

JOSEP E. CORBÍ

Self-knowledge, Authenticity and Obedience

1. The Issue

Self-ascriptions of mental states and dispositions are assumed to have a privileged epistemic authority compared to third-party ascriptions. An agent does not need to check her own behavior in order to know that she intends to read *The Karamazov Brothers* for a while. Anyone else would have to ask her instead, or infer what she intends from one or another piece of evidence. Within the analytic tradition, the debate on self-knowledge has mainly been concerned with this asymmetry between the first-person and the third-person perspectives. Traditional accounts seek to identify a specific epistemic ability that should account for the privileges of the first-person view. Following up on David Finkelstein, I will refer to this kind of view as “detectivist”¹. There is “the old, Cartesian, detectivist view” according to which only the agent herself has a direct, infallible access to her own mental states. It has famously been objected, though, that the states and events of a fully private mind cannot coherently be identified, for there is no way in which appearance and reality could be distinguished within a Cartesian mind².

Alternatively, some philosophers have defended a naturalistic detectivist view (“new detectivism” in Finkelstein’s own terms) according to which the first-person privilege derives from the existence of an exclusive, inner perceptual mechanism that is significantly more reliable than any other perceptual

¹ Finkelstein (2003), p. 2.

² This has, indeed, to do, with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s argument against the intelligibility of a private language. See Candlish, Wrisley (2012), Kripke (1982), Mulhall (2007), Stroud (2000), chh. 5, 6, 13 and Wittgenstein (1953), parr. 243-315.

mechanisms³. It is unclear to me, however, whether the identity conditions of this inner mechanism can be fixed in a way that avoids the shortcomings of a private mind and, yet, preserves the privileges of the first-person perspective. For this mechanism is claimed to be highly reliable, but how is this condition to be established? Reliability is a fact about a certain mechanism and, therefore, it is subject to the contrast between appearance and reality that is unavailable, as we have seen, to a private mind. But, if a third-person perspective is required to determine the reliability of that inner mechanism, the mechanism itself must be individuated in such a way that this constraint could be met, and how could this be so except by allowing a third party to have access to the deliverances of this mechanism? But in what sense could we then claim that the deliverances of this mechanism are still specifically first-personal?

Both old and new detectivists assume that first-person authority is alien to our agential condition. There are, however, some other approaches to self-knowledge that exploit our agential capabilities to account for the epistemic privileges of the first-person perspective. There is, to begin with, “the constitutivist view” according to which first-person authority is to be explained by the fact that our decisions or commitments do constitute our mental states in a way akin to the procedure by which a mayor may marry two people⁴. In this context, a mismatch between my mental states and what I believe them to be can scarcely exist, since there is no distance between my being in such and such a mental state and my decision to be in that state. There is, however, an extensive dissatisfaction with this view. It is hard to swallow, for instance, that my head aches just because I decide it to, and this holds for a number of other mental states that are rather impervious to our decisions. Some sorts of psychical impairment come to confirm the relative

³ See Armstrong (1968), Churchland (1984), Finkelstein (2003), pp. 15-27, Lycan (1996).

⁴ See Finkelstein (2003), ch. 2, Wright (2001).

autonomy of our psychological condition with regard to our decisions or beliefs. We must thus acknowledge the significance to our agency of the idea of “resistance” on the side of our psychological condition.

Some recent approaches to self-knowledge do take this notion of resistance quite seriously and want their account to make sense of it. In fact, they associate our agency with our ability to shape our psychological dispositions, and judge that some typical psychic impairments (i.e., those that psychoanalytic therapy standardly address) have to do with a deficiency in this respect. They thus conclude that a healthy and flourishing agent must have significant command upon her dispositions. The important point for our purposes is their conviction that this command can be enhanced by a certain kind of self-awareness of one’s own psychological condition that is quite hard to achieve. I will refer to this approach as “the authority view” insofar as it exclusively focuses on the authority that an agent must have upon her psychological dispositions and excludes that self-observation could be intimate enough to apprehend the peculiarities of the first-person perspective, since an observational perspective is apparently available to a third party as well⁵. But how is this need to have practical authority upon one’s own psychological dispositions connected to the epistemic first-person privilege we were supposed to account for? The latter was presented as an ability that every agent does possess, whereas the practical authority under consideration emerges as a capacity that only the healthy can achieve and often to a limited extent. In other words, are the epistemic privilege of the first-person perspective and self-knowledge as a certain kind of practical authority really interwoven or do they constitute two independent phenomena?

