

***THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF REFLECTIVE BELIEFS***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the epistemic status of the reflective belief about the content of one's own conscious mental state, with emphasis on perceptual experience. I propose that the process that gives a special epistemic status to a reflective belief is not observation, inference, or conceptual articulation, but semantic ascent similar to the transition from a sentence in the object language to a sentence in the meta-language that affirms the truth of the original sentence. This account of the process of reflection explains why a reflective belief is (subject to some qualification) infallible.

This paper examines the epistemic status of the reflective belief about the content of one's own (and current—hereafter this is assumed) conscious mental state, with emphasis on perceptual experience. There are two major motivations for this inquiry. One of them is the role of reflective beliefs in the traditional form of foundationalism in the epistemology of empirical beliefs. Traditional foundationalists take the reflective belief about the contents of one's own perceptual experience to be infallible and use it as the foundation of the empirical justification of beliefs. Their view of infallible reflective beliefs has received some forceful criticisms, and not many epistemologists nowadays wish to defend the traditional form of foundationalism.<sup>1</sup> I want to show that there is a good deal in the claim of infallibility that still holds up. The other more general motivation is the strong intuition—shared by many, independently of the project of traditional foundationalism—that reflective beliefs possess some special epistemic status. The recent dispute over the compatibility of self-knowledge (knowledge of one's own mental state) and semantic externalism is a good indication of this intuition.<sup>2</sup> Suspected incompatibility of self-knowledge and semantic externalism would not have attracted much attention if the participants of the dispute were ready to renounce the claim of self-knowledge, or a privileged epistemic access to one's own mental states. As we will see shortly, the notion of a privileged 'access' is not helpful and even misleading, but the underlying intuition that reflective beliefs possess a special epistemic status seems sound. An analysis of this epistemic status should be of interest to those who share this intuition, beyond the context of traditional foundationalism. My primary focus in this paper is the

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<sup>1</sup> See DePaul (2001), and Bonjour and Sosa (2003) for some recent criticisms and defenses of the traditional form of foundationalism.

<sup>2</sup> Many important contributions to this dispute are collected in Ludlow and Martin (1998), and Nuccetelli (2003). I will address the issue of semantic externalism in Subsection 4.1.

epistemic status of the reflective belief about the content of one's own perceptual experience, so that the discussion will be directly relevant to the traditional form of foundationalism, and I do support the view that (subject to some qualification) the reflective belief about the content of one's own perceptual experience is infallible. However, my analysis applies to any reflective belief about the content of one's own conscious mental state, including the content of one's own occurrent thought, and thus is relevant to the special epistemic status of reflective beliefs in general.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. PRELIMINARIES

### 1.1 FRAMEWORK AND TERMINOLOGY

This subsection delineates the framework of discussion and establishes terminology. The first set of remarks concerns the concepts of *perceptual experience* and *occurrent thought*. To start with perceptual experience, I take an experience to be conscious by definition. I sometimes speak redundantly of 'conscious experience' but that is only for

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<sup>3</sup> There is one special problem about self-knowledge that arises with regard to an occurrent thought but not an issue with regard to perceptual experience. In the case of perceptual experience, it is clear from the phenomenology of the experience that one is having perceptual experience, and further what type of perceptual experience one is having (visual, auditory, etc.), but it may not be as clear in the case of an occurrent thought what propositional attitude one has toward the content, for example, whether one is having a *belief*, a suspicion, or a *hope* that it is raining. This problem does not affect the claim that a reflective belief about the *content* of one's own occurrent thought is infallible, but the meta-belief that one is having specifically the *belief* that it is raining may be fallible. I am going to side-step this issue by regarding *thought* as generic propositional attitude that comprises belief, suspicion, hope, etc. (cf. Burge 1996, p. 240), and contend that the reflective belief about the content of one's own occurrent *thought* is infallible, without mentioning a more specific propositional attitude, such as belief, suspicion, hope, etc.

emphasis. I do not mean to imply that there is also an unconscious type of experience. The stipulation that experience must be conscious is reasonable in the context of epistemology since it is conscious mental states, and not those mental states buried in the unconscious, that are integrated into our inferential network for further epistemic deliberation. I also assume that perceptual experience has a representational content. To use Chisholm's 'appeared to' locution (Chisholm 1966, Ch. 6), examples of perceptual experiences are being appeared to as if it is raining, being appeared to as if a cat is on the mat, etc. These perceptual experiences have the representational contents that it is raining, that a cat is on the mat, etc., and are therefore true or false, depending on the way the external world actually is. In short perceptual experience is conscious and representational. I take this to mean that we are conscious of the representational content of our own perceptual experience in the sense that when we are appeared to as if it is raining, we have the (fallible) awareness that it is raining. The same point applies to an occurrent thought, i.e. an occurrent thought is conscious and representational, and this means that we are conscious of the representational content of our own occurrent thought in the sense that when we have the occurrent thought that it is raining, we have the (fallible) awareness that it is raining.<sup>4</sup>

The next preliminary remark concerns the state-content ambiguity of the terms 'perceptual experience' and 'occurrent thought'. As in any discussion of the representational state, one must guard against an equivocation of these terms between the mental state itself and its representational content. My policy in this paper is to use the

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<sup>4</sup> Laurence Bonjour (2001) speaks of awareness of content that is non-apperceptive (i.e. not a higher-order awareness that one has a mental state with a certain content) and yet *infallible*. It is unclear to me what it means to have a non-apperceptive awareness of the

term ‘perceptual experience’ and ‘occurrent thought’ only in reference to the mental state itself, and not its representational content. For example, when I say that being appeared to as if it is raining is a perceptual experience, I am referring to a mental state (presumably realized by some neural state of the brain) whose representational content is that it is raining. The term does not directly refer to the representational content—viz. that it is raining. This means that a perceptual experience that is true or false is a mental state itself, and not its representational content. It is similar to saying that a sentence—the bearer of a representational content—and not its representational content, is true or false. According to this terminology, what is simply called a belief about one’s own conscious mental state is more specifically a belief about the representational content of one’s own conscious mental state. For example, the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining is the belief that the perceptual experience I am having has the representational content that it is raining. Some people may find this locution cumbersome but I follow this terminological policy to avoid confusion between a mental state and its representational content.

