

# MIND IN ACTION

*Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*

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## 9 Adaptivity and Self-Knowledge

Does a person's knowledge of his own sensations, emotional states, intentions, wants, and thoughts differ in form or justification from his knowledge of other people's sensations, emotional states, wants, and thoughts? A full answer to this question should not only chart the advantages and liabilities of self-knowledge, but also explain why some people are better at understanding themselves than others and why a person's talents in self-knowledge are not uniform.

My thesis is that self-knowledge has no special status: its varieties constitute distinctive classes, which differ from one another more sharply than each does from analogous knowledge of others. Being aware of one's pains, if it is knowledge at all, is more like being aware of a trumpet call than it is like knowing what one wants or intends to do; knowing one's own character traits is more like knowing someone else's dispositions than it is like knowing how one presently feels. Understanding the varieties of self-knowledge requires a little help from our friends, from neurophysiologists and endocrinologists, to chart the ways in which we absorb information from different sources, the ways in which the language centers function under different conditions. I shall argue that there is much less self-knowledge than meets the ear, and that many cases of self-knowledge are best understood when they are subsumed under other activities: self-knowledge in the service of decision-making, self-improvement, or sociability. Finally, I shall explore the advantages and liabilities of self-knowledge, arguing that while there are no distinctive problems about self-knowledge, there are distinctive problems about being the sort of creature that is capable of it, capable of treating itself as an object to be understood.

### I. Some Distinctions

1. We need to distinguish knowing our character traits, preference rankings, and systematically ordered beliefs from being aware of present sensations, feelings, desires, or thoughts. This distinction is easier and

slicker to state than to work out, because our knowledge of our dispositions surely involves awareness and remembered awareness of present states. Certainly some dispositions are analyzable as states of a very complex kind; and some complex states are not only signs of dispositions, but dispositions of complex kinds. (The present state of a fertilized egg determines its normal development, determines dispositions to respond to specific conditions in patterned ways.) For our purposes, these complications can be left as complications: we need only to distinguish being aware of one's present state, its presented qualities, from one's knowledge of that state as part of a projected pattern, treated as an index of future states, an index that may require considerable deciphering.

2. We need also to distinguish being in a state, for example, being exhilarated, in pain, or tired, from being aware that one is evincing the characteristic signs of a particular state.

Sometimes, but not always, being aware that one is in a certain state is the best indication of being in that state, because the awareness is part and parcel of the state. But when our states are complex, the focus of attention may be wholly on the object, and neither on our state nor our awareness of being in that state. When we focus on the object, awareness is absorbed into sensing; when we focus on ourselves as sensing, we may fail to attend to what we are sensing.

The signs of being in a particular state may range from such somatic symptoms as taut muscles or contracted pupils, to overt behavior such as shrugging, wincing, yawning. Subtler bits of protolinguistic behavior such as sniffing, sighing, hissing, moaning, and the like, are also signs of states. Here again it is easier to plunk down a distinction than it is to work out the details. Somatic states or physical and protolinguistic behavior may be contingently or necessarily part of a state, and so may be either contingently or necessarily symptomatic of it. Although determining whether such behavior is necessarily or contingently related to a state is generally a matter of discovery, it may, in some cases, be a matter of convention or decision. The differentiation of discovery and decision is, furthermore, a matter of degrees, with the blend of discovery and decision different for different states. For instance, though it is unlikely that the connection between wincing behavior and pain is necessary, wincing is probably more tightly connected with pain than giggling is with its state. For our purposes, these important complications can be laid aside; we need only recognize that even when somatic, physical, or protolinguistic behavior is part and parcel of being in a particular state, we can distinguish, conceptually at any rate, the state as a whole from those aspects of it that are taken as its indices, symptoms, or expressions.

3. To be sensing is always to be aware of something. But it is not always the case that when we are sensing, we are focused on the fact that we are sensing; attention may be wholly on the object sensed, and not on oneself sensing. And so we can distinguish, conceptually, at any rate

- a. being in the sort of state that can, on reflection or with a shift in attention, be seen to be (to have been) a sensory state; e.g., we may learn to distinguish proprioceptive states that we had previously not noticed (because this would be the best explanation of our behavior, we might want to say that we had been in those states, even though we had not yet learned how to attend to them as sensory);
- b. being in a sensory state, that is, aware of external or internal stimuli, affecting either the sense organs or proprioceptive mechanisms;
- c. being in a sensory state focusing on or paying attention to some specific aspect of the stimulus or object;
- d. being in a sensory state focusing or attending to the fact that one is sensing, or to oneself as sensing;
- e. being in a sensory state focusing or attending to some further psychological or physical effects of the sensory state.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between attending primarily to some aspect of one's response to stimuli and focusing on some aspect of the stimulus is a matter of degree; it may sometimes be partly, but is generally not wholly, a voluntary matter. Attention can of course shift very rapidly, and it is sometimes difficult to determine whether, in a short period, it has shifted or whether there were simultaneous, distinguishable layers of attending.