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on this issue, so that we get a better understanding of the privileges, uncertainties and blind spots that are involved in self-knowledge. I must confess that I feel rather dissatisfied with the way the

⁵ See Dumm (2006), Moran (2001).

champions of the authority view have addressed this perplexity⁶, therefore I will sketch an alternative approach. For this purpose, I will examine how “sincerity” and “authenticity” relate to one another. I will firstly take advantage of Bernard Williams’ notions of acknowledgement and making sense and, secondly, I will make use of Simone Weil’s distinction between the two senses of obedience and the associated notion of attention. On this basis, I will conclude that a certain sort of self-perception lies at the heart of our agency and, therefore, in our capacity to lead a relatively authentic life. This kind of self-observation escapes the standard worries about a private mind but is in a crucial sense specifically first-personal. It does not imply, however, any systematic epistemic privilege on the agent’s side; if there is any epistemic privilege of the first-person perspective to be granted, it will have to do with the narrative abilities that we regard as constitutive of the self. The discussion as a whole suggests, in any event, a way in which the analytic and the continental traditions can fruitfully cooperate.

2. Sincerity and Authenticity

In *Truth and Truthfulness*⁷, Williams explores the transition from sincerity to authenticity. He elaborates his own view on the basis of two historical proposals. Firstly, there is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s attempt to be entirely self-transparent in his *Confessions*. Rousseau assumes that no one knows him better than himself. According to Williams, his purpose is to reveal his true identity to others so that they could for once acknowledge his moral goodness, and assumes that sincerity would suffice to achieve this goal. But is sincerity really enough? Only on a number of rather implausible assumptions:

This conception presupposes several things. It requires, as we have seen, the authority of self-discovery: [a] the idea that sincere, spontaneous, non-deceitful declaration, the product of his presence

⁶ Corbí (2011^a), (2011^b), (2012), ch 6.

⁷ Williams (2002), ch. 8.

to himself, will guarantee a true understanding of his motives. Moreover, [b] what is revealed and understood in this way will represent a character, a whole person, and this implies that it will be coherent, or, as one might say, steady. True self-revelation will of course reveal conflicting moods and short-term feelings [...] But under this there is assumed to be a real character, an underlying set of constant motives, in which his true self is expressed [...] [c] In his own case, he was sure that these motives were basically benevolent and well-disposed toward others. This impression is basic to Rousseau's project of reassurance, the removal of distrust by first-personal explanation⁸.

A number of virtues are mentioned in this passage that hardly belong to the notion of sincerity as such and involve a more complex notion, like that of authenticity because the idea of a motive, not to mention that of a unified self, requires a kind of steadiness that sincere self-declarations are unable to guarantee⁹. To highlight this point, Williams sketches a different model of truthfulness on the basis of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*: «He [Rameau] offers an exceptionally clear example of sincerity in its basic form of uninhibited expression or enactment, rather than in the form of reporting the findings of self-examination. He is unguardedly spontaneous, too, in his second-order or reflective comments. The model of sincerity as uninhibited spontaneity even applies to his flattery and deceit»¹⁰.

Sincerity as sheer spontaneity about the content of one's self-examination reveals a self that is not unified under a few motives or projects, but whimsical and variable: «Diderot was always attracted to a picture of the self as something constantly shifting and reacting and altering; as a swarm of bees, as a clavichord or harp or other instrument, with the wind or some such force playing on it»¹¹. The model of a swarm of bees or a harp appears as so vulnerable to the circumstances that one must reasonably doubt that any such entity could be endowed with the

⁸ Ivi, pp. 178-179 (sections are mine).

⁹ See ivi, p. 183.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 189.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 190.

relevant constancy of purpose to count as a self or even to have mental states with a certain content at all. Williams thus concludes that we become a proper self by a process of stabilization, that is, by steadying one's own mind: «On Diderot's view, as I understand him, it is a universal truth, not just a special feature of modernity, that human beings have an inconstant mental constitution that needs to be steadied by society and interaction with other people»¹².

The need to steady the mind has severe implications regarding the way sincerity and authenticity are to be construed. Firstly, the model of sincerity as sheer spontaneity must be dropped, for this model implies that self-declarations have implications upon the future or the past and, therefore, scarcely involves any sort of commitment beyond the instant at which the declaration is made: «This means that the declaration at a given instant of self can be only a declaration of self at that instant»¹³. But, in the absence of some minimal commitment, we cannot make sense of the idea that an agent has made a declaration at all: «If what I uninhibitedly declare at a given moment can be taken to myself or anyone else as a declaration of something which I believe, that is because there is a practice that firms up the expression of the immediate state into something that has a future»¹⁴.

Hence, we must move beyond the idea of sheer spontaneity to make sense of a sincere self-declaration. We need some degree of steadiness, but how much? As much as it is required to get a self, even though it falls short of the more exacting demands of authenticity. But, before we shift to the issue of authenticity, let me dwell a bit more on the implications that the need to steady the mind has for the idea of sincerity. As Williams suggests, it implies that «we must leave behind the assumption that we first and immediately have a transparent self-understanding»¹⁵.

¹² Ivi, p. 191.

¹³ Ivi, p. 190.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 192.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 193.

