

## The Question of Privileged Access: Two Arguments for a Skeptical Conclusion\*

\*Draft version of a work in-progress. Do not use without permission.

Robert K. Whitaker

*Abstract:* The question of privileged access concerns whether humans have specially secure or accurate knowledge of their own mental states. I offer two arguments for the skeptical conclusion that philosophers can say little that is definitive about this issue without further empirical work in the psychological disciplines. I take as my starting point William Alston's classic paper, "Varieties of Privileged Access," deriving from it the two observations which guide my two arguments. Additionally, I consider in some detail both Brie Gertler's discussion of privileged access types in her book *Self-Knowledge*, and Christoph Jäger's discussion of the logical relations between privileged access types in his paper "Affective Ignorance."

Philosophers are not currently, nor are they likely to be in the near future, in a position to definitively settle the question of whether humans possess privileged access to their own mental states. Here I will offer two arguments for this skeptical conclusion, the seeds of which were sown over four decades ago with William Alston's well-known paper, "Varieties of Privileged Access."<sup>1</sup> There, Alston helpfully distinguishes some 34 versions of possible privileged access claims, with the aim of showing that prior philosophical attempts to undercut privileged access claims were unsuccessful by virtue of not being sensitive enough to this variety.<sup>2</sup> While Alston avoids taking a position on the truth of any particular privileged access claims, his implied result is that there are some that have not been shown to be false by prior philosophical attempts, and further that there is one variety—"self-warrant"—that is the most reasonable candidate for fulfilling the apparent epistemic aims of a privileged access claim. Perhaps unintentionally, however, he also makes two observations in the paper which, once fleshed out, make it very unlikely that philosophers will be able to say much more of substance about privileged access without further input from psychology—namely, that privileged access claims admit of extensive variety, and that they utilize a limited range of modalities. Here I will expand on these two points and draw out their implications, ultimately constructing an argument based on each for the conclusion that privileged access is a question best left to the psychologists.<sup>3</sup>

Early in his paper, Alston distinguishes two sorts of variety by which privileged access claims could be multiplied: variety in the mental state type to which one is taken to have privileged access, and variety in the sort of superiority implied by the "privilege." He is interested in only the second, mentioning the first, he says, "only to set it aside," but adding

---

<sup>1</sup> William Alston, "Varieties of Privileged Access," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 8.3 (1971): 223-41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the terms "psychological" and "empirical" interchangeably to denote a kind of inquiry that is broadly distinct from philosophical inquiry, owing to its dependence on experimental data and its implicit commitment to certain principles of methodological naturalism. I do not intend these terms to have any more specificity than this, nor am I implying anything about levels of empirical dependence between the various psychological sciences, or between psychology as a discipline and science at large.

that “if anyone is to put forward a privileged access thesis, he should be more specific as to the range of states involved.”<sup>4</sup> This is presumably for two reasons: first, one should be sensitive to the sorts of privilege claims that have actually been advanced in the history of the discussion, giving primacy to those claims made by respected philosophers<sup>5</sup>; and second, and more importantly, until one is clear about the details of a privileged access thesis, one runs the risk of evaluating prematurely, drawing conclusions for all varieties of privileged access claim, that really apply to only some. Alston spells out how this can happen with respect to variety in superiority-types, and implies that a similar mistake can be made with respect to mental state variety. I will here focus more on mental state variety than on superiority-type, though it will be helpful to first outline some of Alston’s findings with respect to the latter.

