

DIALECTIC DELICACIES IN ARGUING FOR AGENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: An agent who acts intentionally knows what she's doing. There are reasons for thinking *that* the agent's warrant for such kind of agential knowledge isn't based on observation. *How* can an agent attain warrant for her agential knowledge non-observationally though? Recently, some philosophers have borrowed the entitlement-based approach to self-knowledge about our mind in attempt to answer this question. By highlighting the proof vs. explanation distinction, I'll argue that this approach faces a dilemma: its key argument works neither as a proper *proof* for the relevant kind of entitlement nor as a proper *explanation* of how the relevant kind of entitlement is generated.

Keywords: Anscombe; epistemic entitlement; intentional action; self-knowledge.

1. Introduction: Non-Observational Agential Knowledge

Ellie is climbing a tree to save a cat. Many onlookers are at the scene. They know that Ellie is saving the cat. As the one performing the action, of course, Ellie herself knows that she is saving the cat. It's constitutive of

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intentional actions that the person who performs an intentional action knows *that she's performing that intentional action*. Call this agential knowledge.

Intuitively, there is a difference between the agential knowledge that Ellie has and the knowledge those onlookers have about the same fact that Ellie is saving the cat. First-person and third-person knowledge about actions appear to be different in kind. This category difference manifests in multiple ways (see Lucy O'Brien 2003); I won't be able to address all of them. I'll focus on the seemingly *non-observational* character of agential knowledge that G. E. M. Anscombe (2000/1957) noted. Whereas both the onlookers and Ellie are warranted in believing that the latter is saving the cat, their *warrants* are different in kind such that Ellie's warrant is, in a unique way, not based on observation.² Ellie learns that she's saving a cat not because she observes anything. I'll refer to the claim that agential knowledge isn't based on observational warrant as the **Non-Observational Thesis**.

Let me clarify what I mean by "observation". It isn't uncommon for people to use the word "observation" only for the outer senses, thereby excluding other forms of sensory access, like proprioception and kinesthesia. But the intuition underlying the Non-Observational Thesis runs deeper. It also drives a wedge between our agential knowledge and these other senses. As John Schwenkler (2011, 146) puts it, part of the intuitive appeal to the Non-Observational Thesis is that, when we're aware of our intentional action, such awareness typically isn't acquired as information *given* to us. Agential knowledge isn't a *passive* form of knowing like observation.

One way to bring this intuition into sharper focus is to consider how the word "notice" is used. When you *see* a pen, it's appropriate to say that you *notice* a pen. When I *hear* piano music, it makes sense for me to say

² In this essay, like others in this debate, I follow Plantinga and use "warrant" as an umbrella term that covers whatever it takes to make a true belief knowledge. Whereas justification by evidence is one way to warrant a belief, we can also be warranted to form a belief simply because we are epistemically entitled to form the belief even if we have no justification (I follow Burge in reserving the word "justification" for warrant based on evidence).

that I *notice* that my neighbor is practicing the piano again. We can describe acquisition of knowledge via the outer senses as our *noticing* something.

But “notice” applies to ways of acquiring knowledge different from the outer senses. It’s sensible to say that I notice the following things: (i) that I’m tapping my foot to the beat, (ii) that I’m crossing my legs, (iii) that I feel disoriented when I look at a certain picture, etc. So, it’s also sensible to speak of (i) kinesthesia, (ii) proprioception, and (iii) introspection as us *noticing* something. *On the contrary*, we don’t say that we *notice* what we are doing intentionally.

I contend that our linguistic intuition about how to use the word “notice” mirrors the idea of a passive form of knowing. The Anscombian claim is that our agential knowledge doesn’t belong to this category. To remain faithful to this intuitive appeal of the Non-Observational Thesis, I’ll use the word “observation” to cover all passive forms of knowing, i.e., all forms of noticing: outer senses, kinesthesia, proprioception, introspection, etc.

Suppose we accept *that* agential knowledge isn’t based on observational justification. Agential knowledge, as knowledge, is still a warranted belief.³ We still need to ask: *how* is agential knowledge warranted without observational justification? An important approach to this question — defended by O’Brien (2003; 2005; 2007) and Yannig

³ By framing the issue this way (i.e., in terms of warrant for beliefs), I set aside theories about agential knowledge that aren’t belief-based. For example, Lucy Campbell (2018) believes that there are two kinds of knowledge. Whereas standardly knowledge is taken to consist in *beliefs* (with extra qualifications), Campbell argues that *intentions* can sometimes play the same knowledge-function that beliefs play and, therefore, we should think that there is another kind of knowledge consisting not in beliefs but in intentions. Since intentions aren’t warranted by observation, this kind of knowledge is non-observational. Our agential knowledge happens to be an instance of that. My concern is that, even if I grant that there are good reasons to speak of knowledge not consisting in beliefs, it’s hard to deny that agents *do* have beliefs about their intentional actions and those beliefs *do* appear to be warranted independent of observation. Unless there is compelling reason to deny that agents have belief-based agential knowledge, adding an extra kind of knowledge in the mix doesn’t seem relevant to shedding light on the nature of the belief-based one.

