

When my Own Beliefs are not First-Personal Enough¹

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ABSTRACT: Richard Moran has argued, convincingly, in favour of the idea that there must be more than one path to access our own mental contents. The existence of those routes, one first-personal—through avowal—the other third-personal—no different to the one used to ascribe mental states to other people and to interpret their actions—is intimately connected to our capacity to respond to norms. Moran's account allows for conflicts between first personal and third personal authorities over my own beliefs; this enable some instances of Moore-paradoxical cases to be meaningful. In this paper we reflect on the consequences of this view for the acquisition of beliefs, and argue that, as in the moral case, excessive concentration on a third-personal understanding of thought undermines the very idea of being directed to the world and of being capable to fully own our own beliefs. We suggest that maybe too much attention to epistemic virtues or to justification is misdirected and could produce beliefs that are themselves not first-personal enough.

Keywords: Richard Moran, Moore's paradox, self-knowledge

1. Introduction: Moran on transparency, avowals and first-personal authority

Self-knowledge is an ineliminable leg of a tripod of varieties of knowledge according to an image of mental life made plausible by Donald Davidson (1991). One's knowledge of oneself is neither independent nor fully reducible to the other two varieties of knowledge—namely, knowledge of other people and knowledge of the world. An interesting way to examine how self-knowledge relates both to our access to the world and to our knowledge of other people is to look at relations of transparency such as those considered by Richard Moran (2001: 60-65). Transparency is what enables me to find out what I believe about something by examining the world from my own perspective. Because my beliefs are transparent, I can avow what I believe with no appeal either to anybody's behaviour or to my internal makeup. My own knowledge of my beliefs has this special channel of access² that involves the transparency of the world to me; of course, I can find out about my beliefs in much the same manner I use to discover what other people believe but transparent access to the world is an alternative, first-personal road that takes me only to my own beliefs. Availability for avowals is a common feature of my mental states and attitudes even though each of them could also be accessible through, say, the interpretation of behaviour; through a third-personal

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² One of the main thrusts of *Authority and Estrangement* (Moran 2001) is to provide an account of self-knowledge that takes first-personal avowals to be a special channel of access to one's own mind without postulating any kind of private object accessible only through avowals. If his position is tenable, as we believe it is, it provides a resting point for an otherwise disquieting oscillation between two unattractive positions: positing private objects and processes to be what is attainable through first-personal access on the one hand and a deflationism about self-knowledge motivated by playing down the role of any kind of first-personal access.



personal path. The avowal of beliefs, however, involves considering the world through our beliefs—our beliefs are transparently world-involving. Yet, my avowals of my beliefs are not entirely oblivious to whatever I know about other people and the rest of the world. At least according to an image such as that put forward by Davidson’s interacting three varieties of knowledge, my knowledge of my own states—including my access to my own beliefs—depends upon other things I know. My knowledge of other people’s mental states and attitudes impacts on what I end up believing about anything because they belong in a public network of cognitive practices, conceptual capacities and further beliefs I share with those around me. My knowledge of the world shapes the way my beliefs are formed and determines their content. My knowledge of the world, as my knowledge of other people, is embedded in the way my beliefs are formed. This belief formation process that takes place in contact with the objects of my beliefs is something that I witness from a first-personal point of view as I stand somehow within my own beliefs. I avow my beliefs through transparency of the world in my thinking much as I avow my intentions through the availability of my own goals in my acting. My beliefs seem to be the glue between my mental life and the way the world has an impact on it—they are simultaneously about the world and entirely my own.

Now, not all of my beliefs are accessible to first-personal inspection—as not all of my intentions are readily available to me. Moran argues that those of my beliefs that are avowed are not in any sense privileged with respect to the ones I find out only by interpreting my behaviour (or taking any third-personal route). The beliefs I avow are not in any sense more genuine, more reliable nor are they in principle different. Some of my beliefs happen to be accessed through a first-personal path but what is distinctively first-personal is not the object of those beliefs but only the path used to find out about them: that they are avowed. Davidson’s varieties of knowledge can be read in a similar vein: “[...] varieties of knowledge are concerned with aspects of the same reality; where they differ is in the mode of access to reality” (Davidson 1991, p. 205). Moran takes seriously the idea that first person authority is therefore not about a (first personal) realm where we have the ultimate authority and that therefore it can conflict with the authority of other sources of information about one’s mind. What is characteristically first personal is the access we have to some of our states. As a consequence of the possibility for first-personal authority to be overridden, there could be conflict between the beliefs I avow and those I am otherwise convinced I hold. Also, there could be a neglect in my effort to form beliefs so that I could end up having beliefs which I fail to own in the appropriate manner. In this paper, we endeavour to explore some consequences of Moran’s approach to avowals and first-personal authority to the way we think about how our beliefs are formed.

