

Suppressed Belief

[PENULTIMATE DRAFT: Please consult published version for citation purposes.]

Self-knowledge is a special kind of knowledge each of us can have of her own mental states, which is expressed in judgements called avowals. A mental state must be conscious for the subject to avow it, thus theories of self-knowledge go hand-in-hand with a conception of what it is for a mental state to be conscious. Focusing on avowals of belief and intention, Richard Moran (2001) offers an elegant and striking account of self-knowledge that links it to the subject's status as a rational agent. His theory conceives of conscious belief and intention as conscious activities of the subject, rather than mental states of which the subject is aware – a view that incorporates ideas explored by Jean-Paul Sartre. I will suggest that this view makes the usual idea of suppressed belief problematic. I will then draw on the work of another phenomenological writer – Maurice Merleau-Ponty – to sketch an alternative.

The traditional model conceives of a conscious belief as a state of which the subject is conscious. On this picture, the objects of introspective awareness – one's mental states – exist independently of one's consciousness of them. The subject believes that p whether or not she is conscious of this belief, and her consciousness of it makes no difference to her belief. Moran objects to this model because it makes the conscious subject a passive spectator of her mental life. Her

conscious beliefs are hers insofar as they happen within her, but her relation to them is no different from her relation to others' beliefs. He argues in contrast that we need a properly first-personal notion of conscious belief that relates the subject to her conscious beliefs *qua* subject. Moran holds that to be the subject of a conscious belief is to have a certain kind of authority over it: the authority to form and revise it in accordance with one's reasons. This means that to have a conscious belief that *p* is to consciously endorse *p* as true. A conscious belief's status as a belief is dependent on the subject's conscious endorsement of its content at the very moment that it occupies her attention. Moran holds that consciously endorsing *p* cannot be properly captured if it is thought of as a form of awareness that has the endorsing of *p* as its intentional object. He argues instead that 'conscious' should be understood adverbially as saying something about the quality of the endorsing. He compares this to the way in which one may play the piano attentively, unreflectively, or deliberately to annoy someone, where the way in which one plays the piano makes a difference to the quality of the playing (Moran 2001: 31).

Moran's account of conscious belief is compelling. However, although he discusses the implications of *unconscious* belief for the scope of our self-knowledge, he says very little about its nature. There are different kinds of unconscious belief, but Moran's discussion deals specifically with 'suppressed' beliefs. These are beliefs the subject

cannot consciously endorse – and so cannot avow – for Freudian reasons. They are attributed to her on the basis of her actions and emotions. If, e.g., I feel resentment when my parents buy my brother a birthday present, try to undermine him when we are staying at my parents' house, but consciously believe that my parents love and treat us equally, my psychiatrist might conclude that I have a suppressed belief that my brother is our parents' favourite child. My suppressed belief is in conflict with how I consciously take the world to be and the actions and emotions that flow from it are subsequently out of step with my reasons. The goal of therapy in such cases is to integrate the subject's emotions and actions with her conscious view of the world, i.e., with her reasons (Moran 2001: 89—93).

Once conscious belief is understood as consciously endorsing a proposition, the notion of suppressed belief becomes problematic. One option is to hold that suppressed belief involves *unconsciously* endorsing a proposition, where 'unconsciously' denotes something about the quality of the endorsing. According to this suggestion, conscious belief and suppressed belief involve the same activity – proposition-endorsing – but different ways of engaging in it. However, if we claim that a subject endorses a proposition, we must be able to say *what* this activity consists in, and *which* proposition the subject endorses. *Consciously* endorsing a proposition consists in entertaining or considering a proposition – having a proposition before one's mind – and affirming or reaffirming that it is true. The proposition the subject

consciously endorses is the one she entertains – she decides in favour of the proposition that she, at that moment, considers. Thus we can see that consciously endorsing a proposition essentially involves entertaining it (although it is more than simply entertaining it, since I can entertain a proposition without endorsing it). However, entertaining a proposition is a conscious phenomenon. No sense can be given to the claim that the subject entertains a proposition *unconsciously*. It follows that unconsciously endorsing a proposition cannot be understood as unconsciously entertaining it and affirming or reaffirming its truth.

