

Richard Moran

AUTHORITY  
AND  
ESTRANGEMENT  
AN ESSAY ON SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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AN ESSAY ON SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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*To my parents*

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## Outline of the Chapters

### **CHAPTER ONE The Image of Self-Knowledge**

#### 1.1 THE FORTUNES OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: DESCARTES, FREUD, AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

The need to circumscribe the kind of knowledge of oneself that is relevant to philosophical reflection; the relevant sort of self-knowledge seen as specific in both content and in level of description. It is only with respect to *some* contents, and when identified by ordinary “personal level” concepts, that knowledge of oneself is either especially important to the life of the person or different in kind from the knowledge of others.

Asymmetries between first-person and third-person perspectives on mental life. The Perceptual Model of self-knowledge and difficulties in capturing a specifically first-person perspective.

Opposing Cartesianism without either denying the substantiality of self-knowledge or its differences from the knowledge of others; different in both the authority of its reports and in the basis on which they are made.

First-person awareness as “immediate,” not based on the observation of the person’s sayings and doings. Immediacy as distinct from either certainty or infallibility.

#### 1.2 THE POSSIBILITY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE:

##### INTROSPECTION, PERCEPTION, AND DEFLATION

The question of how self-knowledge, understood in terms of immediacy and authority, should be so much as possible. Fleeing the “inner eye”: various ways of “deflating” the appearance of first-person reports as genuine reports, expressive of genuine cognitive commitment.

Skepticism about self-knowledge suggested either by functionalism in theory of mind, or “externalism” about mental content, or Wittgenstein’s “rule-following considerations.”

In particular, the skepticism inspired by Content-Externalism seen as presuming a perceptual picture of ordinary knowledge of what one is thinking.

#### 1.3 CONSTITUTIVE RELATIONS AND DETECTION

Does the immediacy and authority of first-person reports have, in part, an a priori basis, or is it purely a matter of capacities people happen to have? The suggestion that a conceptual requirement here would be incompatible with the idea of genuine detection or cognitive achievement, making the “authority” of the first-person a matter of social concessions.

Conceptual connections and “response-dispositional” concepts; the example of color and the class of “extension-determining” judgments.

This case does not, however, support “deflationism” about self-knowledge, nor does the biconditional analysis account for any asymmetry between first-person and third-person judgments of mental life, which is the phenomenon we began trying to account for. First-person authority as a demand on others as much as a concession to them.

#### 1.4 “CONSCIOUS BELIEF”: LOCATING THE FIRST-PERSON

The Perceptual Model and the purely theoretical view of self-knowledge. Understanding the ordinary *importance* of self-knowledge for the person, as well as the character of specifically first-personal awareness, requires relating self-knowledge to the role of the person in the determination of his states of mind, and not just his observation or self-ascription of them.

The analysis of “conscious belief” in terms of second-order states: believing that one believes.

But the presence of a second-order belief will not suffice to make an unconscious or tacit belief into a conscious one, nor can it capture the difference between the specifically first-personal awareness of one’s own belief and other (third-personal) ways one might come to attribute a belief to oneself.

An account of first-person knowledge should explain not only how such “immediate” awareness of one’s own attitudes is possible, but also why it is only *one’s own* attitudes that are knowable in this way.

Intentionally characterized phenomena (including both attitudes and practices) admit of a distinction between inside and outside perspectives. The privilege accorded to a person’s own conception of his state of mind to be related to similar claims sometimes made regarding the “constitutive” role of self-interpretation. This idea, in turn, to be understood (partly) in terms of the “deliberative” role a person plays in determining his own state of mind.

## **CHAPTER TWO Making Up Your Mind: Self-Interpretation and Self-Constitution**

### 2.1 SELF-INTERPRETATION, OBJECTIVITY, AND INDEPENDENCE

Ordinary “realism” about the mental suggests a relation of logical independence between the description of some feature of mental life (e.g., a thought or emotional response) and the feature or state itself. But in the case of the *self*-interpretation of various aspects of psychological and social life, some philosophers have argued that this independence does not obtain. The hermeneutic tradition and Taylor’s Constitutive Claim.

We want to understand why this idea of a constitutive relation between interpretation and object is restricted to “intentionally characterized” phenomena, and why within these it is restricted to their *first-person* interpretation.

Distinguishing the Constitutive Claim from the idea that certain conceptual capacities are necessary for the possibility of certain emotional responses.

