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SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL STUPIDITY

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*Abstract*

Most commonplace moral failure is not conditioned by evil intentions or the conscious desire to harm or humiliate others. It is more banal and ubiquitous – a form of moral stupidity that gives rise to rationalization, self-deception, failures of due moral consideration, and the evasion of responsibility. A kind of crude, perception-distorting self-absorption, moral stupidity is the cause of many moral missteps; moral development demands the development of self-knowledge as a way out of moral stupidity. Only once aware of the presence or absence of particular desires and beliefs can an agent have authority over them or exercise responsibility for their absence. But what is the connection between self-knowledge and moral development? I argue that accounts (such as Kant’s and Richard Moran’s) which construe instances of self-knowledge as like the verdicts of a judge cannot explain its potential role in moral development, and claim that it must be conceived of in a way that makes possible a process of self-refinement and self-regulation. Making use of Buddhist moral psychology, I argue that when self-knowledge plays a role in moral development, it includes a quality of attention to one’s experience best modeled as the work of the craftsperson, not as judge.

**Moral Stupidity**

For most of us, most of the time, moral failure is not conditioned by evil intentions or the conscious desire to harm or humiliate others. Our most common moral missteps do not involve bad decisions made when confronted by runaway trolleys, or unlikely circumstances involving unfortunately situated large persons on bridges whose bodies could be used to service the greater good. Instead moral failure is both more banal and ubiquitous. We rationalize, engage in self-deception, evade responsibility, and fail to adequately notice that others deserve moral consideration. In short, we exercise poor judgement because we are not attending well to, or exercising adequate control over, what is going on in our own experience. In *Middlemarch*, George Elliot identifies these sorts of human tendencies as the basic conditions of human conduct, writing: ‘we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves.’[[1]](#footnote-1)1 Moral stupidity, our default setting, is a kind of crude self-absorption that distorts our perceptions and hence is of paramount importance to right conduct; moral self-development, broadly speaking, will be its cure.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 If Elliot is right and the ‘supreme self’ is getting in the way, then the cure for moral stupidity lies in mastering the supreme self. Moral maturity demands that we get over ourselves.

Self-knowledge (or first-person authority, as it is often called in the contemporary literature) refers to a fallible awareness of one’s present mental states that is non-inferential and immediate and that includes a capacity to speak of these states with some authority.[[3]](#footnote-3)3 Most basically it refers to a state in which I know what I am doing and this, plausibly, makes possible the exercise of more fully responsible agency. Only once aware of the presence or absence of particular desires and beliefs can I have authority over them or exercise responsibility for their absence. By contrast, alienation from one’s own mental states is a peculiarly first-personal failure to know.[[4]](#footnote-4)4 It is a humbling psychological fact that we can fail to know what goes on in our own minds and can be alienated from our feelings, thoughts, and intentions, failing to recognize, accept, or take responsibility for them. A person who, for example, cannot know her own anger in a manner indicative of some authority with respect to it will not be taken to fully manifest responsible agency; over time she will appear to those who know her well as alienated from herself.

If self-knowledge is plausibly linked with moral development, then we should expect to be able to uncover a theoretical explanation of their connection. Construed as merely accurate observations of the self, the moral value of self-knowledge would not be explained. For example, the bare observation that I am now taking the big piece of pie, or now acting from spite, or now feeling shame for having failed by my own moral standards, does not by itself suggest any significant movement out of moral stupidity. The connection between self-knowledge and moral development must include something beyond simply an accurate identification of what passes through one’s mind. But what?

In what follows I will argue that in order to be able to understand it as a resource for developing a way out of moral stupidity, self-knowledge must be conceived of in a way that makes possible a process of self-refinement and self-regulation. I will argue that when self-knowledge plays a role in moral development, it includes a quality of attention to one’s experience best modeled as the work of a craftsperson, who carefully develops her skill by cultivating a refined awareness of her environment and her response to it, in relation to her aim of developing the skills needed to master her particular craft. Accounts of self-knowledge that lack a connection to self-refinement and self-regulation of this sort, and that cannot accommodate the craftsperson model, will be incomplete or mistaken. I suggest that the mistakes made by the accounts that I canvas lie in the fact that they construe instances of self-knowledge along purely theoretical lines, as like the verdicts of a judge. If self-knowledge is understood to be purely a procedural output of this sort its potential role in moral development cannot be explained.