A common view of suppressed belief – and the subconscious in general – is that it involves a division within the mind. A second option, therefore, is to accept that propositions can only be endorsed consciously, but claim that in cases of suppressed belief, there are two dis-unified centres of consciousness within the same person. On this picture, the proposition <my brother is our parents' favourite child> is consciously endorsed by the other centre of consciousness within me. I cannot avow the states that can be attributed to this other centre of consciousness, because I am not related to them qua subject. My relation to them is analogous to my relation to other people's mental states. Thus I can only come to know about the other centre's states on the basis of evidence – my behaviour and emotions. One problem with this suggestion is that it cannot explain all types of unconscious belief. During a game of football, e.g., I see a member of the opposite

team run towards me with the ball. I intercept it and pass it through a gap between two opponents, to someone on my team. We explain my action by saying that I *believe* that I can intercept the ball, and there is a gap wide enough to pass the ball through, etc. However, when I perform the action, I am fully absorbed in what I am doing; I am not consciously thinking about my actions. It follows that the beliefs that inform my action, are not conscious beliefs, even if – unlike suppressed beliefs – I would consciously endorse them if I were to consider the relevant propositions. The claim that unconscious beliefs are consciously endorsed by another centre of consciousness within me is wholly implausible in cases like this one, because it places too great a cognitive demand on the other centre of consciousness, which would have to entertain and endorse propositions at an impossible rate, i.e., the speed at which I act. It follows that some other account of unconscious belief is required, and in the absence of some positive reason for taking just suppressed beliefs – rather than unconscious beliefs in general – to be consciously endorsed by another centre of consciousness, this proposal for understanding suppressed belief should be rejected.

A third option is to understand suppressed beliefs as components of information-processing systems. A device such as a computer can be in states that encode information, which can then be used to generate output of various kinds, e.g., to perform calculations. The computer's information states are not conscious, but the computer

'endorses' the information as true, insofar as it is used in generating the output. It might be supposed that a similar account of suppressed beliefs can be given. My suppressed belief that my brother is our parents' favourite child, e.g., might be thought of as a state that encodes this information. The information is then used by some processing system that generates my feeling of resentment, and my action of undermining him. The proposition <my brother is our parents' favourite child> is endorsed insofar as this information is used in the processing. However, this conception of suppressed belief rules out the possibility of therapy. According to Moran, therapy for suppressed belief consists in integrating one's actions and emotions with how one consciously takes the world to be, i.e., bringing them into line with one's reasons. In the case we are considering, I consciously believe – in line with my reasons – that our parents love and treat my brother and me equally, but I have a suppressed belief that he is the favoured child. Freudian considerations prevent my conscious assessment of my reasons from affecting my belief that my brother is the favoured child. I have, in other words, no authority over it. The aim of therapy is to restore my authority so that I can withdraw endorsement from the proposition <my brother is our parents' favourite child>, since my reasons show that it is false. However, if my suppressed belief is a component of an information processing system, therapy could not restore my authority over it, because information-processing systems are the wrong kind of things to have this kind of authority over. It

follows that suppressed beliefs cannot be understood as components of information-processing systems, without giving up the possibility of therapy.

The problem of accounting for suppressed beliefs can be seen as arising from three ideas. First, beliefs are propositional attitudes: to have a belief is to endorse a proposition. Second, the subject should be conceived as the subject of her mental life, not a mere spectator of it. Third, we have some beliefs that we cannot avow. To accommodate the first two ideas, Moran claims that conscious belief involves consciously endorsing a proposition. We have seen that this leads to difficulties in accommodating the third idea – we have some beliefs that we cannot avow. A solution is to reject the first idea, and argue that not all beliefs can be analysed as attitudes to propositions. This is a claim made by writers in the Phenomenological Tradition. Such writers distinguish between the reflective and the pre-reflective levels of being. At the reflective level, beliefs are representations of the world, i.e., they have propositional content. But at the pre-reflective level, beliefs are non-representational, and simply constituted by certain ways of perceiving and acting. Generally speaking, the reflective and the pre-reflective levels are integrated and influence each other in various ways so that one's conscious beliefs are in line with one's actions. However, the pre-reflective is not fully transparent to the reflective. It follows that one can have a pre-reflective belief that is not in keeping with one's reflective beliefs, but which will be manifest in

one's actions. These ideas allow us to re-conceptualise suppressed beliefs in a way that is compatible with Moran's account of conscious belief as consciously endorsing a proposition. Suppressed beliefs conflict with one's conscious view of the world and are attributed to the subject on the basis of her actions and emotions. They can thus be identified with pre-reflective beliefs that – for Freudian reasons – are not integrated with the subject's reflective view of the world. Therapy will aim at integrating the two levels of being. Space here prevents me from pursuing this strategy in detail. However, I will indicate the shape such an account might take, hopefully showing that this strategy is a promising one.

The clearest and most comprehensive account of pre-reflective being and its relation to reflective being is perhaps that offered by Merleau-Ponty. He conceives of pre-reflective being as a bodily form of consciousness. Pre-reflective (non-representational) beliefs on his account are constituted by the possession and exercise of bodily, i.e., physical, abilities, or motor-skills. Two aspects of this claim need to be explained: the sense in which the possession and exercise of motor-skills is non-representational; and how it is that the possession and exercise of such skills can constitute a view of the world.