### 2.2 SELF-FULFILLMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

To say that a person’s self-interpretation “constitutes its object,” even partially, suggests that, in those cases, the new interpretation *suffices* for a new description to be true of it (perhaps a description conforming to the new interpretation itself). Sometimes taking oneself to be a certain way (e.g., uncomfortable, ambivalent) is sufficient for being truly characterized in those terms. The negative character of such “compromising” self-descriptions, and the self-fulfilling logic of contamination. The appeal of the Constitutive Claim may draw strength from such cases, but they cannot be said to characterize psychological life generally.

### 2.3 THE WHOLE PERSON’S DISCRETE STATES

The privilege accorded to a person’s own interpretation of his state need not be restricted to those cases where the constitutive rela-

tion involves the state's *conforming* to the person's interpretation of it. Even an interpretation which we, on the outside, can see as importantly *mistaken* may nonetheless have a claim to defining his state overall, in a way that is not shared by an outsider's interpretation of it. Seeing one's own pride as sinful constitutes it as importantly different from what it would otherwise be, since conditions like pride are orientations of the person and not atomistic particulars.

#### 2.4 BELIEF AND THE ACTIVITY OF INTERPRETING

Verbs such as "interpreting" and "describing" can denote ordinary activities that can be performed at will, but in that sense the activity of "merely describing" one's state a certain way will not be expected to constitute it as different, any more than mere describing makes a constitutive difference to other things in the world. Rather, the examples that make the best sense of the Constitutive Claim concern the self-interpretation of one's emotional state where "interpreting" it a certain way means actually taking it to *be* that way. This involves cognitive commitment which, like belief, is not something that can be undertaken at will. And this begins to clarify why reflection on one's own intentional states should be linked to the transformation of their character.

#### 2.5 THE PROCESS OF SELF-CREATION:

##### THEORETICAL AND DELIBERATIVE QUESTIONS

Sometimes reflection on one's state of mind is a purely theoretical matter, where the question is how some feature of one's mental life is to be correctly identified. But often one's reflection is more "deliberative" in spirit and seeks to bring one's state of mind to some kind of resolution. This sort of uncertainty is answered by something more like a decision than a discovery. The difference between "I don't know what to feel here" and "I don't know what it is that I do feel here."

The situation of deliberative, rather than theoretical, reflection on one's state helps to account for why it should be *self*-interpretation

alone that is said to “help shape the emotion itself,” and why, even on a commonsense “realism” about mental life, we should *expect* self-interpretation to play this special role.

## 2.6 RELATIONS OF TRANSPARENCY

It is sometimes claimed that, from the first-person point of view, the question “Do I believe that P?” is *transparent* to a corresponding question “Is P true?” a question which involves no essential reference to oneself at all. “Transparency” here means not reduction, but that the former question is answered in the same way as the latter. But what is the basis for such transparency, when it obtains?

There do seem to be situations where the person can or must answer the psychological question of what his attitude *is* in a way that is *not* “transparent” in the relevant sense. Rather than being guaranteed by logic, the claim of transparency is grounded in the deferral of theoretical reflection on one’s state to deliberative reflection about it. Conforming to transparency as a normative demand. Both the “transforming” character of self-interpretation and the “transparency” of one’s present thinking are grounded in the interaction between theoretical and deliberative reflection on one’s state of mind and the primacy of the deliberative stance within the first-person.

## CHAPTER THREE Self-Knowledge as Discovery and as Resolution

### 3.1 WITTGENSTEIN AND MOORE’S PARADOX

Why ordinary self-knowledge should be “nonevidential” rather than a matter of theoretical attribution to oneself, and why this difference matters. Moore’s Paradox as a way of describing situations where one’s attribution of an attitude to oneself does not match the attitude one would explicitly express or endorse (hence, where the Transparency Condition is violated).

What is paradoxical in Moore's Paradox is not restricted to situations of speech or the pragmatics of assertion.

The Presentational View, whereby the first-person present-tense of 'believe' does not have any psychological reference, but only serves to "present" the embedded statement (e.g., saying "I *believe* it's going to rain" as expressing uncertainty about *the rain*).  
Rejection of this view, and its attribution to Wittgenstein.

First-person authority and first-person subjection; blindspots.

How is transparency consistent with the fact of the different subject matters of the two questions (a state of mind, a state of the weather)? Belief as empirical psychological fact about a person, and belief as commitment to a state of affairs beyond the self. Inferring from someone's having some belief to the truth of that belief, versus the categorical relation between belief and "taking to be true" in the first-person.

### 3.2 SARTRE, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE EMPIRICAL

The "self-as-facticity" (seeing belief as a psychological fact about oneself) and the "self-as-transcendence" (seeing belief as a commitment of oneself). The case of the gambler as illustrating conflict between these two perspectives, neither of whose claims is avoidable. One type of "bad faith" as the exploitation of the purely theoretical perspective on oneself; another type as the empty transcendental assertion of one's freedom and clean slate.