### §1 – Varieties of Epistemic Superiority

As noted, Alston begins with several quotations from prominent philosophers, ranging from Descartes and Locke to C.I. Lewis and Norman Malcolm, to illustrate various styles of claim that have been grouped together under the “privileged access” label.<sup>6</sup> He then systematically identifies various sorts of superiority implied by these philosophers’ claims. From Descartes, Lewis, Ayer, and Shoemaker he discerns the claim that it is impossible that one’s judgments or beliefs about one’s own mental states can be mistaken; he labels this kind of privilege “infallibility.” From Descartes, Hamilton, Lewis, Ayer, Ewing, and Malcolm he gets the claim that such beliefs or judgments are immune from doubt, or “indubitable,” and within this broader category are different sub-claims about doubt: one may claim that it is impossible to even “entertain a doubt” about the truth of a proposition which attributes to oneself a current mental state, and this could be interpreted either logically or psychologically.<sup>7</sup> I.e. it is impossible, logically, that one be in doubt about, say, that one is now in pain, owing to the grammar of the phrase; or alternatively, it is impossible (though not logically) that one be, in fact, in a psychological state of doubt about such propositions. Or, rather than this logical/factual indubitability claim, one might make the normative indubitability claim that it is impossible for one to have any epistemic *grounds* for doubt, i.e. to have a *rational* doubt about one’s current mental state.<sup>8</sup> This third, says Alston, is the one that constitutes a distinctive epistemic privilege—a privilege that implies some advantage in acquiring knowledge—and in fact the others are only possibly (cognitively) advantageous if they imply some normative claim.<sup>9</sup> We will return to this discussion of logical, psychological, and normative relations below when we get to our second argument.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>5</sup> This is implied by Alston’s method of drawing his examples of privileged access claims from relevant statements by prominent philosophers, and then constructing different varieties of privilege based on them, as well as by his language when he says that he is not “concerned to distinguish and compare various classes of entities with respect to which [a type of epistemic superiority] *has been asserted*.” Ibid., italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 224-5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 225-6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 226.

From here, Alston distinguishes (from Ayer) “incorrigibility,” a weaker claim than indubitability, which holds that it is impossible that anyone *else* should show that I am mistaken about my present mental states, as well as several varieties of “certainty” claims (also divided along factual and normative lines), though Alston eventually concludes that certainty generally reduces to some form of either infallibility or indubitability.<sup>10</sup> He also discerns in Hume and others an “omniscience” claim that is interestingly related to, though distinct from, the infallibility claim—i.e. one can be “mistaken” about one’s mental states, if one can, both by being *in error* about them and by being *ignorant* of them.<sup>11</sup> Through an analysis of these two modes of privileged access alongside the traditional “Justified, True Belief” (JTB) model of knowledge, Alston concludes that infallibility and omniscience differ as to which element of knowledge entails the other two; i.e. infallibility is the claim that belief logically implies justification and truth where current mental states are concerned (if one believes she is in pain, then it is the case that she is in pain and she is justified in so believing), whereas omniscience is the claim that truth logically implies both belief and justification (if one is in pain, then she believes that she is in pain and is justified in so believing).<sup>12</sup>

Still utilizing this JTB-based analysis, Alston adds to this list of four styles of privileged access claim (Infallibility, Omniscience, Indubitability, and Incorrigibility), two others: “Truth-sufficiency,” the claim that one is “so related to propositions ascribing current mental states to himself that it is logically impossible both for such a proposition to be true and for him not to be justified in believing it to be true; while no one else is so related to such propositions”<sup>13</sup>; and “Self-warrant,” the claim that one is “so related to propositions ascribing current mental states to himself that it is logically impossible both for him to believe that such a proposition is true and not be justified in holding this belief; while no one else is so related to such propositions.”<sup>14</sup> He then provides a brief but helpful examination of the various modalities (logical, nomological, and normative) involved in these claims, arguing that by varying these, we can extend the list of privileged access types even further, and still further by considering various kinds of non-modal privileged access claims. By Alston’s count, once we do this, we end up with some 34 claims: “16 modal principles, 6 *de facto* unrestrictedly universal principles, 6 ‘by and large’ principles, and 6 ‘normal conditions’ principles,” or 16 modal and 18 non-modal principles, all by varying the form of our original 6: Infallibility, Omniscience, Indubitability, Incorrigibility, Truth-sufficiency, and Self-warrant (some of which, for various reasons, Alston thinks do not admit of all modal interpretations).<sup>15</sup>

## §2 – Varieties of Mental State Types

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 227-8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 240.