Luthra (2017) — is to borrow a move from agentialism about mental self-knowledge. Agentialism is a view that invokes a special form of epistemic entitlement to tell us why we have privileged knowledge *about our own mind*. Call the attempt to apply the same strategy to our first-person knowledge *about our intentional actions* the **Agency Approach**.

This essay aims to examine the key agentialist argument that defines the Agency Approach. After explaining the agentialist argument and how it's redeployed to address agential knowledge in section 2, I'll argue in sections 3 and 4 that the argument faces a dilemma once we fully appreciate the distinction between an argument that serves as a *proof* that a phenomenon exists and an argument that serves as an *explanation* of said phenomenon. In section 5, I'll explore what one needs to keep the Agency Approach alive.⁴

2. The Agency Approach

2.1 Entitlement about Our Minds

The phrase “epistemic entitlement” is used in many ways. Defenders of the Agency Approach typically rely on the notion developed by Tyler Burge. The basic idea is that some beliefs can be warranted even without justification because a person, for some reason, is in an entitled position to hold that belief unless they have reason to doubt it. To be epistemically

⁴ The objections I'm going to offer apply to both the Agency Approach to self-knowledge about actions and agentialism concerning self-knowledge about the mind. This paper focuses on the Agency Approach, however, because the fundamental motivation for the Agency Approach and the fundamental motivation for agentialism aren't the same. Whereas the Agency Approach aims to help us understand the non-observational character of agential knowledge, I'm not 100% positive that this is also the driving force behind agentialism for mental self-knowledge. With different motivations in play, the dialectics involving the same objection may play out differently. I have no objection to extend the same points I'm going to make about the Agency Approach to agentialism more generally. But I want to limit the scope of this essay.

entitled, the person doesn't even need to have the cognitive ability to grasp the basis of their entitlement.⁵

There are different kinds of epistemic entitlement. Some say we're entitled to form perceptual beliefs, for example. Why do we have perceptual entitlement? According to Burge's (2003) view, assuming content externalism, the reason that we are so entitled is that the content of perceptual representations is in part determined by the *actual* historical correlation between the perceptual representation and what is perceived in normal circumstances.

We are also entitled to form beliefs about *some* of our other mental states; in particular, those mental states that we have control over via rational deliberation, e.g., judgments. According to Burge, the entitlement we have in forming beliefs about these mental states is different from our entitlement for forming perceptual beliefs. Content externalism doesn't tell us why we are entitled to form beliefs about our rationally managed mental states. For my purpose, I'm not interested in Burge's negative reason *against* conceptualizing our self-knowledge about our minds as a kind of perceptual knowledge.⁶ I'm only interested in his *positive* argument that purports to tell us why we are entitled to form beliefs about

⁵ Christopher Peacocke (1996) has also developed a concept of epistemic entitlement but he appears to use "entitlement" and "justification" interchangeably. And Crispin Wright's (2004) notion of epistemic entitlement applies only to an attitude he calls acceptance and not to belief. For the purpose of this paper, Wright's notion is not as directly relevant. Furthermore, since we distinguish warrant and justification (see footnote 2 for terminological clarification), "epistemic entitlement" and "externalist justification" could just be verbally different but could also be distinct and orthogonal to each other, depending on one's views on other epistemological issues. For example, suppose one defends the view that says that to *possess* a piece of evidence and justify one's belief based on it, one doesn't need to have access to the basis of the piece of evidence's justificatory force. If so, one would have externalist justification (partly depending on how one defines externalism), but not epistemic entitlement (as Burge uses the term). To focus on the Agency Approach, I'll set the internalism-externalism debate about justification aside.

⁶ For a defense for an observational/empirical model of mental self-knowledge against Burge's objection, see Gertler (2018). *Contra* Burge, for an attempt to apply the perceptual entitlement model to self-knowledge (or at least an agent's knowledge of her own *tryings*), see Peacocke (2003).

our rational mental states if they aren't understood as perceptual beliefs (see also footnote 16).

