

The Mud of Experience and Kinds of Awareness¹

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ABSTRACT: In *Authority and Estrangement* Richard Moran takes some rather illuminating steps towards getting rid of the Cartesian picture of self-knowledge. I argue, however, that Moran's crucial distinction between deliberative and theoretical attitude is seriously contaminated by that traditional picture. More specifically, I will point out why some crucial aspects of the phenomena that Moran describes in terms of the interplay between the theoretical and the deliberative attitude, should rather be interpreted as a process that takes place within the deliberative attitude itself. The theoretical attitude will, as a result, constitute a rather marginal attitude towards one's own psychological dispositions and experiences, the adoption of which only makes sense in rather peculiar, often pathological, situations.

Keywords: deliberation, self, perception, self-knowledge, authority, passivity.

1. Introduction

Richard Moran's main purpose in *Authority and Estrangement* is "to defend a view of first-person awareness that sees it as both substantial, representing a genuine cognitive achievement, but which nonetheless breaks decisively with the Cartesian and empiricist legacy."² My view is, however, that, even if Moran takes some serious and illuminating steps towards getting rid of the Cartesian picture of self-knowledge, there are still some crucial points at which he seems to be trapped by that picture.

Moran claims that the idea of a rational agent involves the interplay between two attitudes: the theoretical (or empirical) and the deliberative (or practical). The Cartesian Model of self-knowledge focuses on the former and neglects the latter. Moran argues, however, that the deliberative attitude is constitutive of agency and this fact brings with it some basic differences between the way an agent relates to himself and the way he relates to others. I am, nevertheless, convinced that Moran's characterization of the deliberative attitude is contaminated by the Cartesian Model. More specifically, I will argue that some crucial aspects of the phenomena that Moran describes in terms of the interplay between the theoretical and the deliberative attitude, should rather be interpreted as a process that takes place within the deliberative attitude itself. The theoretical attitude will, as a result, constitute a rather marginal attitude towards

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² Moran (2001), p. 3.



one's own psychological dispositions and experiences, the adoption of which only makes sense in rather peculiar, often pathological, situations.

To this purpose, I will distinguish two different senses in which we can speak of activity or passivity of the self. This distinction will allow me to stress the relevance of aspect perception in the deliberative attitude and, as a result, improve our understanding of the role of this attitude in the agent's psychic health. This vindication of perception seems to conflict with Moran's view. For he seems to leave perception out of the deliberative attitude insofar as he associates it with the Cartesian notion of immediacy and the kind of estrangement that is constitutive of the theoretical attitude. Yet, I will articulate a different notion of perception which fits with the requirements of the deliberative attitude.

In what follows, I will, firstly, sketch Moran's view of the distinction between the theoretical and the deliberative attitude, as well as the way in which they are supposed to interplay. At this point, I will argue that, under the label 'transparency condition', Moran mixes up a trivial and a nontrivial constraint, and the distinction between these two constraints will turn out to be crucial to understand Moran's notion of avowal. Secondly, I will elucidate two senses in which we can speak of activity or passivity of the self. And, finally, I will draw some conclusions as to the role of perception in the deliberative attitude and also the way in which deliberation plays a crucial role in the agent's psychic health.

2. Moran: *the theoretical vs. the deliberative attitude*

We may distinguish between the theoretical and the deliberative attitude by examining the akratic gambler's case. Suppose, at some point, the akratic gambler reflects on the impact of gambling on his life and, as a result, he *decides* not to gamble anymore. We may say that, in so doing, he adopts a deliberative attitude towards his life. Yet, he soon realizes that he had previously made similar decisions to no avail, since he ended up gambling even more intensely than before. So, he may *predict* that, despite his best intentions, he will after all keep on gambling and ruining himself and his family. In making this prediction, he adopts what Moran calls 'a theoretical or empirical attitude' towards himself. He may even seek to use his decision as a barrier against his drive and, in this respect, he will regard his own decision from an external or theoretical perspective, that is, as a sort of counteracting force.³