As Alston hints, the varieties of privileged access could be similarly multiplied by paying attention to the sorts of mental states generally taken to be privileged in one of the above-mentioned ways. For example, he distinguishes between “phenomenal states,” or the “present contents of consciousness,” which include such things as “sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts,” and “dispositional states,” which include “beliefs, desires, and attitudes.”<sup>16</sup> While either category of states could be the object of privileged access claims, the former are presumably the more likely candidates, since they are arguably simpler and there is a widespread intuition that while one may be mistaken about or ignorant of their (even current) desires (for example), it is much harder to be mistaken about one’s *thoughts* about one’s desires. More recent treatments draw similar boundaries around what sort of mental states are good candidates for privileged access. Thus, Brie Gertler mentions two varieties of dispositional mental states that she thinks are relatively uncontroversially not good candidates for privileged access: character traits and “affective forecasting,” or predictions about one’s own happiness.<sup>17</sup> These dispositional states are not good candidates, she says, because they are counterfactual claims—claims about what one *would* do or feel in some yet to be specified set of circumstances, and these circumstances may very well not be available to any exclusively first-personal method of access (such as introspection), much less specially available in one of the above ways.

But there are also non-dispositional states that may not be good candidates, such as what motivates some of our actions or emotional experiences. Gertler here cites Nisbett and Wilson’s 1977 study<sup>18</sup> which suggests that people often engage in *post-hoc* rationalization about their motivations, and so lack privileged access to “the reason that actually shaped their choice.”<sup>19</sup> Gertler also cites Benjamin Libet’s famous 1985 experiment<sup>20</sup>, concluding that the accumulated evidence indicates “that at least some of our actions are caused by factors that are unconscious or subpersonal, and hence inaccessible by introspection.”<sup>21</sup> But what about conscious mental states? Might those be good candidates for privileged access? Gertler here quotes from Wilson:

My decision to get up off the couch and get something to eat... feels very much like a consciously willed action, because right before standing up I had the conscious thought “A bowl of cereal... sure would taste good right now.” It is possible, however, that my desire to eat arose nonconsciously and cause my conscious thought about cereal and my trip to the kitchen.<sup>22</sup>

The idea here is that the causal relations between one’s thought and one’s action are not directly accessible to one; they are, rather, as Ryle pointed out (with Dennett following), matter of *post-hoc* theorizing, and as Gertler says, “If one must resort to theorizing in order to

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>17</sup> Brie Gertler, *Self-Knowledge*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 71.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes,” *Psychological Review* 84 (1977): 231-59.

<sup>19</sup> Brie Gertler, *Self-Knowledge*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> B.J. Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8 (1985): 529-66.

<sup>21</sup> Brie Gertler, *Self-Knowledge*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

grasp one's own states, one does not have privileged first-person access to them."<sup>23</sup> So apparently the causal relations of our motivations and actions are not good candidates for privileged access claims either. What about moods and emotions? Here Gertler too quickly concludes that since these "are dispositional states, it is unsurprising that we lack privileged access to them."<sup>24</sup> Her reasoning for this is that regardless of any phenomenal feel associated with them, emotions and moods must be at least partially dispositional, and so are to that degree susceptible to error or ignorance. Gertler is careful to point out here that certain phenomenal states, even if we might possibly be in error about them, are still compatible with a sufficiently weakened form of privileged access claim, such as "that we have a special method for grasping our phenomenology, and this method enables our self-attributions to achieve an especially high degree of certainty."<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, she thinks that emotions and moods are not candidates even for this form of privileged access, since they cannot be exclusively phenomenal. This is a controversial claim, and one that, I think, ought to be contested on the grounds that all emotional states are not clearly dispositional (e.g. despair, for which an essential element may be that there are no behaviors to which one is disposed, for good or ill), and that even if they are all partially dispositional, they are also, by Gertler's admission, partially phenomenal, and thus indicative of certain mental states, rightly called emotional, which are candidates for some privileged access claims. Gertler later makes an admission along these lines, though she doesn't go quite far enough: she says that "we can make sense of the *appearance* of privileged access to standing attitudes, without abandoning our previous denial that we have privileged access to dispositional states."<sup>26</sup> In other words, we can admit that it *seems like* we have privileged access to phenomenal states that are tied to other dispositional states (such as emotional states) because we may have privileged access to them insofar as they are *occurrent*. But this unnecessarily limits the possible privileged domain without argument; even setting aside questions about how to non-arbitrarily draw the boundaries of occurrence, why think only occurrent states can be privileged, or that other phenomenal states can only be privileged in virtue of occurrence? E.g. even pain can be a non-occurrent phenomenal state, and it is widely thought to be the candidate for privileged access *par excellence*. But then occurrence does not seem to be the *sine qua non* of privileged access candidacy, and if pain, why not emotional feels?