**Kant’s Duty of Self-Knowledge**

In Western philosophy Immanuel Kant stands out as a thinker who clearly recognizes the importance of self-knowledge for moral development. For Kant the first command of all duties to oneself is to know your heart, the quality of one’s will in relation to duty: “‘*know* (scrutinize, fathom) *yourself*,’ not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of optional or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty.”[[5]](#footnote-5)5 Self-knowledge concerns the purification of one’s will (one’s moral perfection) and demands that we recognize our intentions as they are framed by the requirements of duty.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 A rich man who proudly helps the needy thinking he is doing something meritorious should, Kant tells us, beware reveling in moral feelings of his own generosity; after all he is merely living up to his obligations.[[7]](#footnote-7)7 Awareness of his own motives and other mental states is necessary so that he will not fall into delusion about his own moral constitution and the demands of duty.

Self-knowledge, Kant claims, will both dispel contempt for oneself as a person and counteract egotistical self-esteem; it is the beginning of all human wisdom. Yet Kant is not naive about our ability to glean an accurate account of the self, and worries about the human tendency to self-aggrandizement. Humans are dissemblers, inclined to ‘discover’ selves that they have unconsciously put up for display: ‘If a human being notices that someone is observing him and trying to study him, he will either appear embarrassed (self-conscious) and cannot show himself as he really is; or he dissembles, and does not want to be shown as he is.’[[8]](#footnote-8)8 Kant worries that this tendency to appease the ‘dear self’[[9]](#footnote-9)9 leads us to make ourselves exceptions to standards to which we hold others, and leads to moral confusion. He warns against attending to our experience in ways that are morally dangerous, such as in casting our actions as ‘noble, sublime, and magnanimous’1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 when what we are doing simply satisfies the demands of duty. For Kant, moral self-knowledge is not easily achieved and a duty of the first importance.

Could duty itself provide a framework for the acquisition of the kind of self-knowledge that leads the way out of moral stupidity? It seems not. While Kant is right that paying attention to the requirements of duty can help to prevent confusing moral requirements with moral narratives about our own goodness in fulfilling them, he over-estimates the power of the dutiful framework to access and maintain self-knowledge. Thoughts of duty can also trigger the very human tendency to dissemble that blocks an accurate self-perception, as when one’s account of what one is doing silently shifts from a self-serving motive to a description under which what is being done is required by reason.1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 In such cases the thought of duty presents a kind of threat which can be appeased by a recasting one’s intention; I’m no longer taking the big piece of pie because I want to, I am helping you stick to your diet. Kant supposes that self-knowledge can be had by applying the appropriate judicial constraint (duty) to our intentions as a measure of our moral perfection, but it seems that a less moralistic frame for self-knowledge is required to avoid the tendency to self-illusion. More accurate perceptions of what we are like will be had if the frame for self-knowledge is not itself a moral standard to be met.

Next I will discuss a less moralistic account of self-knowledge, advanced by Richard Moran, with the aim of showing that while a significant improvement, because it too conceives of self-knowledge as verdicts about one’s present state, it is unable to explain how self-knowledge could help to provide a path out of moral stupidity. The necessary connection between self-knowledge and the way out of moral stupidity requires, I will suggest, that self-knowledge be understood in such a way that even when primarily observational, it can be thought of as authoritative. To make my case I will consider self-knowledge within Buddhist philosophy (as found in the Pali Canon) and its techniques for accurate self-perception.

