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Precis of Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge, by Richard Moran

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Authority and Estrangement addresses a set of questions about self-knowledge and seeks to answer them in the context of the broader differences between the first-person and third-person perspectives on oneself. Attention to these broader differences takes the discussion from epistemology to moral psychology, and seeks to relate some of the issues of contemporary philosophy of mind to the concerns with self-consciousness in post-Kantian thought.

One question is simply: why should there be any differences at all between how a person knows his own mind and how he may know the mind of another person? Two such differences in particular have attracted philosophical attention. First, a person can typically know what he believes or intends or wants “immediately”, that is, without appeal either to behavioral evidence or observations of any kind. Secondly, this independence of evidence appears to contribute to, rather than detract from, the authority with which first-person reports are delivered and received. So the book seeks to provide a unified account of the immediacy of ordinary self-knowledge and the special authority of first-person reports of attitudes and states of mind. In particular I try to account for the special importance of the capacity for self-knowledge, both for rationality and for psychic health in general. As the book progresses, this becomes a question concerning what importance there could be of the specifically first-personal access to one’s beliefs and other attitudes, given that this is not the only way of learning such facts about oneself. If knowledge of one’s own attitudes matters to rationality in various ways, why should it matter what particular form this access takes (i.e., the form associated with immediacy and first-person authority)?

Chapter Two connects the special features of the first-person position with respect to knowledge or awareness of one’s state of mind to a related difference made by the first-person characterization or description of one’s state of mind. Philosophers have sometimes claimed that the person’s own characterization of his emotional state is not merely descriptive of it, but plays a constitutive role in determining what that emotional state actually is. But why should reflection on one’s own emotional states relate to a transformation of their character, when this is not the case with respect to reflection on the emotional states of other people or the world in general? I argue that there is a real phenomenon here, but that it has more than one aspect to it. Part of the answer requires us to distinguish what I call theoretical questions about one’s state of mind from deliberative questions about it. A theoretical question, such as “What is it that I was about to do?” or “What is it that I feel about him?” is answered by a discovery of some antecedent state of mind such as an intention or emotion. A deliberative question, such as “What am I going to do now?” or “What do I think about the chances of getting there on time?” is answered by the resolution of some issue, arriving at a commitment or a decision. I argue that the transformative character of a person’s own interpretation of his state, when it obtains, cannot be accounted for in terms of the theoretical aspect of the activity of interpretation alone, but involves the interplay between theoretical and deliberative questions.

This distinction between what I eventually call theoretical and deliberative stances toward oneself is also important for the understanding of what is sometimes called the transparency of first-person questions to corresponding world-directed questions. Various philosophers have 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?’, where this means that the former question is answered in the same way as the latter, without any particular reference to oneself. I argue, however, that we cannot see transparency as logical requirement on such first-person questions since there are situations where the person can or must answer the psychological question of what his attitude is in a way that is not transparent to a corresponding question about the justification or appropriateness of that attitude. 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. This very deferral, however, points to the relevance that transparency does have for the understanding of self-knowledge, for insofar as the person can answer the question about his belief in a way that conforms to transparency, we will have the beginnings of an explanation both of how it is possible for the person to know his mind ‘immediately’, without appeal to evidence, and how the answer arrived at has a kind of authority not shared by any other person’s ascription to him of some state of mind. ‘Avowal’ is defined as a way of answering a question about one’s belief or other attitude that obeys the ‘Transparency Condition’, hence a form of self-knowledge that is immediate because transparent to a corresponding question that is directed outward, upon the world.

Chapters Three and Four examine a range of cases where the ‘Transparency Condition’ is violated, by way of trying to reach a better understanding of why the particular form of ordinary self-knowledge associated with avowal should matter at all either to the rationality of the attitude in question or the overall psychological health of the person. Moore’s Paradox is taken up as compressed example of a thought or utterance in which the two aspects of the avowal of one’s belief come apart: the ascription of the belief to oneself and the endorsement of the belief as true. The discussion of what goes wrong in a case of Moore’s Paradox helps to explain what is at stake in the ordinary alignment of the theoretical and deliberative stances toward oneself. This leads to a discussion of akrasia and Sartre’s distinction between the ‘self as facticity’ and the ‘self as transcendence’, roughly corresponding to the distinction in terms of theoretical and deliberative stances. “Bad faith” can be understood as the tactical substitution of the demands of one such perspective for the other, or the perpetual shifting between them in order to avoid the demands of either one.

Chapter Four begins by addressing two challenges to the legitimacy of the ‘Transparency Condition’. The Expressivist challenge says that the appearance of reference to oneself in statements such as “I believe it will rain” is illusory, and that rather than functioning as reports or descriptions of anyone’s state of mind, such statements are only more or less hesitant assertions about the weather itself. If this were right, then such thoughts or statements could not be our model for self-knowledge of any kind, since nothing about anyone’s belief or other state of mind is judged or asserted here. The second challenge in a sense runs through the book as a whole and this is that Transparency cannot be a legitimate or even sensible demand, since it requires one to answer a question about one subject matter (one’s state of mind) as if it were a question about a wholly distinct one (the state of the weather). The reply to both these challenges proceeds

together. Answering a deliberative question about one's belief regarding P is a matter of making up one's mind with respect to P, and here one's attention will be focused on the reasons for or against P, and not on facts about oneself. If it is possible for a person to answer a deliberative question about his belief at all, this involves assuming an authority over, and a responsibility for, what his belief actually is. Thus a person able to exercise this capacity is in a position to declare what his belief is by reflection on the reasons in favor of that belief, rather than by examination of the psychological evidence. In this way transparency can be seen as normative for first-person statements of belief, and avowal can be seen as an expression of genuine self-knowledge. If avowal were incompatible with the retention of reference to oneself (as in Expressivism), then knowledge of one's attitudes would only be possible in the alienated situation of purely attributional psychological ascription, from a third-person point of view. The remainder of the chapter relates the authority over one's attitudes to the 'reflective freedom' appealed to in Sartre as well as in contemporary moral psychology.

Chapter Five concerns the more general possibilities of clash between the perspective on oneself as a rational deliberator and the perspective on oneself as an empirical subject in the world. Sartre's akratic gambler returns to illustrate 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. The imperative of impersonality in ethics is discussed in connection with Nagel and Williams, and I take up various difficulties in articulating such an imperative in a way that does justice to both perspectives and does not privilege either one of them. The chapter takes up an extended example of the paradoxes of self-censure to show the different possibilities and consequences of the moral estimation of oneself and of others. Impersonality, even-handedness, and the epistemological requirement of total evidence in our estimation of a person provide special opportunities for bad faith when that person is oneself.