

ALAN THOMAS

REASONABLE PARTIALITY AND THE AGENT'S POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT. It is argued that reasonable partiality allows an agent to attach value to particular objects of attachment via recognition of the value of the holding of that relation between agent and object. The reasonableness of partiality is ensured by a background context set by the agent's virtues, notably justice. It is argued that reasonable partiality is the only view that is compatible with our best account of the nature of self-knowledge. That account rules out any instrumental relationship between moral demands and moral character, but that familiar claim is given an unfamiliar explanation. Instrumentality depends on a prior objectification of the self and it is that kind of objectification that, in the ethical case, represents a form of ethical evasion. Self-knowledge is transparent, incomplete and essentially connected with first person endorsement. The transparency condition is that knowledge of one's state of mind is "taken" transparently to its object. More specifically, ethical transparency is the feature that my virtues do not exhibit themselves to me in self-knowledge, but take me transparently to the way in which they saliently represent the world as containing evaluative properties calling for various forms of response. It is concluded that reasonable partiality grounded in the nature of the virtues is the only reflective account of morality compatible with the most plausible account of the nature of self-knowledge. The demands of impartiality are incompatible with a condition of having a personal point of view, namely, that a self can stand in a non-alienated relation to itself via its capacity for self-knowledge.

KEY WORDS: impartiality, reasonable partiality, self-knowledge

This paper argues that a class of basic ethical reasons, reasonably partial reasons, can be described as arising from an agent's personal point of view: the point of view of a virtuous agent. I will defend the thesis by arguing that it is supported by our best account of some of the distinctive features of consciousness and self-knowledge. I outline an approach to moral psychology that supports this claim about ethical reasons and that defends this class of reasons from the distortions imposed upon them by impartialist accounts of the personal point of view.

Central to my argument is the idea of the transparency of consciousness. This aspect of conscious experience has been much discussed, particularly in connection with the philosophy of perception (Thomas, 2004a). I will, in this paper, take a restricted interest in this complex phenomenon and will focus on a claim, central to the phenomenological tradition of theorizing about consciousness, that sees consciousness as intrinsically connected to our capacity to represent the world transparently to

judgement¹ (Sartre, 1993; Rowlands, 2001, 2003; Thomas, 1997, 2003a,c). In the case of conscious beliefs, self-knowledge involves the content of that which is known by a subject being transparent to the subject. For example, to find out whether you believe that Napoleon died on Elba, you do not inspect your inner mental machinery to determine that which you believe. Instead, you set about determining the truth of the belief itself. You put in play those methods that lead you to fix the truth of the *content* believed (Edgley, 1969; Evans, 1982). Yet this “outward directedness” is not only compatible with the idea that the rational endorsement of that which you know is central to self-knowledge: it actually serves to explain it.

This general claim has three important consequences for moral psychology. First, as I have argued elsewhere, in their primary dimension of assessment moral claims are to be understood as cognitive. The best explanation of our ethical experience is that such claims are to be interpreted as expressing beliefs (Thomas, 2005). If ethical claims are cognitive then the transparency intuition should apply to them. Secondly, if this general view of the mind retains a crucial and irreducible role for the first personal point of view and its connection with rational endorsement, then one could derive from this view a constraint on the proper form of ethical objectivity (Deutscher, 1983; Moran, 2001). Thirdly, a connection can be drawn between different models of self-knowledge and the idea that an objectified view of oneself may represent the ethical error of false objectification (Sartre, 1993; Moran, 2001). These interconnected ideas, all clearly present in Sartre but also in the work of contemporaries, such as Richard Moran, will be applied in this paper to the idea that reasonably partial reasons arise from the personal point of view of the agent. But the main conclusion that I want to derive from the application of these ideas to ethics is that the personal point of view cannot be “objectified”.

1. REASONABLY PARTIAL REASONS AND THE PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW

A partial reason is a basic ethical reason that holds in virtue of a relation between an agent and a particular object of value (Williams, 1981; Cottingham, 1983, 1986, 1991, 1996, 1997). Moral agents stand in these relations to particular objects, and the reasons grounded on these relations arise in the context of an agent’s particular, personal, point of view (Williams, 1981; Scheffler, 1994). There are ethically objectionable forms of partiality, but the ethically unobjectionable forms are shaped

¹ More specifically, my concern is with one strand in this tradition originated by Kant that finds its fullest development in Sartre. For a general account see Zahavi (1999).

by a background context of justice. There is more than one way of connecting the three ideas of partiality, reasonableness and the personal point of view, but the way in which I do so is by adopting a virtue ethical perspective.² It is from such a perspective that we can see those partial reasons that arise from a relationship between an agent and a particular object as constrained by the background role of justice. It is also from such a perspective that we can see an agent's virtues, from our third personal interpretative perspective, as expressing a personal point of view.

