

The Philosophical Imagination: Selected Essays

by Richard Moran

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This impressive book collects sixteen essays, spanning nearly three decades, all but one of which have been published elsewhere. Though reading a collection like this is often an occasion to discover exotic rarities from obscure edited volumes, Moran's stature in the field is such that many, if not most, of the pieces here will be familiar to his readers. The essays are not structured chronologically but appear under three headings, "Art and Aesthetics," "Readings of Contemporary Philosophers," and "Agency and the First Person." These divisions are not modally robust: an essay on Frankfurt's notion of identification could easily have fit into the third part, not the second, and though Murdoch and Anscombe were both born in 1919, Moran's take on Murdoch appears in the second and his two essays on Anscombe in the third. Neither are these divisions descriptively exhaustive: a fascinating essay on Cavell on photographic expression ranges well beyond standard aesthetic concerns into a meditation on how any bodily posture or movement is necessarily expressive of the person whose body it is, how this is especially true of our facial movements, and how this form of expressivity cuts across the active/passive distinction.

As these glosses already suggest, the essays do not form anything like a structured whole. Though Moran's previous book, the highly influential *Authority and Estrangement* (2001), also treated a broad array of topics, from Moore's paradox to self-effacement in ethical theory, this was part of a larger argument for the irreducibility of the first-person point of view in understanding mind and action. As his brief introduction to the present volume notes, Moran has continued to pursue this theme, now in tandem with a variety of other preoccupations: the inadequacy of the distinction between the cognitive and non-cognitive, the possibility and necessity of imagining the inner life of another person, and the extent to which rational agency is operative even in attitudes of caring and pleasure. (A companion volume, entitled *The Exchange of Words*, assembles Moran's essays on speech, testimony, and intersubjectivity.) Reading the present volume cover to cover, I noticed the recurrence of certain philosophical moves, notably the strategy of arguing that there is room in logical space for some possibility that philosophers had not previously considered; Moran is characteristically uneasy with strict binaries. Often, as with the idea that intentional states such as finding something funny are an expression of an agent's responsiveness to reasons without being entirely under voluntary control, this strategy takes the form of identifying some non-reductive account of the phenomena that does not fall into the absurdities from which the reductionist alternative recoiled. Still, these essays are not really in conversation with each other—Moran is the rare philosopher who doesn't often cite his own work—so rather than attempt to address them as a whole, I will offer summaries of each of the three sections and lengthier remarks on one recent essay from each, for the reason that the older pieces have been critically discussed by others.

Part One, "Art and Aesthetics," begins with "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination" (1994), the most widely cited paper in the collection, in which Moran argues that the so-called problem of fictional emotion—how it is that we can have genuine emotional responses to objects we do not believe to be real—can be dissolved by operating with a more expansive concept of the imagination, one that does not analyze it exclusively in terms of the representation of sets of propositions. "Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force" (1989) tries to determine what

is correct in Davidson's provocative claim that metaphors do not communicate any content. Though Moran agrees that one dimension of metaphor is that of its effects, in which the hearer adopts a perspective on the target of the metaphor (e.g., seeing someone as a wolf), he argues that metaphor must also have a cognitive dimension, namely the contentful beliefs that prompt the comparison in the first place: "The metaphor will not succeed in getting us to see anything as anything without our having some previous understanding of *which* aspects of a wolf are being used as a perspective on *which* aspects of human beings" (42). "Artifice and Persuasion: The Work of Metaphor in the *Rhetoric*" (1996) is a compressed tour through some of the interpretive difficulties of Aristotle's text, building to the intriguing conclusion that his ambivalence about metaphor is explained by the fact that both the cognitive benefits and rhetorical dangers of metaphor arise from the same property: its imagistic power, which requires development through the imaginative activity of the audience. "Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty" (2012) is one of the highlights of the collection. Masterfully reading the *Critique of Judgment* alongside *In Search of Lost Time*, Moran argues that both Kant and Proust are concerned with the sense of requirement or obligation in the experience of the beautiful, but that Proust's emphasis on what is individualizing and even isolating in the experience of beauty shows that Kant is wrong to identify the experience of necessity with a demand for universal agreement. "Cavell on Recognition, Betrayal, and the Photographic Field of Expression" (2016), described above, draws attention to the human face as a privileged field of expression. This field is made especially vivid by the special properties of the camera, although Moran does not explain precisely how this is so.