4. We need to distinguish expressions of our states that happen to be in propositional form from bona fide propositional reports of those states. What we want in this area is not so much a distinction as a continuum leading to a distinction. On one side there are sighs, groans, hissings, intakes of breath—some almost straight physical reactions, others more distinctly conventional in character—moving toward straightforwardly conventional expressions, "Ouch," "Ai," "Oi," "Yum." These in turn gradually move toward sentential expressions: "That hurts," "Great!" "Delicious!" Some of these sentences verge on the propositional, but here is where discontinuity appears. All of this behavior, subtly differentiated as it indeed can be, is contrasted with a person uttering a sentence meaning to report what is the case, capable of being evaluated as true or false. Of course the same sentence can be used both expressively and propositionally. In a particular instance, "My neck hurts" may verge toward "Ouch!"; in another, toward a precisely formulated proposition. What is more important, as we shall see later,

is that a sentence may be doing both simultaneously: several speech acts can be performed at the throw of one sentence, and sometimes the various speech acts must nestle in a certain order of intentional priority in order for them all to be brought off successfully.

## II. Some Caveats

Let's not bog down here, or anywhere else for that matter, about whether we are talking about physical states or psychological states or psycho-physical states. I think we are, in all these cases, dealing with psycho-physical states, but explaining that is a different shaggy dog story. An analysis of the privileges of self-knowledge may perhaps, as Descartes had hoped, shed light on the mind/body problem; but if it did, it would only be because it recast mirror reflections from many distinct light sources.

It is a mistake to begin with an initial prejudice in favor of cases of high truth and clarity. If we were to discover that a certain type of self-knowledge were less likely to be falsified, because it was noninferential or in some way self-warranted or incorrigible (or any of that crew), it would not at all follow that such types of self-knowledge give us better knowledge of ourselves as we live and breathe than our less clear and less certain knowledge. It might give us better knowledge of our being-presently-aware-of-ourselves-as-sensing, but the relation of those states to the rest of us would still be uncharted. It is Cartesian simplistic formalism to suppose that what is clearest, or most self-evident, is pivotal in other ways: that it is paradigmatic or foundationally central, or the basis of inferences about more complex self-knowledge. It may well turn out that what we know most clearly and certainly about ourselves is also least central to our character taken as a whole. If understood out of context, such knowledge is likely to be highly misleading, however perspicuous it might be in itself, *in vacuo*.

The claim that a first-person report of a present state is incorrigible or self-warranted *in principle* (rather than in that well-known sense of "incorrigible" that means "corrigible later, when we know more") assumes rather than supports mind/body identity.<sup>2</sup> Such reports are indeed no more corrigible than is the height of mercury in a thermometer or a dog's howling at the moon, because the report is itself (treated or translated as) a state. But treated in this way, reports are no more reports than is the height of mercury or a howl. If they are incorrigible, it is because they are not the sorts of things that could be either true or false.

For good causes, but not logical reasons, these incorrigible utterances have the same sentential form as propositions. Uttered as propositions,

they are corrigible claims, genuine reports. Reporting is (at the very least) a triadic, if not actually a quadratic relation: a person reports something (to someone). The use of an utterance, and not its sentential form, determines whether it is a corrigible propositional report or an incorrigible howl. The sentential forms of first-person reports are, I shall claim, typically, and not just occasionally, ambiguous: they best fulfill their various functions by being ambiguous.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons, besides a passion for perspicuity, for beginning self-knowledge by inspecting first-person reports of present states. These relatively clear cases do, as we shall see, play a crucial role in complex knowledge of our complex selves. But that role is not that of a building-block, and self-knowledge is not constructed from our awareness or remembered awareness of present states, as if such knowledge were additive or cumulative, a charting of correlated certified bits of clear and distinct reports.

In being careful not to treat first-person reports of present states as paradigms of self-knowledge, we must also be wary of assuming that the self is a tightly organized system, whose processes are in principle directly available to self-certifying introspection. Though they differ in their choice of initial units of privileged self-knowledge, both Cartesians and empiricists assign favored status to conscious processes as central to the organization of the self. Cartesians postulate a unified mind, as a reflective repository of clear and distinct ideas; empiricists construct the mind from sensory experience. Both assume that the mind forms a single system, capable of being scanned from a single vantage point. By treating the mind as a psychic panopticon they tend to overestimate the integrative power of self-knowledge.

We should not begin with an initial prejudice favoring the simplicity or even the integrated organization of the self.<sup>3</sup> Because our interest in the self is not only ontological, but also practical, we should be careful not to suppose that its integrated organization assures the conditions that make self-knowledge possible. We may well discover that the conditions work in the other direction: that presumptive self-knowledge is used in order to achieve integration. Some forms of self-knowledge have authority because they define, form, crystallize an emergently integrated self, rather than because they most clearly express a determinate and formed system.

### III. Feelings: Sensations, Pains, and Emotions

There is much force in the intuition that a person's awareness of his own feelings differs from his awareness of the feelings of others.<sup>4</sup> One

doesn't, after all, *have* someone else's feelings, though one may understand them better, and in some cases even be attending to those feelings more closely, than the person who has them.