Burge states that our rational mental states are products of critical reasoning. Critical reasoning is a reflective activity. To reason critically, it isn't enough that a person reasons and entertains rational mental states in a way that matches certain principles. The person needs to have a *meta-level awareness* of her mental states and consciously shape them according to certain principles. Being critical reasoners, it must be the case that we have access to our rational mental states. Therefore, he argues, we are rationally entitled to form beliefs about our own rational mental states.⁷

2.2 From Entitlement about Our Minds to Entitlement about Our Actions

O'Brien defends a view about the epistemology of our rational mental states similar to Burge's. But she argues that these rational mental states are mental *actions*. And our entitlement to form beliefs about these rational mental states is but a special case of our entitlement to form beliefs about our actions.⁸ Consequently, she applies Burge's argument to actions to tell us why we are entitled to hold beliefs about our own intentional actions. Our intentional actions are products of our *practical reasoning* capacity. The performance of our intentional actions is guided by our deliberation of the pros and cons. For performing an action to be guided by one's reasoning, one must be able to have a meta-level belief about one's action as a choice among alternatives. That means we must have beliefs in order for our actions to count as rational and for us to count as practical agents of those actions. So, she argues, just as we are entitled to form beliefs about our rational mental states, as rational agents, we are

⁷ Other agentalist account of mental self-knowledge can be found in Richard Moran (2001) and Matthew Boyle (2009).

⁸ O'Brien is interested in self-knowledge about action generally. My focus is more restricted. I'm only interested in the epistemology of *intentional* action. This is partly because, unlike O'Brien, I'm not convinced that an agent has the same kind of privileged self-knowledge regarding her non-intentional actions.

entitled to form beliefs about our intentional actions. What's necessary for our rational agency is automatically justified; our beliefs about our own intentional actions don't need to rely on evidence for justification.

Luthra (2017) offers a similar argument to tell us why we are entitled to our agential knowledge. Luthra's presentation is particularly useful in that he brings a *normative* premise of the argument to the fore. The reason why we are entitled to our agential knowledge isn't that we do things based on practical deliberation but that we *should* do things based on practical deliberation.

Luthra states, not implausibly, that, if a norm applies to a person, that person must at least be in a position so that they can be epistemically warranted to trust, i.e., to believe, that they're acting according to said norm. If I could never be justified in believing that I'm ϕ -ing, then I couldn't possibly have obligations that I can only discharge by ϕ -ing. For example, a norm that requires one to have a heartbeat of 80 times per minute cannot apply to me right now because even if my heart were indeed beating at 80 times per minute, that wouldn't be something that I could be warranted in believing about myself right now.

Acting according to our practical reasoning — i.e., performing intentional actions — is necessary for satisfying the norms of a well-functioning practical agent that apply to us. Therefore, the fact that such norms are applicable to us entails that we have epistemic warrant to believe/trust that we are performing whatever intentional actions we perform.

To appreciate the insight of Luthra's normative construal of the argument, consider this. Perhaps O'Brien is right that having knowledge about one's intentional action as a choice among options is essential for being a genuinely practical agent who does things based on practical deliberation. But one might object that this argument simply repackages, instead of answering, the question of why we are entitled to form beliefs about our intentional actions. The question now becomes why we should think that we truly are practical agents that act based on practical deliberation. At best, O'Brien's argument proves a conditional: *if* we are practical agents that act on practical deliberation, we have epistemic

warrant to form beliefs about our intentional actions. The argument cannot rule out the possibility that our practical agency is an illusion.

Luthra's normative construal of the argument allows one to say something in response (I'm not saying this is the final word). By construing the argument normatively, the issue isn't about whether we are genuinely practical agents. The point is that we *should* be practical agents (and hence comply with the norms of practical agency) even if we aren't. Suppose Ellie is a person who doesn't think things through before she acts. Still, the norms of practical reason apply to her: she *should have* acted based on thorough deliberation. According to Luthra's version of the argument, it's the practical norms that govern how we should be practical agents, not the fact that we are practical agents, that provide the reason for why we have such epistemic warrant. Given the advantage of the normative construal, I'll focus on Luthra's version of the agentialist argument; but the following discussion equally applies to other versions.

By borrowing Burge's agentialist reasoning about our rational *mental states* to intentional *actions*, O'Brien and Luthra offer a kind of argument that purports to tell us why we are also entitled to hold beliefs about our own intentional actions. Such agentialist arguments rely on nothing that an agent observes; it appeals only to an essential link between our intentional actions and our rational agency. (They flesh out the nature of this essential link differently.) So, it would appear that we now not only know *that* we have non-observational agential knowledge, but we also know *how* we have it. Appearances, however, can be deceiving.