The Cartesian Model identifies self-knowledge with the kind of knowledge provided by the theoretical attitude. It is concerned with the kind of fact about oneself which is discovered by the eye's mind, by the empirical Spectator who contemplates

³ "Sartre's case of the akratic gambler who resolves to stop gambling is in some ways a more helpful example for considering the two stances and the contrasting roles of commitment (*of oneself*) and theoretical knowledge about oneself. For the gambler to have made such a decision is to be committed to avoiding the gaming tables... But now, at the same time, he does know himself empirically too; he knows his history, and from this point of view his 'resolution' is a psychological fact about him with a certain degree of strength" (Moran (2001), p. 79).

the play in his inner theatre. In general, we may say that a theoretical question "... is answered by discovery of the fact of which one was ignorant"⁴ and, therefore, a theoretical inquiry ends in a true description of the agent's state.⁵ By contrast, "... a practical or deliberative question is answered by a decision or commitment of some sort, and it is not a response to ignorance of some antecedent fact about oneself".⁶ In this case, the inquiry culminates with the formation of an intention or the endorsement of an attitude.

A crucial question is how these two attitudes interplay.⁷ We may address this issue by considering how an agent may answer the question

(2a) 'Do I believe that *P*?'

relates to the answer that he may provide to the question

(2b) 'Is *P* true?'

Even if the two questions are not equivalent, the agent must answer, in the standard case, both questions the same way. This implies that, in such cases, the agent does not answer (2a) by looking onto his inner theatre to see whether he has a certain belief, but as a result of deliberating about what the right answer to question (2b) is. In so doing, he is exploring the world to determine whether *P* is true. Hence, the fact that (2a) and (2b) satisfy *the transparency condition* (i.e., that they are transparent to one another insofar as the agent must answer (2a) "... by reference to (or consideration of) the same reasons that would justify an answer to the corresponding question about the world"⁸) implies that (2a) is construed as a deliberative question and, consequently, that, by raising that question, the agent adopts a deliberative attitude.

This transparency condition just highlights a *conceptual* connection between (2a) and (2b), when the former is raised in a deliberative manner. And this condition is *trivial* insofar as an agent cannot fail to satisfy it, given that the capacity to adopt a deliberative attitude is constitutive of being an agent.

Yet, there are some rather peculiar (or parasitical) cases where (2a) could be raised as a theoretical question, namely: in those cases where there appears to be a mismatch between what the agent claims to believe and what his behavior shows he believes. In such cases, the agent himself may raise question (2a) in order to address the following theoretical question:

⁴ Moran (2001), p. 58.

⁵ "In characterizing two sorts of questions one may direct toward one's state of mind, the term 'deliberative' is best seen at this point in contrast to 'theoretical', the primary point being to mark the difference between that inquiry which terminates in a true description of my state, and one which terminates in the formation or endorsement of an attitude." (Moran (2001), p. 63)

⁶ Moran (2001), p. 58.

⁷ "We will gain a clearer view of the interplay between these two types of inquiry by considering a related claim about how a question about one's own belief must present itself" (Moran (2001), p. 60).

⁸ Moran (2001), p. 62.

(2a*) Is ‘believing *P*’ among my behavioral dispositions?

In this case, the satisfaction of the transparency condition is no longer a trivial matter for the agent, but comes up as an achievement. It is true that an agent’s psychological states and attitudes *must* be to some extent responsive to the result of his practical deliberations. For this is a rational constraint for the individuation of agents (not to say, for the individuation of an agent as a rational one). But this leaves much room for specific mismatches between the outcome of one’s deliberations and his actual psychological states.⁹

In what follows, I will explore the ways in which our psychological attitudes may be responsive to (or resist) our deliberations. I tend to agree with Moran’s intuition that a certain kind of awareness (i.e., the deliberative) informs and infuses our experiences in a way that we judge constitutive of a rational, healthy agent (and, to some extent, of being an agent at all). And this is so because “... in much the same way that his actions cannot be for him just part of a passing show, so his beliefs and other attitudes must be seen by him as expressive of his various and evolving relations to his environment, and not as a mere succession of representations.”¹⁰ I really sympathize with this idea.