It is convenient to have some terms of abbreviation. I will often call the representational content of one’s own conscious mental state simply ‘content’ and the belief about this content ‘content belief’. In the case of perceptual experience, I will also call the content ‘appearance’ and the content belief ‘appearance belief’. For example, when I am appeared to as if it is raining, that it is raining is the appearance, and the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining is the appearance belief. I will call the transition from a conscious mental state to the content belief (the belief about the content of one’s

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content, e.g. that it is raining, other than having the awareness that it is raining, which is obviously fallible—i.e. it may not be raining in the external world.

own conscious mental state) that makes the latter infallible ‘reflection’ and the content belief formed by reflection ‘reflective content belief’ or simply ‘reflective belief’. The main thesis of this paper, expressed succinctly, is therefore: Reflective beliefs are infallible.

## 1.2 Moderate Conceptualism about Perceptual Experience

One controversy on perceptual experience deserves special attention. I have used as examples of appearances (representational contents of perceptual experiences) *that it is raining* and *that a cat is on the mat*. Some people may object to these examples since these appearances are conceptually articulated,<sup>5</sup> while according to some philosophers (e.g. Evans 1982) the representational content of a perceptual experience is not conceptually articulated. Only a *thought* has a conceptually articulated content. I do not accept this view,<sup>6</sup> but it is not my position either that *all* perceptual experiences have conceptually articulated contents. I only defend the moderate form of conceptualism that *some* perceptual experiences have conceptually articulated contents, and further even when the content of a perceptual experience is conceptually articulated, it is usually only

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<sup>5</sup> They are moreover *propositionally* articulated so that they are apt for alethic evaluation. The content of a perceptual experience can be conceptually articulated without being propositionally articulated—e.g. I am appeared to *bright-redly*—but my focus will be those with propositional articulation, which are of more interest in the context of foundationalist epistemology.

<sup>6</sup> The analysis of the reflective appearance belief I propose in this paper holds even if the content of the perceptual experience is not conceptually articulated. For example, if I have the perceptual experience of being appeared to in a conceptually unarticulated way, then the process of reflection generates the appearance belief that I am appeared to in a conceptually unarticulated way, or simply that I am appeared to *thusly*. If my analysis is correct, this reflective appearance belief is infallible, but the result is not very interesting since an appearance belief of this kind is of no use in the justification of further beliefs that have conceptually articulated contents. This is part of the reason why I am defending here a form of conceptualism about the content of a perceptual experience.

*partially* conceptually articulated. For example, I may be appeared to partially conceptually as if it is raining, while further details of the appearance, such as the way it is raining, may remain conceptually unarticulated.

This moderate form of conceptualism is much more defensible than all-out conceptualism—i.e. the view that the contents of *all* perceptual experiences are *totally* conceptually articulated. The standard objections to conceptualism about perceptual experience only threaten all-out conceptualism, and do not affect the moderate version. For example, it is difficult to deny phenomenologically that some perceptual experiences have no conceptually articulated contents. Moderate conceptualism can easily accommodate this point since it does not deny the existence of such perceptual experiences. It is also pointed out by the opponents of conceptualism that the content of a perceptual experience is too fine-grained to be captured conceptually (Evans 1982, p. 229). There are, for example, more shades of blue we can distinguish visually than we can articulate in words. Moderate conceptualism can accommodate this point as well since it does not claim that the content of a perceptual experience is totally conceptually articulated.

Non-conceptualists, such as Evans, go all the way to the other extreme, claiming that no perceptual experience at all has a conceptually articulated content. According to this view, perceptual experience only provides raw materials for thoughts, which have conceptually articulated contents. For example, the same inkblot for the Rorschach test receives many interpretations—each with its own conceptual articulation. One possible explanation is that there are two layers of contents, viz. one non-conceptual content for the perceptual experience, but many conceptual contents for different thoughts that

articulate the same non-conceptual content of the perceptual experience differently. This is a natural suggestion, and I think there are some cases where there are indeed two layers of contents. Consider the notorious case of the speckled hen. I take a short glance at a speckled hen and judge that it has forty-eight speckles.<sup>7</sup> The number of speckles being large, I may well be wrong. Furthermore—and this is the point of the case—I may not even be appeared to as if the hen has forty-eight speckles. With only a short glance, it is unlikely that there being forty-eight speckles is part of the content of my *conscious* perceptual experience. It is more likely that I am only appeared to as if the hen has *many* speckles.<sup>8</sup> In that case, there being forty-eight speckles is only in the content of my *thought*, and not in the content of my perceptual experience. There are, in other words, two layers of contents involved—one (for the perceptual experience) with no specific number of speckles, and the other (for the thought) with forty-eight speckles.

The case is interesting in many ways, but it is not typical. It is only in rare occasions that conceptual judgment is detached from perceptual experience. Think of the famous duck-rabbit figure in contrast. When I judge that it is a duck, I do not *apply* the concept of duck-ness to the content of my perceptual experience. I simply *see* the figure *as* a duck, and I do not have a conscious visual experience at the same time whose content is neutral between duck-ness and rabbit-ness. The situation is different in the case of the speckled hen. The judgment that the hen has forty-eight speckles is *applied* to the content of my visual experience, but never part of the appearance itself. I do not *see* the

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<sup>7</sup> A cluster of similar cases (Ayer 1940, p. 124; Price 1941; Chisholm 1942) was discussed in the dispute over the infallibility of the observation of sense data.