3. Proof or Explanation?

There is more than one sense in which an argument can tell us why something is the case. Consider the following two arguments:

Argument 1:

[1] If Joel is alive, he must have contacted Ellie.

[2] Joel has not contacted Ellie.

Therefore:

[3] Joel is dead.

Argument 2:

[4] Joel was hit heavily in the head.

[5] No one can survive a heavy hit in the head.

Therefore:

[6] Joel is dead.

There is an important difference between them. Suppose Ellie, being Joel's friend, refuses to believe that he's dead. Both arguments can be employed as an attempt to convince her to accept her friend's death — a **proof**.⁹ But there is one thing that Argument 2 can do but Argument 1 cannot. Suppose Ellie accepts that Joel is dead but demands an **explanation**; she wants to know how he died or why his death occurred. Whereas Argument 2 is an explanation (whether it's a good explanation is a different issue), Argument 1 isn't.

In the previous section, we've seen the agentialist argument which, by appealing to our rational agency, purports to tell us why we are entitled to hold beliefs about our own intentional actions. With the proof-explanation distinction in mind, a question arises: is the agentialist argument meant to prove that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge or explain why we have non-observational entitlement? The discussions about the Agency Approach haven't always been sufficiently clear about this.

On the one hand, there is dialectical reason for thinking that the agentialist argument is at least meant to **explain** where our epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge comes from. For instance, recall Burge's work on perceptual entitlement. Content externalism isn't developed to prove that we are entitled to our perceptual beliefs. The fact

⁹ By 'proof', I don't mean something that establishes a conclusion with 100% certainty, which is how the word is used occasionally. I use the word in a weaker sense. A proof doesn't need to be conclusive. I'm certainly not the only one who uses the word in this weaker sense. That's what scientists typically mean when they speak of certain scientific claims being proven. For an example of epistemologists using the word this way, see Engel (1992, 136).

that even infants have warrant for believing what they perceive is meant to do that. The crucial contribution of content externalism is to help establish an account that explains the source of said entitlement after we acknowledge that such entitlement exists. In Burge's discussion about epistemic entitlement, content externalism about perception is often juxtaposed with our agential knowledge to shed light on the two kinds of epistemic entitlement. Given this, it would make little dialectical sense if the agentialist argument were merely meant to prove that we have epistemic entitlement for self-knowledge and not also to explain the distinctive source of such entitlement.

On the other hand, some can be read as if they interpret the agentialist argument only as an attempt to prove that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge. When Setiya complains that Shoemaker (and Burge) fail to offer detail about our (groundless) agential knowledge, he writes:¹⁰

Shoemaker declines to specify the nature of this mechanism [i.e. the mechanism through which the relation between an agent's meta-level awareness about her beliefs and her rational capacity contributes to the warrant for her self-knowledge], except to say that it is "constitutive" of belief. Insisting that self-knowledge draws on capacities involved in being rational, he does not tell us how these capacities work or what they are. (2011, 181-182; this complaint is meant to apply also to Burge, see *ibid*, 181, footnote 37)

Here's how one *might* read Setiya's complaint. The agentialists offered a proof — based on the fact that we have the capacity to reason — so as to *show that* our agential knowledge must be supported by a non-observational epistemic entitlement without offering any detail to *explain how* our capacity to reason generates an epistemic entitlement for our meta-level awareness about ourselves. *If that's* the right way to interpret

¹⁰ Shoemaker's view doesn't belong to the Agency Approach. The point here is simply that Setiya thinks that the same point against Shoemaker applies to Burge. It's how Setiya understands Burge that matters here.

Setiya's complaint, he understands the agentialist argument as a proof, not an explanation.

How these philosophers read each other is hard to pin down beyond dispute. I don't intend to offer an exegesis of this literature. The bottom-line is, the literature leaves it ambiguous whether the agentialist argument is meant to be a proof or an explanation. The dialectical significance of the distinction hasn't been appreciated as much as it should be.¹¹

4. Cannot be Proof

In this section, I'll offer a reason *not* to treat the agentialist argument as a proof. But before that, let me highlight three dialectical nuances that we must keep in mind if we were to navigate around this discussion properly.

Firstly, saying that our agential knowledge is based on epistemic entitlement alone isn't yet saying that our agential knowledge is based on non-observational warrant. Some forms of epistemic entitlement are observational. The Agency Approach is about a specific form of epistemic entitlement.