My problem is that I don’t think Moran provides an adequate elucidation of the resources that are available to the deliberative agent in shaping his life. For, in my view, he is still trapped by the Cartesian Model of the self. Despite his claims on the contrary, Moran interprets the deliberative attitude too much in connection to the traditional role ascribed to the effort of the will. The agent must appeal to the effort of the will to carry out his decisions and keep his commitments. The theoretical attitude is concerned, by contrast, with the discovery of passions that somehow the will must counteract. This leads Moran to treat indirect ways of making one’s psychological attitudes more responsive to one’s deliberation as the result of adopting a theoretical attitude towards oneself. It is like moving one’s right arm with one’s left hand, instead of raising it directly. I think, however, that there are indirect ways of altering one’s psychological states and dispositions which form a part of the deliberative attitude and play a crucial role in the agent’s psychic health.

To uncover Moran’s residual Cartesianism, I will explore two different ways in which the self may be either passive or active. This will allow me to sketch an alterna-

⁹ Thus, we may say that a process of deliberation may give rise to two kinds of suspension. The agent may call into question the adequacy or legitimacy of some attitude of his, that is, suspend its normative force; but this suspension must generally have some effect on some other sort of suspension, namely, depriving that attitude of psychological force. The latter claim expresses a rationality requirement for the individuation of agents and its satisfaction plays a complex role in the agent’s psychic health. The kind of psychological pathology that psychoanalysis addresses has to do with the incapacity of an agent’s judgment to provoke this second kind of suspension. Moran seems to reserve the word ‘avowal’ for those expressions of what one thinks, feels or experiences which satisfy the nontrivial transparency condition; otherwise, we may just say that the agent reports about his psychological states and attitudes.

¹⁰ Moran (2001), p. 32.

tive picture of the self where the deliberative attitude will encompass a lot more elements than Moran seems prepared to include within it. A consequence of my approach will be that we can hardly conceive of the self as the interplay between the deliberative and theoretical attitude, since the latter plays a rather residual role. Those cases where the agent adopts a theoretical attitude towards himself should rather be described as cases where the self is broken into pieces instead of cases where the agent is gathering elements to build himself up.

3. *Passivity and the self*

The Cartesian Model is anchored to a limited understanding of the relation between passivity and activity in the life of the self. In this view, the self is passive when it yields to passions or when he contemplates the play in its inner theatre. By contrast, the self is active when it forms an intention, makes a decision, and seeks to carry it out despite the strength of its passions. But there are other crucial senses in which we may say that an agent is passive or active.

Think, for instance, of the sense in which the self is passive when it *follows* a mathematic demonstration and accepts its conclusion; or when it modifies its perceptual beliefs in the light of the changes that take place in its environment (for instance, if I lifted up my keyboard, I could not longer believe that my keyboard is on the desk) This sort of passivity is similar to the passivity of the dancer who follows a piece of music. The latter, like the mathematic demonstration, imposes upon the self an order, a sort of necessity, but that imposition (as opposed to what happens with the strength of passion within the Cartesian Model) does not oppress or enslave the self, but contributes to his expansion and creation. The agent senses that his life is richer when he understands a mathematic demonstration, when he tracks what is going on in his surroundings or when his body follows a melody. The idea that some forms of passivity are creative for the self, may sound weird to some people. Just think, however, that, in order to understand the plight of the akratic gambler, we are making use of some notion of degradation or destruction of the self. The idea of creation of the self comes up as the contrasting pole of this notion. Once we acknowledge that such an idea not only makes sense, but it is indispensable to understand some of the cases at issue, we just need to explore what experiences are creative or destructive for the self. And I do think that few people will seriously deny the creative character of the kind of experiences I mentioned before.