<sup>8</sup> I follow A. J. Ayer (1940) on this point, but even if there is some definite number of speckles in the content of my perceptual experience, it may not be forty-eight, in which case there being forty-eight speckles is still not in the content of my perceptual experience, but only in the content of my thought.

hen *as* having forty-eight speckles. It is helpful here to distinguish the ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ conceptual articulation of the content of perceptual experience. When the conceptual articulation is part of the appearance itself, as in the duck-rabbit case, I call the articulation ‘intrinsic’ to the perceptual experience. When the conceptual articulation is merely *applied* to the content of perceptual experience, and never part of the appearance itself, as in the speckled hen case, I call the articulation ‘extrinsic’ to the perceptual experience.

If phenomenology is our guide, in most cases the conceptual articulations of the content of a perceptual experience is intrinsic to the perceptual experience, and when the conceptual articulation is intrinsic to the perceptual experience there is only layer of content. I believe this is usually the case when we see an inkblot for the Rorschach test. Suppose my visual experience is non-conceptual at the beginning of the test, but soon I come to *see* the inkblot *as* a fox-head. This conceptual articulation is now part of the content of my visual experience, or the way the figure appears to me. In such a case my initial perceptual experience with non-conceptual content is *replaced* by the new perceptual experience with a conceptually articulated content.<sup>9</sup> If a few moments later I come to see the inkblot as a woman’s torso, another perceptual experience replaces the previous perceptual experience. There do not co-exist two layers of content at any point—only a series of perceptual experiences with different contents. The speckled hen case, where there are two layers of contents because of an extrinsic conceptual

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<sup>9</sup> The external object of perception retains its identity regardless of the way we perceive it, but the existence and characteristics of the representational content are dependent on the representation. Where there is no representation, there is no representational content. When the representation becomes conceptual, there is no longer non-conceptual representational content. Unlike the external object of perception the representational content does not survive a change in representation.

articulation of the content, is an exception rather than a norm. Therefore, it does not undermine the position of moderate conceptualism about perceptual experience that the contents of some perceptual experiences are (partially) conceptually articulated.

## **2. OBSERVATION, INFERENCE, AND CONCEPTUAL ARTICULATION**

We are now ready to address the main issue of this paper, namely the process of reflection by which one forms a belief with a special epistemic status about the content of one's own conscious mental state. This section examines three initially attractive views of the process as (1) observation, (2) inference, and (3) conceptual articulation, and explains why they all fail. I will propose my own account in the next section. As mentioned earlier, my primary focus in this discussion will be an appearance belief, i.e. a belief about the content of one's own perceptual experience.

### **2.1 OBSERVATION**

Let us begin with *observation* as a candidate for the process of reflection. According to this view, we form a content belief by observing our own mental state. For example, when I have the perceptual experience of being appeared to as if it is raining, I observe this perceptual experience and form the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining.<sup>10</sup> An obvious problem with this view is that it does not explain the special epistemic status of the content belief. What makes the observation of one's own mental state different

from the observation of the external world? It is sometimes suggested that we have some *privileged epistemic access* to our own mental state, but that is not a real explanation. It only gives a name to the mysterious way the observation of one's own mental state is special. In the absence of a real explanation, the observation view is unattractive to the proponents of the special epistemic status.

Of course, the absence of a real explanation of the special epistemic status is no reason to reject the observation view if one does not wish to defend the claim of the special epistemic status. There is, however, a more fundamental problem with the observation view—namely, an equivocation of the term ‘perceptual experience’ between the mental state itself and its representational content. In my terminology an appearance belief is a belief about the *representational content* of a perceptual experience, while the observation of a perceptual experience (the mental state itself) does not reveal its representational content in any immediate way. There is a distinction between observing that it is raining, and observing a perceptual experience that has the representational content that it is raining. The observation of the perceptual experience itself would reveal, presumably, some properties of the brain such as spiking frequencies in some neural pathways. But perceiving those properties does not allow us to recognize in any immediate way the representational content of the perceptual experience, or what the perceptual experience represents—viz. that it is raining.<sup>11</sup>

Some people have suggested that what we observe in reflection is not the perceptual experience itself, but the representational content of the perceptual experience

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<sup>10</sup> This view is less plausible in the case of an occurrent thought, which does not have clear phenomenology to observe, but I do not press this point since the view fails for a more general reason.

(Langsan 2002). It is hard, though, to make sense of this suggestion. We can observe concrete entities such as the rain falling from the sky or the mental state that *has* the representational content that it is raining, but we cannot observe in any ordinary sense the representational content that it is raining. In order to do so, we would have to ‘observe’ an abstract entity such as a proposition. There is, of course, the expression ‘observe that it is raining,’ but it only means that the observation leads to the belief that it is raining. It does not mean that one literally observes the abstract entity *that it is raining*. Since I see no sensible way of understanding the observation view, I conclude that the process of reflection by which one forms a content belief is not observation.

## 2.2 INFERENCE

The second candidate for the process of reflection is *inference*. The idea is that the belief about the content of one’s own conscious mental state is formed by an inference from that conscious mental state. In order to defend this view with regard to an appearance belief, we need to assume that the original perceptual experience has a conceptually articulated content since it is impossible to make an inference from a mental state with no conceptually articulated content.<sup>12</sup> As explained in earlier, I have no problem with this assumption. Moderate conceptualism about perceptual experience acknowledges that the contents of some perceptual experiences are (partially) conceptually articulated. But as with the observation view, an obvious problem with this view is its failure to explain the

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<sup>11</sup> This point is made by Dretske (1993) and Güzeldere (1995) against the higher-order representation theory (HOR) of consciousness.

