

MORITZ SCHLICK ON SELF-EVIDENCE

The problem of self-evidence, the question whether there are any instances of it and what epistemological value attaches to them, is one that has dogged the footsteps of modern philosophy from its beginning in Descartes up to the present day. The following consideration will show how important the problem is. Our conviction that a proposition is true is often supported by some form of substantiation, in the ideal case by a proof of the proposition. Not all propositions, however, can be substantiated. The substantiation or establishment of any proposition begins with premisses and proceeds by means of inferences to its final conclusions. If we are to accept the conclusion, we must be convinced of the truth of those premisses and the validity of those inferences. Thus no conviction can be a substantiated one unless there are convictions that do not come to us by means of substantiation but are thought to be in no need thereof. Substantiated beliefs depend upon unsubstantiated ones. The same holds for knowledge too. Valid modes of inference ensure that the truth of the premisses is inherited by the conclusions. Thus if our inference is correct and our original premisses true, then the proposition established by the inference is also true. But the truth of the original premisses is not mediated by inference. Mediated and substantiated knowledge can exist only where there is unsubstantiated knowledge. Since an infinite regress of substantiation is out of the question, we are left (so the usual argument runs) with the choice between a dogmatic or conventionalist position that declares certain propositions true without further justification and on the other hand, the assumption that certain propositions possess a self-evidence that guarantees their truth.¹

Against this position Schlick adduced the following argument:

Now we do, of course, establish truth by means of various data of consciousness, and we may if we choose call these self-evidence. But it is impossible to sustain the doctrine that there is a peculiar irreducible experience of self-evidence, the presence of which constitutes a sufficient criterion and an unmistakable mark of truth. This is proved by the empirical fact that the experience of self-evidence occurs also in the case of notoriously false judgements. Any false claim that is defended with honest fervour may serve as an

example. Thus the systems of such great metaphysicians as Descartes and Spinoza consist in large measure of false judgements which their originators nevertheless held to be the most certain of all truths. I am aware that defenders of the doctrine of self-evidence maintain that in these instances what was experienced was not genuine self-evidence; they would have us believe that what was involved instead was a certainty "without self-evidence". This claim, however, is tangled up in a hopeless contradiction. On the one hand, if genuine self-evidence is experienced as essentially different from spurious (a certainty without self-evidence), then the two will never be confused with one another; there will be no mistakes about self-evidence – with the result that we shall have denied the existence of the very set of facts the theory was devised to explain. On the other hand, if there is no immediate difference between the two experiences, then we can decide only indirectly, by means of subsequent investigation, whether what is present is certainty with self-evidence or certainty without it. And this is an admission that a genuine criterion of truth is not to be found in an experience of self-evidence, but that the other criteria are decisive which have to be employed in connection with that subsequent investigation. Such criteria cannot themselves be experiences of self-evidence; otherwise we would be caught up in a circle. But then the claim that self-evidence is the ultimate criterion becomes untenable. Thus each alternative leads to a contradiction with the presuppositions of the theory.²

Schlick's argument has been criticized by W. Stegmüller. "Against this apparently cogent reasoning", he writes, "our only objection must be its contradictoriness. For its claim is to have rendered self-evident (and clearly no pseudo-self-evidence is intended at this point) that there is no "objective" self-evidence distinguishable from pseudo-self-evidence. How then are we to know that all our reasoning against self-evidence is not pseudo-reasoning, since in its very course we have been the victims of pseudo-self-evidence?"³

Stegmüller, for his part, maintains that the problem of self-evidence is an insoluble one. Any argument for the existence of (genuine) self-evidence and equally any argument against it, must presuppose the (genuine) self-evidence of its own premisses and modes of inference, thus leading in the one case to a *petitio principii* and in the other to a self-contradiction.⁴

Our aim is to show, contrary to this view, that Schlick's argument, once it has been reconstructed in a fairly obvious way, is completely correct. To be sure, Schlick provoked criticism such as Stegmüller's by dispensing with precise conceptual distinctions, and by making such statements as, "that the foundations of what we know are neither certain nor uncertain; they merely *are*. They are not something evident, nor need they be; they are independently, self-sufficiently there."⁵

We begin with a number of distinctions. We call *self-evident* those states of affairs of whose subsistence we are convinced without relying

self-evidence (a true conviction as to the occurrence of self-evidence). By II it will follow that self-evidence and genuine self-evidence are simply the same thing.

We thus face the question whether spurious self-evidence is possible. If this is to be excluded, we have to assume the principle:

- III If someone is convinced that it is self-evident to him that p , then it is in fact self-evident to him that p .

Taken together with II this tells us that the occurrence of self-evidence (in one's own case) is *problem free*: One can never be deceived as to whether something is or is not self-evident to one.