Normally, pain is a perception of an injury in one's own body.<sup>5</sup> But Siamese twins might have pain receptors in the tissue that connects them, so that the nail on which Joe steps may stimulate pain centers both in his brain and in that of his Siamese twin, Shmoe. Of course, Shmoe's pain would still be his insofar as it registered in his brain, and that brain was distinct from Joe's. But it would be a pain associated with an injury done to a body that, on other grounds (its separability, for instance), we would not identify as Shmoe's. And if adrenalin could be carried through the connective tissue, Shmoe might feel fear generated by beliefs and desires that would normally be primarily attributed to Joe.

This little fancy brings out the point I want to make: determining whether feelings have special status, whether they are perceptions, whether they are the sorts of perceptions that are routed through the language centers, should be left safely in the hands of neurophysiologists and endocrinologists. Some of what has seemed mysterious and problematic about self-knowledge requires an understanding of proprioceptive mechanisms, the dynamics of the various perceptual processes, their relation to other functions of the central nervous system; it requires discovering how changes in glandular functions affect the perceptual and nervous systems as well as locomotion and coordination, and under what circumstances the language centers are active in the perceptual processes.

To be in pain is generally not only to be aware of being in pain, but to have that pain be at the (sometimes nagging) focus of one's attention. It is for this reason that pain reports carry such certitude, and for this reason that we learned to express and report our pains so surely. One can imagine a species for which pain is a perceptual sensation much like other proprioceptive perceptions. Members of such a species might be able to take in pains subliminally, the way we take in unaccentuated features of the visual field or the workings of the digestive processes. While this might be a maladaptive trait, one that would diminish a species's capacity to survive in a dangerous environment, there is some evidence that we can, with some training, come to treat some of our pains in this way. There is also some evidence that we can, with training, become aware of, and control, internal bodily functions that we do not now notice. In any case, the dominance of pain sensations and the possible control of that dominance are to be explained by neurophysiologists.

Though it is a contingent fact that pain is associated with a disordered state of one's own body, it is no mere accident. Though pain is normally accompanied by other sensations that follow upon damage to the body (different sensations, as we come to learn, from different parts of the body), these other sensations are not evidence for the pain, any more (or less) than are the whole set of events that have occurred more publicly (e.g., falling, cutting one's hand). They are all coincident, though not accidentally coincident, features of a whole situation. When various sensations have been frequently or intensely associated in our original experiences (and when our attention has been fixed on their copresence), it is sometimes very difficult for us to learn to separate them out again.

Nor does learning to identify one's feelings involve applying general criteria that were somehow acquired in a different way. We have been misled by post-Cartesian and post-empiricist concerns with what is immediate, noninferential, self-warranted, or infallible, hoping to discover foundational material from which to construct our complex knowledge. What is salient in experience—what is normally presumed to be at the focus of attention—is neither evidence nor criteria for our feelings. Yet it is through the salient features of our experiences, along with them, that we learn to reflect on sensations, to identify them and describe their tonalities.

We learned how to give voice to our feelings at our parents' knees, learned to describe those states in propositional form rather than in wincings, howlings, and kickings in exactly the same way, and very often at the same time, as we learned how to describe the wind's rustling the leaves or the parched earth absorbing rain. Though we learned what the world is like by learning our mother tongue as our mother spoke it, learning what is painful is not learning pain language or vice versa. Correcting our pain reports may indeed require relearning the language, but it certainly does not simply consist of acquiring a better vocabulary.

What happens is something like this: a child falls down and scrapes his knees. His parents, assuming that this set of sensations—of startle and pain, the range of particular sensations that they themselves would find salient in such circumstances—are most central in the child's attention when he whimpers or cries, say, "Oh, you've fallen and scraped your knees. That hurts. It must smart." And out comes the care and the ointment. A child benefits from learning to express his experience, his sensations, in clear and unambiguous reports.<sup>6</sup> There is considerable pressure to express one's pain in propositional form, even when one is in too much agony to be interested in performing a propositional reporting speech act. There is considerable adaptive force in training oneself to

do it, by second nature, almost as one winces or limps. Such utterances are not given a truth-functional form because one primarily intends to utter what is true, but because one wants help. If banging a drum would do that more efficiently, we'd bang drums. Our needs take precedence over verification: in such cases, we are interested in truth because it is of adaptive service.

We learn to express emotional feelings the same way as we learn to report pains.<sup>7</sup> Because parents are rarely as well attuned to what might be salient and focal in a child's emotional field as they are to his physical pains, learning to express emotions in propositional form is far less successful than learning to express pains accurately. It is a matter of rare good fortune for parents to be good at attentively describing their children's condition, rather than projecting their own feelings, or (out of mistaken tact) avoiding personal talk about what is taken to be a private matter. A person who in all the usual respects knows his language very well may nevertheless be very poor at knowing his own emotions, even if he has, by reading novels, acquired a rich and subtle vocabulary for emotions. One's knowledge of one's own emotional feelings may be highly specialized, depending on where one's parents were asked. For instance, some parents might be relatively good at understanding the subtleties of children's affections, but very poor, or very threatened, at describing their fears. A child whose parents suppose that every little tumble means pain are planting seeds of hypochondria, developing a tendency to focus on certain sorts of sensations as pains; a child whose parents treat such cases as a piffle are more likely to hatch the sort of stoic who does not feel such sensations as painful. Parents who are wildly off, or inconsistent, or given to panic, confuse a child about whether he's right to call what he feels "pain." This is a schizogenic environment.