For the first-person, the sense of the primacy of the practical, deliberative question over the predictive, theoretical question.

### 3.3 AVOWAL AND ATTRIBUTION

"Transparency" as a normative requirement on rational agency.

Reporting one's state of mind, where this is an evidence-based attribution, in the service of psychological explanation, versus expressing or avowing one's attitude, where this is a matter of one's declared commitment. The description of forms of psychic conflict

such as self-deception and *akrasia* requires an account of the clash between attitudes of the *same* basic type, otherwise “reporting” and “expressing” could simply go their separate ways, as in Moore’s Paradox.

Anscombe and the sense of “I’m going to bed at midnight.” The first-person statement of intention commits itself both practically and empirically.

If we reject the Presentational View and claim that psychological terms like ‘believe’ can be univocal across first- and third-person contexts, describing the same state of affairs, then the avowal of one’s attitude and the explanatory attribution of that attitude can be seen as different routes to knowledge of the same thing. Hence the language of “stances” as applied to deliberative and theoretical questions. This poses the question: For self-knowledge of one’s belief or other attitude, why should it matter that this knowledge is arrived at by one route rather than another? What is the importance (both philosophical and psychological) of the specific route of avowability to self-knowledge?

Consideration of an “ideal symptomatic stance” toward oneself to show that the importance of avowability cannot be a matter of either spontaneity, greater certainty, or reliability.

Wittgenstein and Sartre against the purely theoretical picture of self-knowledge; mind-reading as applied to oneself.

The two aspects of the first-person perspective on one’s attitudes: “immediacy,” in the sense of the report’s not basing itself on behavioral evidence; and “endorsement,” that the expression of the attitude normally counts as a claim of some sort about its *object*.

The loss of the authority to speak for one’s attitudes or feelings is not made up for by any amount of improved theoretical access to them.

### 3.4 BINDING AND UNBINDING

Deliberation aims to settle the question of what I think or feel, or what I’m going to do. It represents a failure of deliberation when it

issues, not in a settled belief or intention, but instead either in the attempt to exert some influence over one's belief or will, or in some state of mind which is then treated as evidence for what one believes or intends.

Not further evidence about oneself, but only the authority of one's commitment, can make for the link between one's present deliberative thinking and one's actual future belief or action. Similarly for the emerging from a purely attributive ("therapeutic") relation to some repressed attitude into the ability to avow it.

The example of settling some question by flipping a coin, and then flipping it again "to make sure." The ability to bind oneself and the recognition that one can always *unbind* oneself. The significance of the behavior of the coin, like the significance of the thought that concludes my deliberation or expresses my conviction, cannot be for me a matter of *discovery*. "Making sure" and the alibi of the appeal to "further evidence," which undoes one's self-knowledge.

Wittgenstein and "I believe I hope you'll come." The retreat from avowal: suspending self-expression and the limitations of truthful attribution.

## **CHAPTER FOUR The Authority of Self-Consciousness**

### 4.1 EXPRESSING, REPORTING, AND AVOWING

If an avowal is a first-person belief-statement that obeys the Transparency Condition, how can it be thought to retain the status of a *report* with reference to a particular person? Expressivism as the denial that first-person present-tense "psychological" utterances function descriptively, hence a fortiori the denial that such utterances can be statements expressive of self-*knowledge*.

Rejection of expressivism generally, and specifically with respect to avowals.

#### 4.2 RATIONALITY, AWARENESS, AND CONTROL:

##### A LOOK INSIDE

If avowability is what makes for the difference between “merely attributional” knowledge of oneself and genuine first-person awareness, what is the importance of this difference for the rationality and health of the person? One explanation of this importance is given by the argument that self-knowledge is a requirement for the rational control of beliefs and other attitudes. But the rationality of belief does not generally require monitoring and intervention; and, at the same time, such a requirement would not account for the need for specifically first-person awareness of one’s beliefs. The importance of “immediacy.”

#### 4.3 FROM SUPERVISION TO AUTHORITY:

##### AGENCY AND THE ATTITUDES

Authority, responsibility, and the “motivated” or “judgment-sensitive” attitudes.

Two ways of being “active” with respect to one’s desires; for example, pinching oneself, on the one hand, and orienting or committing oneself, on the other.

Reasoning, deliberating, versus aiming to produce some belief in oneself. Assuming authority for one’s attitudes (seeing them as “up to me”) versus exerting control over them.