<sup>12</sup> Some authors (e.g. Fales 1996, Ch. 6; Heck 2000, Sec. 4) speak of ‘inference’ from a non-conceptual content to a conceptual content, but what they call ‘inference’ is more appropriately characterized as conceptual articulation of the content, or a combination of

special epistemic status of reflective beliefs. For example, the perceptual experience of being appeared to as if it is raining, which represents the external world, possesses no special epistemic status, and thus the appearance belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining should not possess a special epistemic status, either, if it is derived by an inference from the perceptual experience.

That is, of course, not a problem for people with no interest in the claim of the special epistemic status. There is, however, a more fundamental problem with the inference view that is decisive against it even if one has no wish to defend the claim of the special epistemic status. Namely, the truth and falsity of a content belief—e.g. whether or not I am really appeared to as if it is raining—does not depend on the truth and falsity of the perceptual experience it is supposed to be inferred from—e.g. whether or not it is raining.<sup>13</sup> This is incomprehensible if the two mental states are related by inference. To see the strangeness of the view, suppose I am appeared to as if it is raining but it is not actually raining, and hence my perceptual experience falsely represents the external world. If the process of reflection that generates the appearance belief were inference from the perceptual experience, the falsity of the perceptual experience should negatively affect the appearance belief inferred from it—but it does not. Regardless of the weather in the external world, my appearance belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining is true as long as *I am* appeared to as if it is raining. To state the problem in abstract terms, the perceptual experience represents the external world and hence one can derive from it by inference a perceptual belief about the external world, but an appearance belief does not represent the external world—it is about (a semantic property

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conceptual articulation and inference proper. I will examine below the view that the process of reflection consists in conceptual articulation.

of) a mental state. One cannot derive by inference a belief about a mental state solely from a belief about the external world—they do not have the right kind of logical relation. I conclude that the inference view is untenable.

### 2.3 CONCEPTUAL ARTICULATION

The third candidate for the process of reflection is *conceptual articulation*. According to this view, we form a content belief by conceptually articulating the content of our own conscious mental state. Obviously, the view requires that the conscious mental state in question originally have a conceptually unarticulated content. That is not a problem at least with regard to some perceptual experiences.<sup>14</sup> If one accepts moderate conceptualism about perceptual experience, only the contents of some perceptual experiences are (partially) conceptually articulated. The problem, however, is that conceptual articulation does not turn a perceptual experience into an appearance belief. Suppose I am originally appeared to in a conceptually unarticulated way, and then this appearance becomes conceptually articulated. What I obtain by this process is still a perceptual experience—namely, a perceptual experience with a conceptually articulated content, such as being appeared to as if it is raining. This is not an appearance belief.

The underlying problem of the view is similar to the one we found in the inference view. To recall, the main difficulty of the inference view is the absence of an appropriate logical relation between the original conscious mental state and the content belief supposed to be derived from it by inference. If the content belief were formed by

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<sup>13</sup> This point has been made by Dretske (1995, Ch. 2) and Brueckner (1998).

<sup>14</sup> The view is not applicable to an occurrent thought whose content is already totally conceptually articulated, but I do not press this point since the view fails for a more general reason.

inference from the conscious mental state that represents the external world, the content belief should also represent the external world, but it is instead about a mental state. Similarly, if the appearance belief were formed by conceptual articulation of the content from the perceptual experience that represents the external world, the appearance belief should also represent the external world, but it is instead about a mental state. The truth and falsity of the appearance belief has no bearing on the way the external world actually is. To conclude, conceptual articulation does not constitute the process of reflection.

Some people may think of combining conceptual articulation with either observation or inference to explain the process of reflection, but no such attempt succeeds even in those cases of perceptual experience where conceptual articulation is applicable. This is because conceptual articulation of the content of a perceptual experience would only generate a perceptual experience with a conceptually articulated content, and it has been shown already that neither inference nor observation turns a perceptual experience *with a conceptually articulated content* into an appearance belief. Consequently, combining conceptual articulation with either observation or inference does not turn a perceptual experience with a conceptually unarticulated content into an appearance belief. We must look elsewhere for the process of reflection.

### **3. REFLECTIVE SEMANTIC ASCENT**

Let us take stock to see the problem we are facing. We want to understand the process of reflection by which one forms a belief with a special epistemic status about the content of

one's own conscious mental state. With regard to perceptual experience, it is assumed in this paper that a perceptual experience is a conscious mental state with a representational content, and that in some cases the content of a perceptual experience is (partially) conceptually articulated—e.g. I may be appeared to as if a cat is on the mat. It seems quite obvious—even trivial—that when I have such an experience, I can form a true belief that I am appeared to as if a cat is on the mat since I have the *conscious* perceptual experience *that a cat is on the mat*.<sup>15</sup> Still none of the three initially attractive accounts of the process of reflection proved tenable. One reason for their failure, I propose, is that these accounts all rely on a substantial procedure—observation, inference, or conceptual articulation—to explain the process. In my view the process of reflection is much less substantial, which is appropriate for understanding the (intuitively) trivial way the belief about the content of one's own conscious mental state is true.

My proposal in this section is that the content belief that has a special epistemic status is formed by *semantic ascent* from the original conscious mental state, where semantic ascent is understood in the following way.

***Semantic ascent*** is a transition from an  $n$ -th order representation to an  $n$ -plus-first order representation that ascribes a semantic property to the original  $n$ -th order representation by purely conceptual process without any new empirical input.

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<sup>15</sup> This point applies to the case of an occurrent thought as well. When I am thinking that it is raining, I already have the *conscious* thought *that a cat is on the mat*.

We focus here on the transition from the first-order representation to the second-order representation.<sup>16</sup> One familiar type of semantic ascent is the transition from a sentence in the object language to a sentence in the meta-language that affirms the truth of the original sentence—for example, from ‘Snow is white’ to ‘‘Snow is white’ is true’. It is a transition from a first-order representation to a second-order representation, and the second-order representation ascribes the semantic property of *truth* to the original first-order representation. No new empirical input is needed for the transition. In a similar way the process of reflection allows a transition from a first-order representation (a perceptual experience or an occurrent thought) to a second-order representation (a content belief), and the second-order representation ascribes to the first-order representation the semantic property of *having a certain representational content*. No new empirical input is needed for the transition.