It is important to notice that learning to describe one's pains, sensations, and feelings is not different from learning to describe anything else. A child learns to express/describe (his reactions to) the wind, magnets, and telephone calls in just the same way as he learns to describe events taking place within himself. In both cases, assumptions are made about where attention is likely to be focused, what features in a situation have salience. Sometimes salience is constitutionally and situationally determined (as with pains and reds) and attention can only be diverted or redirected; but sometimes—especially in early childhood—salience is formed by directing and charging attention. In both cases, gifts in self-knowledge may be highly specialized, only regionally acute.

Someone might object that we have not yet touched on what is really peculiar and distinctive about self-knowledge and self-awareness: that it is our own feelings that are directly and immediately, noninferentially

present to us, while our awareness of objects is always mediated through some modification in us, some sensory awareness within ourselves. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that something like this is true, that our experience of physical objects comes to us by a modification of our bodies. It is these modifications that constitute the beginning of our knowledge of the world. According to this view we do not construct or infer the properties of our own sensations; if they are intentional, they are so in a more direct and immediate way than external intentional objects, and so our knowledge of them is of a different sort from our knowledge of physical objects.<sup>8</sup>

When this view gets a full head of steam, it sometimes gets carried to the point of saying that there is a sense in which we only directly know ourselves, and that our knowledge of the world is merely inferred or constructed from basic, fundamentally introspective knowledge. Well, what are we to say to that, even in its more modest forms? In one sense, there is nothing that needs to be said. What is at issue is what is supposed to follow from it even if it were acceptable. Neurophysiologists must tell us whether a difference in stimulus makes a difference in type of awareness: whether, for instance, the awareness of smells is a different sort of awareness from the awareness of sounds, both different from the awareness of having eaten too much. In any case, there is a sliding confusion, generating either an infinite regress or skepticism, created by saying that because we know the world through (by) our experiencing it, it is our knowledge-of-our-experiences that constitutes, first, our knowledge of ourselves and, then, through that, our knowledge of the world.

Of course it is built into the grammar and semantics of perceptual language that there be a subject, just as it is built into the attribution of any predicates that they be attributed to something. But nothing follows from these physical or grammatical givens: it certainly does not follow that we know ourselves, our complex and total selves, better or more clearly than we know external physical objects. Even if sensing were a form of knowing, it does not follow that awareness of sensations is the clearest form of self-knowledge. The simplicity, salience, strength, or decipherability of a sensation does not seem to be determined by the location of its stimulus. Reds and pains are salient; grays and low-grade infections are not.

#### IV. Wants and Intentions

Some wants and intentions are associated with particular sensations and feelings: under normal circumstances, a person who wants to eat or sleep is in a particular physical state.<sup>9</sup> We learn to report these wants in the

same way as we learn to report our feelings, by hearing our parents chatter about how tired we seem, how (despite our protestations to the contrary) we really want to go to bed. Other wants and intentions are even more plastic: they are not necessarily identified with, or accompanied by, any particular sensation, but are both structured and induced by experience and education. In forming these wants, parents are not always guided by hypotheses about what is focal in our attention; on the contrary, they are trying to induce a set of motivational desires that are not yet strongly developed, trying to produce wants whose satisfactions they believe beneficial to us.

Consider what happens when parents are coping with a child's wants: Joe is beating up Eric. A concerned parent steps in and says, "Stop that. Eric didn't do anything to you, and anyhow, even if you are angry with him right now, you don't want to hurt him; you want to be friends with him." What parents say, and even more important, what they do and how they look, will crystallize a set of wants and desires, define their appropriate objects and actions, and at the same time give a vocabulary for reporting them. But few intentions are created *ex nihilo* by talkative parents. Some, but not all, are specifications of more fundamental needs: whether the satisfaction of such desires also satisfies the more fundamental need is not something that is normally determined solely by the ideology of desires, by what we believe to be satisfactory. An indication that the organizing fit is awry is that a person remains restless, uncomfortable, discontent, even when his sincerely expressed wants seem to have been met. In such cases, it is extremely difficult to know what one wants, precisely because the conceptual vocabulary has been deflected.

What parents once did to us, we eventually do to ourselves. We commandeer wants by expressing them in a reporting tone of voice. Much of our talk about our wants is mimetic in character: we express and reflect what we take to be the wants of those around us, without being committed to the actions that are presumed to satisfy those wants. Shared expressions of desires cement communities: our overriding need to belong to what we take to be well-formed communities, to solidify our place in our society, often leads us to express, and sometimes to acquire, desires that were not initially directly motivating. In expressing such wants publicly, we come to take them to be genuine reports, though initially they were neither true nor false, but only vague and indeterminate. In expressing them, we were neither deceived nor deceiving: we were being sociable.