**Avowal as the Fundamental Form of Self-Knowledge**

To see the importance of the process through which we come to possess self-knowledge, consider the difference between cases where we learn about our own mental states through the testimony of others instead of through our own awareness. My trusted friend tells me that I am nervous as she watches me pace back and forth and, recognizing this evidence, I come to see that I am nervous. My colleague tells me that I am angry and only then do I realize that I am yelling. My therapist tells me that I resent my younger sister and, as he advances evidence for his view, I come to see how confused about my own experience I have been. Such cases signal a degree of alienation from ourselves and our own reasons for action. We are seriously alienated from ourselves when we are unable to recognize *from within* what we can be led to recognize *from without*, when we can get access to what we believe or feel *only* in this indirect way. This fact about failures of self-knowledge by way of alienation leads Moran to focus on the way we access the self we claim to have knowledge of, and to stress the role of rational agency in the production of self-knowledge; it is through the activity of reasoning, he argues, that our deliberative conclusions become active states in us. We, reasoners, cannot consistently maintain a view of ourselves as someone only to be observed and still conceive of ourselves as agents: ‘One must see one’s deliberation as the *expression and development* of one’s belief and will, not as an activity one pursues in the *hope* that it will have some influence on one’s eventual belief and will.’1[[12]](#footnote-12)2

Like Kant, Moran holds that in self-knowledge one does not simply discover a psychic given and file an accurate report. Moran privileges the standpoint of deliberation, describing the Kantian view of reflective consciousness as identifying an inescapable situation of decision; agents are forced to endorse or reject their inclinations and thereby assert authority over what counts as reason-giving. Of course, much of what one knows about oneself may be known in the mode of observation; one can become aware of an intentional attitude without endorsing it. I might simply bear witness and so not find it to be a reason for action. For example, I may find that I feel dismissed but may not accept the proposition ‘Ted was dismissive of me’ as a premise in subsequent deliberations; I may simply accept the fact of feeling dismissed without taking it to be true. On Moran’s account of agency, it is only when I move beyond the attribution of the feeling (as when I judge that I was, or was not, treated dismissively) that my rational freedom is expressed as an assertion of authority. I may suspend an impulse to believe by questioning it (‘am I over-reacting?’) and thereby refuse to authorize the inferential roles it would otherwise have within my network of beliefs. At any particular moment I may not be able to rid myself of the thought but may be able to insulate it from having an influence in my explicit reasoning.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 As these observations are neither endorsed nor rejected, they lack the authority of those which are avowed by the agent and Moran concludes that the ability to avow one’s belief is the fundamental form of self-knowledge.1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 It is this claim (that avowal is the fundamental form of self-knowledge) that I will contest, but before doing so it is important to see why Moran supposes avowal to be as significant as he does.

To see the significance of avowal, consider its persistent absence. If years of therapy have left me believing that I resent my sister only because my therapist provides very good reason to believe it, and yet I can only maintain this belief indirectly through consideration of the evidence he advances then something is amiss, as yet unresolved. More successful therapy would leave me able to know what I feel about my sister directly, by thinking about my sister. Beliefs that cannot be avowed are ‘cognitively isolated’ and indicate a measure of alienation, falling outside of the ‘normal processes of review and revision that constitute the rational health of belief and other attitudes.’1[[15]](#footnote-15)5 Avowal is of singular importance in self-knowledge, according to Moran, because it clearly indicates self-authorship, manifesting the rational freedom of a self-reflective being.

Moran finds the authority of agency specifically in those cases of deliberation which produce a judicial output as a direct result of reflection on the object of thought: ‘the capacity not just for awareness of one’s beliefs, but specifically awareness through avowal, is both the normal condition and part of the rational well-being of the person.’1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 Beliefs are avowed when they are transparent in the sense that they can be known by the agent by considering nothing but the object of that belief. A belief is transparent when it can be ‘expressed by reflection on its subject matter and not by consideration of the psychological evidence for a particular belief attribution. That is to say, one is not treating the belief-attribution to oneself as a purely empirical or theoretical matter.’1[[17]](#footnote-17)7 So if I can express my belief that I resent my sister by thinking about nothing but my sister (not the evidence supplied by my therapist) then it is a transparent belief, and only then do I have self-knowledge of the most fundamental form.1[[18]](#footnote-18)8 As Moran sees it, if I cannot avow such a belief, but only attribute it to myself empirically, then I am in no better position to speak for my feelings than I was prior to the belief attribution, for I have admitted no authority over them. This is why he further claims that avowal represents the most fundamental form of self-knowledge, one which ‘gives proper place to the immediacy of first-person awareness and the authority with which its claims are delivered.’1[[19]](#footnote-19)9

