REASONABLE PARTIALITY AND THE AGENT’S POINT OF VIEW

Accepted: 1 November 2004

ABSTRACT. It is argued that reasonable partiality allows an agent to attach value to particular objects of attachment via recognition of the value of the holding of that relation between agent and object. The reasonableness of partiality is ensured by a background context set by the agent’s virtues, notably justice. It is argued that reasonable partiality is the only view that is compatible with our best account of the nature of self-knowledge. That account rules out any instrumental relationship between moral demands and moral character, but that familiar claim is given an unfamiliar explanation. Instrumentality depends on a prior objectification of the self and it is that kind of objectification that, in the ethical case, represents a form of ethical evasion. Self-knowledge is transparent, incomplete and essentially connected with first person endorsement. The transparency condition is that knowledge of one’s state of mind is “taken” transparently to its object. More specifically, ethical transparency is the feature that my virtues do not exhibit themselves to me in self-knowledge, but take me transparently to the way in which they saliently represent the world as containing evaluative properties calling for various forms of response. It is concluded that reasonable partiality grounded in the nature of the virtues is the only reflective account of morality compatible with the most plausible account of the nature of self-knowledge. The demands of impartiality are incompatible with a condition of having a personal point of view, namely, that a self can stand in a non-alienated relation to itself via its capacity for self-knowledge.

KEY WORDS: impartiality, reasonable partiality, self-knowledge

This paper argues that a class of basic ethical reasons, reasonably partial reasons, can be described as arising from an agent’s personal point of view: the point of view of a virtuous agent. I will defend the thesis by arguing that it is supported by our best account of some of the distinctive features of consciousness and self-knowledge. I outline an approach to moral psychology that supports this claim about ethical reasons and that defends this class of reasons from the distortions imposed upon them by impartialist accounts of the personal point of view.

Central to my argument is the idea of the transparency of consciousness. This aspect of conscious experience has been much discussed, particularly in connection with the philosophy of perception (Thomas, 2004a). I will, in this paper, take a restricted interest in this complex phenomenon and will focus on a claim, central to the phenomenological tradition of theorizing about consciousness, that sees consciousness as intrinsically connected to our capacity to represent the world transparently to
In the case of conscious beliefs, self-knowledge involves the content of that which is known by a subject being transparent to the subject. For example, to find out whether you believe that Napoleon died on Elba, you do not inspect your inner mental machinery to determine that which you believe. Instead, you set about determining the truth of the belief itself. You put in play those methods that lead you to fix the truth of the content believed (Edgley, 1969; Evans, 1982). Yet this “outward directedness” is not only compatible with the idea that the rational endorsement of that which you know is central to self-knowledge: it actually serves to explain it.

This general claim has three important consequences for moral psychology. First, as I have argued elsewhere, in their primary dimension of assessment moral claims are to be understood as cognitive. The best explanation of our ethical experience is that such claims are to be interpreted as expressing beliefs (Thomas, 2005). If ethical claims are cognitive then the transparency intuition should apply to them. Secondly, if this general view of the mind retains a crucial and irreducible role for the first personal point of view and its connection with rational endorsement, then one could derive from this view a constraint on the proper form of ethical objectivity (Deutscher, 1983; Moran, 2001). Thirdly, a connection can be drawn between different models of self-knowledge and the idea that an objectified view of oneself may represent the ethical error of false objectification (Sartre, 1993; Moran, 2001). These interconnected ideas, all clearly present in Sartre but also in the work of contemporaries, such as Richard Moran, will be applied in this paper to the idea that reasonably partial reasons arise from the personal point of view of the agent. But the main conclusion that I want to derive from the application of these ideas to ethics is that the personal point of view cannot be “objectified”.

1. **Reasonably Partial Reasons and the Personal Point of View**

A partial reason is a basic ethical reason that holds in virtue of a relation between an agent and a particular object of value (Williams, 1981; Cottingham, 1983, 1986, 1991, 1996, 1997). Moral agents stand in these relations to particular objects, and the reasons grounded on these relations arise in the context of an agent’s particular, personal, point of view (Williams, 1981; Scheffler, 1994). There are ethically objectionable forms of partiality, but the ethically unobjectionable forms are shaped

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1 More specifically, my concern is with one strand in this tradition originated by Kant that finds its fullest development in Sartre. For a general account see Zahavi (1999).