Secondly, simply saying that our agential knowledge is based on non-observational warrant also falls short of saying that our agential knowledge is based on some form of epistemic entitlement. There may be different forms of non-observational warrant. For example, some believe that mathematical intuition serves as evidence for mathematical beliefs. Justification via evidence, observational or not, is by definition not epistemic entitlement. The Agency Approach is about a particular form of non-observational warrant.

Thirdly, the Agency Approach I'm interested in examining is based on the agentialist argument that appeals to an essential connection

¹¹ For readers who think that the agentialist argument is *obviously* a proof or *obviously* an explanation and that I'm gesturing at an ambiguity that doesn't exist, the truth is, different philosophers have expressed this same claim about what's 'obvious' to me from both sides.

between our self-knowledge and our rational agency. My target is rather specific. I'm not addressing just any view/argument that uses the idea of epistemic entitlement to study agential knowledge. Philosophers occasionally gesture at the fact that even infants (Burge 2003, 528) have perceptual knowledge and that even lower-level organisms (Luthra 2017, 479) can know what they are doing in order to demonstrate that perceptual knowledge and agential knowledge must be based on epistemic entitlement, not evidence. These additional arguments make no appeal to the essential connection between self-knowledge and agency; whether they succeed or not is beyond the scope of this essay.

What does a proof do? To show that *p* is the case, an argument needs to rule out some nearby possible scenarios in which *p* is *not* the case. As Littlejohn (2018) puts it, '[i]t seems that if you have any reason to believe *p* it has to rule out something to support *p*.' (534) The agentialist argument, however, doesn't rule out any significant alternatives while speaking in favor of the existence of a non-observational epistemic entitlement to form beliefs about our own actions. Let's take a closer look at Luthra's version of the argument, which I summarize as follows:

[7] The norms of practical agency apply to us.

[8] Relying on our practical capacity, i.e., performing intentional actions, is necessary for complying with the norms of practical agency.

[9] If being *F* is necessary for one to comply with the norms of practical agency, and if those norms apply to one, one must be able to know the fact that one is *F* when one is *F*.

[10] One must have epistemic warrant to believe that *p* to be able to know that *p*.

Therefore:

[11] We must have epistemic warrant to form beliefs about the intentional actions we perform.¹²

¹² This is a simplified version of Luthra's reasoning. He actually proceeds in two steps: first, he establishes the warrant for a general self-trust in one's practical ability; then, as a second step, he establishes warrant to form beliefs about our specific intentional actions

Note that [11] actually says nothing about *non-observational epistemic entitlement*. (The argument wouldn't be valid had we rephrased [11] to be about non-observational epistemic entitlement and not just about epistemic warrant in general.) As I have emphasized, saying that we have a non-observational epistemic entitlement for a belief is a much more specific claim than simply saying that we have an epistemic warrant for the belief. The claim that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement to form beliefs about our own actions is a specific claim about *how* we are warranted to form those beliefs. It's more than just a statement about the fact *that* we are epistemically warranted somehow. Notice that even those who think that agential knowledge is justified by *observation* would obviously agree *that* those beliefs are epistemically warranted (knowledge requires epistemic warrant). In this debate, no one denies that our beliefs about our intentional actions are epistemically warranted. The Agency Approach aims at making a substantive claim about the *nature* of the epistemic warrant for our agential knowledge. And the agentialist argument is presented as the centerpiece of this endeavor. But [11] is a trivial statement that doesn't contradict anyone's view in this discussion.

Surely, the premises of the agentialist argument, i.e., [7] - [10], don't appeal to our observation; the argument is a piece of *a priori* reasoning. But that alone tells us absolutely nothing about the *source* of the warrant that the conclusion (i.e., [11]) refers to. [11] doesn't even force us to accept that our agential knowledge is based on *non-observational* epistemic warrant, let alone *non-observational epistemic entitlement*.¹³ It's perfectly consistent to say both (a) that there is an *a priori* argument for *the fact that*

based on the warrant for this general self-trust. This is how Luthra separates his view from dogmatism. The details don't matter for the point I'm going to make.

¹³ Notice that I'm not saying that the advocates of the Agency Approach must rule out that observational evidence about our actions is available to us. Of course we have observational evidence for what we are doing. The point is that we don't typically form beliefs about what we are doing *based on* that observational evidence. If we interpret the agentialist argument as a proof, it's meant to convince us that our agential knowledge is typically *based on* some form of non-observational epistemic entitlement — despite observational evidence being available. But, as I try to show, the argument doesn't do that.

our beliefs about our actions are warranted *and* (b) that the warrant happens to be based on observation alone. So, the *a priori* character of the agentialist argument doesn't prove that we have any non-observational epistemic entitlement.