2. When my beliefs conflict: Moore’s paradox, double access and akrasia

There is a reading of Moore’s paradox favoured by Moran—but also, to some extent, suggested by Wittgenstein’s comments (PU: II, x)—according to which a situation where I say “I believe that p” and subsequently that “p is not the case” could be a way

to point at the double access I have to my own beliefs. It could be that I have found a way to ascribe to myself the belief that *p* and yet I am not ready to avow my belief that *p*. Maybe I do want to have a single belief about the matter but it so happens that as I stand, I cannot form any belief other than *p* is not the case by examining how things appear to me (and further engaging the best of my reasoning capacities to reflect about the matter at stake).³ From a first-personal path I determine that I believe something that is quite different from what is available to me through, say, interpretation of my behaviour. Maybe I have been convinced by my therapist that I believe I am being followed because this explains my behaviour of looking back whenever I am walking while I have no conviction whatsoever that anyone is following me. The conflict emerges because beliefs are part of what explains both my action and my perspective on how things are. One could argue that a therapeutic process aims at (and eventually will) integrate my beliefs and made me capable to avow that I am being followed (or reject the therapist interpretation of my behaviour). There are, however, instances of conflict because my two sources of information—both, in principle, equally reliable or trustworthy—about my beliefs tell me different things.⁴

These two routes are quite essential for the role beliefs play both in our capacity to have states about the world and to be accountable in our action. In fact, double access to beliefs is what makes them responsive to norms.⁵ It makes beliefs corrigible on the light of other people's beliefs. If we had no more than third-personal access to our own beliefs, we would be unable to attribute to them any capacity to guide action and thinking: my own beliefs would be oblivious to my mental life—or to anything that is in some sense internal to me, for that matter. My actions, my thinking and my intentions would be understood by me only with the resources that I use to understand someone else's: I could be forced to do or think something but could not be persuaded or otherwise moved by reasons to do or think anything. First-personal access to my beliefs is part of what makes them in any sense mine and what grounds the de-

³ It could be tempting to compare this situation with that described by McDowell (1994) where I have the experience that *p* but judge that *p* is not the case (for example, when he discusses the Müller-Lyer paradox). The situation here, however, is very different. In McDowell's case, one of the contents—delivered by experience—is not even (yet) a belief. In the present case I use all my cognitive powers (of perception and judgment) to form the belief that *p* is not the case and yet I am ready to admit that I believe that *p*. Even though the two cases are different, in both we have two mental contents and only one of them seems to be up to me. See Bensusan & Pinedo (2006) for a discussion of the McDowell example and its consequences.

⁴ Conflicts like those of course cannot take place concerning anybody else's beliefs but mine. Discussion with Moran and Angus Ross in the XVI Spanish Inter-University Meeting on Moran's work in Valencia made it seem clear that if first-personal authority concerning the contents of one's own beliefs is taken to be fallible, conflict between first-personal and third-personal authorities is bound to happen and Moore-paradoxical claims could be expressions of this conflict. We would like to thank the participants of the Meeting for this and other invaluable insights.

⁵ Interestingly, it seems that responsiveness to norms depends on a double access to my beliefs more than on a unified sense of personhood. Moran's perspective does not entail that there are unified minds as opposed to a collection of inarticulated fragments. Unfortunately, we don't have space here to argue further for this account of normativity as independent of personhood.

gree of autonomy my thinking and action enjoy. Our own beliefs are vehicles for our capacity to be moved by reasons because they are not only something we inspect but also something we can be held responsible for; we are liable to them in a way we are not liable to anything external to our own making. Without third-personal access, our beliefs could not be corrigible. Without first-personal access, they could not be corrected as no one would be responsible for them in order to rectify them. Any beliefs can be false and can be judged to be so and rectified—and this is because they are accessible through these two routes.