People who are unsure of the place of present wants in the system of their long-range preferences, or who have come to distrust their expressive responses, often engage in experimental self-manipulation by

expressing wants in propositional form, leaving open or bracketing the question of whether trying to get is the primitive sign of such a want. Without deliberately doing so, someone may try out a want for size by speaking it out, to see what happens to him *in foro interno* and among his friends when he treats it as a bona fide want. Often this is an elaborate and indirect way of discovering what was wanted all along; but sometimes this process forms a want that was indeterminate, capable of being specified in a number of ways. ("It's hot; I want something cool. Ice cream. No, ice cream makes me thirstier than ever. Sherbet, strawberry sherbet. No, strawberry is too sweet. Lime sherbet, that's it; that's what I want.") When the feedback is unfavorable, the assertion or expression of a want is sometimes the first step in recognizing that it is not what one wants; when the feedback is favorable, it can be the first step in crystallizing and forming a want. ("The mob is in the streets; I must find out where they are going for I am their leader.") The successful maneuvering of self-knowledge requires that a presumed want be treated as if it were actual.

When a want is initially vague and tentative, with some (but not all) of the conditions for its satisfaction left undefined, the process of playing it out in expressive reports gives direction to actions that will eventually count as primitive attempts at trying to satisfy. In such cases, talk that has the look of self-knowledge—and indeed requires the look of self-knowledge—is also simultaneously doing quite different work. Its truth-functional form is at the service of making satisfactory decisions, in situations where motivational conditions are plastic. Its form is a useful benign camouflage, imitating the standard use of the propositional form. The voice of an authoritative report is required to mobilize energy that would be unremoved, not to mention undirected, by utterances that lack the look of truth.

There are two sorts of cases where the expression of wants is ambiguous, and where it is unclear whether reports are genuinely truth-functional. A person who has not yet identified or correctly described his needs or wants may express them hypothetically, proceeding just as he would in any other investigation, seeing whether accepting these desires as his would have untenable consequences. The more difficult and interesting cases are those where the desire is not yet crystallized, where the uncertainty is not merely a matter of the agent's not knowing his own wants, but of those wants being still partly indeterminate. In such cases, the expression of a desire may become reportive, because it has had a causal role in forming the motive.

Of course if such transformation, manipulation, and crystallization were the only forms of self-knowledge, we would have trouble learning

how to reflect on our wants. If all desires were grossly indeterminate, we'd even have trouble making it clear what it is to want something, not to mention what it is to understand one's wants. That there are trans-formative and indeterminate cases of self-knowledge does not argue against there being some cases of clear and assured reports of immediate or long-range desires. I do not want to suggest that there are no clear cases of correctly reporting one's defined wants. My claim is only that the complicated and indeterminate cases should not be treated as deviant forms of the clear cases, or as misleadingly described cases of wholly distinctive processes.<sup>10</sup>

It might be objected that the sort of self-knowledge that is formative rather than reportive should not be called knowledge at all. Ambiguous reports might admittedly not be able to form and crystallize motives without being called self-knowledge. But even if individual self-deception were shown to be psychologically benign and necessary, it cannot on that account be justified as a rational general practice. It would take a very long paper to deal with this objection to anyone's satisfaction. I can only here make some bald assertions: misled by a Hobbesian model of wants and intentions, we have taken motives to be determinate, and treated cases of indeterminacy as cases of ignorance or self-deception. We made this mistake because we wished to make the ideal model of rational choice psychologically descriptive as well as logically normative, on the grounds that we could not insist on the normative character of the model unless it in fact corresponded to psychological processes.

One might suppose that it would always be both rational and adaptively advantageous to be as precise as possible about what one wants, to avoid the encroachment of indeterminate desires. But increased definition may mean decreased adaptivity when it limits the range of substitutable satisfactions. Desires that are defined by a clearly formulated set of conditions for their satisfaction may be frustrated by environmental and social changes. More vaguely formulated, less precisely closed wants can be satisfied by a larger range of objects and actions without having to be redefined. The trade-off between rationality and adaptivity requires balancing out the advantages and disadvantages of vagueness in maximizing satisfactions.

Even a responsible systematic comparison of well-formed desires, an attempt to map presumably determinate preferences, is not always an exercise in self-knowledge. The difference between voicing a present desire and reporting one's considered preferences is not always the difference between self-certified but unevaluated opinion (whatever that may be) and a justified true belief; nor is it the difference between an expression and a report. Political tracts and religious confessions are

rich in examples of how self-knowledge, systematic comparisons of well-formed desires, and evaluations of long-range commitments can be used to transform or redirect motives. In such cases, self-knowledge and self-improvement are two faces of a single process, one in which it is essential that the dominance of truth-telling and wishful thinking remain indeterminate.