Gertler concludes that the domain of possible privileged access claims is limited to three types of mental states, which are, in descending order of controversy: sensations, conscious thoughts, and occurrent attitudes.<sup>27</sup> I would add to this list, for the above reasons, phenomenal states tied to emotions, moods, and other dispositional states. But even if we stick to this list of three, we can see that there are a large number of mental states that are possibly epistemically privileged. If we were so inclined, we could begin to review the history of philosophy of mind discussions in order to mine varieties of sensation, thought, and occurrent attitude, paying attention to subtle distinctions that might make a difference to our discussion. Doubtless we would want to examine the epistemic differences associated with

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 82.

visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensations; with conscious thoughts about sensations (whether these are distinct from perceptions or not), versus thoughts about non-sensate objects; with perceptual thoughts, memory thoughts, imaginative thoughts, abstract thoughts, or affective thoughts; with occurrent attitudes as they relate to any of these prior distinctions. It is not hard to see that even a small sampling of such distinctions in mental states, once combined with Alston's account of types of superiority claims, will result in a very large number of possible varieties of privileged access claim.

### §3 – Two Skeptical Arguments against a Philosophical Resolution of Privileged Access

Given the above observations, one can construct arguments to show that philosophers are not currently in a position to settle the question of whether there are any mental states to which one might have some variety of privileged access. I will here give two such arguments. The first is focused on modal privileged access claims, the second on all privileged access claims more generally, including non-modal ones.

#### Argument 1 (from limited modality):

- 1) Via Alston, there is a limited range of modalities that can be implied by privileged access claims. Whatever the type of superiority (or mental state) intended, the relation borne between the state and its epistemic status will be either logical, nomological, normative, or some combination of these (such as nomological-normative).
- 2) The modality could be logical. However, claims of a strong logical relation between states and their epistemic status are implausible and dialectically unhelpful.
- 3) The modality could be nomological, owing to some psychophysical laws as yet undiscovered. If so, this is an empirical question, to be answered by psychologists, to which there is so far no clear answer.
- 4) The modality could be normative (as it seems it must be to some extent). However, this begs for explanation. *Why* should the first-person perspective of a specified mental state be normatively epistemically privileged? I.e. what sort of relation does the normative property bear to the mental state? Presumably, the answer to this question must take either a logical or a nomological form, and so the circle begins again.

I take it that premises 1 and 3 are not in need of much support. Premise 1 simply lays out a range of possible interpretations of the modality included in all modal privileged access claims, such as those laid out by Alston (I have also stuck with his list of modalities). By way of supporting premise 3, one may note, as Alston does, that privileged access claims almost invariably involve epistemic normativity (at any rate, this is what philosophers seem to be interested in), and this notion is not at home in the empirical sciences:

To say that a belief is warranted is to say that it comes up to the proper epistemic standards, and to determine what the proper standards are for one or another kind of belief is not within the province of an empirical science, anymore than is any other

normative question. Hence it could not be nomologically impossible for a belief to be unwarranted.<sup>28</sup>

One might disagree, but as he says, all this would amount to is an even more complicated array of privileged access claims, all of which await empirical support. Premise 4 is also fairly straightforward, and turns on the common intuition that evaluative or normative claims are in a kind of *prima facie* tension with the methodological naturalistic assumptions of science and much philosophy. In other words, to borrow Alston's phrasing, interpreting the modality of a privileged access claim strictly normatively "presupposes that a defensible epistemic standard would effect a direct connection between being a FPCMSB and being warranted."<sup>29</sup> But as he goes on to show, if there is no such epistemic standard—and one is hard to derive from descriptive scientific claims—then one will need to combine the nomological and normative modalities in order to interpret the privileged access claim.<sup>30</sup> And this takes us back to premise 3.

The most problematic premise, it seems to me, is 2. Many in the discussion of privileged access have taken logical relations to be important for understanding and deciding privileged access claims, including Alston himself.<sup>31</sup> But what reason is there to think that the modality in question might be logical? Presumably, if we could note strong logical relations between privileged access types, such that we could derive some types from others, we might have reason to think that first-person epistemic access is *logically* privileged.