Since [11] says nothing specific about the source of an agent's warrant for her agential knowledge, the argument [7] - [11] doesn't rule out any relevant options in this discussion, the whole point of which is to determine the source of the warrant for agential knowledge. The issue isn't that I'm not convinced by what the argument proves if it's interpreted as a proof. By not ruling out *any* sources of epistemic warrant for our agential knowledge, the argument doesn't even *present itself* as a proof for the existence of a non-observational epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge.¹⁴

Certainly, relevant support often goes beyond agentialist arguments like [7] - [11]. Just to be absolutely clear, I'm *not* saying that agentialists did nothing to rule out alternative accounts about the nature of the epistemic warrant for our agential knowledge. They surely did. What I'm saying is that this argument, [7] - [11], i.e., the appeal to an essential connection between self-knowledge and agency, contributes nothing meaningful to that effect. What I'm trying to focus on is the appeal to the self-reflective nature of rational agency that agentialists make a big deal of. What is it supposed to accomplish? Whatever it does, it doesn't serve to prove that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge.

Various *negative arguments* are offered by agentialists to show that observation is *not* a suitable source of epistemic warrant for our typical agential knowledge. Those arguments are certainly interesting in their own right (see Gertler 2018 for a critical examination of such arguments). It's not the goal of this paper to address them. Instead, the goal of this

¹⁴ In response to my complaint that, interpreted as a proof, the agentialist argument shows nothing interesting in this debate, it's sometimes said that I have overlooked the fact that the agentialist argument is a *transcendental argument*. I must admit I fail to see the relevance of the label. If an argument is meant to be a proof that p is the case, the argument should aim to rule out some significant scenarios of not-p. If it doesn't, it isn't a proof that p is the case. Calling it a transcendental argument wouldn't help.

essay is to better understand the unique and prominent attempt to offer a *positive argument* that appeals to the fact that first-personal knowledge is essential to our rational agency in order to conclude that our agential knowledge is based specifically on non-observational epistemic entitlement. Notice that those negative arguments alone don't support the positive thesis that our agential knowledge is based on non-observational *epistemic entitlement*. As I've emphasized: saying that there is non-observational warrant is one thing, saying that there is non-observational *epistemic entitlement* is another thing — a more specific claim. It's important that we separate different arguments and judge each of them in light of their own dialectical purposes even if they are associated with the same philosophers and the same general philosophical view.

For what it's worth, even if we *combine* these negative arguments against an observation-based account of agential knowledge with the positive argument [7] - [11], interpreted as an attempt to prove that we have epistemic warrant for agential knowledge, the best that can prove is that we must *somehow* be warranted to form beliefs about our intentional actions independent of observation. This still doesn't tell us anything about this 'somehow' — the one thing that we have been trying to figure out in this discussion. We still don't have anything that serves as a proof that this non-observational warrant exists *in the form of a non-observational epistemic entitlement* specifically. For a proof like this to go through, one needs an additional premise that basically amounts to saying that if the epistemic warrant for our agential knowledge is non-observational, that epistemic warrant must be based on epistemic entitlement. Assuming an additional premise like this comes pretty close to just assuming the conclusion. The dialectic power of such a proof is therefore incredibly weak.

Setting aside the dialectical weakness of such a combined argument, the bottom line is, my previous point still stands: the contribution of the agential argument, i.e., [7] – [11], is redundant. In this debate, no one denies that we have agential knowledge (hence, no one denies *that* we have epistemic warrant for such knowledge); the issue is about the *nature* of this epistemic warrant.

What I've said so far doesn't prevent the argument from being interpreted as an *explanation* of our epistemic entitlement to form beliefs about our actions instead. This is because, unlike a proof, it's at least not obvious that explaining something must consist in ruling out alternatives.¹⁵ A mosquito bite can be offered to explain a person's death even if that doesn't rule out significant alternative scenarios, e.g., any close by possible scenarios in which he was bitten by a mosquito and remained alive. So, if Ellie wants us to *convince* her of Joel's death, citing a mosquito bite won't do. *Yet*, saying that could serve as an *explanation* of Joel's death. Perhaps, in a similar way, the agentialist argument can still be interpreted as an attempt to show how, *assuming* that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge (so we aren't trying to prove that), such epistemic entitlement *stems from* the practical norms that govern us, not from observation.

Remember our leading question: how are we warranted to form beliefs about our intentional actions non-observationally? If we have an argument to *prove that* we are non-observationally entitled to form those beliefs, that would be an answer. Would the argument be less satisfying if it could only be read as an *explanation* and not as a proof of our non-observational entitlement? Not necessarily.