V. Thoughts

Privileged access to one's own thoughts has seemed the most plausible claimant to the special status of self-knowledge. One might well suppose that such reports as "I am now thinking of Vienna" are self-warranted, if anything is.<sup>11</sup> Even if someone gives way under persistent questioning to admit that in thinking of Vienna they were only thinking that it was a city much thought-of by philosophers in search of *recherché* examples, still, they were thinking of Vienna. Even if it turned out, on prolonged examination, that it was not so much Vienna they were thinking of, as what they associated with Vienna—Baroque architecture and austere philosophy, *sachertorte*, and Authority—they were (among other things, as it turned out) thinking of Vienna.

Nevertheless, a great deal of what passes for knowing what one thinks is really speaking one's piece, responding to situations with an improvised repertoire of appropriate speech acts. When people get together for a good talk, only a small part of what they do when they preface their remarks with "I think that . . ." is properly described as reporting or sharing their thoughts. (Not that they are hiding them, either.) People learn to chatter very much as they learn to play croquet, as part of their activities in making friends, competing for attention, getting on cooperatively or combatively. Having interesting (but not too interesting), true (but not too true), conversation is at the service of these enterprises. It is more like an Ionesco play and the Living Theater than like the high-minded enterprise of drawing consequences from premises. Nor is it irrational, or even arational, of us to use ambiguous sentences, apparently propositional in form, to perform nonassertive actions of other sorts.

A child learns to report what happened during the day, learns to formulate, as part of what happened, what went through his mind. He learns to improvise, imitating the grown-ups, answering questions of the form, "What are you thinking about?" and "What do you think of . . . ?" with an appropriate set of responses. Most of the time answering these questions does not involve stepping back, considering the evidence, and reporting the result of one's investigations in the grab-bag of one's beliefs.

One just answers the question, usually truthfully enough, or at any rate, appropriately enough. As long as they speak sincerely, what people say characteristically is at least part of what they're thinking at the time, what is going through their minds. But it does not follow that what people say represents what, all things considered, they think or believe, what in some sense they are willing to be held responsible for. One intentionally thinks and believes against one's better judgment. There is *akrasia* of belief and thought, as well as action. Just as a passing fancy does not always qualify as a want, so a passing (propositional) thought does not always qualify as belief.

Laying bare one's thoughts on euthenasia, South African investments, or the identity of Hesperus and Phosphorus is much more like giving vent to one's feelings, or enthusing over raspberry ice cream, than our general tact and sociability, our respect for the rationality of others, generally let us acknowledge. It is true that when we hear people say what they think, we find out what sort of people they are, but this is not necessarily because we have found out what they really believe. The connection between what people say and what they think is not necessarily that the former represents the latter: sometimes people discover what they think by reflecting on what they tend to say. It is often possible to say, having just glanced at a friend's face, "I know exactly what you're thinking," in situations where he must perform a complex investigation before confirming our insight.

Of course, we need not put this in terms of what people actually say out loud to each other. The description and analysis hold, also, for what runs through people's heads when they are not saying anything out loud. Molly's monologue in *Ulysses* is a complex set of responses to what she sees, to her recollections and associations, to what she thought the moment before. It is what is on her mind and so, in one sense, it is what she is thinking. But no particular slice of that monologue represents what she really believes or thinks, even at that time slice. (Though it doesn't falsely disguise it either.) It indicates what she thinks (it is what's on her mind), without being exactly what she thinks.

Of course we can examine our expressed opinions and beliefs, asking ourselves what, in all this array, we really do think. This process is very much like examining our expressed wants and desires in order to determine our systematized preference rankings: it is formative as well as reportive, normative as well as descriptive. Systematically discovering what we really think borders on determining what we think we ought to think: we hoist the psychology of our beliefs to a construction of their logical relations, committing ourselves to believing what is entailed by our beliefs, even when in some sense we are not prepared to say whether



we truly accept these consequences. What we think is not the sum, not even the ordered sum of what we say in a propositional tone of voice, even to ourselves.

There is no correlation between the complexity or the subtlety of an expressed thought and its being accepted as a justified belief, placed in a systematic relation to others. When mathematicians are doing mathematics full tilt, unselfconscious about matters of proof, when they are thinking mathematics, they speak their minds, stimulated by this or that remark. It is more of a Molly Bloom performance than it might at first seem. Of course mathematicians can step back and ask themselves what they really think about all the mathematics they've said. They may then demonstrate or revise what they first blurted out, just as a responsible evaluation of one's desires may reaffirm or revise one's blurted wants. But many fancy thinkers just run on with their thoughts, without faltering to analyze the justificatory status of their claims or to determine whether they indeed believe what they have said. Such thinkers are often very powerful, steaming full head on, sometimes with considerable originality in constructing intricate fugal improvisations of their basic repertoire. It is for this reason that someone who does elegant and complex mathematical work is not on that account necessarily going to be better than the friendly neighborhood bore at knowing what he really thinks about South African investments, or for that matter, better at demonstrating the Pythagorean Theorem to his own satisfaction. Because much mathematical chatter is still chatter, there is no reason to suppose that mathematicians should be better than most folk at knowing what they feel, or for that matter, what they think.