Thinking about moral agency and judgement primarily in terms of moral character allows one to draw the necessary connections between moral psychology and wider issues in the philosophy of mind. A key feature of virtues, noted by Williams in his insightful discussion of the nature of virtues and motivation, is the asymmetry between first and third personal perspectives on a virtuous person's character (Williams, 1985, pp. 8–11). The virtuous agent deliberates from, not with, an evaluative perspective on the world that registers what is important and salient for that agent. But this person does not, typically, use the virtue terms in his or her first personal deliberations. That would be, as Williams puts it, a “misdirection of ethical attention” unless the person concerned is learning to be moral. It is others who use terms for the virtues in characterizing the dispositions and motivations of the moral agent from a third personal and (usually) social standpoint. There are exceptions to this general thesis, such as the virtues of justice and righteousness, but in general a kind person (for example) does not deliberate about what to do, on an occasion when the exercise of this virtue is demanded, in terms of kindness.

This asymmetry between the interpretation of the moral psychology of others and one's interpretative stance towards oneself will prove important in giving a phenomenologically accurate account of the role played in ethical reflection by the idea of the personal point of view. I will speak, in this paper, of the personal point of view as making certain reasons available to an agent. I will use this noncommittal formulation deliberately in order to avoid more theoretically loaded descriptions of the relationship between the moral agent and values. A leading representative theoretical description of this relation uses the idea of an agent-relative reason for action (Nagel, 1986). This is a standard way in which the idea that a reason stands in a special relation to a particular agent, or class of agents, has been understood. However, for various reasons, the whole idea of an agent-relative reason seems to me an unhappy one, as “regrettably obscur(-ing) useful distinctions”, as a fellow sceptic has put it (Skorupski, 1999). It will prove important to my subsequent argument that the relation in which the

²For a similar strategy, see Cottingham (1996).

personal point of view stands to an agent's values is one of *presupposition* in a sense to be explained.

Generally speaking there are two broad ways in which philosophers have analysed the idea of "relativity to a point of view" in a certain class of judgements. One strategy introduces the idea of presupposition and offers an explanation in which a certain class of reasons presupposes a certain point of view. A different strategy works by offering an analysis of the content of a class of reasons so as to bring out a concealed relativity in the content of that class of reasons. These different strategies are both valid enterprises in particular contexts, and a given class of reasons may exhibit both features, but the two kinds of explanation offered remain distinct.

It will prove important in this paper to argue that it is the former style of presuppositional explanation that correctly characterizes the relationship between the personal point of view of a moral agent and the evaluatively salient aspects of the world that figure in his or her deliberations. I think this kind of explanation contrasts clearly with one that uses the idea of agent-relativity as such explanations precisely involve analysis of the contents of moral reasons. Their content is further analysed to unpack concealed "agent-relativity" in the full specification of such reasons. That is, I think, in the particular case of the virtuous agent's relationship with values, a mistake (Thomas, 2003b, Section 3; Thomas, 2004b). For that reason I will not, in this paper, avail myself of the idea of an agent-relative reason and will restrict myself to the less theoretically committal formulation. That formulation is that the personal point of view makes a certain range of reasons available to an agent.³

Connecting reasonable partiality, the personal point of view, and the perspective of a virtuous agent gives virtue ethics an argument in its defence that it badly needs. The virtue ethicist faces familiar difficulties in explaining exactly what is distinctive about virtue ethics given that alternative normative theories, such as consequentialism or deontology, seem equally able to accommodate a role for moral character and virtue. The answer usually given is that, on these alternative views, one's character is valued instrumentally as an effective instrument of consequentialist maximization or as the set of character traits required effectively to pursue one's duty. The virtue ethicist alone can explain an apparently paradoxical feature of a person's virtuous character, namely, that it is both intrinsically valuable and yet valuable only in so far as it represents an evaluative point of view on the world. A failure to acknowledge this paradox or to come up with a reflective explanation which dissolves its paradoxicality is a central problem

³I give more detailed reasons for my unhappiness with the terminology of the agent-relative versus the agent-neutral in 'The Scope of the Agent-Relative', unpublished ms. Also relevant is section three of Thomas (2003b).

for those normative ethical theories that do not begin from a virtue ethical perspective, but introduce it as a derived notion, subordinate to making one's character an instrument of other values. Bernard Williams once put the argument as follows in the course of his objection to indirect impartialist ethical theories:

Is there anywhere in the mind or in society that a theory of this kind can be coherently or acceptably located? The theory finds a value for these dispositions, but it is still an instrumental value. The dispositions are seen as devices for generating certain actions That is what those dispositions look like when seen from outside. . . . But it is not what they seem from the inside. . . . The dispositions help to form the character of an agent who has them, and they will do the job the theory has given them only if the agent does not see his character purely instrumentally, but sees the world *from the point of view of that character*. Moreover, the dispositions require the agent to see other things in a noninstrumental way. They are dispositions not simply of action, but of feeling and judgement, and they are expressed precisely in ascribing intrinsic and not instrumental value to such things as truth-telling, loyalty and so on (Williams, 1985. p. 108, emphasis added.).