If the agentialist argument is to be understood as an explanation, the dialectic should be reconstructed in the following way. We start with the fact *that* we have a non-observational warrant for agential knowledge. We just need to know *how* we come to have such a warrant. Here's a **hypothesis**: we have a non-observational warrant because we are *epistemically entitled* to form beliefs about our own actions *and* the basis of this entitlement is independent of our observation. Why should we accept this hypothesis? *Not* because of the agentialist argument (I've shown that this argument cannot help prove this hypothesis). Instead, it's because of inference to the best explanation: the truth of the hypothesis best explains

¹⁵ Of course, a lot of the detail depends on one's theory of explanation, which I'm not going to offer here. All I'm endorsing is the very weak claim that it's *not obvious* that it *needs* to rule out alternatives. For example, one might think that offering theoretical unification is a form of explanation, in which case an explanation doesn't need to be able excluding any alternatives.

why we have a non-observational warrant for agential knowledge — the fact we started from. What work does the agential argument do then? Whereas the hypothesis states that the basis of the relevant epistemic entitlement is independent of observation, it doesn't say where this epistemic entitlement comes from. Without any detail, one might find the explanation offered by the hypothesis *ad hoc* and it becomes unclear whether the hypothesis really offers a *good* explanation, let alone the best one. The agentialist argument helps by giving us a sensible story about the basis of this special epistemic entitlement the hypothesis refers to.¹⁶

5. Order of Explanation

We're finally clear what the Agency Approach is getting at: it's not to convince us that we have non-observational epistemic entitlement for our agential knowledge; instead, it's an explanation of what constitutes said epistemic entitlement. I want to present a problem for this explanation.

Let's consider Argument 1 again. Why can't it explain Joel's death? That Joel hasn't contacted Ellie is meant to be something that happens after Joel's death. There is no backward causation. So, for *p* to *causally explain* *q*, the fact *p* has to be either before or simultaneous to the fact *q*. Instead of being a peculiar feature of causal explanation, this reflects something about explanation in general: it must respect a proper *order of explanation*.

The order of explanation doesn't have to be about the timing of the explanans and of the explanandum. Here's an example about grounding

¹⁶ Once the role of the agentialist argument and the dialectical context around it are understood this way, the agentialist argument by itself is not meant to be a challenge to empiricism about agential knowledge. This agentialist argument is an explanation of what constitutes the non-observational entitlement *after assuming that* we have such a non-observational entitlement. It's not to be read as an attempt to prove to those who are not sure whether our agential knowledge is empirical (or: observational) that our agential knowledge is based on non-observational entitlement. Given all this, it isn't an objection to the agential argument to point out, as Gertler (2018) does, its compatibility with empiricism.

as a kind of metaphysical explanation. The existence of an abstract object can be explained by the existence of a concrete object (e.g., Socrates's existence explains the existence of {Socrates}). Intuitively, the explanation cannot go in the opposite direction. Abstract objects don't ground the existence of concrete objects.¹⁷

Here's another example. Non-normative facts may explain normative facts.¹⁸ But the explanation cannot go in the opposite direction. For example, certain moral facts, e.g., that the US government should implement universal basic income, *may* exist partly in virtue of some socio-psychological facts. But it doesn't seem right to use moral facts to explain facts about human psychology or sociological facts.¹⁹

Here's a third example. Since it's plausible that *ought* implies *can*, we certainly can *infer* facts about what we can do based on what obligations we have. But not all inferences are explanations. Intuitively, having the ability to X is a *pre-condition* of having a duty to X. A thing entails its pre-condition but doesn't explain its own pre-condition. Hence, although *ought* implies *can*, *ought* doesn't explain *can*. One may *prove that* a person has an ability by appealing to an *ought*; but one may not *explain* her abilities by appealing to her obligations. Having greater power partly explains Spiderman's greater responsibility, not the reverse. To try to explain our abilities with our obligations is to get the order of explanation wrong.

Interpreted as an explanation, unfortunately, [7] - [11] seems to have messed up the order of explanation in exactly this way. Having epistemic access to our actions partly constitutes our ability to comply with the

¹⁷ I'm not saying that this cannot be contested. One might, like L. A. Paul (2002), think that individuals are nothing but bundles of abstract properties. I'm only trying to illustrate *the idea* of explanatory order. There are, of course, disagreements about specific instances of explanatory order.

¹⁸ This isn't to say that normative facts are *reducible* to non-normative facts.