Still, it might be thought that here at last we have come upon the special status of self-knowledge. The capacity to step back to evaluate one's desires or to determine what one really thinks (i.e., rationally should think) seems a wholly distinctive process.<sup>12</sup> Someone who is capable of systematizing and evaluating his *prima facie* wants and thoughts might be thought necessarily to be in a privileged position to determine what his thoughts are. It might be argued that there must be some sense in which a person must be able to claim all those desires and thoughts as his in order to systematize them, not to mention evaluating his own right to have them. But what are we to make of schizophrenics who do not recognize the "I" implicit in all their experiences, who dissociate themselves from feelings, desires, and thoughts that might normally be attributed to them, and that manifestly move them? If such cases do not cast doubt on the Kantian claim—and most Kantians would certainly argue that they do not—then the implicit direct ownership of one's experiences and thoughts does not have any implication for priv-

ileged self-knowledge. It is a consequence of the logic of experiencing and not a royal road to self-knowledge. In any case, the question of whether the capacity to (attempt to) formulate a (rational) system of one's beliefs and desires is distinctive, whether the activities of reflecting and remembering are distinctive, are questions for neurophysiologists to answer. They must determine whether such rational reflection on the system of experiences that one takes to be one's own is a distinctive psychophysical state, which is integrative because it has a nondistortive access to other physical states. Whether there is a nontrivial panoptical perspective on one's thoughts is as much a question for physiology as it is for transcendental analysis. That there is a perspective from which panoptical regulation is claimed, by no means establishes the validity of that claim.

## VI. Images of the Self and Reflexive Attitudes

Does a person have a special epistemic access to her sense of herself, a guiding sense of her primary 'identity' that includes her identifications and ideals as well as a primitive somatic sense of herself? I think not. Whatever special relation a person may have to her sense of herself, that special relation is not one of privileged knowledge. To begin with, a person's reflexive attitudes are layered, composed of distinctive strands acquired in different ways at different times. Sartre gives a plausible and vivid description of how a person develops a preconceptual general somatic self-identification, as awkward or deft, excitable or calm, energetic or lethargic, from her constitution and infantile experiences. Childhood illnesses, the bundling or loosening of limbs—all contribute to this underlying layer of a person's reflexive attitudes, her psychophysical sense of self. Even though this fundamental somatic sense may play a crucial role in affecting the structures and directions of a person's motives and social interactions, it does not qualify as knowledge, because it is rarely conceptualized. If a person develops beliefs about her basic somatic sense of herself, those beliefs may be askew. A hefty, healthy person may think of herself—even experience herself—as frail and vulnerable.

The sense of self that an infant acquires through its earliest social interactions affects, and is affected by, the constitutionally and experientially based sense of self. The tonal character of the ways that early nurturing figures react to the child—their delight or repulsion, the anxiety or ease of their handling—forms a further layer in a person's sense of herself. Such initial physical reactions move toward psychological and social role casting: seen as an intruder or as a welcome guest, at

the periphery or at the center of family life, the child is impelled into scenarios that form self-identifications. "You're a bore, a pest" or "You are wonderfully amusing" is conveyed to a description-hungry two-year old. Sometimes such characterizations can become self-fulfilling; but they can also be profoundly misleading.<sup>13</sup>

Cultural structures form further layers in a person's sense of self: one layer is articulated by ethnic, gender, class, age, and racial stereotypes that affect actions even when they conflict with more critically self-conscious motives. Another is formed by a person's conscious and reflective ideals, ideals of oneself as a social reformer, or as generous or intellectually rigorous. Sometimes such ideals are personified in an admired figure who provides a model for imitation.

A person can be unaware of, or mistaken about, the ways in which these various strands in her sense of herself—her somatic self-imagery, her social personae, her idealized identifications—interact with one another. She can also be unaware of the roles that the various strands in her sense of herself play in the formation of the structure of her thought, her motives, and her actions. Though the various aspects of a person's identifications are fundamental to her agency, sometimes to the point of being constitutively self-fulfilling, they are nevertheless also capable of being opaque and misunderstood.

An example may help dislodge the notion that reflexive attitudes represent knowledge of oneself and one's motives, knowledge that prompts or directs appropriate action. Consider David casting an interested eye on Bathsheba. His reflexive attitudes partly individuate his desires. His condition is one of *desire* (rather than an inflammation of the gonads); it is a particular *sort* of desire (an erotic desire rather than *furor poeticus*); and it is *his* desire (rather than one caused by a deviant chain, a wicked spell cast on him by the ghost of Saul). His reflexive attitudes—his somatic sense of himself, his sense of his social entitlements and their limits, his idealized identifications—are central in determining whether and how his condition is motivating. For instance, they make a difference to whether David decides to send Uriah, an excellent soldier and an important ally, off to what is near certain death, for the sake of Bathsheba.