Williams does not explicitly make a connection between this critique of indirect impartialist theory and a virtue ethical perspective that is uniquely placed to explain the relationship between the normative content of ethics and the moral psychology of character, but the connection is there to be made. Virtuous agents exhibit their personal point of view not simply in the practical conclusions that they draw. They show their moral character to others not simply by what they decide to do, but also by those considerations that they are prepared to countenance, the range of considerations that they view as relevant, their sensitivity in noting aspects of situations (or failing to do so) and the quality of their practical deliberation. It is from the general perspective of agents' virtues that we can see their evaluative interests as making various aspects of the world evaluatively salient to them and as representing their personal pattern of evaluative concerns.⁴ Hitherto, discussion of the distinctive character of a virtue ethical perspective on value has focused on the question of whether or not it is the only view that allows one to take up a non-instrumental relationship to one's character. This issue is, in fact, secondary to a more fundamental issue of what it is to take up an *objective* stance towards one's own character.

Much of the ethical objection to the idea of reasonably partial reasons arises from ignoring the background context set for an agent's deliberations by the virtue of justice. As Phillipa Foot has argued, an agent's deliberations are shaped by the internalization of the demands of justice (Foot, 1985). These demands of justice need not, in their turn, receive

⁴Let me emphasise once again that the issue, as I see it, is evaluative salience or relevance, not the disproportionate evaluation of states of affairs or "outcomes".

an impartialist justification (Galston, 1980). There are, clearly, ethically objectionable forms of partiality or favouritism, but a context of justice suffices to explain what is objectionable about many of these cases. The aim is not, in any case, to offer a theory of rightness that actually determines the stringency, or otherwise, of particular obligations. The aim is to cast light on how that which John Cottingham has called an “autodicy”, an ethically unobjectionable form of self-concern, is so much as possible (Cottingham, 1991, p. 802). Defending a general class of considerations need not become mired in particular debates as to whether, for example, the parents of murderous offspring owe stronger duties to the common weal or to their criminal progeny. The practical verdict in each such case depends on the detailed specification of the factors bearing on decision. This paper leaves such issues open, but it ought to do so.⁵ The aim of this paper is to defend the idea that amongst the relevant factors that may legitimately bear on such decisions are reasonably partial reasons that express an agent’s personal point of view.

2. THE PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW AND THE IMPARTIAL POINT OF VIEW

Impartialist views, such as consequentialism, pressurise the ideas that I have described. They represent an agent’s personal point of view as a candidate ethical conception to be set alongside other conceptions shaped by a more demanding notion of impartiality. While it would go beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the issue in all its generality, I will consider one way in which impartialism seems to me to distort the intuitive idea of an agent’s personal point of view. Impartialism contrasts the agent’s personal point of view with another conception in which the agent is reflectively aware that his or her own view is no-one’s point of view in particular.⁶ The demand of impartiality is that you acknowledge, alongside your ethical view of the world, the thought that there is nothing in it that is distinctively or particularly yours. You are one person amongst others, equally real, and their projects and concerns are as real as yours.

That minimally impartial thought does not, it seems to me, in any way destabilise our ordinary idea of the personal point of view. It is perfectly

⁵Given that a wide range of other normative views, from applications of the categorical imperative to rule consequentialism, now offer themselves as accounts of the right making features of actions, as opposed to an account of a decision procedure, proponents of reasonable partiality ought to be entitled to as much latitude as their critics allow themselves.

