THINKING AND SPEAKING

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ABSTRACT

Based on Eli Alshanetsky's work *Articulating a Thought*, in this paper, I present a reconstructed puzzle involving complex thoughts and a method for how to tackle articulating them. Then, I reconstruct and provide objections to Alshanetsky's favored view with rationality. I expound on an initially overlooked deflationary view that is arguably much more viable, while also adding a layer of nuance and granularity to the view that affirms its place in solving the puzzle. I reach the conclusion that if articulation is simply a medium for us to express our complex unfinished thoughts, then perhaps it isn't necessary for us to clarify the thought.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Articulating a Thought*, Eli Alshanetsky examines the process of clarifying our thoughts through speech.[1] He attempts to find a solution to the paradox of trying to articulate an idea when it is not yet fully formed. This paper reconstructs the puzzle, discusses a solution that Alshanetsky finds the most compelling, and makes a case for the "thinking-project file" deflationary account that is potentially stronger than Alshanetsky's.

II. THE PUZZLE

Alshanetsky poses an epistemic puzzle as follows:

A. I can articulate a particular thought that I have—for example, my thought that *p*.

B. Successfully articulating the thought requires knowing that the meaning of my articulation matches my thought; I come to this knowledge (partly) on the basis of my knowledge of what I am thinking.

C. Knowing what I am thinking requires having an articulation and drawing on my knowledge that the meaning of the articulation matches my thought.

In cases where one is thinking complex thoughts, it seems that some level of articulation is needed to clearly establish one's own thoughts. We might have a vague idea as to what we are thinking, but after articulation, our thought is certainly more explicit. To establish the paradox in the puzzle, Alshanetsky states a principle known as Begging-the-Question: "If I come to know that p (partly) on the basis of my knowledge that *q*, then having that knowledge that *q* cannot require drawing on my knowledge that *p*."[2] With this principle, we can see that the puzzle or statements A-C above are inconsistent. To further illustrate the paradox, consider Meno's puzzle of investigation:

> M[eno]: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you do not know? [3]

How can articulating a thought help you clarify it considering you don't have a solid thought to articulate? The puzzle alleges that to start forming words to articulate a thought we must already know exactly

1 Eli Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 36.
2 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 36.
3 Plato, *Meno*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1976), 80d–e.

the nuances of our thought. However, in these cases, it seems that for us to clarify our thought, we must articulate it. Even if it is the case that somebody else verbally speaks my thought correctly before I say anything, how do I recognize that it is the right expression of my thought, without even fully being able to explain what I was thinking? It seems extraordinary that one can recognize when their thought is correctly formulated without figuring out how to articulate it correctly themselves.

III. THE RATIONAL VIEW

Alshanetsky defines implicit knowledge as "a placeholder for whatever it is that allows us to recognize the correct formulations of our thought" and explicit knowledge as a way "to know that we are thinking that *p*."[4] By reframing articulation to encompass the transition from implicit to explicit knowledge rather than partial to complete knowledge, he rejects proposition B in the puzzle.

Alshanetsky posits that inside our minds we have multiple representational forms for thoughts, such as kinesthetic, visual, and even a purely conceptual format. He explains that many times our ideas are encoded in multiple different forms. In complex thoughts, these representational forms must be reconstructed and converted into a "'verbally interpretable' format" at the time of articulation.[5] He explains how many times the simplicity of just changing formats cannot be enough to explain our difficulty in articulation, and so he describes a psychological model for verbal communication:

> On Levelt's model, we monitor the articulation process through three distinct channels, or feedback loops. The "outer loop" receives inputs from audition and allows us to detect errors by attending to our overt speech. The "inner loop" enables us to monitor our inner speech—the stream of phonetic plans for overt articulation. And the (innermost) "conceptual loop" allows us to monitor the pre-verbal message directly, in the process of its construction, to check whether it is appropriate for expression and whether the timing for expressing it is right.[6]

This systematic model accounts for the idea that as we are articulating one thought, we are simultaneously formulating a second thought that will align with the first and make sure that our words are truly fitting for the idea.

There are some challenges that Alshanetsky poses for this encoding account before refining the potential solutions. The first problem is a

4 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 90.
5 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 92.
6 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 93.

lag in recognition. Under the current encoding-difference account, it seems that there would need to be some amount of time to process what someone else is saying when trying to express the formulation of a thought. However, recognition of formulation should be instant, given that the thought is in your mind. How is this possible if you have not even come up with a verbally interpretable representation for the thought? The second problem has to do with the organization of our thought fragments. The framework a person has at a given moment does not account for how that person can speak about their thought holistically when first articulating it. The third problem concerns completion. If we truly do have a verbally interpretable representation before articulating our thought externally, then there does not seem to be a compelling reason to start and finish verbally expressing our thought. Since our thought is clarified at the verbally interpretable level, it seems that the actual articulation is optional. This view, then, is highly problematic as it brings us back to the puzzle. The final problem that Alshanetsky describes as a "deeper challenge" has to do with how at certain points in this process it seems that we can directly control the progress as opposed to it being completely unconscious (as it is in the present account).[7]

Alshanetsky argues that a second iteration of the encoding-difference theory can solve all the above problems. On this account, an articulation is split into two processes running in parallel:

a. the *sub-personal* thought process that constructs the verbally interpretable representation and renders our initial thought suitable for expression;

b. the *personal-level* process of setting out and arranging the information in the representation on the page—i.e., of putting the representation's content into English.[8]

Alshanetsky explains that there are two main steps in articulating a thought. The first is when you are sparked with the thought and can think internally, which will lead to the creation of your signature. The second is when you find a satisfactory formulation for the thought and can express it verbally. Regarding recognition, Alshanetsky claims that we simply recognize the correct formulation from someone else's speech when their words match our thought's signature. As he puts it, "Our detection of a match is as cognitively basic as a direct comparison between two colors or simple shapes."[9]

It can be argued that Alshanetsky's second account does not escape all the concerns he poses. Perhaps the most pressing is the problem of

7 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 100.
8 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 103.
9 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 119.

completion. If the verbally interpretable representation is at some level present before articulation, is there a need for articulation? Beyond this, recognition by the means of signatures seems to be a weak framework if the basis for it is simply implicit knowledge. Perhaps there is a better deflationary view.