This approach is exemplified in a recent paper by Christoph Jäger,<sup>32</sup> where he presents an interesting case against privileged access views of emotion by way of our capacity to be ignorant of or mistaken about our emotional states in various ways, which turns on certain observations about the logical relations between types of epistemic superiority implied by privileged access claims. Though Jäger cites Alston's "Varieties" paper only once (and erroneously),<sup>33</sup> its influence is clear, both in method and terminology. Jäger begins, like Alston, by laying out quotations from several more and less prominent philosophers espousing what he takes to be versions of the privileged access view.<sup>34</sup> Jäger's observation about these quotations is that they concur in the view that one's cognitive access to her own emotions is superior to her access to the emotions of others. He then sets about trying to make trouble for this claim.<sup>35</sup> Jäger limits his discussion to occurrent mental (affective) states, and he suggests that we construe claims about "certainty," "consciousness," and

---

<sup>28</sup> Alston, "Varieties of Privileged Access," 238.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. on pg. 227 he says something about indubitability which foreshadows some of Christoph Jäger's comments, discussed below: "...a psychological (logical) impossibility of the entertaining of any doubt would be the same thing as a psychological (logical) necessity of feeling completely assured that one is correct."

<sup>32</sup> Christoph Jäger, "Affective Ignorance," *Erkenn* 71 (2009): 123-39.

<sup>33</sup> See note 31.

<sup>34</sup> It is not immediately apparent that all of the quotations are relevant to privileged access in the way that Jäger is discussing it, but I do not wish to quibble about historical interpretation here, other than to note a particularly significant confusion below.

<sup>35</sup> Though as we will see, it is not clear that he says much against *this* claim at all, unless we allow him to tack it onto another distinct claim that he does argue against.

“awareness” all in terms of belief and knowledge.<sup>36</sup> His next move is to unite two theses that he gleans from Chisholm into what he calls the (Affective) Self-Intimation thesis (SI). This is the conjunction of the claims that when one is in an emotional state, she strongly believes that she is in that state, and that when one is not in a given emotional state, she believes that she is not in that state. Jäger states it thus:

SI: For each affective state A (of an appropriate type) it holds that, necessarily, (i) if S is in A, S believes herself to be in A; and (ii) if S is not in A, S believes herself not to be in A.<sup>37</sup>

This thesis entails another, says Jäger, which he draws from Descartes, and calls (Affective) Infallibility (AI):

AI: For each affective state A (of an appropriate type) it holds that, necessarily, (i) if S believes herself to be in A, S is in A; and (ii) if S believes herself not to be in A, S is not in A.<sup>38 39</sup>

It is here that Jäger makes the crux of his case, when he claims that SI, together with a further thesis, entails AI. The way he does this is by noting that the consequent of SI (ii) (*S* believes that she is not sad) entails [let’s call it SI (ii)\*]: “*S* does not believe that she is sad,” *if* we add the “Doxastic Non-Contradiction” (DNC) thesis:

DNC: Necessarily: If S believes not-*p*, then S does not (at the same time) believe *p*; or, equivalently: Necessarily: If S believes *p*, then S does not (at the same time) believe not-*p*.<sup>40</sup>

And of course, SI (ii)\* is the contrapositive of AI (i). A similar inference can be made from SI (i) to AI (ii), again if we accept the entailment of “does not believe” from “believes not,” along with DNC. But should we accept these? For one, there is considerable debate about whether DNC is true. Roy Sorensen, e.g., argues at length that we are rationally committed

---

<sup>36</sup> Jäger, 126. It is here that the problematic reference to Alston occurs. As we saw above, Alston suggests, for arguments given in his paper that are outside the scope of this one, that “certainty” claims may be reducible to some form of infallibility or indubitability claim. He says nothing about consciousness or awareness, however, nor are the reasons he gives for so reducing certainty those of Jäger, whose reduction is open to criticism in a way that Alston’s is not. Unfortunately, Jäger does not justify his reduction other than by appeal to authority (Reid, Freud, Alston, Chisholm, etc.). But there are worries here: e.g. why should we think that awareness “entails” knowledge? E.g. I can be “aware” of a fly buzzing nearby, but on a classic JTB model of knowledge, I neither “know” by that alone that there is a fly nearby (it could be someone making a fly noise or a recording or some other insect), nor even that I hear one buzzing nearby (think Gettier-style cases). Nonetheless, for the sake of discussion, I’ll allow Jäger’s reduction of disparate cognitive states to belief states.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> A couple notes here: first, Jäger seems to misinterpret Chisholm when he attributes to him the SI thesis. Rather, Chisholm’s claim in the quoted passage seems to be that if one is in fact sad, and thinks about it, then one cannot fail to miss the fact that one is sad. Or put differently, if you think you’re sad, then you are. This is actually the AI thesis, not the SI thesis. Attributing SI to Chisholm misses his emphasis on the importance of considering what emotional state one is in. Similar to this, Jäger attributes the AI thesis to Descartes, though this is a tough conclusion to draw from the passage Jäger provides. Rather, Descartes’ claim seems to be that if one is sad, then one’s “soul” has sadness “in it,” whatever that means. Even if we interpret that to mean that one is thinking about being sad, then the claim is: if one is sad, then she believes she’s sad, not the other way around. This is the SI thesis, not the AI thesis, and we should not interpret Descartes as inferring the AI thesis from this view, as that would be fallaciously affirming the consequent.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