⁶This thought experiment does not require that the agent literally view him or herself as an individual instance of a collective mind (as Schopenhauer argued) or as psychologically reduced to a set of mental components that are tokens of the same type as the components of other minds.

compatible with a cognitive emphasis on the “outward directedness” of our ethical attention and the ethical faults that are internal to that idea. If that is all that is meant by impartiality, there would seem to be little in it to undermine the claim that each of us *does* possess a point of view on the world. My point of view is no-one’s in particular, but it is still mine: it cannot help but be *my* outwardly directed focus on those values that are salient and important to me. Clearly, a great deal here depends on the multiple ambiguities of the idea of particularity. It is not mine in the sense that it is deictically attached to me: an ethical equivalent of metaphysical “thisness” (Thomas, 1996). Ethically, my attention is directed outwards, to those people and objects that are my particular ethical concerns. Others have similar concerns, and it is a lapse into selfishness or egotism to value those objects of my concern *solely* because they are related to me. In that sense, my point of view is no-one’s in particular, but it is still mine. Properly interpreted, the minimal impartialist thought is simply a reminder of the virtues and vices internal to objective moral judgement itself. Selfishness and egotism are defects in that which Iris Murdoch called one’s “just and loving attention” to particular things. It can be re-interpreted as a reminder, from within the standpoint of the personal point of view, of what objectivity in that context amounts to and the nature of its characteristic failings. It has been forcefully argued, for example by Max Deutscher, that in the context of our relation to values that which constitutes being objective inherently depends on partiality in the sense of “interestedness”:

Partiality is essential to any objectivity, though it is equally a sharp risk. . . . The opposite of partiality is indifference, not impartiality, just as boredom, not disinterest, is the opposite of interest (Deutscher, 1983 p. 73).

This limited force to that which I have called the “minimally impartialist thought” motivates the impartialist to go beyond it. It is held to be a requirement of the communicability, or the objectivity, or the simple rationality of moral requirements that we need to take the next step: a switching argument.⁷ Contrast two reasons, one of which is expressive of the personal point of view, in the sense that it is from that point of view, and the other of which is impartial in the sense that it is a reason determined by an impartial perspective. Solve for the highest common factor, that which the two views have in common, and identify that which remains (McDowell, 1982). This general strategy is used to introduce several non-equivalent contrasts, but the aim of them all is to isolate the contribution of the “personal point of view”, as a determinant of reasons or values, contrasted with the impartial

⁷The best critical discussion, with more general application, of the problems with this entire class of arguments is McDowell (1982).

as such a determinant. (At this point one might, once again, be tempted to introduce the distinction between the agent-relative and the agent-neutral.) The basic idea is to establish a contrast between that which is ethically relevant when viewed from the personal point of view and that which is ethically relevant when viewed impartially, and to do so by isolating the two factors or “stances” that those points of view represent.

I contrasted above two different ways in which one might philosophically explain the idea of a constitutive relation between a class of reasons and a point of view: one way invoked the idea of presupposition; the other analysed the content of these reasons to uncover a tacit relativity in their content. This new line of impartialist argument, it seems to me, misconstrues the connection between values and relations by making the personal point of view an indexical parameter *within* moral reasons or values, whereas the correct account should be presuppositional in general form. Compare two analogies: it has been argued that all practical reasons are *de se* or essentially indexical (Perry, 1993). By contrast, value as an entire category has been argued to stand to human interests or concerns in the relation of *pre-supposition*. Just as postboxes are not red for humans, but simply red in colour with their relativity to our outlook presupposed, so value as an entire category presupposes human interests and concerns (Wiggins, 2000). Both cases involve relationality but of different kinds. One of these views insists that one class of contents, in a particular context, is tacitly indexical. The other view insists that another class of contents, in any context, is never indexical. Which case is more closely analogous to the relation between an agent’s personal point of view and values?

The crux of my argument is that the relationship between the personal point of view and both values and reasons is directly analogous to the presuppositional case. An agent’s personal point of view is not a determinant of value, nor, for that matter, of reasons. Phenomenologically, it makes values available to an agent’s judgement, and hence the metaphor of a “point of view” gets its grip. But that is not because such a “point of view” functions like a further parameter involved in the content of an agent’s reasons. The personal point of view functions as a transcendental condition for the availability of these reasons and not as an indexical parameter within them. A personal point of view is an ethical agent’s standpoint on ethical reality. It is as important as that which that standpoint reveals, but is not important in its own right. Recall that the personal point of view is as much about what counts for an agent as a relevant consideration as about the content of those factors that do count as an agent’s final, all things considered, practical verdicts. This argument is reinforced by appealing to the transparency of self-knowledge. When one comes to focus on one’s “personal point of view”, as a determinant of the values one acknowledges or the reasons that one holds, the judger is taken “transparently” to those values and reasons.

You can, of course, direct your ethical attention to such matters as the quality of your perceptions and your sensitivity to moral concerns, but those are the virtues internal to objective moral judgement itself.