Taking into account these principles, which are all to be regarded as meaning-postulates and thus as analytic propositions, three interpretations of the word "self-evident" can be distinguished, for all of which I and II hold.

- (1) III holds but III* does not. Self-evidence is thus problem free but not reliable and consequently is, like conviction, a purely subjective criterion of truth.
- (2) III* holds but not III. Self-evidence is thus reliable but not problem free. In that case self-evidence is an objective criterion of truth but one can be deceived as to its occurrence.
- (3) III and III* both hold. Self-evidence is thus both problem free and reliable, a criterion of truth both subjectively decidable and at the same time objective.

For brevity's sake we shall give to self-evidence in senses (1), (2) and (3) respectively the names *subjective*, *objective*, and *perfect* self-evidence. Interpretation (1) most nearly corresponds to the normal use of the word "self-evident", which is particularly marked by the characteristic of being problem free. In the normal understanding of the word it would be nonsense to say, "I do not know whether the state of affairs p is self-evident to me": it is in line with this that such statements are contradictory according to III. This rules out interpretation (2). But what are we to say of interpretation (3)? The concept of perfect self-evidence is certainly not the normal concept of self-evidence. This can be seen simply from Schlick's observation, quoted above, that in the past self-evidence has frequently led to the formation of false judgements. In the sense of "self-evidence" which permits us to make

this assertion, self-evidence is not perfect. In what follows, when we speak of "self-evidence" without further qualification, subjective self-evidence will always be what is meant. For "self-evident in the objective sense" we shall also use the briefer designation "self-evident*".

States of affairs that are self-evident can subsist or not subsist. In the case that it is self-evident to someone that p , and p does subsist, we shall speak of *correct self-evidence*. It is then natural to define as follows: It is self-evident* to a person a that p just in case it is self-evident to a that p and p subsists. So interpreted the concept of "self-evidence*" satisfies principle III* but not principle III; furthermore correct self-evidence can be termed (genuine) self-evidence* and incorrect self-evidence specious self-evidence*.⁸

Schlick's argument can now be reconstructed. His aim is to show that there are no instances of perfect self-evidence, no self-evidence whose occurrence constitutes "a sufficient criterion and infallible mark of truth". To establish this, he points to the fact that there are instances of incorrect self-evidence. The remainder of his argument is addressed to the objection that all such cases are instances of merely spurious self-evidence. Schlick says that if the difference between genuine and spurious self-evidence were part of what was given us in the experience of self-evidence, then we should be able to see through the spuriousness immediately: it would therefore be impossible for us to be mistaken about the genuineness of an instance of self-evidence, with the consequence that there would be no instances of spurious self-evidence. It results, therefore, that the distinction between genuine and spurious self-evidence on which the objection rests cannot be maintained. This part of the argument can also be put in the following way. The distinction between genuine and spurious cannot be made for any form of self-evidence that satisfies III; in particular, it cannot be made for perfect self-evidence. But, Schlick continues, no form of self-evidence that does not allow the immediate distinction between genuine and spurious can be a subjective criterion of truth. Our conviction that p was self-evident would require every bit as much justification as the conviction that p was valid, which the self-evidence of p was meant to justify. This can be put in another way. If III is abandoned, then in the first place there can no longer be any perfect self-evidence and in the second place no form of self-evidence can perform the task required of it, that namely of providing justification without substantiation.

In effect Schlick's argument amounts to this: that, in the face of the fallibility of judgements arrived at through self-evidence we cannot have both reliability and freedom from problems. Self-evidence thus cannot be both a subjectively decidable and an objectively adequate criterion of truth.

This argument is essentially correct, but with the reservation that from the statement (1) "There are judgements formed as a result of self-evidence but false" it only follows that the self-evidence in question is not generally reliable, i.e., is not perfect self-evidence. The statement, "There are no instances of perfect self-evidence", on the other hand, is stronger. It asserts that there is no nonempty concept of perfect self-evidence. But this by no means follows from the fact that statement (1) is true, when "self-evidence" is taken in its normal sense. Perfect self-evidence certainly exists, but only within very narrow limits, e.g., as regards very elementary analytic or introspective propositions, and not as regards any question touching the external world. If we regard the external world as independent of us, then there can be no analytic connexion between what is subjectively decidable (as self-evidence is according to III) and what is objective, though this is what III* demands. As Frege put it, "By the step with which I win an environment for myself I expose myself to the risk of error."⁹

Stegmüller's criticism of Schlick's argument does not hold good for the following reason. It does not have to be made self-evident* that there is no self-evidence* nor does Schlick need perfect self-evidence that there is no perfect self-evidence. Schlick neither disputes the existence of instances of correct self-evidence, nor does he claim perfect self-evidence for his argument. He only wants to show – i.e., to make correctly self-evident (in our interpretation to make self-evident*) that there are no instances of perfect self-evidence.