Comparison to the semantic ascent to the truth claim gives us an initial understanding of the process of reflection since both of these transitions are species of semantic ascent. There are, however, some obvious differences as well. First, there is a difference between *linguistic* semantic ascent and *mental* semantic ascent. Linguistic semantic ascent is a transition from a sentence in the object language to a sentence in the meta-language, while a mental semantic ascent is a transition from a first-order mental state to a second-order mental state. This difference is not significant since it does not affect the *structure* of the ascent. We can easily construct a mental counterpart of the linguistic semantic ascent. For example, instead of semantically ascending from the

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<sup>16</sup> If one accepts the higher-order representation theory (HOR) of consciousness, then the relevant transition is from the second-order representation to the third-order representation since HOR states that a conscious mental state about the external world is already a representation of a representation.

sentence ‘Snow is white’ in the object language to the sentence ‘‘Snow is white’ is true’ in the meta-language, we can semantically ascend from the first-order belief *that snow is white* to the second-order belief *that the belief that snow is white is true*. For closer structural parallelism, one can understand the linguistic semantic ascent as transition from the sentence ‘Snow is white’ to the sentence ‘The sentence whose content is that snow is white is true’. This transition is structurally identical to the mental semantic ascent from the belief *that snow is white* to the belief *that the belief whose content is that snow is white is true*. The standard form of linguistic semantic ascent with quotation marks has the simpler form because of the tacit assumption that the object language and the meta-language are homophonic—i.e. the content of the sentence ‘Snow is white’ is that snow is white.

A more substantive difference between the truth claim and the content belief is the semantic properties ascribed to the original first-order representations. The sentence ‘‘Snow is white’ is true’ ascribes the semantic property of *truth* to the original first-order sentence, while the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining ascribes the semantic property of *having a certain representational content* to the original first-order mental state. I will call semantic ascent of the former type *alethic* semantic ascent while calling the latter *reflective* semantic ascent.

**Alethic semantic ascent** is a transition from an  $n$ -th order representation to an  $n$ -plus-first order representation that ascribes the semantic property of truth to the original  $n$ -th order representation by purely conceptual process without any new empirical input.

**Reflective semantic ascent** is a transition from an  $n$ -th order representation to the  $n$ -plus-first order representation that ascribes the semantic property of having a certain representational content to the original  $n$ -th order representation by purely conceptual process without any new empirical input.

Alethic and reflective semantic ascents are both species of semantic ascent but with significant differences in the resulting second-order representations. To begin with, the second-order representation that results from alethic semantic ascent (such as the sentence “‘Snow is white’ is true” or the meta-belief that the belief that snow is white is true) does not possess any special epistemic status while a content belief (such as the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining) possesses a special epistemic status—indeed I am going to show that it is infallible.<sup>17</sup>

A related difference is that alethic semantic ascent can still be considered a form of inference while reflective semantic ascent is not an inference of any kind. Alethic semantic ascent preserves truth—e.g. if ‘Snow is white’ is true, then “‘Snow is white’ is true” is also true. In fact there is no difference in substance between the contents of the first- and second-order sentences. If the original sentence is about the external world, the sentence that affirms its truth is also indirectly about the external world. The sentence that affirms the truth of the original sentence is fallible simply because the original sentence is fallible. A content belief formed by reflective semantic ascent, on the other hand, is infallible, and this is not because the original conscious mental state is infallible. The original conscious mental state, such as being appeared to as if it is raining, often

represents the external world and is fallible, and yet the content belief obtained from it by reflective semantic ascent is infallible. As explained in Subsection 2.2, this would be incomprehensible if the transition from the former to the latter were a form of inference. There is no inference whose contingent conclusion is infallible no matter whether its sole premise is true or false. Reflective semantic ascent that constitutes the process of reflection is therefore not an inference.

Here is then our puzzle. The original conscious mental state is fallible, while the content belief formed from it by reflective semantic ascent is infallible. Clearly the contents of these two mental states are different in substance. Nevertheless reflective semantic ascent converts the former into the latter without any new empirical input. The reason, I submit, is that reflective semantic ascent assigns a new role to the same representational content.<sup>18</sup> When I have a conscious mental state, I have the (fallible) awareness of the subject matter. For example, when I have the perceptual experience of being appeared to as if it is raining, I have the (fallible) awareness that it is raining. That is what the external world appears like to me. Crucial to reflective semantic ascent from this mental state is the fact that what the external world appears like to me—*that it is raining*—is by the very fact that it is what the world appears like to me, the content of my

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<sup>17</sup> I add some qualifications to the claim in the next section.

<sup>18</sup> Some proposals have been made in the same direction. Tyler Burge (1996), for example, suggests that in certain cases of self-knowledge the intentional (representational) content of one's own mental state is "thought and thought about in the same act" (p. 244), but Burge applies this account to a very limited class of self-knowledge, which he calls *cogito*-like judgments. (See below for more on *cogito*-like judgments.) With regard to a broader class of self-knowledge Burge speaks of "a constitutive relation [...] between the judgments about one's thoughts and the judgments' being true" (p. 245), but he does not spell out the nature of this constitutive relation. Other authors with similar views, such as Dretske (1995, Ch. 2) on 'displaced perception' and Peacocke (1996) on 'conceptual redeployment' also provide only a partial account of the process of reflection.

perceptual experience. By re-characterizing *what the external world appears like to me*—namely, that it is raining—as *the representational content of my perceptual experience*, I obtain the true belief about the content of my perceptual experience—i.e. the belief that I am appeared to as if it is raining. There is no need for new observation, inference, or conceptual articulation in the process. I simply ascribe to my perceptual experience *what the external world appears like to me* as its representational content. I can do this because when I have a perceptual experience, what the external world appears like to me *is* the content of the experience.