The impartialist “switching argument” that isolates two components in the determination of moral judgement can be used in an allegedly non-exclusionary way. Thomas Nagel, for example, has argued that it is equally natural for us to occupy both a personal and an impartial standpoint. Serious ethical reflection can be informed by both and the result, he argues, is a genuinely pluralist view (Nagel, 1986). I will not repeat here arguments that I have presented elsewhere for viewing this as a merely superficial form of pluralism (Thomas, 2003b). In the present context I simply want to add that one can (misguidedly) use a switching argument to isolate the separate components of an impartial and personal judgement, but then, as it were, re-attach the two components. That gives you two evaluative aspects to the world, or two classes of ethical reasons, one impartially determined and one personally determined. That is an important step, for example, in the development of a hybrid ethical theory that takes very seriously the idea of a personal point of view (Scheffler, 1994).

It may seem unfair to single out for particular criticism a form of impartialist theorizing that does take the personal point of view seriously and which can, indeed, be interpreted as uniquely structured to do so. But, in fact, hybrid theory represents for my purposes a perfect example of a view in which the personal point of view functions like an indexical parameter within reasons. Only if so understood can the personal point of view generate an evaluation of outcomes which is disproportionate to the evaluation of outcomes from an “objective”, “impersonal” or, more accurately, “impartial” perspective. It is this disproportionate evaluation that is central to hybrid theory, limiting as it does the breadth of an agent’s discretion in a theory where he or she is always permitted, but never required, to bring about the best outcome impartially considered. If two contrasting perspectives suffice to determine different evaluative outcomes, as specified by reasons, then they are clearly being interpreted as functioning like indexical parameters *within* reasons rather than presuppositions of a class of reasons. The criterion for this distinction is whether or not the content of the reason is determined by the parameter and, in this case, the answer is clearly that the personal point of view and the impartial point of view give reasons determined from those stances or perspectives that differ in their respective *contents*. That is clearly the case as they express different evaluations.

But this very idea of an isolation of two components in judgement is deeply wrong and the transparency intuition undercuts the very idea that moral reasons are determined from two contrasting “points of view”, namely, the personal and the impartial. That remains true even in a view

that is not, itself, hostile to the very idea of a personal point of view. There is little point in taking that idea seriously after it has been subject to a distorting misrepresentation. Bernard Williams's objection to impartialism was that it misrepresented the personal point of view and then constructed an impartial model of that which it had misrepresented to its own satisfaction (Williams, 1981). My objection to how impartialists model the personal point of view, even when they claim to be sympathetic to that idea, is that a conception of that which *can* be modeled is at play in the initial misdescription of our intuitive idea of a personal point of view. Since impartialism can be a "stance" that generates classes of values and reasons, so the personal point of view, to be ethically admissible, must be construed as analogous to such a stance. But it is not so analogous and the idea of a personal point of view as it figures, for example, in a hybrid ethical theory, is damagingly misdescribed.

3. CONSCIOUSNESS, SELF KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSPARENCY

The arguments I have given for defusing the impact of the minimally impartialist thought, and not allowing it to play a role in any more ambitious switching argument, depend on the transparency of our ethical beliefs. The personal point of view is a perspective on value and if it is a cognitive perspective it should exemplify the transparency of self-knowledge. That is why any attempt to reify the personal point of view takes one transparently to its objects. Thus, in my view, the best prospect for ultimately defending the idea of the personal point of view is to place it in the context of a general approach to consciousness and self-knowledge that, in turn, make the transparency intuition defensible.

Setting out a complete account of consciousness and self-knowledge is not an appropriate task for this paper. Limitations of scope mean that I can only outline arguments that I have presented elsewhere (Thomas, 1997, 2003a,c). An *adverbial* theory of consciousness argues that the "difference that makes a difference" to conscious experience, as opposed to mentality generally, is that I am "in" those states consciously. An adverbial theory of consciousness must be understood on the basis of an analogy with an adverbial theory of perceptual experience. The point of such a theory of perceptual experience was negative: it was to dislodge a competing act/object model of perception. Similarly, the point of an adverbial theory of conscious experience is negative, the rejection of act/object model of conscious awareness. Conscious awareness has a certain adverbial feature that, when characterised, redeems the claim that this feature attaches to the conscious experience of a subject such that there is an answer to the question: what is it like to be a subject of that kind? (Thomas, 2003a).

The term “conscious” is applied both as a person level predicate applied to whole people or other animals and to states of such organisms. This relationship between “creature consciousness” and “state consciousness” is not straightforward. O’Shaughnessy’s careful reflections on “conscious” as a person level predicate already make a substantial and insightful philosophical point (O’Shaughnessy, 1991, 2000). The “logic” of the term, applied to a person, is that being conscious stands to being asleep or anaesthetized as being yellow stands to being red. The relation here is of determinable to determinates: you get a more illuminating account of what consciousness is by contrasting it with deprivations of consciousness in a mental subject than by contrasting it with mentality as a whole.