to believing any number of contradictions.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, even Jäger admits that read empirically, DNC is false; he suggests it as a constraint on minimal epistemic rationality. If Sorensen is right, however, even this weaker thesis is false. Even if we grant it, however, are we to think that “actual human cognizers” aren’t “minimally rational”? That seems an undesirable consequence. Still more problematic is the supposed entailment of “does not believe” from “believes not.” Should we accept this move?<sup>42</sup> It features prominently in a third thesis that Jäger thinks is entailed by the conjunction of SI and AI—(Affective) Omniscience (AO):

AO: For each affective state A (of an appropriate type) it holds that, necessarily, (i) S is in A iff S believes so; and (ii) S is not in A iff S believes she is not.<sup>43</sup>

But surely AO (ii) is false: It entails “If I don't (actively) believe I'm not sad, then I'm sad.” But can't I have no beliefs *at all* about not being sad (the proposition  $\sim p$ : “I'm not sad”), whether or not I am in fact sad? If so, then how can omniscience be equivalent to SI (with DNC) and AI, since neither requires positive belief in the proposition “It is not the case that I am not sad” (i.e.  $\sim\sim p$ )?

Additionally, Jäger takes an extraordinarily strong interpretation of the necessity that obtains between these theses: he says that SI, and consequently all the others, is construed as the modal thesis that it is *logically impossible* for the relation in question (being in an emotional state and believing that you are) to not obtain. But it is unclear why Jäger should want to make this so strong, especially given Alston's comments in his “Varieties” paper, with which Jäger is presumably familiar. There Alston says of strong logical modalities embedded in certain privileged access claims:

...it is quite conceivable that the world should be such that a person's reports of his feelings, thoughts, and beliefs would be no better guide to the future than, say, his reports of his immediate physical environment, which are still highly reliable, but by no means so overbearingly so as to be rightly accepted as self-warranted. If the world were like this, it would depend on further factors whether a given FPCMSB [first-person, current, mental state belief] were warranted, just as is now the case with perceptual beliefs. Such factors might include how alert the person is at the moment, how good a judge he has proved himself to be in such matters, and so on. Thus in this logically possible world FPGMSB's would be sometimes unwarranted, viz., in those cases in which the requisite additional factors were not present. But then even in our world it cannot be *logically* impossible for a FPCMSB to be unwarranted.<sup>44 45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Roy Sorensen, *Vagueness and Contradiction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> This move is made rather quickly in footnote 5, pg. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Jäger, “Affective Ignorance,” 128.

<sup>44</sup> Alston, “Varieties of Privileged Access,” 237.

<sup>45</sup> Additionally, one may think that such a strong interpretation of the relevant modality would be unlikely on its face. Surely, e.g., there is a possible world where someone is sad without believing that she is, or a world where only emotional creatures evolved and none with doxastic capacities, or one where the only existent is Sadness. These aren't contradictory states of affairs, and so broadly logical necessity seems already the wrong way to go for interpreting epistemic privileged access modalities.