Consider first, how motor-skills are acquired. Merleau-Ponty holds that the acquisition of a motor-skill does not involve representations because motor-skills cannot be acquired by thinking; there is an irreducibly bodily element to their acquisition. One acquires them

through practice, which is a process of the body's familiarising itself with the activity in question: to acquire the motor-skill, the body has to “‘catch’ the movement” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 143). Consider, e.g., what it is like to learn to play the clarinet. One cannot learn to play by *thinking* about doing so, one has to pick up the instrument and try to play it. At first, the instrument will be experienced as ‘foreign’. I may be surprised at its weight, it will smell strange, it may feel uncomfortable in my hands, and when I try to play it, I may repeatedly miss the lower keys as I am unused to their position. As I practise, I will become familiar with the way the instrument feels, the amount I have to stretch my fingers to reach the keys, how hard to blow it to reach the high notes, and so forth. It will no longer feel strange and uncomfortable to hold; playing it will be second-nature or habitual to me.

Motor-skills can also be exercised without the need for representations. There are two dimensions to the exercise of a motor-skill. First, motor-skills are exercised in perception. On Merleau-Ponty's account, perception is directly of things and situations that call for a certain kind of behaviour. He suggests, e.g., that when a player is engaged in a game of football, she perceives the yard lines as real boundaries – lines of force – not just white lines painted on the ground. Similarly, she perceives her opponents as obstacles, and the spaces between them as opportunities to progress towards goal, or to pass the ball to a member of her team (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 168). In some cases, the invitations to behave will constitute an emotive dimension to

the things and situations one perceives. A dinner party with the Queen, e.g., *feels* like a formal occasion, and it would be inappropriate to behave as I would with my immediate family. The formality of the occasion calls for a certain sort of behaviour.

It is the possession of motor-skills that enables the agent to perceive opportunities for action. For any physical activity, there will be environments where one can engage in it, and environments where one cannot. I cannot roller-skate, e.g., unless I am in a bit of the world that contains roller-skates, a relatively flat surface, and a reasonable amount of space. Since engaging in an activity essentially requires a certain sort of environment, the ability to engage in that activity necessarily involves the capacity to identify appropriate places to do so. Merleau-Ponty holds that the capacity to identify places that are appropriate for engaging in an activity is constituted by the perception of those places as inviting one to engage in that activity. Acquiring the ability to do *x* is thus partly a matter of learning to perceive certain places as appropriate for doing *x*. Learning to rock-climb, e.g., partly involves learning to see little cracks and ledges in the rock as hand and foot holds. When one starts out, only the bigger ledges and wider cracks will look suitable, but as one gets better at rock-climbing, smaller ledges will be perceived as offering a passage up the rock-face. Thus one will progress from seeing a rock-face as an impassable mass of rock to seeing it as climbable. The better one gets at climbing, the better one will become at perceiving opportunities to do so, and thus

different rock-faces will be perceived as more or less difficult to climb. To perceive an opportunity to do x is thus to exercise one's skill at doing x.

Clearly, acquiring a motor-skill is not just a matter of learning to perceive opportunities to do x; it also involves learning to execute the bodily movements involved in doing x. The second way to exercise a motor-skill is by executing the relevant bodily movements. Again, Merleau-Ponty holds that the agent can do so without the need for representations. The opportunities for action that the agent perceives can immediately initiate and guide her behaviour without the need for any intervening mental states – such as intentions – that represent the behaviour that is performed. The agent simply perceives an opportunity to behave and responds by so behaving. The football player, e.g., perceives an opening between two opponents, which 'invites' her to pass the ball through it. Her perception of the opening as inviting her to pass the ball through it, immediately 'calls forth' her action of passing the ball. Dreyfus calls behaviour that is immediately brought about by one's perceptions of one's environment, 'absorbed coping' (Dreyfus 2000).

Representational thought and absorbed coping interact in various ways. The demands one perceives correspond with the motor-skills one possesses. However, one's current task also contributes to perception. It is only when playing football that the player sees the ball as to-be-intercepted. In many cases, the agent's adoption of a task

results from her practical deliberations, and in this way representational thought influences absorbed coping. Representational thought can also build demands into a situation, over and above those that are simply perceived. When I learn to drive, e.g., I have to think about what I am doing, I cannot simply 'cope' with my situation like an experienced driver. I have to think about what the road signs mean. My judgement that a particular road sign means that I should slow down builds an extra demand into the situation that I then respond to by slowing down. When I have had enough practice, I will perceive the sign as requiring me to slow down and do so automatically, without needing to think about it. But before I get to this stage, representational thought has a hand in guiding my behaviour. There are further ways in which representational thought interacts with absorbed coping.