We may, then, distinguish between *low passivity* and *receptive passivity*. The former is the kind of passivity that the Cartesian Model ascribes to passions and it is low because, by yielding to them, the self degrades itself. The will must make all efforts to counteract its strength if the self has to keep its integrity. And, surely, regarding passions as low involve a certain view about what constitutes my true self, about the aspects of myself with which I identify. By contrast, the kind of passivity that is involved in following a mathematic demonstration is, as we have seen, *receptive* (tracks an order,

a necessity) and *creative* (the self expands itself by the experience of following the order that it discovers). That is why I have decided to call it ‘receptive passivity’.¹¹

Attention, the capacity to focus your attention on one or another aspect of reality, plays a crucial role in receptive passivity. Think, for instance, on a rather simple case of dawning of an aspect:



We can see this image as an elderly woman or as a charming young woman. It depends on which aspect of the picture one pays attention to. Those who see the picture in one of the two ways may have problems to see it the other way. And, at this point, the effort of the will is counterproductive. The more you keep your attention fixed on the picture, the less likely it is that you may experience the dawning of that new aspect. The agent must withdraw his attention for a while and then come back to the picture.¹² Some other people may help him by drawing his attention to this or that feature of the picture: ‘Look at this as feather or at that as a large nose’.

We may then say that the agent has a certain control upon his attention, since he may focus on one or another aspect of the picture. He may also decide to withdraw

¹¹ By insisting on the passive element in some sorts of receptivity, I am not thereby denying that some sort of activity is involved: for instance, our capacity to shift our attention from one to another aspect of the situation. Moreover, I am convinced that receptive passivity plays a crucial role in ways of activity that are creative for the self. Yet, this is a crucial issue I cannot address in this paper.

¹² Think, for instance, on the pains that the narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu* take to find out the experience that lies behind the initial emotion produced by the contact with the madeleine soaked in his tea: “I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation. And that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room. And then, feeling that my mind is growing fatigued without having any success to report, I compel it for a change to enjoy that distraction which I have just denied it, to think of other things, to rest and refresh itself before the supreme attempt. And then for the second time I clear an empty space in front of it. I place in position before my mind’s eye the still recent taste of that first mouthful, and I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed” (Proust, v. 1, overture). Cf., in this respect, Wittgenstein (1953, part 2, sec XII), Murdoch (1986) and Weil (1963).

his attention, but he cannot control the dawning of a new aspect and he cannot help seeing (the same way I cannot help understanding Spanish when people around me talk in my mother tongue) the aspects that have already dawned upon him. We clearly have here a case in which the self is passively receptive to some features of the world.

A crucial point is that we can adopt this attitude not only with regard to mathematical demonstrations or the observation of external objects, but also with regard to our own bodily experience, to the emotions that the different situations arise within us, and so on. And this fact will significantly alter the Cartesian (and, to some extent, Moran's) conception of what constitutes one's own true self. To this purpose, it is essential to distinguish between receptive passivity and the sort of passivity involved in the theoretical attitude, namely, seeing one's psychological states as a passing show, as a play taking place within our inner theatre.

4. *Receptive vs. theoretical passivity*

One may certainly adopt a theoretical attitude towards his own psychological states and dispositions in some rather peculiar, almost pathological, circumstances. Yet, when the Cartesian Model takes it as the proper attitude towards one's mental life, or when Moran insists that the agent articulates his life by the interplay of the theoretical and the deliberative attitude, they are assuming a certain view about the role of passions in human life, in the articulation of an agent's identity.

An agent can only lead his life in evaluative terms. He must shape his life as oriented towards some more or less definite telos. And one crucial question will be how faithful he is to that telos. For the Cartesian, passions are just facts about the agent which may favor or hinder his capacity to approach his own telos. But, in any case, the agent's passions play no role in articulating his telos. They are just facts, like external facts, on which the agent must count in order to fix the most appropriate means to reach his goals. Passions have, then, a merely instrumental relation to the agent's telos. To put it another way, the agent identifies himself with his telos, his true self is the one that pursues that telos. And, within the Cartesian Model, passions do not form a part of his true self, they bear a mere instrumental (quite often disturbing) relation to it.¹³

Moran certainly distinguishes *brute* desires from *motivated* desires. The former are constraints for the agent to accommodate, like a broken leg, while the latter are judgment-sensitive.¹⁴ A certain degree of responsiveness of desires to the agent's deliberation is, as we have seen, a necessary condition for being an agent at all. And some

¹³ Yielding to passions is often considered to be sinful in itself. There is one trivial interpretation of this conviction, namely: yielding to passions involves being unable to be guided by one's telos and this constitutes the most serious deviation from it. This remark assumes that the agent must find the motivational force to pursue the telos somewhere else, namely: in the effort of the will.