While there is much to agree with in Moran’s sophisticated account, he wrongly privileges the act of avowal as the fundamental form of self-knowledge. It is false that in all cases of ‘mere’ attributional awareness a person is in no better position to speak for her feelings than before, and false that the authorship of transparent avowal signals the fundamental form of self-knowledge. An equally significant form of first-person authority may be present in instances of self-awareness that lack transparency precisely because they do not include the endorsement or rejection of an intentional attitude as a reason for action, and promote moral development because they manifest a form of self-understanding that remains as yet open to complete determination by an act of will. The significance of these cases cannot be explained when avowal is taken to be fundamental. For example, when I recognize that I feel that Ted was dismissive, but do not endorse it, I may (contra Moran) be much better placed to speak for my feelings in the sense that I come to experience them as needing my authorization, not supplying their own. Indeed, I may be even better situated with respect to them than I might be in the case that I feel dismissed and endorse the feeling heedlessly. The recognition that my feelings concerning Ted may not be adequate evidence for a belief about Ted may prove the starting point for some fruitful reflection. The awareness of their presence in me is a potentially empowering form of self-understanding, and so a form of self-knowledge, in which what is known is not my judgement *per se* but some of the conditions operating upon it. To become aware of one’s previously unrecognized jealousy, or condescension, or fear, is to leave oneself placed to reinterpret what one has reason to do, and to do so with better information. Fear of the disapproval of strangers, for example, may, once recognized, appear so silly that it evaporates, or may persist, but not without modifying the agent’s possibilities. When cases of self-awareness without avowal involve a comprehension of that state as inclining my thoughts and actions, that comprehension can be a significant and transformative component of awareness, drawing my attention to the background beliefs and attitudes (and my responsibility for and control over them) which themselves influence the intentional attitudes that arise in me. Hence, avowal is not a necessary condition for self-knowledge.

Because the moral point of self-knowledge is, at least in part, to free us from our moral stupidity, to develop wisdom, Moran’s focus on transparent outputs of deliberation seems excessive. The significance of avowal lies not in the bare expression of the transcendence of agency over facticity, for we can clearly author transparent beliefs which are delusions grounded in ignorance and self-absorption. As Kant recognized, it is all too easy to *discover* my generous nature when my action merely indicates a willingness to do what I deem morally obligatory. While avowal bears the marks of a certain kind of authorship and is, generally speaking, important to individual rational well being, the transparency involved in avowal does not always signal authorship in a meaningful sense, nor rational well-being. Insofar as it permits gross self-delusion it is not plausibly the most fundamental form of self-knowledge. Hence, avowal is not a sufficient condition for self-knowledge.

It might be objected that because what I become aware of in such a case is the belief that I am generous, not the fact of my generous nature, the significance of avowal is untouched by the self-deception; delusion is a form of self-authorship. However, while it is true that, in such a case, I am aware of my belief about my generosity and not the fact of my generosity, the objection itself undercuts the appeal to avowal as the fundamental form of self-knowledge by showing it to be arbitrarily privileged. Moran’s account is highly sophisticated and he notes that in cases where one suspends an inclination, stepping back from it, one thereby influences the course of things, establishing an empirically different state of mind.2[[20]](#footnote-20)0 The problem is not that Moran fails to recognize these subtleties, but that he fails to recognize their significance in self-authorship, over generalizing from the importance of the fact of deliberation and the commitment and rational freedom it involves, to the presumed importance of that aspect of agency in each act of deliberation. The fact that deliberative questions are responded to with decisions and commitments, and that this indicates a form of authorship, is not at issue. Epistemic questions such as ‘what am I like?’ and ‘what do I really value?’ are also questions concerning self-authorship.