We can now see why the content belief formed by reflective semantic ascent is infallible. Suppose the world appears like to me in a certain way—say, *p*—as I have a perceptual experience. By the very fact that it is what the world appears like to me, *p* is the representational content of the perceptual experience. Thus, I can form the appearance belief that I am appeared to as if *p* by adding the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if* to what the external world appears like to me, namely *p*.<sup>19</sup> The resulting belief *that I am appeared to as if p* is trivially true since *p* is what the external world appears like to me.<sup>20</sup> The process is similar to alethic semantic ascent, in which we add quotation marks and the suffix ‘is true’ to the sentence ‘Snow is white’ to form the sentence ‘‘Snow is white’ is true’. In the case of alethic semantic ascent, the resulting sentence is trivially equivalent to the original sentence. In the case of reflective semantic ascent the resulting appearance belief is trivially true.

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<sup>19</sup> In a similar spirit, David Papineau (2002, Ch.4) proposes that the concept of experience ‘the experience:---’ is formed by adding the experience operator ‘the experience:’ to perceptual classification ‘---’.

<sup>20</sup> When reflective semantic ascent converts an occurrent thought to a belief about its content, the mental prefix to add is *I am thinking that* instead of *I am appeared to as if*.

For those who are interested in the project of traditional foundationalism, I also want to note that the perceptual experience that is transformed into an appearance belief by reflective semantic ascent plays the role of an *unjustified justifier*. The notion of an unjustified justifier is often associated with contextualism in epistemology, but in my analysis it is not the context but the process of reflective semantic ascent that makes perceptual experience an unjustified justifier. For example, the perceptual experience of being appeared to as if  $p$  is not epistemically justified at the foundational level—i.e. at the outset of the foundational project of building epistemic justification, there is no good reason to think that  $p$  is actually the case in the external world. Nevertheless, its representational content,  $p$ , or what the external world appears like to me as I have the perceptual experience, makes it certain that the reflective belief that I am appeared to as if  $p$  is true. Thus, the perceptual experience, when it is made the unjustified justifier by the process of reflective semantic ascent, stops the regress of epistemic justification in the epistemology of empirical beliefs.

## 4. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

### 4.1 Semantic Externalism

As mentioned earlier, there has been a controversy over compatibility of self-knowledge and semantic externalism. The problem goes like this. Semantic externalism proposes that the representational content of a mental state is determined in part by conditions external to the person's mind. Suppose someone with incomplete knowledge of medical

terms tells the doctor that he has ‘arthritis’ in his thigh (Burge 1979). He does have—let’s suppose—a rheumatoid ailment in his thigh, but since ‘arthritis’ refers to inflammations of *joints*, his statement is false. In addition—and this is the point of the case—he seems to have a false *belief* that he has arthritis in his thigh. We suppose next that the same person belonged to a community in which the word ‘arthritis’ referred to rheumatoid ailments in general (call it ‘tharthritis’). His statement that he has ‘arthritis’ in his thigh would, then, be true since ‘arthritis’ refers to *tharthritis* in that community and he has indeed tharthritis in his thigh. Moreover, he would have—it seems—a true *belief* that he had tharthritis in his thigh. The upshot of this thought experiment is that the content of a mental state is determined in part by conditions external to the person’s mind, in this case by the linguistic practice of the community the person belongs to. An apparent consequence of this view—semantic externalism about the contents of mental states—is that in order to know the content of even our own conscious mental state, we need to know the relevant external conditions, such as the linguistic practice of the community. But if this is the case, how can a belief about the content of one’s own conscious mental state be different in its epistemic status from a belief about the external world, for example, a belief about the linguistic practice of the community?

The standard response to this challenge is that the same external conditions affect both the content of the original mental state and the content of the meta-belief about the original mental state, and thus they ‘cancel out.’ For example, if the word ‘arthritis’ refers to *arthritis* in the community, then the person believes that he has arthritis, and he also believes that he believes that he has arthritis. The meta-belief is then true. If, on the other hand, ‘arthritis’ refers to *tharthritis* in the community, then the person believes that he

has tharthritis, and he also believes that he believes that he has tharthritis. This meta-belief is also true. So, regardless of the relevant external conditions, the person's belief about the content of his own mental state is true.

This explanation looks fine when we are dealing with the belief about the content of an occurrent *thought*, but it is questionable with regard to the belief about the content of a perceptual experience. Suppose someone in our (English-speaking) community tells the doctor that he has 'arthritis' in his thigh. With regard to the content of his *thought*, semantic externalism seems correct that the person falsely thinks that he has arthritis in his thigh, but this does not seem to apply to the content of his perceptual experience. Since he is having pain in his thigh and arthritis cannot develop in the thigh, he is not *appeared to* as if he has arthritis in his thigh even if he sincerely says that he has 'arthritis' and 'arthritis' refers to arthritis in the community. He may even say that he is appeared to as if he has 'arthritis', but he is actually appeared to as if he has *tharthritis*. In short, semantic externalism does not seem to apply to the content of a perceptual experience. Given this observation, the reasonable stance appears to be: Accept semantic externalism about the content of thoughts, but reject it with regard to the content of perceptual experience. But then we have a problem. According to this view, the person in the case *believes* that he is appeared to as if he has *arthritis* (accept semantic externalism), but he is *appeared to* as if he has *tharthritis* (reject semantic externalism). His belief about the content of his own perceptual experience is then false.