Even more significantly, neither SI nor AI as they stand actually say anything about privileged access, which is the target of Jäger's paper. Jäger simply tries to tack this onto SI, saying,

“For the sake of brevity I shall from now on omit this addendum [that the stipulated emotion-belief relation applies only in the first person] but assume that the idea is that only the subjects of the states in question bear the respective relations to these states.”<sup>46</sup>

But this is a different claim. One should like an argument for adding this addendum to SI, especially since the alleged inference from SI to AI is doing the bulk of the work in the paper. It's also not plainly true that SI should be restricted to the first person: e.g. I could easily be angry without believing that I am, not having stopped to consider it, whereas the person I am yelling at has a well justified belief that I am angry. The thing to notice about such a case is that the third person perspective is justified (or not) on the same evidence base as the first person (my generally irate behavior); the only difference is that I have not examined this behavior, whereas the other person has. So here SI seems to extend to the third person as reliably as to the first person.

The upshot of all this logic, says Jäger, is that it (believe it or not) “reduces the complexity of investigations” into whether privileged access claims are true. In other words, if we can show that AI is false, and SI (with requisite addenda) entails AI, then by *modus tollens*, we know that SI is false, as well as AO and other related theses. These include “Perfect Knowledge,” which is just SI in terms of knowledge rather than just belief, and the “Doxastic Excluded Middle,” (DEM) which stipulates that for each affective state, one must (necessarily) either believe herself to be in that state or not in that state. Jäger says that this is “just an instantiation of bivalence,” and thus that if DEM is false, and we have to get rid of either SI or bivalence, SI should go. But this is a rather surprising claim, since it clearly ignores the possibility mentioned above of having *no* beliefs; in order for DEM to be an instance of bivalence, there would have to be a clause stipulating that *S* has a belief about *A*.

In the rest of the paper, Jäger attempts to disprove AI (since he thinks, as noted, that he is thereby disproving all other varieties of privileged access by way of logical relation). He gives five arguments for this, which I won't look at here, since if my above points are correct and SI does not in fact reliably entail AI (or if the consequences of such an entailment would be too severe, such as hardly anyone being minimally rational), then we can safely dismiss Jäger's arguments in the rest of the paper, since they won't actually touch SI.

This failure is, I think, as convincing a reason as one might need for abandoning a logical approach to deciding privileged access questions, and thus leaves us in a position to affirm premise 2 of our argument.

#### Argument 2 (from variety):

- A) Discussions of privileged access are not sensitive enough to differences in mental state types.

---

<sup>46</sup> Jäger, “Affective Ignorance,” 127.

- B) Once these types are enumerated and considered in relation to the varieties of epistemic superiority outlined by Alston, the varieties of privileged access grow exponentially, so that discounting them all (or proving them all) via a single argument form becomes very unlikely.
- C) Additionally, vagueness of mental state types transfers into vagueness of the associated privileged access claim.
- D) Therefore, the veracity of privileged access claims must be evaluated on a case by case basis, which—given the current, still somewhat inchoate state of philosophical psychology—leaves the question open to further investigation, as well as to potentially irresolvable interpretive differences.

This second argument is in need of less support than the first. I take it that I have made the case for premises A and B above. By C, all that is meant is that for mental state types that are not yet well understood, such as phenomenal feels, or occurrent thoughts about perceptual states, the question of privileged access to those states will be made proportionately more difficult by the fuzziness in their object states.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, if B is right, then D follows: one may not respond to all privileged access claims via a single (or even probably several) argument form(s).<sup>48</sup> It should also be noted that this second argument applies to all privileged access claims, including non-modal varieties such as those which operate under Alston's "by and large" and "normal conditions" principles.<sup>49</sup> We see, then, that once we follow the project that Alston began as far as it will go, we find that there is little left to say about privileged access for the philosopher, besides perhaps more epistemological speculation about what privileged access *could* amount to within sufficiently well-defined parameters.

---

<sup>47</sup> I do not think that this premise is necessary to my argument; I include it only to show how the problem of privileged access might be further complicated by paying closer attention to mental state variety.

<sup>48</sup> For some anecdotal support of the latter claim in premise D, see Eric Schwitzgebel and Russell Hurlburt, *Describing Inner Experience?: Proponent Meets Skeptic*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> These in turn bear a resemblance to a weaker version of AI, which Jäger discusses later in his paper. He attributes it to Donald Davidson, who says, "Our sincere avowals concerning our present states of mind are not subject to the failings of conclusions based on evidence. Thus sincere first person present-tense claims about thoughts, while neither infallible nor incorrigible, have an authority no second or third person claim, or first person other-tense claim, can have." Jäger, "Affective Ignorance," 130.