If we take all contents to be responsive to norms, they would be all could all accessible by two routes. Take, for example, sensorial content such as that of “ φ is red”. We could consider a Moore-paradoxical situation with respect to sensorial content: I can have a third-personal access informing me that “ φ is not red” (for example, because I know this is a lemon and lemons are never red) while I avow a sensation that “ φ is red”. In this situation, however, belief has to go one way or the other; this is indeed the message Wittgenstein expresses when he says that “one can mistrust one’s own senses but not one’s own belief” (PU: IIX). Beliefs seem indeed to have a special position within our mental economy because they are the vehicles for our capacity to be moved by reasons and at the same time they can enjoy transparency. It is due to this special position that I can safely say that “not- p even though $M(p)$ ” where M stands for ‘I have the impression’ or ‘I fear’ or ‘I desire’, or ‘I fancy’, or ‘I hope’, or ‘I wish’ without the impression of paradox that would appear if M stands for ‘I believe’. Moore’s case seems paradoxical when we take both “not- p ” and “I believe that p ” to be the result of first-personal transparent access to my belief.

The availability of first-personal and third-personal access to most mental content makes them susceptible to akratic gaps: typically cases such as I desire to stop smoking while I desire to smoke. It is often the case that one of the contents of the akratic state is determined by an avowal whereas the other is determined by my reflection that takes in my beliefs concerning what I should desire, fear or envy (but that can come together with further avowals). In this case, what is a result of an interaction with my beliefs is what is up to me whereas what is purely accessed by avowal is not. We hear people saying that they cannot help themselves to stop wanting to smoke, it is beyond their own control.⁶ In these cases, we avow what is not up to us, avowals appear as recognitions of something in us that we would not like to see present: even though I would desire to stop smoking and that makes my desire for a cigarette mostly unwelcome, I avow the desire. In the case of beliefs, however, it is often rather the case that the beliefs I attribute to myself—those I access in third-personal manner—are the ones that are beyond my control and somehow less of my responsibility whereas the beliefs I avow are those that are up to me because they have gone through (or should have gone through) my scrutiny. Hence, for instance, in the example above, I can be

⁶ It is not the case that what is not up to one is beyond the influence of moral norms, social rules or the impact of what is taken to be our duties. Consider Davidson’s (1969) interesting example where someone decides after reflection she should not stand up and brush her teeth but cannot stop herself to do it out of a sense of duty.

persuaded by my best capacity to reason that no one is following me while acknowledging that my therapist is right to explain my behaviour attributing to me the belief that I am being followed; this latter belief is not up to me, it is not something I believe in spite of being convinced that no one could be following me. In the cases that render plausible cases of Moore's paradox, it seems like the first person access to beliefs is the one that bring responsibility to the believers; the avowed beliefs are the ones that are up to the person who entertains them. In the case of beliefs—but typically not in the case of desires or fears—akrasia has to do with us having beliefs that are not avowed and get into our mental life in a way that escapes both our scrutiny and our capacity to transparently examine the world to acquire beliefs.

3. Transparency, belief acquisition, and 'not first-personal enough'

Our own actions, beliefs and desires are in many ways related to the way we evaluate them ourselves; Moran's perspective holds that self-evaluation and self-knowledge are in many ways intertwined. Still there could be pitfalls in the way our evaluation of ourselves influences our mental contents. Moran (2001: chapter 5, especially p. 152-194) discusses cases of self-effacement where one tries to think morally in a way that would not take herself into consideration. In some cases, it could be appropriate not to give oneself privileges in a moral deliberation but there are cases where the asymmetries between first and third personal judgments cannot be safely overlooked. Judging oneself from a third-personal perspective can be a way to be excessively sensitive to the way others would describe our actions. In this context, Moran discusses a thesis by Bernard Williams' (1985: 11) according to which "thinking about your possible states in terms of the virtues" is "to think about the way in which others might describe or comment on the way in which you think about your actions, and if that represents the essential content of your deliberation, it really does seem a misdirection of the ethical attention [...]". The idea is that if too much attention is paid to how one's action would be perceived from the outside—from a third-personal perspective, from the perspective of interpretation of action—it would somehow taint a moral act. One could, for example, be motivated by an attempt to look modest or courageous in somebody else's (or in one's own eyes while observing one's own action) instead of looking at the world with courageous or modest eyes and acting accordingly. It is one thing to act moved by a virtuous way of seeing the world and another to act guided by models of virtuous action. Of course one has to learn, at some point, how to see the world in a virtuous way and that would most likely involve looking at virtuous actions in order to acquire the capacity to spot in the world the salient features that would guide a virtuous judgment. Still, according to Williams' thesis, an action guided by an attempt to be virtuous—and that, therefore, sees virtue from an external point of view instead of seeing the world through virtuous eyes—is not fully morally adequate because it is not first-personal enough. This can be understood as a consequence of the asymmetries between how I evaluate my own action and how I evaluate somebody else's: it is morally fine to judge other people in terms of how virtuous their actions are but it may not be so to judge one's own action likewise because evaluation can