My view on this issue is that there is still a sense in which the belief is true. When the person says that he is appeared to as if I have 'arthritis' in his thigh, it is clear that what he (the speaker) means by 'arthritis' is tharthritis, though the word 'arthritis' means

arthritis. In other words, there is a discrepancy in this case between the word meaning and the speaker's meaning. Corresponding to this distinction, there are two contents we can assign to his belief. One is the social content—*that he is appeared to as if he has arthritis*—that corresponds to the word meaning, while the other is the psychological content—*that he is appeared to as if he has tharthritis*—that corresponds to the speaker's meaning.<sup>21</sup> The person's belief about the content of his own perceptual experience is true with regard to the latter, the psychological content of the perceptual experience. Here is then a significant qualification about the claim of infallibility in the case of a reflective appearance belief. A reflective appearance belief is infallible not with regard to its social content, but with regard to its psychological content.

Once we adopt this understanding of infallibility in the case of a reflective appearance belief (i.e. a belief about the content of one's own perceptual experience), the standard resolution of the conflict between semantic externalism and self-knowledge becomes suspect even in the case of a belief about the content of one's own occurrent thought. The standard resolution proposes that the same external conditions affect the social contents of both the original thought and the belief about its content, and thus their influence cancels out. However, if we are going to defend the infallibility of a reflective

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<sup>21</sup> The terms 'social content' and 'psychological content' are Brian Loar's (1988). Loar makes a compelling case that we use the psychological contents in common sense psychological explanation, but there are also many philosophers who question the intelligibility of the narrow content, which the psychological content amounts to. I believe our practice of content ascription to perceptual experience strengthens the case for the narrow content, for if the content of perceptual experience is narrow, as it seems to be, then we cannot reject the narrow content in general. An obvious alternative is to insist on applying semantic externalism to the content of a perceptual experience as well. I find it implausible, but some opponents of the narrow content may prefer that. Those who take this option could still use the idea of reflective semantic ascent in explaining the special epistemic status of reflective beliefs, where all relevant contents (including the content of a perceptual experience) would be susceptible to the same external conditions.

appearances belief with regard to its psychological content and not its social content, it is more consistent to defend the infallibility of a reflective belief in general with regard to its psychological content. This means that when the person in the arthritis case says that he thinks he has ‘arthritis’ in his thigh but what he means is that he thinks he has *tharthritis* in his thigh, we assign to the belief underlying his statement the psychological content that he thinks he has *tharthritis* in his thigh, which corresponds to the speaker’s meaning. This in turn forces us to maintain that he also thinks that he has *tharthritis* in his thigh. In other words, when it comes to self-knowledge, the content of a thought about which the reflective belief is infallible should also be the psychological content that corresponds to the speaker’s meaning, rather than the social content that corresponds to the word meaning. In my view this analysis of self-knowledge captures the intimate way in which we know the content of our own conscious mental state better than the standard analysis that the external conditions, to which we may have no epistemic access, ‘cancel out.’

To summarize the discussion of semantic externalism, the observation that semantic externalism does not apply to the content of a perceptual experience prompts us to set aside semantic externalism for the appearance belief as well and focus on its psychological content. Consistency then requires that we assign psychological contents to all mental states in the analysis of self-knowledge. This does not mean that we abandon semantic externalism with regard to their social contents that probably serve other purposes. We can recognize both kinds of contents, accepting semantic externalism about the social content in some contexts, but focusing on the psychological content in the analysis of self-knowledge.

## 4.2 Non-Reflective Content Beliefs

Here is another challenge to the infallibility of reflective beliefs. Suppose I take a short glance at some cats on the mat and come to believe *hastily* that I am appeared to as if five cats are on the mat.<sup>22</sup> Is it not possible that this hastily formed belief is false? The question is not about the number of real cats on the mat, which may not be five, but whether I am really appeared to as if five cats are on the mat. Given the careless way the judgment is made, it seems quite possible that I am actually appeared to as if *six* cats (or just *some* cats) are on the mat. Can a reflective content belief be, then, false due to careless judgment?

The answer is no. The case does show that not all content beliefs are infallible. But that is not the issue here. I am only defending the infallibility of *reflective* beliefs, i.e. content beliefs that are formed by reflective semantic ascent. I maintain that they are infallible by the very nature of reflective semantic ascent. Here is the reasoning. Suppose I come to believe *that I am appeared to as if five cats are on the mat* by the process of reflective semantic ascent. This means that I come to have this belief by adding the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if* to what the world appears like to me. It follows from this that the world does appear to me as if *five cats are on the mat*. Otherwise—e.g. if the world appeared to me as if *six cats are on the mat*—I would not come to believe *that I am appeared to as if five cats are on the mat* by simply adding the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if* to what the world appears like to me. In the case considered above, where I believe that I am appeared to as if five cats are on the mat while I may actually be

appeared to as if six cats (or just some cats) are on the mat, the content belief is not formed by reflective semantic ascent. It is formed on the basis of an unsupported substantive judgment, which makes any belief fallible. Reflective beliefs owe their special epistemic status to the way they are formed. A content belief formed in some other way may well be false.<sup>23</sup>

This is an important point, especially in comparison with what Tyler Burge (1996) calls a *cogito*-like judgment, which is made true by the very act of content ascription. For example, when I judge that I am thinking that there are physical entities, I make this ascription of the content to my thought true by the very act of content ascription. The reason is that the act of ascribing the content that there are physical entities requires that I have the thought that there are physical entities since the ascribed content *that there are physical entities* is part of the whole content of the judgment *that I am thinking that there are physical entities*. As a result, a cogito-like judgment is true no matter what content I ascribe to my thought and no matter how I come to ascribe it. If I suddenly change my mind and judge for no good reason that I am thinking that there are non-physical entities, the ascription is still true because making this ascription requires that I entertain the thought *that there are non-physical entities*. What makes a cogito-like judgment true is not its descriptive accuracy, but its execution. In contrast to this, when I form an appearance belief by reflective semantic ascent, I have to assign to my perceptual experience *what the world seems like to me* as its content. Not all appearance beliefs are true because unlike a cogito-like judgment, forming an appearance belief does not

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<sup>22</sup> The example is a variation of the speckled hen case discussed earlier. I made the number of cats in the example small so that the number can be more easily part of the conceptually articulated content of the perceptual experience.

automatically make it true. Only the appearance belief formed by reflective semantic ascent is infallible.