¹⁴ "For the person himself, then, his motivated desire is not a brute empirical phenomenon he must simply accommodate, like some other facet of reality he confronts. For this sort of desire, as a 'judgment-sensitive' attitude, owes its existence (as an empirical psychological fact) to his own deliberations and overall assessment of the situation" (Moran (2001), p. 115-6).

kinds of psychological disturbances can be described as an insufficient responsiveness of the agent's mental attitudes to the result of his deliberations. Yet, it is unclear how desires themselves must participate in the agent's deliberations, whether they have anything to say in the articulation of the agent's telos, in finding out what counts as a sensible human life for that agent.

My view is that passions do not bear a mere instrumental relation to a human telos, but a constitutive one: no telos could be human unless the agent's passions contribute to fix it, to articulate what counts as valuable. In this model, passions are not external to the true self, but form an integral part of it. Yet, we must avoid interpreting the notion of 'true self' in the light of the Cartesian model: the true self is not an exclusive inner theatre, but involves elements of himself with which the agent identifies.¹⁵ And this identification has an essential evaluative component: the elements of myself I want to cultivate, to honor, to respect. So, claiming that passions form a part of my true self involves the recognition of a practical commitment towards them. And the notion of commitment is alien to the theoretical attitude and constitutive of the deliberative one.

Moreover, one might have the temptation to think that one *just* decides to cultivate or honor some elements of oneself, say, some passions. Yet, this way we are going back again to the Cartesian picture. For there should be a true-true self who seems to be responsible for those decisions. Here it is when receptive passivity comes again into the picture. The fact that some elements of ourselves must be honored, and the extent to which they must be honored and cultivated, is imposed upon the agent after a proper process of deliberation, like the conclusion of a mathematic demonstration is imposed upon him. This implies a view of our mental life as carrying with it some values and, therefore, that their value is not imposed upon it from an external deliberative instance. This way we not only discover what we experience, but, by so doing, we also find out what is valuable in our lives. But this discovery is not the result of the theoretical attitude, within which the stream of consciousness has no axiological import, but of a different attitude: the attitude of a self who is trying to find out (and shape) his telos and, therefore, his life.

At the core of the theoretical attitude lies the distinction between facts and values and, needless to say, the denial that there are evaluative facts. That is why, within the theoretical attitude, we can only conceive perception as involving some sort of estrangement from any practical commitment. Yet, the notion of receptive passivity is certainly open to the perception of evaluative facts. We can see that the conclusion follows from the premises in a mathematic demonstration. *Prima facie*, we also see that a certain action is cruel or generous or cowardly. Of course, there are all sorts of arguments against this initial intuition. As I have argued somewhere else, I do not think

¹⁵ One may surely recognize as part of his true self dispositions with which he does not identify because he regards them as vicious. This suggests that there may be different kinds of relations that the agent may bear to the elements that he acknowledges as truly his. Not just identification, but, for instance, acceptance or dismissal. The notion of 'receptive passivity' may help us to explore and articulate the different sorts of relations, but this issue goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

any such argument works,¹⁶ but, in any case, it is worth noticing how the Cartesian Model of self-knowledge may depend on a subjectivist view about values and, specifically, how Moran's view about the boundaries of the deliberative attitude (and, therefore, the role of the theoretical one) may be conditioned by that assumption.