The main ethical relevance of these ideas is that I *am* my conscious “point of view” on the world. A virtuous agent does not engage with those values made available by his or her personal point of view “with” his or her ethical character, but rather from a perspective afforded by that character. A character is that *from which* one deliberates, but it is not itself an object for the person whose character it is. In this respect it shares the central feature of awareness generally which can neither be modeled on the idea of external perception nor on the “aboutness” relation involved in the general idea of “thinking about.”⁸ Conscious experience does not involve reflexivity, or thoughts standing in an intentional relation to each other (Siewert, 1998, chapter six; Thomas, 2003c). Conscious awareness takes one transparently to its object and it is a phenomenological error to take one’s subjective point of view on the world as itself constituted by some higher order standpoint towards it. But this is not a Lichtenbergian “no ownership” view either, given that it is a priori that a perspectival thought has a subject that can attach the “I” to it (Peacocke, 2001). This explains the centrality, in accounts of consciousness and self-knowledge, of the transparency intuition. Reject an underlying act/object model of conscious awareness, and there is no mystery in explaining how an account of an objective world and a subject’s place within it is also an account of the subject adverbially correlated with such an objective world.⁹ But it is an error to take that idea of

⁸Higher order perception theories attempt to explain consciousness as analogous to inner perception, or “inner sense”: a mental state is made conscious when it is the object of an inner scanner analogous to outer perception. Higher order thought theory attempts to explain consciousness as analogous to being “thought about”, a general kind of intentional relation between thoughts and their objects: a mental state is made conscious when it is the object of a higher order thought, that thinks about the lower order thought, such that the higher order thought need not itself be conscious. Dispositional higher order thought theory claims that the higher order theory need only be dispositionally available; actualist higher order thought theory claims that the higher order thought must be actually concurrent.

⁹That would be my gloss, for example, on the central arguments of Sydney Shoemaker’s (1996a, 1996b).

conscious awareness and to use its notion of perception or intentionality to cast light on that which constitutes consciousness. An adverbial theory of consciousness respects these negative constraints: it does not model consciousness relationally, either as analogous to perception or as involving the intentional idea of “thinking about”. It offers a plausible context for the intuition of transparency that is central to the objection to impartialist ethical theorising developed here. The connection between this approach to consciousness and the idea of transparent self-ascription will now be described in more detail.

4. SELF-KNOWLEDGE, RATIONAL ENDORSEMENT, AND THE LIMITS OF IMPARTIALITY

One of the key advantages of adverbialism about consciousness is that it does not attribute too high a degree of internal complexity to an organism in a way that outstrips our intuitions about how widely consciousness can be found in nature. Its implicit theory of mental functioning can specify which further features a mental subject must have to be attributed consciousness, but this attribution of consciousness is, unsurprisingly, that of a “one level” theory of consciousness (Thomas, 2003c). It is a difference that makes a difference, explanatorily, but it does not make this difference by complicating an internal hierarchy of states within the organism or giving it the kind of explicit self-conception found in self-conscious thought. Consciousness does not, then, need self-consciousness if by that we mean a higher order control function that organizes our distinctive rational capacities such that they co-operate or mutually focus (when they do) or which explains the depletions of consciousness (when they do not). This is the correct basis for a positive account of the connections between consciousness and rational control and offers a defence of the transparency intuition.

A first order conscious, rational, mental subject has a certain capacity, which supervenes on its first order capacities, to self-ascribe its mental states. It is fully conceptual: it does not operate solely at the level of sub-personal mechanisms, even if such mechanisms underly it (Peacocke, 1998; Thomas, 2003a,c). To self-ascribe is not to entertain self-conscious thoughts about one’s first order representations. That construal would fall into the trap of an act/object model of awareness, applied in this case to the mind’s knowledge of itself. Self-ascription is not to entertain thoughts about oneself but rather to be in a position rationally to endorse them as from a point of view: one’s own point of view as a rational subject. I have defended elsewhere that which I have called a “weak supervenience” view of self ascription (Thomas, 2003a). The content of that self-knowledge supervenes

on a functioning, global, set of mental capacities, centrally the capacities for rationality and for forming an objective conception of the world.

This account of self-ascription is the proper context for the transparency intuition. Given a background global set of capacities, if you form a rational belief with which you are identified, then you can self-ascribe it. Freed from an act/object model of conscious experience, or of the self, an "outwardly directed" belief can also be a vehicle of your self-knowledge. But, running the argument in the opposite direction, as it were, in focusing on your self-knowledge you are taken transparently to the content of that which is known. That a conscious subject finds him or herself in an objective world not of their own making plays a crucial role in securing the connection between the content of the subject's "outwardly directed" beliefs and the subject's capacity to self-ascribe this knowledge.