"Proust and the Limits of the Will" (previously unpublished), like most of these essays, defies easy summary. In the first place, it is an ambitious exercise in textual interpretation, arguing that the social and erotic concerns of Proust's novel can be linked to its metaphysical preoccupations by the theme of the "contra-voluntary." To put it crudely, in the Proustian universe (and surely elsewhere), the criterion of Reality is that it resists the subject's will. But this means that when it comes to knowing our own mind and others', there is a special epistemic value to be placed on the involuntary. This explains not only Proust's narrator's obsessive spying and prying as he seeks inadvertent signs and betrayals from his lovers and friends, but also his privileging of the famous episodes of the madeleine and the paving stones as revelations of involuntary memory. Moran's engagement with the novel is more nuanced than earlier philosophical treatments by Martha Nussbaum or Rae Langton, who attack Proust as a metaphysical, epistemological, and even moral solipsist. Moran rightly sees that this is only one side of the coin, and that it is Proust's commitment to the distinctness of persons that makes them "both the occasion for skepticism and ... the very condition of desire's fulfillment" (105), namely as "something genuinely independent of one's own solipsistic desire" (115). (I develop this kind of reading at greater length in Kubala, 2016.) But I was left uncertain, when faced with his extensive taxonomy of modes of the contra-voluntary, as to whether Moran finds these Proustian claims independently defensible. How could episodes of involuntary memory play a role in *restoring* the will, as the narrator's writerly vocation is restored by the experience with the paving stones? Does the involuntary behavior of others always have greater epistemic standing, for our knowledge of them, than their voluntary behavior? And if, as Moran shrewdly observes, the narrative is a fairy-tale quest initiated by an Original Trauma (when the young narrator wins a goodnight kiss from his mother, albeit somehow in the wrong way), to what extent could these observations be true of the wills that *we*, who do not live in fairy tales, have?

Part Two, “Readings of Contemporary Philosophers,” opens with “Cavell on Outsiders and Others” (2011), a dense commentary on a 15-page stretch of *The Claim of Reason* about the relation between skepticism about the external world and skepticism about other minds. Two essays on Frankfurt follow: “Frankfurt on Identification: Ambiguities of Activity in Mental Life” (2002) and “On Frankfurt’s *The Reasons of Love*” (2007). The former is the gem of Part Two—a penetrating development of the notion of an agent’s activity not in terms of identification with one’s desires but of responsiveness to reasons—and the latter is a brief rehearsal of various objections to Frankfurt’s picture of caring not as a response to value or reasons but as a matter of how people and projects *become* valuable and reason-giving to us. “Williams, History, and the ‘Impurity of Philosophy’” (2016), first published in this journal, is a rich reflection on Williams’ understanding of philosophy as a humanistic discipline, one which, like history, has to combine two perspectives that are often at odds: an ‘internal’, non-reductive view of practices that are partially constituted by forms of self-understanding, and an ‘external’ view that shows “the temporality, the partiality, and the contradictions of that internal understanding itself” (199).

“Iris Murdoch and Existentialism” (2012) reads *The Sovereignty of Good* as a polemic, which for Moran is both a form of praise and a source of what he perceives as her distortion of existentialist ideas. He argues that we better understand Murdoch when we take her to be not only responding to but in fact drawing on insights from existentialism, Sartre in particular, *contra* the received story that she completely repudiated her earlier fascination with him (she wrote the first book-length study of Sartre in English). This approach is suggestive, but I worry about some of the details. For instance, Moran claims that in Murdoch’s well-known example of the mother-in-law, M is not under any *illusion* when she perceives her daughter-in-law D as vulgar, undignified, noisy, and tiresomely juvenile; M is not making a mistake about the facts but rather, in Sartrean fashion, has a free *choice* to reorient her own vision of D’s qualities. But this reading is in tension with Murdoch’s realist language of “discovery,” which implies that M is getting something right, something that was previously wrong or distorted, when she discovers—as opposed to simply reimagines or reconceives—that D is actually refreshingly simple, spontaneous, delightfully youthful, and so forth. If we allow that M does have a choice in the matter, we should also insist that, for Murdoch, that choice is constrained by those features of D that really are there to be discovered.