taint one's motivation and therefore action itself. Williams—in a vein that often resembles Sartre's notion of bad faith—believes that we can consider an action from the moral point of view in terms of how much first-personal it is.

We claim that, if Williams is right about moral judgments, we can apply the idea that mental content is sometimes not as first-personal as it should be to beliefs in general. We can start out by considering epistemic (or doxastic) virtues, instead of moral virtues. Consider a case of someone that, in the process of acquiring and managing her beliefs, pays excessive attention at how reliable (or empirically adequate, or coherent, or widely accepted) her beliefs are when considered from a third-personal point of view. The suspicion is that she can be misdirecting her capacity to have a third-personal access to her beliefs. We surely judge anybody's beliefs in terms of their virtues—in terms of features that we use to evaluate their justification or their likelihood to be true—and this is at least one way to assess somebody else's beliefs. Since other people's beliefs are not transparent to me—I cannot establish their beliefs by just looking at the world—it is open to me to consider the epistemic quality of their beliefs from an external point of view. In our case just above, however, the person who pays excessive attention to the epistemic qualities of her beliefs can be neglecting the transparency that is open to her as a resource to establish her own beliefs. She will then be paying too much attention to the standards of evaluation for beliefs (that maybe she is ready to recommend and further to maintain) to an extent that would neglect her capacity to examine the world from the perspective of her beliefs; in this sense she can end up holding beliefs that are not first-personal enough—she could have a measure of what we can describe as a case of epistemic bad faith.⁷

In the case of acquiring beliefs, as in the case of guiding moral action, one should have epistemic virtues somehow embedded in the eyes that, by looking at the world, acquire beliefs. If this extension of Williams' point is correct, at least as far as the acquisition of beliefs is concerned, the talk of justification (or of epistemic or doxastic virtues) belong in a third-personal perspective. In our education, of course, we get our capacity to acquire beliefs tuned to what is deemed justified or otherwise likely to be true but this process eventually is expected to become first-personal and part of our own transparent access to our beliefs—our own way to look at the world. In some sense also, neglect of transparency (and of first-personal access) is also a neglect of responsibility for one's own beliefs; it is as if one is hiding behind what are taken to be (or indeed are) good beliefs instead of taking the responsibility of viewing the world from (epistemically) virtuous eyes. Beliefs acquired in this manner can fail to be a product of one's own perspective on things as that perspective was sacrificed to conform to accepted standards. The believer is then in the position of someone who is not moved by reasons but forge beliefs that manage to conform to them. Those beliefs could be said to have earned their acceptability at the cost of becoming less

⁷ The issue can echo some of the debates on epistemological externalism: an epistemically virtuous person does not need to know that her beliefs are, for example, justified. Maybe she shouldn't pay too much attention to how justified her beliefs are. It is enough to acquire justified beliefs.

owned. Of course, beliefs acquired in this way cannot entirely bypass one's scrutiny. They are, like the cases of moral action Williams had in mind, only insufficiently first-personal. As such, it is often not straightforward to recognize them: insufficiently first-personal beliefs are acquired by believing the right thing and not what one is persuaded to believe. A measure of one's capacity to scrutinize the quality of a candidate belief is inadequately deferred to one's capacity to conform to what is prescribed; such beliefs are designed to avoid the risk to fail to conform to the endorsed epistemic (or doxastic) standards. In that sense, this is a case where a measure of one's authority and responsibility over one's beliefs is renounced. The danger of acquiring beliefs that are not first-personal enough is the danger of not seeing the world through one's own eyes but appealing instead to (one's understanding of) some external authority to determine what to believe. Neglecting transparent, first-personal access to beliefs and their acquisition can amount to disowning one's own worldview.

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