As Richard Moran has noted, an important aspect of self-knowledge that is frequently obscured in philosophical discussion of its nature is that it is, itself, ethically significant (Moran, 2001, xxix–xx). That significance, in turn, arises from the fact that you can take up one of two stances towards yourself in self-knowledge: a rational stance, in which one introduces the issue of normativity, intentionality and the thought that one can be held responsible for one's thoughts as their author, or a blankly non-normative stance. In the latter instance you inspect, via inner sense, an objectified account of your own mind that is thereby also potentially an alienating self-conception (Moran, 2001; Thomas 2003). The "subject" and the "object" of self-knowledge come together in the claim that those contents that are mine are those that I can avow. That, in turn, implies that they are potential items of self-knowledge and self-ascription: contents that are endorsed *as mine*. They are rationally integrated into my system of beliefs and desires (as opposed, for example, to being viewed by me as a pathological compulsion with no role in my self-understanding as a rational agent save as an objectified problem). I cannot, by endorsement, integrate anyone else's mental contents into their rational plans of thought and action. This does, I believe, lead to an interesting and insightful view of self-knowledge, one with particular importance for moral psychology. For a certain primacy does attach to the perspective of rational endorsement, or avowal, where that is a stance towards my own thoughts that I cannot take up to the thoughts of another. But, conversely, an objectified view of my own mental life is, once again, not a version of the kind of theoretical or observational knowledge that I could have of another person's mental life, but by happenstance applied to me.

This account of the nature of self-knowledge has ramified consequences for the moral psychology of the virtues, but in the present context I want to focus simply on one: that virtue ethics is uniquely placed to explain what it is to think objectively about oneself in the context of ethical decision.

The deliberative stance requires, in various different ways, that the agent involved be capable of an objective and critical stance towards his or her own character but objectivity, in this sense, is not the same as treating one's character as an objectified given. That would be, as Sartre and Moran argue, to adopt an alienated self-conception and a manifestation of ethical evasion and bad faith. Thus, the issue about whether virtue ethical explanations of character and right action can be undercut by other normative ethical approaches is *not* the issue of whether one can take up an instrumental stance towards one's character. Such a stance could only be taken up if one's character had already been objectified in a mistaken way: as an object for whose nature one is not responsible. If our best account of self-knowledge explains how such objectification represents an ethical error it also, as a corollary, undermines any account of the relation between character and value that treats the former instrumentally.

Having identified this plausible approach to self-knowledge, the challenge is not to allow it to be obscured by further, cross-cutting, distinctions. The largest obstacle to retaining this insight is the issue of the relation between theoretical and practical reasoning. Two conflicting commitments pull philosophical accounts of self-knowledge in apparently contradictory directions: to do justice to the element of commitment that is involved in "theoretical" self-knowledge, there is a strong temptation to introduce a "Neo-Stoic" account that introduces a separate mental act of endorsement, an act of will, that constitutes commitment to a mental content. But this neglects the second feature of self-knowledge, namely, the distinctions between practical and theoretical uses of reason and our knowledge about their use.

Christine Korsgaard, for example, believes that the very idea of having a reason involves an element of reflective endorsement on the part of the agent that is ultimately traced to the structure of his or her will (Korsgaard, 1996a). But it seems to me that the generic idea of rational commitment or endorsement is certainly not an idea that depends on an act of will. A Neo-Stoic account of theoretical judgement looks very unattractive. The idea that in perception, for example, I am constantly reflexively monitoring the content of my perceptual experience and quasi-voluntaristically endorsing it has little to recommend it (Thomas, 2003a). It is the difficulty of doing justice to both of these facts that is problematic: the fact that both theoretical and practical reason seem to involve a notion like commitment or endorsement, and the fact that the two notions of reason seem to have distinctive features.

A representative difficulty, it seems to me, is even exemplified in Richard Moran's otherwise excellent discussion of this issue (Moran, 2001). Moran's view of self-knowledge identifies the element of commitment in self-knowledge as involving, constitutively, our capacity to

avow. He rejects, quite correctly, any connection between this idea and an act/object model of conscious awareness. On this basis, too, he rejects a reflexive model of self-consciousness as rational control: he quite correctly points out that this simply reproduces an act/object model of conscious awareness and offers a new ground for it. But having made all these insightful points, Moran then suggests that avowal is connected to a "deliberative" stance and, when discussing the ethical importance of the capacity for avowal, relates his work to Christine Korsgaard's voluntarist and Neo-Stoic account of our relation to practical reasons which clearly incorporates an act/object (reflexive) model of rationality. This set of commitments does not add up, unless Moran believes that a reflexive model of the connection between self-consciousness and rationality makes sense for practical reasons, but not for theoretical. Even if he believes the latter, how, given the involvement of "deliberation" in what may be called the theoretical sense of self-knowledge, can he avoid the reflexive model of self-knowledge re-entering by the back door when ejected through the front door?