### 4.3 Evidence from Psychology

Some critics familiar with the recent psychological literature on false self-reports may question the claim of infallibility on empirical grounds. In some experiments on false self-reports an unsuspecting participant is presented with a figure that induces a visual illusion.<sup>24</sup> The participant reports that she sees the object in a certain way, which is different—as expected—from the true figure. However, her visually guided motor behavior is inconsistent with the report. The participant behaves as if she sees the figure *correctly*. There is no reason to doubt that her verbal report reflects what the figure appears like to her as she has the perceptual experience. It may seem in this case that what the figure appears like to her as she has the perceptual experience is not truly the representational content of her perceptual experience, which is revealed by her visually guided motor behavior. Some people may suggest that the experimental results undermine the seemingly innocent step in my reasoning that what the external world appears like to me as I have a perceptual experience is the representational content of the perceptual experience.

The dissonance between the verbal report and the visually guided motor behavior is an intriguing phenomenon, but it does not affect my point that what the external world appears like to me as I have a perceptual experience is the representational content of the

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<sup>23</sup> I will discuss in the next section the issue of whether we can identify reflective beliefs correctly.

<sup>24</sup> See Aglioti et al. (1995), and Milner and Goodale (1995, Ch.6). See also Clark (2001) on the philosophical implications of these experimental findings.

perceptual experience. Recall that by stipulation the term ‘experience’ in this paper refers to a *conscious* mental state. This means that in our terminology the person in the experiment is appeared to in the way she verbally reports. It is irrelevant to the determination of the content of her conscious perceptual experience that she ‘sees’ the object differently at some subconscious level. I grant that ascribing to the person some subconscious perception whose content is different from what she verbally reports helps explain her non-verbal behavior, but that is not the issue we are interested in. What mental state we assign to the person depends on the nature and purpose of the inquiry. If we want to explain and predict the person’s visually guided motor behavior, we had better set aside her verbal report and focus on the subconscious perception. However, that is not appropriate for the purpose of epistemology since it is conscious mental states, and not those buried in the subconscious, that are integrated into the person’s inferential network for her further epistemic deliberation. There is therefore no good reason, in the context of the present inquiry, to think that the person in the experiment reports the content of her perceptual experience falsely.

## **5. EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

I have replied to some likely objections to the claim that reflective beliefs are infallible. There is, however, one issue that still needs to be addressed. In response to one of the objections I have acknowledged that a content belief that is not formed by reflective semantic ascent may be false. The claim I defend is that a *reflective* belief—a content

belief formed by reflective semantic ascent—is infallible. This qualification gives rise to the following question: Can we identify reflective appearance beliefs correctly? This is an important question since the claim of infallibility is of little epistemological significance if our *identification* of an infallible belief is seriously unreliable.

There are two levels at which the issue of identification may be raised. First, one may ask whether ordinary people with no interest or training in epistemology can identify reflective beliefs correctly. With regard to this question, it is fair to say that very few can even comprehend the question. What is ‘reflective appearance belief’, ‘semantic ascent’, ‘mental prefix’?<sup>25</sup> However, the question of identification at this level is not the most important, nor is it philosophically interesting. To see why, it is useful to compare the issue to the identification of logical truths. A logical truth is infallible, but few people with no interest or training in logic would comprehend the question when they are asked whether a certain statement is ‘logically true’. A more important and interesting question is whether there is a procedure a student of logic can follow to ascertain that the statement is logically true. Similarly, it is more important and interesting to examine whether there is a procedure a student of epistemology can follow to ascertain that a certain content belief is a reflective belief and thus infallible.

As we have discussed at some length, the process that converts a perceptual experience into an infallible appearance belief is reflective semantic ascent, i.e. to add the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if* to what the world appears like to me as I have the perceptual experience. This process of adding the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if* to

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<sup>25</sup> If my analysis in this paper is correct, ordinary people are still ‘entitled’ to hold their reflective beliefs, where the entitlement ‘consists in a status of operating in an appropriate way in accord with norms of reason, even when these norms cannot be articulated by the individual who has that status.’ (Burge 1996, p. 241)

what the world appears like to me serves as a method of ascertaining that a certain content belief is a reflective belief and thus infallible. Of course, no mental process is totally immune from an error. In some moments of mental lapse I may make an error in following the procedure—e.g. there may be some confusion about the mental prefix *I am appeared to as if*, which may lead to a false appearance belief. The identification of a reflective belief is therefore fallible, though a (genuine) reflective belief itself is infallible. This may be disappointing to some traditional foundationalists, but we are still in good shape epistemologically, for the identification of a reflective belief is *empirically* infallible. An error in the process of reflective semantic ascent is not an error of the empirical kind—i.e. not an error due to deficient or insufficient empirical evidence—but an error of the conceptual kind. This is because reflective semantic ascent is a purely conceptual process whose success does not hinge on the correctness of any empirical evidence. Comparison with the identification of logical truths is useful on this point as well. A logical truth is infallible and there are certain formal procedures—such as the truth tree method—one can follow to ascertain that the statement is logically true, but our identification of a logical truth is still fallible. We may, for example, forget to check off a statement at some place in the truth tree, but this is not an empirical error due to deficient or insufficient empirical evidence since the procedure is purely conceptual. Since there is no way, as far as I can see, to preclude the possibility of a mental slip in any conceptual process for the identification of a true belief, the best we can hope for in the epistemology of empirical beliefs is to eliminate all possibilities of an empirical error. The identification of an infallible belief by the procedure of reflective semantic ascent achieves that.

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