of seeing that *S* is in pain is just a figure of speech, a result of what Mill identifies as the tendency to suppose that 'we see and feel what in reality we infer' (1891, p. 4). Strictly speaking, knowledge of other minds is never evidentially baseless.

This objection assumes that in order to see an object *b* as having some property *P* it is necessary to see both the object and to see the property in question. Is this principle correct? Consider this example from Dretske: *b* is a piece of hot metal and I see that *b* is hot by seeing it glow in the manner characteristic of hot metal. I see and thereby know that *b* is hot to the extent that (1) I see *b*, (2) *b* is hot, (3) the conditions under which I see *b* are such that *b* wouldn't look the way it looks unless it was hot, and (4) believing that the conditions are as just described I take *b* to be

²⁰ This point is emphasized in Ryle (1994).

hot. Yet even though I see that b is hot I don't see b 's heat, whatever that would mean. So here is a case in which I see that b is P without seeing both the object and the property.²¹

Applying this to the case at hand, the idea would be that in the right circumstances I can see that S is in pain without seeing his pain. The sense in which I see that he is in pain is more like the sense in which I see that Dretske's piece of metal is hot than the sense in which I see that my laptop is dusty. Specifically, I see that S is in pain to the extent that (1) I see S , (2) S is in pain, (3) the conditions are such that S wouldn't look the way he looks now unless he was in pain, and (4) believing that the conditions are like this I take him to be in pain. I know that S is in pain by how he looks and I have in the way he looks a reason for believing that he is in pain. None of this means that my knowledge must be inferential after all since it is not being proposed that propositions about how S looks figure as premises in an inference to the conclusion that he is in pain. I can have, in the way that an object b looks, a *reason* for believing that it has some property P without concluding that b is P by some process of *reasoning*.²²

If our knowledge of other minds is sometimes non-inferential then the observation that some of our self-knowledge is non-inferential doesn't suffice to explain what makes self-knowledge special. What is true, of course, is that little, if any, of our non-inferential self-knowledge is perceptual whereas the only non-inferential knowledge of other minds that I have described is perceptual. So would it be better to say that what makes self-knowledge special is that it is *both* non-inferential and non-perceptual? Even this won't do. After all, testimonial knowledge is non-inferential and non-perceptual. Perhaps, then what makes self-knowledge special is that much of it is non-inferential, non-perceptual *and* not based on testimony. At this point, however, the claim that self-knowledge is epistemologically distinctive is in danger of reducing to the claim that self-knowledge is self-knowledge and not some other kind of knowledge. Everything is what it is and not something else. The remaining question, therefore, is whether this leaves us with any clear sense of what the philosophical problem of self-knowledge is supposed to be.

5

A traditional way of formulating philosophical problems is in the form of 'how possible' questions. So, for example, familiar philosophical questions include 'How is a priori knowledge possible?', 'How is freedom possible?', and so on. In general, we ask how knowledge of some specific kind is possible when there are factors that make it look impossible.²³ Now consider the question 'How is self-knowledge

²¹ See Dretske (1969, p. 154) and Cassam (2007a, p. 163).

²² Seeing that b is P is an example of what Dretske calls 'epistemic seeing'. This kind of seeing 'does not.... involve reasoning or inferring that b is P on the basis of what one has seen to be the case or on the basis of how something looks' (Dretske 1969, p. 159).