Part Three, “Agency and the First Person,” contains essays on the philosophy of mind and action. “Interpretation Theory and the First Person” (1994) anticipates *Authority and Estrangement* in rejecting the “theory theory” of commonsense psychology, in particular the idea, found in Davidson and Dennett, that the primary, meaning-constituting use of concepts like ‘belief’ and ‘desire’ is the prediction and explanation of behavior. This idea fails to accommodate the differences between first- and third-personal psychological ascriptions and the epistemological priority of the former. “Anscombe on Practical Knowledge” (2004) and “Anscombe on the Expression of Intention: An Exegesis” (2009), the latter co-authored with Martin Stone, offer detailed and plausible interpretations of *Intention*, explaining why Anscombe characterizes practical knowledge as “non-observational” and why she elucidates the concept of intention “in terms of language,” respectively. “Self-Knowledge, ‘Transparency’, and the Forms of Activity” (2012) argues against several recent accounts of self-knowledge, from Nishi Shah and David Velleman, and from Alex Byrne, that divorce it from rational agency.

“The Story of My Life: Narrative and Self-Understanding” (2015) returns to the existentialists, this time in reference to the notion of living one’s life as a story. Both Moran and the existentialists want to critique this notion, but the existentialists overreach in claiming that narrative is necessarily falsifying; Dostoevsky and Sartre, for instance, hold that to live one’s life as the unfolding of a story would be to adopt an observer’s perspective on it, one which would fail to correspond to first-personal experience. Moran points out that the existentialist critique rests on an overly narrow conception of narrative, however, one that concerns an *individual* life only. On a broader conception, narratives adopt a perspective on events that is often unavailable to the subjects of that narrative, for a variety of reasons: the meaning of an action can change depending on what occurs later, individuals can be deluded about themselves and others, and historical understanding can itself evolve over time. As Moran nicely puts it, “The truth of someone’s story will typically display forms of significance that could not be available to the character, but without for all that being either a falsification or the representation of something that applies only to the story and not to the reality the story is recounting” (311). These claims are plausible, but their dialectical upshot with respect to recent philosophical debates about narrativity is uncertain. It seems that one could accept Moran’s critique while still holding that, say, human lives are best understood in narrative form, or even that the unity of the person is constituted by an activity of self-narration.

In such a short review of such an idiosyncratic collection, I can only give some sense of the contents of each essay. Yet if this book offers little unity of theme, there is ample unity of style, which is worth comment in its own right. Moran rejects the idea of the philosopher as proselytizer, ardently defending some more or less outlandish claim against any and all comers, in favor of a more cautious approach. The term ‘essays’ in his title is extremely well-chosen. For one thing, these are stylishly written, with arguments that unfold gradually without being signaled telegraphically in the fashion of the latest journals. They demand to be read carefully, not skimmed for a main thesis or flashy example; the philosophical work takes place in the dialectic, not the conclusion. For another thing, they are often ‘attempts’, raising as many questions as they answer. This is in keeping with the hermeneutic spirit of Moran’s work, which “takes the work of reading to be as centrally a form of philosophical thought as any other, and not a substitute for the real thing” (xii). A characteristic parenthetical phrase notes that “in this passage [Williams] is paraphrasing Schelling, but he makes the thought his own” (190). Much the same could frequently be said of Moran himself in his paraphrases of others, and in a laudatory sense. Yet the reader could be forgiven for asking whether all these thoughts, from such a diverse group of thinkers, hang together in a more unified way. So I will close both by recommending this thoroughly absorbing book to anyone interested in the various topics it treats and by expressing the hope that perhaps someday Moran will again be moved to write about them in a more systematic fashion.

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