Moran’s account has been criticized in a similar vein, described as a kind of ‘deliberative purism’, problematic insofar as it promotes an undesirable and misleading picture of well-developed agency. According to Victoria McGeer, Moran’s view would need to be supplemented by a non-deliberative, regulative component in order to really do justice to the first-person authority involved in a psychologically realistic account of rational control. Much self-regulation does not involve rational deliberation, but operates automatically as when we develop habits to control or manage our cognitive or affective weaknesses. We avoid certain topics of conversation or certain people, and we develop other creative systems of constraint and reward to help us live up to our values. According to McGeer, recognition of the importance of self-regulation by non-deliberative means allows us to see the value in taking the appropriate empirical stance toward oneself: ‘A morally mature agent, a morally wise agent, is one who understands the peculiar responsibility she has for making and maintaining her own psychological states.’2[[21]](#footnote-21)1 The morally wise agent will recognize the human capacity to subvert rational self-authorship and so will not rely exclusively upon it; instead she will aim to diminish her moral stupidity using a variety of strategies. The connection between moral wisdom and self-knowledge eludes Moran’s account which prizes the form of the output independently of the process that produced it. First-person authority is not found most fundamentally in verdicts and judgements, but is also to be found in the process by which these deliberative outputs are developed. Let me expand on this weakness in his account by reflecting on the difference between the judicial model of self-knowledge (found in Kant and Moran) and the craftsperson model of self-knowledge found in the Buddhist view of self-knowledge.

**Buddhism on Self-Knowledge**

Buddhism is, of course, famous for the challenge it poses to the notion that there is a self and so it may seem odd to turn to it for a richer account of self-knowledge. However, it is precisely because it challenges some standard assumptions about the origins of self-authorship that it offers a useful contrast and suggests a different model for self-knowledge. The doctrine of Not-self (or No-self) *anatta,* is one of the Buddhist teachings most important to that account of self-knowledge. In the meditative practice definitive of Buddhist teachings, self-knowledge is developed by learning to apprehend the contents of one’s mind in ‘Not-self’ terms. We are to attend to our experience in a manner that diminishes the sense of oneself as a discreet, permanent, and wholly independent being. To discern experience rightly is to acknowledge: ‘This is not mine. This is not myself. This is not what I am.’2[[22]](#footnote-22)2 This practice aids self-knowledge by driving a wedge between thoughts and their thinker, so that the thinker learns about the workings of her mind and identifies less readily with its contents. She does this by perceiving that the constituents of her experience are not constitutive of herself. None of the constitutive elements of the person (the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental fabrication, or consciousness) is the self.

The doctrine of Not-self is philosophically controversial even within Buddhism, however. Is it properly interpreted as a doctrinal commitment to the metaphysical fact that there is no self? Or is it best conceived of as an imperative of practice - the commitment to perceive the contents of one’s experience without identifying them as the self? On the latter interpretation, the Not-self doctrine is perhaps especially relevant to considerations of self-knowledge, and is the one I shall adopt.

One proponent of the Not-self doctrine as an imperative of practice is Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who has argued that it is best and most fruitfully understood as a technique of perception on the grounds that this both explains its practical significance and coheres with the textual evidence from the Pali Canon.2[[23]](#footnote-23)3 He points out that in the single sutta in which the Buddha is directly asked whether there is or is not a self, he refuses to answer the question. Moreover, Thanissaro Bhikkhu argues that in other suttas, both the view that I have a self and the view that I have no self are included among the class of views that constitute a ‘fetter of views,’ having the potential to hinder comprehension. Both the view that there is a self and the view that there is no self can impede development by misdirecting attention, leaving us unable to attend properly or wisely to those features of experience that can lead to the abandonment of suffering. We avoid the fetter of views by attending appropriately to experience, by being guided by an awareness of suffering.2[[24]](#footnote-24)4 The purpose of this method of perception is, of course, to put an end to suffering, and so for Buddhism moral development – finding a way out of moral stupidity – is part of a process aimed at securing happiness. As a practical stance the Not-self doctrine promotes self-knowledge by freeing us from the notion that there is a separate, constant self and focusing instead on the process of how our self-perceptions are created. Whatever self there is, it is a self in process.

When Moran claims that avowal is the fundamental form of self-knowledge on the grounds that it instantiates authorship of beliefs and attitudes and so genuine first-person awareness, he fails to recognize the authority available in certain modes of epistemic awareness. I may be much better placed to speak for my feelings because I now understand them and understand their causal role in my experience. In Buddhist terms a parallel of sorts is had in right view (one of the steps on the Eightfold Path) which describes the ability to understand in one’s experience suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation. So right view describes a way of seeing oneself that is itself transformative – it involves observational awareness aimed at comprehension.