²³ This is the account of 'how possible' questions given in McDowell (1998b) and Cassam (2007a).

possible?'. What might lead one to ask this question? Here is one proposal: what makes self-knowledge look impossible is precisely the fact that it is baseless. On this account, the question that someone who asks how self-knowledge is possible is really asking is: how it is possible that our knowledge of our own inner lives is baseless?²⁴

McDowell's response to this question is to object that it fails to present us with any determinate philosophical difficulty 'until we have been told why it should seem impossible that self-knowledge should be special in that way' (2006, p. 89). We can see the force of this response by focusing on the suggestion that a lot of our self-knowledge is evidentially baseless. Someone who asks how evidentially baseless self-knowledge is possible needs to explain why it should seem impossible that any self-knowledge should be evidentially baseless. If we assume that in general knowledge requires evidence and that self-knowledge is unique in not requiring evidence then perhaps it would be natural to wonder how self-knowledge is possible. What would be motivating this 'how possible' question is the worry that there is a plausible requirement on knowledge from which self-knowledge is somehow exempt, and that this needs explaining. We have seen, however, that self-knowledge is not unique in being evidentially baseless and that on one fairly standard conception of evidence it does not appear to be case that knowledge must be based on evidence. To this extent we still lack a satisfactory response to McDowell's challenge. That is, we lack a clear sense of the determinate philosophical difficulty to which the question 'how is evidentially baseless self-knowledge possible?' is supposed to give expression.

Suppose, then, that instead of focusing on evidential baselessness we focus on explanatory baselessness and ask how explanatorily baseless self-knowledge is possible. Unlike the assumption that self-knowledge is evidentially baseless the assumption that it is explanatorily baseless really would raise a question about its possibility. To suppose that one's knowledge that *P* is explanatorily baseless would be to suppose that one knows that *P* without there being any way in which one knows that *P* or any substantive account of how one knows that *P*. This is hard to fathom because we tend to think of knowledge as something that one can only get by doing something, for example by seeing or proving or remembering or whatever. Seeing that *P*, remembering that *P*, proving that *P* and so on are ways of knowing that *P*, and it is natural to think that if one knows that *P* then there must be a specific way in which one knows that *P*.²⁵ As Williamson observes, 'a necessary condition of being in some states may be having entered them in specific ways' (2000, p. 41) and it is hard not to think of knowledge as just such a state.²⁶

To say that it is hard to think of any knowledge as explanatorily baseless is not to close off the possibility of explanatorily baseless knowledge. Nevertheless, if it looks as though a particular kind of knowledge, say self-knowledge, is explanatorily

²⁴ This is roughly Crispin Wright's question in his (1998, p. 22).

²⁵ Williamson claims that 'if one knows that *A*, then there is a specific way in which one knows' (2000, p. 34). For further discussion of this claim see Cassam (2007b). Unlike Williamson, I conceive of ways of knowing as pathways to knowledge or ways of coming to know. For Williamson, 'ways of knowing' are determinates of the determinable 'knows'.

²⁶ There is a defence of this conception of knowledge in Cassam (2009).

baseless, then it is a genuine question how such a thing is possible. It is the background assumption that when one knows that *P* there is always a way in which one knows that *P* that makes this question pressing. We might end up giving up this assumption but it might also turn out that what appears to be explanatorily baseless knowledge is not genuinely so. This is how it is with self-knowledge. As we have seen, the reasons for thinking that any self-knowledge is explanatorily baseless are not good ones. In some cases, there is a clearly identifiable pathway to the knowledge in question. So, for example, feeling that one is in pain is a way of knowing that one is in pain. In other cases, the explanation of one's knowledge is less obvious but nothing has so far been said that makes it plausible that in such cases there is no explanation.

If this is right, then the appropriate response to the question 'How is explanatorily baseless self-knowledge is possible?' is to point out that there are good general reasons for thinking that such a thing is not possible and that none of the standard examples of explanatorily baseless self-knowledge is convincing. Does this mean that the possibility of self-knowledge doesn't need explaining? This doesn't follow. What is true is that, for different reasons, neither the evidential nor the explanatory baseless of self-knowledge needs explaining. Evidential baselessness isn't a special problem because it isn't just self-knowledge that is evidentially baseless. Explanatory baseless isn't a problem because it isn't a genuine phenomenon. All of this leaves it open, of course, that there are other 'how possible' questions about self-knowledge that really do need to be addressed. It remains to be seen what such questions might be and whether there are any that lack a satisfying response.

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