On Merleau-Ponty's account, both the possession and the exercise of motor-skills constitute pre-reflective beliefs about the world. Motor-skills are general beliefs, whilst their exercise in perception and action are specific beliefs about particular things and places. Consider, e.g., the ability to type accurately by touch. If I have this ability, I can be said to know the position of the letters on the keyboard. On Merleau-Ponty's account, this knowledge is not constituted by a representation of the position of the letters, but simply by my capacity to type, i.e., by my possession of the motor-skill. My knowledge is a special kind of bodily knowledge, which is distinct from

my knowledge that, e.g., the capital of England is London. Since I know the position of the letters on the keyboard, I can be said to have a belief concerning their position, but this belief is *not* a representational state, it is constituted by my ability to type. Possession of this motor-skill is not tied to any particular keyboard (I can type by touch on lots of different keyboards), and thus the belief it constitutes is about the positioning of letters on keyboards in general. Now consider a case where I perceive a rock-face as climbable, and respond to this perception by climbing it. The object of my perception is the particular thing in front of me, the rock-face. My action of climbing also concerns this particular object – it is with this particular object that I engage. The way that I ‘cope’ with, the rock-face constitutes a pre-reflective belief that the particular thing in front of me is suitable for climbing.

On the whole, one ‘copes’ with the world in ways that are congruous with how one represents it as being. But this is not always so. A person may consciously endorse the proposition <I am only attracted to members of the opposite sex>, whilst perceiving people of the same sex as attractive, and immediately responding to this perception by behaving flirtatiously towards them. Her perceptions and behaviour constitute a bodily belief that people of the same sex are attractive, which is in conflict with her representational belief that she is only attracted to people of the opposite sex. Where a subject has a bodily belief that is in conflict with those propositions that she would

consciously endorse, she can be attributed with a suppressed belief. It was claimed above that I have a suppressed belief that my brother is our parents' favourite child. This can be understood as a bodily belief, constituted by certain habitual ways of perceiving my brother and acting towards – or interacting with – him. The emotive dimension to my perceptions of my brother, e.g., is one of jealousy and resentment. Just as the sense of formality immediately regulates my behaviour at the dinner party with the Queen, so too my feelings of jealousy and resentment immediately call forth certain sorts of behaviour from me. When we are at our parents' house, I will perceive and respond to opportunities to undermine my brother, and so on.

The goal of therapy will be to integrate the two levels of belief, so that my ways of 'coping' with my brother are brought into alignment with my conscious beliefs about our parents' opinions of us. A full account of how therapy operates on this picture is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will briefly indicate what it involves. One's pre-reflective beliefs are one's habitual ways of 'coping' with the world. Where these beliefs are suppressed, they are out of keeping with the way one represents the world as being. In the case discussed above, my reasons support my conscious belief that my brother and I are loved and treated equally by our parents, but I have a pre-reflective belief that he is the favoured child, which is constituted by certain habitual ways of 'coping' with him. To bring the two into alignment, I need to break my habitual ways of 'coping' with my

brother and form new habits. My therapist will help me uncover the source of my old habits, and bring me to the realization that these ways of 'coping' with my brother are ungrounded, thus paving the way for a new habit to be formed. Acquiring new ways of coping with my brother will be similar to acquiring a motor-skill such as driving a car. To begin with, I will not simply perceive situations involving my brother as requiring a certain kind of behaviour. Instead, I will have to represent the demands to which I respond. Over time, however, these new demands will simply be perceived. Once this happens, my pre-reflective beliefs about my brother – my habitual ways of 'coping' with him – will be in alignment with how I represent the world as being.

The above account of suppressed beliefs as ways of coping with the world that are out of keeping with how one consciously takes it to be, allows us to both retain Moran's view of conscious belief as consciously endorsing a proposition, and accommodate the thought that we are not completely transparent to ourselves. It also highlights the limitations of our self-knowledge. It is our conscious beliefs that we can avow. Thus self-knowledge concerns reflective being. Most of the time, one's conscious beliefs are in line with one's pre-reflective view of the world, as the two levels are integrated in various ways. Nevertheless, the reflective and pre-reflective levels of being are distinct, and there can be varying degrees of dis-integration between them. Insofar as this dis-integration is possible, our self-knowledge is

never complete. There is no absolute guarantee that my ways of coping with the world will accord with my representations of it.

References

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