But David doesn't need to form a diagnosis of his condition in order to act as he does. Though his reflexive attitudes are expressed within his intentions and their affective tonality, his condition—his erotic interest in Bathsheba—is standardly already the beginning of action. David could, of course, have investigated his reflexive attitudes, and could have attempted to guide or check his actions on the basis of his discoveries. But the diagnostic or interpretive processes that represent one

way of checking or redirecting action, are not necessary in order to begin or instigate it. In any case, the results of a person's investigation into the reflexive attitudes that are expressed in his condition, his motives and actions, are only as good as his investigative astuteness. The success of his actions, or the reform of his habits are not a direct function of the astuteness of that knowledge.

## VII. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-Knowledge

We are hardly likely to underestimate the advantages of self-knowledge. Aside from the intrinsic pleasures of the exercise of our talents for insight and clarity and the narcissistic pleasure of exercising those talents on ourselves, the advantages of objective detachment—freed from the dangerous tyranny of impulse, capable of evaluating the place of a present desire or thought in relation to long-range commitments—are relatively obvious, especially to philosophers who earn a living by making a profession of their talents for insight and clarity. The capacity for this sort of detachment is a condition for being able to evaluate the rationality of one's long-term convictions and desires.

That rational detachment may be maladaptive in some circumstances is less obvious. Like all dispositions, the capacities for self-knowledge can be brought into play appropriately or inappropriately, beneficially or harmfully. The capacities are indeed adaptive, but it doesn't follow that it is adaptive to exercise them under all circumstances, or adaptive to develop those capacities to their utmost potentiality and power. Any generally adaptive dispositional trait, such as sharpness and keenness of hearing, may become maladaptive if it is magnified or oversensitized. The capacity to respond to shifts in sound in our environment, to identify those sounds, is a highly useful trait. But developing those capacities, hearing ever more subtle sounds, constantly noticing the sound differentiations around us, would be highly damaging to the balance of our dispositions. In the very nature of the process, focusing limits. What we want is the adaptive rather than the virtuoso development of our dispositions, including those exercised in self-knowledge, the self-regulatory rather than the wholly magnetized gifts of response.

One of the reasons that self-knowledge is magnified as a virtue is that it looks like a good candidate for the traits that scan the environment to determine where, at any point, the focus of our attending should lie. But if the analysis we've given of self-knowledge is right, then self-knowledge is not a panoptical power. It seems likely that neurophysiologists will discover that the various homeostatic systems that control the direction of attention are very complex indeed; that these mechanisms

are regional rather than central (for example that what brings a sound into focus is not the same as what leads us to focus on an awareness of ourselves hearing that sound).

A person who actively concentrates on his awareness of himself as feeling, wanting, or thinking, constantly evaluating the rationality and the appropriateness of his responses, can suffer the disadvantages of extreme disassociation. His attending to the objects of his experience is often broken to concentrate on reflective questions. He is likely to have difficulty holding on to his present thoughts, wants, and feelings, even though he may become very good at recollecting them in tranquillity and reconstructing them clearly. Though disassociated, such a person may be able to produce an impressive and sophisticated account of what he is doing, descriptions that are not false, but that are no longer on key. He may, for instance, correctly report the reasons for his wanting to go to Paris; but because his attention has shifted to the absorbing question of what he wants, or because he is focused on deflecting fears and insecurities, or on dazzling his friends with the subtlety of his introspective gifts, his *wanting to go to Paris* has lost its fervor, its direction. His desire has been put to uses—to please or to teach—that may be quite different from the original needs. Indeed such a person may no longer be primarily reporting his desires, but undertaking a performance of some other sort, impressing his friends by the subtlety of his self-knowledge. He has achieved objectivity and plausibility at the cost of conviction. When it comes right down to going to Paris, the actions of such persons are often ill-timed, wooden, ill-suited to satisfy even their manifest desires. Because their attention has shifted from what they desire to themselves as desiring, they cannot bring off the appropriate action with conviction or *élan*.

These difficulties are not difficulties in the analysis of self-knowledge; they are difficulties in being the sort of creature who is capable of it. Self-knowledge does not require capacities for a special sort of direct, noninferential, intuitive, panoramic view of oneself; on the contrary, it requires capacities to treat oneself as an object of knowledge, in the same way as one treats everything else as an object of knowledge. Crucial among these capacities is that of redirecting attention, focusing on the fact that we are in this or that state, wanting this or that, having said this or that. That we are capable of focusing on ourselves as wanting, thinking, or feeling, capable of evaluating those wants, thoughts, and feelings in many different ways, and then further trying to modify or change our responses, has given us enormous adaptive advantages. But when these gifts are nourished to excess, they may block the equally adaptive advantages of being unselfconsciously absorbed in our activi-

ties, resisting the fullest development of self-knowledge, in the interests of the best development of our selves.

But even at its properly proportioned best, self-knowledge is no guarantee of well-formed, let alone wise action. The merit of self-knowledge does not derive from the knowledge, but from the character of the person who has it, from the ways that she is able to use her knowledge well and appropriately. Self-knowledge is only as good as the person who has it.