#### 4.4 THE RETREAT TO EVIDENCE

If the “authority” of “first-person authority” were purely a matter of epistemic access, then the abrogation or replacement of this authority by some other type of access might be conceivable. But the suspension of first-person authority on an occasion does not support the coherence of the idea of its suspension across the board. Even taking the person’s own thoughts and words as being only of symptomatic or evidential significance for what his

state of mind actually is must rely at some point on his authority to speak his mind.

#### 4.5 FIRST-PERSON IMMEDIACY AND AUTHORITY

Once more, the relation of rational authority to the special “immediacy” of first-person awareness. Why should the particular avenue of awareness matter? Comparison with Anscombe’s Condition on intentional action.

From the agent’s point of view, the primacy of Justifying reasons over Explanatory reasons for his action.

The two faces of immediacy; epistemic and practical.

The “subject” use of ‘I’. This requirement on first-person awareness can now be seen in terms of the requirement of “immediacy” and the priority of Justifying reasons over Explanatory ones. Answering the question of my belief from the Deliberative stance, I do not refer to myself as falling under any particular description.

#### 4.6 INTROSPECTION AND THE DELIBERATIVE POINT OF VIEW

Further discussion of how the account of deliberation remains part of the theory of *self-knowledge*. The stance of deliberation as central to any account of self-knowledge that seeks to account for three features of the general form of self-knowledge which is of specifically philosophical interest: Immediacy, Authority, and the special importance of such self-knowledge to ordinary psychic health.

#### 4.7 REFLECTION AND THE DEMANDS OF AUTHORITY: APPREHENSION, ARREST, AND CONVICTION

The relation of self-consciousness to rational freedom in Kantian and post-Kantian traditions of thought (the “Tradition of Reflection”). Why should *this* faculty of awareness have any deeper relation to freedom or rationality than any other one (e.g., various modes of perception)?

Sartre: reflective awareness of a “psychic given”; as “positing my freedom” with respect to it. Retaining the specifically first-person reference of this idea.

Korsgaard, Nagel, and self-consciousness as making inescapable a situation of decision. Why can't the person be a “mere bystander” here?

The metaphor of “stepping back”; suspension of legitimacy and suspension of psychic force.

Appraising some “psychic given” versus asserting the authority for what shall count for me as a reason. This brings us to a capacity that is indeed strictly first-personal, unlike a special mode of awareness.

#### 4.8 THE REFLECTIVE AGENT

Descartes against the Perceptual Model of self-knowledge. The internal limits of the symptomatic stance.

The person moves from attribution of a belief to avowal of it when he conforms to the Transparency Condition. Conformity to this condition does not for him have any theoretical justification, but is a matter of his commitment of himself. It is an assertion of his rational freedom, claiming his belief here as “up to him.”

Sartre, “There is no inertia in consciousness”: what psychic forces may operate in me is an empirical matter; what I *count as a reason* is not. That is the business of the person, and not some part of him.

## **CHAPTER FIVE Impersonality, Expression, and the Undoing of Self-Knowledge**

### 5.1 SELF-OTHER ASYMMETRIES AND THEIR SKEPTICAL INTERPRETATION

The differences in perspective between Self and Other, in particular the fact that the possibilities for knowledge of mental life are systematically different in the two cases, are of independent philo-

sophical importance and are more fundamental than any skeptical consequences that may be drawn from them.

Further, the description of the asymmetries themselves does not itself privilege *either* point of view. Neither perspective need be interpreted as *aspiring* to the position or possibilities of the other, and even the authority of the first-person is related to its blind-spots, and the possibilities of “counter-privacy.”

## 5.2 THE PARTIALITY OF THE IMPERSONAL STANCE

Egoism, solipsism, and the imperative of impersonality in Nagel. The Impersonal Principle as expressing “a conception of oneself as simply a person among others, all of whom are included in a single world.”

Avoiding an interpretation of the Impersonal Principle which ultimately asserts the dominance of the “external point of view,” denying either the distinctiveness or the legitimacy of the demands of the first-person perspective.

In this way we can see that each perspective has a legitimate claim upon us, and neither can do the work of the other. Nonetheless, they can clash, and when they do, neither side has an exclusive claim to dictate the terms of a resolution. For the conflict is between perspectives and not within either one of them, each of which may in such a case be perfectly consistent within itself and reasonable in its own demands. One perspective only “leaves something out” from the perspective of the other one.

Sartre’s gambler once again, and the competing demands of being empirically realistic about oneself, and being answerable for one’s thought and action. From within either of the two perspectives, the demands of the other one can be described as characteristic forms of evasion.

Impersonality in ethics and its existentialist critique.

Attitudes and relations that are grounded in their “other-directed” application, and which can be adopted toward oneself only under some degree of psychological and conceptual tension.

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