5. *The healing effect of receptive passivity*

Moran repeatedly insists on the healing effect of a certain kind of awareness, namely: the sort of awareness that the deliberative attitude provides. As he points out, merely accepting the truth of the psychoanalytic interpretation of one's neurosis does not have any curative effect. The patient needs to internalize that interpretation in a different sense, not just accept it from a theoretical perspective: "The goal of treatment, however, requires that the attitude in question be knowable by the person, not through a process of theoretical self-interpretation, but by an avowal of how one thinks and feels what is to be restored to the person is not just knowledge of the facts about oneself, but self-knowledge that obeys the condition of transparency."¹⁷ Needless to say, this transparency condition must be construed in a *nontrivial* sense and, in this respect, there are two crucial questions that remain open:

(5a) why does the satisfaction of the nontrivial transparency condition have a healing effect?

and

(5b) what can an agent do to satisfy the nontrivial transparency condition?

Regarding question (5a), Moran seems to confine himself to claim that the sort of personal integration involved in the satisfaction of the (nontrivial) transparency condition is by itself a criterion of psychic health. I do not think this is false, but I am convinced that the notion of 'receptive passivity' allows us to say a lot more about the two previous questions. Yet, to advance in this direction we should better address question (5b) first.

In my view, receptive passivity plays a central role in the ways the agent may try to satisfy the transparency condition. Of course, there might be other indirect means like taking some pills, structuring your time, and so on. And I agree with Moran that none of these means is specifically first-personal. Yet, receptive passivity is also an indirect way to modify the responsiveness of one's psychological attitudes to our practical deliberations, but it is strictly first-personal. Receptive passivity with regard to one's own emotional responses, bodily experiences, and so on, requires, as we have seen, a careful discernment and recognition of the axiological import involved in such experiences. Only through a continuous deliberation of this kind, can the agent fix his *telos*

¹⁶ Cf. Corbí (2004).

¹⁷ Moran (2001), p. 90.

in a way respectful to what he actually values.¹⁸ If, on the contrary, the agent's process of deliberation rested on a distorted or incomplete picture of himself, his decisions will find counteracting forces within himself and, as a result, he will regard himself (at some level of awareness) as a threat to himself. And this will give rise to a feeling of anguish insofar as you become your own (and unnoticed) enemy with regard to the satisfaction of your deepest needs.

Recognition and acceptance of one's complex psychological reality (in the way provided by receptive passivity and not just theoretically) has, on the contrary, two healing effects: (a) your decisions will arise out of the acknowledgement of your complex reality and (b) you will begin to regard yourself more as a cooperator than as your own torturer: the recognition of your own needs on a particular occasion reveals a change in the attitude towards yourself.

This recognition plays also a role in the way the agent sees others. As it is clear in shame and guilt, part of the pressure upon oneself comes from a tendency to adapt to the voice of others, to hear their voices as having normative import. Now that the agent is able to take his own needs into consideration, he is also on the way to set a limit to those voices and, therefore, the agent is less prone to see the others as a threat.¹⁹

Therefore we see that the procedure to satisfy the nontrivial transparency condition (namely: being receptively passive towards one's own emotional and bodily experiences) gives us a hint to understand why the satisfaction of such a condition has a healing effect: the agent not only becomes more integrated, but stops acting upon himself as a severe judge, which is the image of oneself that lies at the bottom of the Cartesian division between passions and the effort of the will. Similarly, passions will not necessarily be outside the boundaries of the true self, but will quite often contribute to articulate the agent's true self, the set of values which constitutes his telos. This is why such a look at our own passions forms a part of the deliberative attitude and is inconsistent with the theoretical one.

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¹⁸ For the sake of simplicity, let us leave aside the complex relations between what an agent actually values, what is valuable in his life, and what is valuable. I am not claiming that the two last questions reduce to the first one, but just that what an agent actually values must play a significant role in fixing the right answer to the two other questions. The notion of 'reflective equilibrium' (cf. Goodman (1983) and Rawls (1999)) may help us to articulate how these three questions interrelate.

¹⁹ Cf., in this respect, Taylor (1985), Williams (1993), Wollheim (1999), and Corbí (manuscript).

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