Stegmüller's undecidability argument is also untenable. That some things are self-evident is itself self-evident, but it requires no substantiation. No, it is self-evident to anyone to whom anything has ever been self-evident. It is, by principle I, likewise self-evident that there are instances of correct self-evidence. This too needs no substantiation, for self-evidence invariably carries with it conviction of truth. On the other hand, no immediate self-evidence can be claimed for the very strong generalized statements "There are no instances of self-evidence" and "There are no instances of correct self-evidence", while the statement,

“It is self-evident to me that there are no instances of (correct) self-evidence” would be, as Stegmüller justly stresses, paradoxical. There can thus be no talk of undecidability as regards the problem of self-evidence. To be sure, we ourselves have put forward arguments; but we have not sought to substantiate the assertion that there are instances of self-evidence – that assertion has never been seriously contested so far as subjective self-evidence is concerned: what we have done is to talk about meaning postulates for the word “self-evidence” and about the consequences of these postulates. In so doing we have been able to assume self-evidence for our premisses and conclusions without being guilty of *petitio principii*. It is a truth beyond doubt that if nothing is self-evident to a man – not even this fact itself or the sense of his own statements – then there is no foisting self-evidence on him by proof. With such people, however, supposing they existed, there would be no possibility of rational discussion. Certainly no one who has written on the problem of self-evidence has been among their number, because there can be no honest assertion unless the speaker is convinced of its truth, but without immediate convictions (i.e., convictions attended by self-evidence) there cannot be any mediated convictions either, nor, hence, any convictions at all.

Stegmüller also goes wrong when he speaks of our deciding to recognize self-evidence or to acknowledge its validity. Self-evidence is a subjective criterion of truth. Anyone to whom something is self-evident is, by principle I, also convinced of its truth. Self-evidence leaves no more room for decision than conviction does. It is nonsense to say “I am convinced that p holds but may not decide to regard p as true” and equally nonsense to say, “It is self-evident to me that p holds but I may not decide to regard p as true.”

But where does this leave the argument with which we began – that since all substantiation comes to an end somewhere, our claims to know anything rest either on dogmatic presuppositions that cannot be justified or on self-evidence which guarantees truth? As we have seen, perfect self-evidence exists, if at all, in very restricted and uninteresting areas. Of the two alternatives we seem to be reduced to that of dogmatism. This unwelcome conclusion is, however, by no means compelling. Perfect self-evidence is required only for the justification of perfect knowledge, i.e., of knowledge for which it holds that if someone is convinced that he knows that p , then he does indeed know that p :

suppositions about one's own knowledge would thus be infallible. Here too a similar principle applies. The normal concept of knowledge is not that of perfect knowledge.¹⁰ What is true, using "knowledge" in the normal sense, is that if we are convinced that a state of affairs p subsists, then we are also convinced that we know that p holds. Conviction is the strongest subjective criterion of truth: surer than sure of a thing we cannot be. By principle I, we shall in consequence be convinced of the subsistence of a state of affairs, once that subsistence is self-evident to us. Thus we have no need to ask for more than (subjective) self-evidence regarding the premisses and argumentation of an instance of substantiation: that is enough for us to be convinced of the truth of the conclusion. To be sure, convictions are not always right; but then there cannot be a subjective guarantee of the truth of synthetic propositions when their holding good is independent of all opinions on the part of the subject in question.

NOTES

¹ Self-evidence primarily attaches to propositions and states of affairs. Sentences can be (and *Sätze* are in the original German of this article) so called when the propositions that they express are self-evident.

² Schlick, *GTK*, pp. 148–9.

³ Stegmüller (69), 180.

⁴ See Stegmüller (69), 168ff.

⁵ Schlick, *GTK*, p. 148.

⁶ This is why the equation of "merely subjective" self-evidence with certainty (in the sense of conviction) that is found in both Schlick and Stegmüller cannot be defended.

⁷ If "knowledge" is understood in the sense of true conviction, as argued in Kutschera (81), 1.3 and 1.4, then II is equivalent to the principle "Self-evidence implies knowledge of self-evidence."

⁸ It holds by the definition that: "It is self-evident to someone that p just in case he believes that it is self-evident* to him that p ." From this our assertion follows. If, on the other hand, the definition is not accepted, then a distinction must be drawn between correct self-evidence and self-evidence* and also between incorrect self-evidence and spurious self-evidence*.

⁹ Frege, *LI*, p. 24.

¹⁰ See Kutschera (81), ch. 1.

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