IV. DEFLATIONISM

Alshanetsky gives an example of a philosophy student who is struggling to enunciate their thought. Sometimes in such cases, a teacher may attempt to enunciate what the student was thinking. In some such cases, the teacher's enunciation might be close enough to what the student was vaguely thinking such that the student agrees that what the teacher said was what they were thinking. As Alshanetsky notes, "The student is likely to recognize that the teacher has captured the objection he was *after*, rather than any thought that he *had* when he raised his hand."[10] However, we might want to say that the student's original thought was not actually formulated adequately by the teacher. Rather, the student's thought was incomplete and it became more complete as the student continues thinking.

A deflationist might argue that the philosophy student might have a near epiphany about an objection or solution to a problem. The feeling is somewhat like when someone understands a joke they have been thinking about for a while. At the moment of the epiphany, a person may have some way of expressing this feeling or thought, even if they may not have an exact grasp or capability to express the inner "something" right away. Right after we articulate, Alshanetsky explains how our acknowledgement:

- immediately follows our understanding of the formulation, without our having to engage in any (overt) inference or reconstruction, and
- facilitates our transition to (what appears to us as) a "clearer" or "better-informed" state, relative to the initial shift.[11]

Using this we can establish a basis for instances in which the puzzle manifests in the way above. Now, we have reached the true disagreement between the deflationist and inflationist. The deflationist believes that no definite thought is formed before articulation (only a thought that resembles the essence is formed), whereas the inflationist believes that a definite thought is formed before articulation.

10 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 44.
11 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 46.

Now we can examine the radical "thinking-project" deflationist view, which denies that we follow any pre-supposed condition when trying to approve or disapprove a formulation for our puzzling thoughts. Similar to starting an MSWord file on your desktop, I start a thinking-project file in my mind when I first begin to think of how to go about finding an efficient solution to a problem. Just as one changes the name for an MSWord file and chooses where to locate it, I subconsciously add tags and labels for this thinking-project file. Since this file poses interesting questions and involves a complex problem, I become very invested in it. There is no real way to just ignore the file unless its importance naturally fades away. Even if I am not actively working on it while I work on other activities, such as doing the dishes, my mind finds itself coming back to this thinking-project file. In common language, I may claim that it is "in the back of my mind," but it is never gone, and until it is complete I will have no true or false value that is assigned to it. Thinking about it "in the back of my mind" is akin to adding partial content to the file only to perhaps come back and remove it. Therefore, any time someone asks me to explain the solution to this problem, I will give an incomplete formulation of my thoughts because it is representative of the incomplete nature of my thinking-project file.[12]

Alshanetsky claims that under this view, correct recognition is based on our thinking having reached an equilibrium. This is paradoxical because it is the recognition itself that brings our thinking to rest. However, rather than saying a correct formulation is recognized when our thinking has reached an equilibrium, a more fitting way to look at it is as a checkpoint. This checkpoint system is akin to a coding file that is saved after some progress is made. At any point, we can look back in this file's revision history to trace the changes made. As partial progress is made on the problem, our mind occasionally saves this thinking-project file. Whenever someone asks me what the solution to the coding problem is, I give an incomplete answer that perhaps most closely resembles the last checkpoint. With regard to recognition, I take a formulation as correct when it is in line with my thinking-project file. I recognize formulations as finished states that could line up with the direction my thinking-project file is going. With this small modification of the deflationist thinking-project file view, we can account for the problem mentioned earlier because our file never reaches a stable equilibrium.

One might object to this checkpoint system by arguing that a person may temporarily agree with an outside explanation of their thought but might ultimately find it unsatisfactory. However, this worry can be accounted for with a multidimensional checkpoint system. It might be that the professor speaks a formulation that the student correctly recognizes as representing their thought because, at the time the professor speaks, it seems that the formulation is in line with the student's thinking-project file. However, as the student makes progress on their thinking-project file for this objection, new checkpoints are reached. These checkpoints could be in a slightly different direction than what was originally planned. As a result, the student could realize that in fact, the professor did not actually capture the student's thoughts. Comparing this to Alshanetsky's original thinking-project view, the student under the original view would be unable to tell if their thought was being conveyed accurately because their project was not at equilibrium. As such, the thinking-project file view with the checkpoint system modification can refute premise A in our puzzle stated near the beginning of the paper while being more straightforward than Alshanetsky's solution.

12 Alshanetsky, *Articulating a Thought*, 58.

V. CONCLUSION

Thinking about the process of articulating our thoughts, especially in these puzzling cases where we struggle to accurately create a formulation of our thoughts, while also aiming to clarify our thoughts can be a confusing matter. While Alshanetsky sheds light on this issue by considering various accounts and reaching a nuanced theory of his own, I believe there is still room to be explored further with the deflationary theories. This paper has examined and offered modifications to one extension of one deflationary account discussed by Alshanetsky.

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