My point is not that any account of self-knowledge must frame experience in terms of suffering, but rather that there are modes of being aware of what one is doing that manifest authorship of one’s constitution that rival the authority demonstrated in acts of avowal. Insofar as this sort of meditative practice helps one to learn about the contents and operations of one’s mind, it challenges the supposition that the authorship found in agency can be adequately understood as the aggregation of judgements or avowals made by the agent, and suggests that the authorship of agency includes the refinement of the operations which precede the construction of judgements. One way to put the point is to claim that Moran simply fails to recognize the agency and authority involved in the formation of our mental fabrications themselves.

This is not to say that the Buddhist account explains the nature and attainment of self-knowledge; in this context, to do so would be question-begging. My aim in this brief discussion is not to advance such a strong conclusion, but instead to challenge the judicial model of self-knowledge by redrawing the boundaries of attention and awareness it presumes, challenging in turn the presumptive authority of the episode of avowal as the most fundamental form of self-knowledge. If we shift our thinking about the scope and degree of attention involved in the acquisition of self-knowledge to include the self in a dynamic system, then the claim that avowal most clearly signals self-authorship becomes less convincing.

This weakness in the judicial model of self-knowledge can be made clearer by contrasting it with a craft model of self-knowledge. On the model offered by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the knowledge needed to free oneself from suffering is like that needed for the development of other quotidian skills (such as throwing pots or sharpening knives). It is to be understood as a form of craft knowledge because its development requires more than the simple observation of the object of one’s attention. It necessarily also includes observation of the quality of one’s attention in the act of observation. Hence, in self-knowledge one must become ‘more sensitive to one's own sensitivity and its consequences.’ Developing the analogy between the growth of self-knowledge and the acquisition of musical skills, Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes:

This is similar to the way in which a musician must learn to listen to his/her own performance, a process that ultimately involves listening to the quality of one's listening itself. The greater one's sensitivity in listening, the more profound one's performances become. In the same way, the greater one's sensitivity to one's own mind in the development of skillful qualities, the more one abandons the causes of suffering and realizes its cessation.2[[25]](#footnote-25)5

Considered in this light, we might well conclude that agential authority lies in the sensitivity with which she reads her experience, not in her willful transcendence of it, and hence is an importantly qualitative notion.

In the *Advice to Rahula at Ambalatthika Sutta*2[[26]](#footnote-26)6 the Buddha speaks to his son about the dangers of telling a deliberate lie, thereby establishing the need for truthfulness, and follows it with a lesson about the importance of repeated reflection on bodily actions, actions by speech, and action by mind. The Buddha’s advice is straightforward. When considering an action reflect upon whether it will lead to suffering for oneself, others, or both. If on reflection you know that it will lead to affliction (that it is unwholesome) then you should not do it. If you believe it would not lead to affliction then it is permissible. While you are doing the action you should consider whether what you are doing now leads to affliction for yourself or others; if it does, the action should be stopped. If, on reflection, it seems wholesome, you may continue. When you have done the action you should reflect on whether it led to affliction, whether it was unwholesome; if you know that it was unwholesome then you should acknowledge this (even publicly). Having confessed it, you should commit to refraining from it in the future. If the action was wholesome, you ‘can abide happy and glad’. The sutta ends with the following summation of the training: ‘you should train thus: “We will purify our bodily action, our verbal action, and our mental action by repeatedly reflecting upon them”.’

Although the advice is straightforward, the message is subtle. The exhortation to repeated reflection is an exhortation to a steady, attentive awareness that will develop self-knowledge useful to the cessation of suffering. One comes to know oneself through reflection on one’s actions, their predicted consequences, their actual consequences, one’s response to their actual consequences, and so on. In short, one learns about oneself (gathers knowledge) by attending to one’s experience with openness, honesty and perseverance so that one sees them in the relevant context. This need not require the diligence of a Buddhist monastic in order to count as self-knowledge, the point is simply that without that quality of attention, the connection to moral development goes unexplained. Absent attention of this sort it isn’t clear that knowledge of one’s intentions and beliefs could diminish the crude self-absorption operative in moral stupidity. Hence to explain how it contributes to moral development, self-knowledge must be amenable to being modeled as craftsperson’s knowledge; one’s artifacts are one’s actions. The aim of self-knowledge is *not* simply the aim of attaining another true belief about me, for this cannot lead me out of moral stupidity, or suffering. The aim must include also an increase in one’s sensitivity in knowledge acquisition; hence it is a form of craft knowledge and not a purely theoretical enterprise.