In my view, what has led Moran astray here is the conflation of the rejection of an act/object model of awareness with the separate issue of the relation between theoretical and practical knowledge. He tacitly assumes that a "theoretical" model of self-knowledge must take an act/object form and exhibit the features of detachment, distancing and a "spectator" relationship to the object known that are characteristic of such a model. But perceptual experience does not conform to an act/object model, and even if it did, that kind of model could not be a model for self-knowledge, nor for conscious experience, nor even for self-consciousness. You can reject an act/object model for all of these phenomena, without denying that they can still involve a "theoretical" as opposed to "practical" relationship with your own mental states. If you take the latter route, you end up giving precisely the false picture of, for example, perception, that Moran himself cautioned against. Offer a different diagnosis of what is wrong with "perceptual" analogies for self-knowledge and Moran's insights into the nature of self-knowledge can be detached from an entirely separable commitment to a form of Neo-Stoicism about self-knowledge in which it is construed as "more like" practical, deliberative thinking than theoretical self-description. The dichotomy is a false one. Our general capacity of reason has two aspects: practical and theoretical. There is a notion of rational endorsement that spans them both. However, the idea of endorsing states that I can avow as mine comes simply with the idea of mental ascriptions as being constrained by rationality.

An adverbial theory of consciousness emphasizes that we need consistently and rigorously to avoid applying an act/object model which is not even true of external "perceptual" awareness, nor of its "quasi-perceptual"

inner analogue. Neither conscious awareness, nor self-knowledge, nor self-consciousness fit the act/object model any more than perception does. The advantage of an adverbial re-interpretation of all such act/object models is that self-knowledge should now appear unproblematic. The use of “I as subject” without any prior identification component is bound up with a subject’s capacity immediately to avow his or her state of mind in a distinctively first personal way that is still of philosophical interest when the temptations of Cartesianism have been resisted. We do stand to knowledge of our mind in a way that is distinctive, and interpretationism is wrong to argue that the first personal stance to the mind is the limiting case of a third personal, interpretative stance applied to oneself.

This capacity first personally to avow our mental states in self-knowledge is central to viewing mental subjects as free, both in what they choose to do and in those theoretical conclusions with which they are identified, committed to, or, from which they cannot be dissociated. However, to accept these insights while also acknowledging that theoretical and practical reason are distinct exercises of reason, I think we need to hold our existing assumptions steadily in view. Our attitude to a content always holds open the issue of endorsement or commitment. That is expressive of our standing as rational agents. But endorsement or commitment comes in two forms: practical and theoretical. In neither case do we need to identify a separate mental component that represents that endorsement or commitment: another piece of mental machinery known mundanely via inner sense. To be free is to express our rational agency by endorsing our best reason (Hampshire, 1960, p. 198). But this freedom comes in two forms: commitment to our best theoretical reason and commitment to our best practical reason. These are distinct capacities of mind even if the way in which they involve commitment, as expressions of our rational agency are the same. One faculty, reason, is expressed via two distinct capacities.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has appealed to wider issues in the philosophy of mind to defend the idea that there is an ethically useful sense in which we have a personal point of view, shaped by the background context of justice, with an important role to play in the defence of reasonably partial ethical reasons. It does not figure as a component within moral reasons, in particular, a component within them that generates a disproportionate evaluation of outcomes from the personal, as opposed to the impartial point of view.¹⁰ More positively,

¹⁰My own approach to the (limited) role of impartiality as a pragmatic constraint on moral argument is set out in Thomas (2002).

the personal point of view has been demonstrated to arise from the contrast between the third personal point of view of those appraising ethical character and the first personal perspective of the deliberating agent. It is an artefact of the general interpretative stance that we take towards the mental lives of others and for that reason is, in some respects, indeterminate. It can be viewed as expressive of the reality of moral character, or as representing an individual's ethical engagement with the world in a sense that outruns issues of character. The idea of a personal point of view can survive such indeterminacy if it proves to be an ethically useful way of interpreting both the actions of others and, subject to the limitations described in this paper, to some extent, our own irreducibly first personal ethical place in the world.

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Department of Philosophy
University of Kent, Canterbury
Kent, CT2 7NF
E-mail: a.p.thomas@kent.ac.uk;
URL: <http://www.logical-operator.com>