¹⁹ This can be contested. Attempts to revert the order of explanation aren't unprecedented. It has been done, notably, by Plato. According to his theory of Form, the way each individual thing exists is explained by the Forms it partakes. For example, a particular city is a city because it partakes in the Form of a city. Platonic Forms are ideals, i.e., the ways things *should* be.

norms of practical reasoning and hence is a pre-condition for the applicability of these norms to us. If it aims to explain this epistemic access by appealing to the practical norms that govern us, the agentialist argument is an attempt to use an *ought* to explain what constitutes the corresponding *can*.

Those who embrace the Agency Approach, therefore, face a dilemma: *either* the agentialist argument is offered as a proof that, curiously, doesn't rule out any competing alternatives to their view *or* the argument is an explanation that gets the order of explanation wrong. The moral of the story I draw from this is that the Agency Approach, which crucially relies on an essential connection between self-knowledge and agency, as it is expressed by arguments like [7] – [11], should be abandoned. This doesn't rule out other ways to develop an account of non-observational epistemic entitlement to shed light on our agential knowledge. For example, Lam (2021) develops one that explains the non-observational warrant of agential knowledge as an instance of Kripkean contingent *a priori* stipulative knowledge. Here, however, I want to wrap up the discussion in a slightly different direction.

One might wonder whether the order of explanation problem actually means I was wrong in the previous section to suggest that the agentialist argument should be interpreted as an explanation. Maybe it should be interpreted as a proof after all, only as a bad proof. Part of the reason I think it's more illuminating to construe the agentialist argument as an explanation — regardless of whether there was a clear original intention — is that I suspect there is still room to maneuver regarding the order of explanation problem.

I said that, intuitively, [9] can't be true if it's read as saying not only that *ought* implies *can*, but that *ought* explains *can*. But I have no *arguments* for saying that *ought* can *never* explain *can*. If one insists upon developing the Agency Approach, one might say that, sometimes, *ought* explains *can* and this is one of those times. One might then replace [9], which is simply about what norms *entail*, with [9'], which is an explanatory claim about what is the case *in virtue of* norms:

[9'] If being F is necessary for one to comply with the norms of practical agency (setting aside other norms that also govern us, e.g., moral norms), and if those norms apply to one, one must, *in virtue of those norms*, be able to know the fact that one is F when one is F.

Surely, explaining *can* with *ought* doesn't sit well with our intuitions. But here's a possible response to explain away the counter-intuitiveness. One might argue that the source of those intuitions is that, *typically*, the basis of our ability is non-normative. For example, the fact that I have the ability to save a drowning kid consists of various non-normative facts, e.g., certain physiological facts about me. And my ability explains what norms apply to me — non-normative facts explaining normative facts. To explain my ability with normative facts in such *typical* cases would get the order of explanation wrong by explaining the non-normative with the normative. In contrast, in the particular case we are addressing, the relevant ability to be explained — our ability as rational agents — happens to be partly *normative* as well: this ability partly consists in us *having the epistemic warrant* to form *de se* beliefs. "Epistemic warrant", as Jaegwon Kim (1988) reminded us, is a normative notion. So, *if* the source of our intuition against using *ought* to explain *can* just is an intuition against explaining the non-normative with the normative in disguise, the intuition loses its force in this particular context where both the explanandum and the explanans happen to be normative, unlike the drowning kid case.

I don't *know* that any of this is true about my intuition against *ought* explaining *can*. *Even if* this were true, this at best undercuts an objection against using [7] – [11] as an explanation. This doesn't change the fact that using the norms of practical agency to explain our entitlement to form *de se* beliefs about our intentional actions is *ad hoc* given that *ought-to-can* explanations don't exist anywhere else whether or not the "can" involved is normative. Simply asserting [9'] doesn't get rid of the *ad-hoc*-ness. Since the dialectical purpose of the agentalist argument construed as an explanation is to show that the hypothesis about our non-observational

epistemic entitlement for agential knowledge isn't *ad hoc* (see section 4), the argument itself better not rely on premises introduced *ad hoc*.

Therefore, what the advocates of the Agency Approach need for it to remain a viable option is an independently sensible view that explains how the norms of practical agency can *explain* — not just *entail* — the existence of epistemic warrant, which is a constituent of our ability to comply with those norms. If not, and if I'm right that our agential knowledge is essentially tied to our rational agency simply in the sense that such self-knowledge is a pre-condition of rational agency, then the agential argument fails to explain our non-observational agential knowledge. I'll leave this task to the defenders of the Agency Approach. I don't have an argument against its possibility. But until that explanation is offered, the approach remains an empty promise.²⁰

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