It is worth noting the limits of my argument. I have not argued that self-knowledge is a sufficient condition for moral goodness, nor attempted to ground morality on self-knowledge. I haven’t committed to, or assumed, an account of the good. I have not claimed that all moral agents seek always to become better moral agents, but have simply assumed that agents typically tend to do what they think required or permissible, by their own lights, and that some agents are interested in their own moral development. So my argument is not defeated by appeals to the amoralist or the morally lazy. Instead I have started with the assumption that self-knowledge plays a role in the kind of self-development that provides a way out of moral stupidity and asked whether this can be accommodated by some, otherwise appealing, accounts of self-knowledge. I have argued that accounts of self-knowledge should allow for or acknowledge the importance of a form of empirical awareness of one’s mental states and that this suggests that self-knowledge should be at least partly modeled on the knowledge developed by a craftsperson. I have tried to indicate how self-knowledge plays an indispensable role in the development of a keener moral sense and a more fully responsible agency.[[27]](#footnote-27)

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1. 1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2. Victoria McGeer makes use of George Eliot’s notion of moral stupidity when bringing the issue of moral responsibility to bear on an account of first-person authority. McGeer grants that our perceptions and experiences are distorted by an egocentric disposition to show ourselves in a good and special light and claims that the ‘common developmental challenge’ is thus to grow up out of the natural state of egoism. Victoria McGeer, ‘The Moral Development of First-Person Authority’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (2007), pp. 81-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3. Matthew Boyle describes it as ‘the awareness expressed in a subject’s ability to speak in the first person, without self-observation and with apparent authority, about her own present mental states’ in his, ‘Two Kinds of Self-Knowledge’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77 (2009), pp. 133-164, p.134. While not the focus of this paper, some self-knowledge can be non-inferential. See, for example, Krista Lawlor, ‘Knowing What One Wants’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 79 (2009), pp. 47-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4. See Richard Moran’s *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), AK 6:441. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6. For an interesting overview of Kant’s position on the difficulty of attaining self-knowledge see Allen Wood’s *Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.193-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 6:454. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), AK 7:121. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), AK 4: 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), AK 5:85. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11. I have argued at length that Kant’s account is open to this kind of objection in ‘Moral Self-Knowledge in Kantian Ethics’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 12 (2009), pp.525-537. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12. Richard Moran, ‘Self-Knowledge: Discovery, Resolution, and Undoing’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 5 (1997), pp. 141-161, p.157. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13. Moran, *Authority*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14. Moran, *Authority*, p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15. Moran, *Authority*, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16. Moran, *Authority*, p.108. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17. Moran, *Authority*, p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18. Moran argues that it is possible that one discover something about oneself either by theoretical means which would involve the direct appeal to evidence, or by deliberative means which would involve avowal and thus meet the transparency condition. Attitude statements made through attribution and through avowal will refer to the same phenomena so that ‘We should, then, see the stance of avowal and the stance of explanation as two ways of becoming aware of the same thing.’ *Authority*, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19. ‘From within a purely attributional awareness of herself, she is no more in a position to speak for her feelings than she was before, for she admits no authority over them.’ *Authority*, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20. Moran, *Authority*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21. McGeer, ‘Moral Development’, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22. ‘Discourse on the Not-Self Characteristic’, *Samyutta Nikaya,* 22.59, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight website, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.than.html (accessed May 26, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23. ‘No-self or Not-self?’, in *Noble Strategy* (Valley Center, Ca.: Metta Forest Monastery Publisher, 1999), pp. 71-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24. See, for example, ‘All the Taints’, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), (Sabbasava Sutta) 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Wings to Awakening: An Anthology from the Pali Canon*, 4th ed (Barre, MA: Dhamma Dana Publications, 2004) p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I would like to thank Thanissaro Bhikkhu for reading, and making helpful comments on, an earlier version of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)