Thus, I will argue that this challenge to the idea of immediacy also calls into question the view of a self-declaration as a sort of self-report, that is, the idea that an agent has immediate, direct access to some facts that she might eventually decide to report. To this end, let me examine the identity conditions of the facts an agent is supposed to report in her self-declarations. And here I propose to resort to Williams' discussion on the distinction we can draw in history between "a chronicle" and "a narrative". We may be tempted to regard a chronicle as providing the materials, the facts, upon which one or another narrative can be elaborated¹⁶. Narratives will thus seek to make sense of certain facts, whereas chronicles are supposed to merely report them. This model presupposes that facts are out there, ready to be reported by a chronicle or selected by a narrative, and, therefore, as not being shaped at all by the purposes of the inquiry itself, but previous to it¹⁷. We can certainly distinguish between a chronicle and a narrative, or between facts and attempts to make sense of them, but it does not follow that facts are not themselves the product of some mini-narratives, that is, of some attempts to make sense of some narrower sequences of events. As Williams puts it, «The model serves to remind us that there can be agreement on facts and disagreement about what makes sense of them to whom»¹⁸.

The contrast between the facts we agree upon and a disagreement about what makes sense of them, does not imply that the former are determined regardless of any shared inquiry. One may feel tempted, though, to claim that history should stick to the facts or, in other words, to the agreed facts, giving up any attempt to make sense of them. For history has to do with truth and knowledge, and any narrative that tries to make sense of the agreed facts seems to go beyond what can be assessed as true or false. We may call this as a "minimalist" approach to history:

¹⁶ See *ivi*, p. 239.

¹⁷ See *ivi*, pp. 240, 257.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 240.

The point is that a minimalist style has to hold its own or earn its place against others. The ever deceptive word “really” can suggest that in simply telling the truth, and that anything else is not just fiction but falsehood. That is the error of what is often called “positivism”. The claim that there is no overall or large-scale sense to be made of the past is itself a larger-scale claim, and it has to be earned, like any of the others. Perhaps it can be earned, but it does not come as a free gift from metaphysics to history¹⁹.

The minimalist approach becomes deprived of its metaphysical gist, however, once we acknowledge that we do not confront facts as such, but within the context of a narrative or an inquiry. It follows that the minimalist approach has to address the same issues concerning the relevance of their inquiry that affect more ambitious approaches. Hence, there no definite metaphysical benefit to be expected and the question is no longer whether one must stick to the facts and leave aside any attempt to make sense of them, since any narrative, minimal or otherwise, must always rely on making sense. The real issue for history is thus deprived of its metaphysical scent and reduced to the question as to what narrative is more appropriate to any given occasion. It may occur that the minimalist story should prevail on some such occasions, but I will sketch some reason why it cannot always be so. And this reason has to do with the structure itself of making sense as Williams elucidates it.

Regarding the structure of making sense, two constitutive features are highlighted: (a) making sense is relative to an audience, and (b) making sense is not a matter of the will. Regarding the first point, «the basic idea is that it makes sense to a certain person (or group) *that* P. We can take ‘P’ as the story»²⁰. We can try to make sense of a certain action in terms of one or another story, in terms of either P or Q, but the ability of either story to make sense of that action will be relative to a certain audience. P can make sense of this action to audience A, whereas failing to provide this outcome for audience B that may

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 246.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 235.

rather prefer a different story Q. It is important to stress that audiences and stories are not totally alien to each other and, therefore, that different audiences may derive some enlightenment by confronting their disparate stories so that some sort of agreement may eventually emerge. But how is this to take place? Here we come to the second feature mentioned above: it is not a matter of the will, that is, it is not up to an audience to decide that a certain story makes to them:

What makes sense to someone is not, in any connection, a matter of the will; even in a situation of decision, although the agent decides to do the action, he does not decide that the action, or the kind of action, or the considerations that support the action make sense to him. People can come to see, and come to see quite suddenly, that some course of events or someone's reasons for action make sense to them, but this comes as a discovery²¹.

Here we come to the idea of resistance that led to the idea of authenticity in the first place. Williams connects this resistance to the notion of need: «if their minds do change, and this is because the new interpretation better suits their needs, their needs do not figure as a premise in an argument»²². The phrase “suits their needs” invites a mere instrumental relation between a story and the agent's needs, but a mere instrumental relation will not do. We are not contemplating a situation where a certain agent, say, a politician, cynically supports a certain policy just because it fosters her political career. This would count as a mere instrumental association with a certain story, but in such a case the most we can say is that it makes sense for this politician to endorse that story rather than claim that the story itself makes sense to her. And, yet, it is the latter sense that we want to apprehend, that is, a more intimate manner in which a story “suits” the agent's needs. Perhaps, we can appeal here to the notion of “expression”:

²¹ Ivi, pp. 261-262.

²² Ivi, p. 262.

One way in which an agent's beliefs and desires, in general his motivational states, make sense of his decisions and actions is that they can explain them. But they can explain them only because they are expressed in them, and that is a relation which can hold only between an agent's motivational states and that agent's actions. When an action presents itself to the agent as the thing to do, his conviction that it makes sense to do it is an expression of his motivational state, and this basic level of its making sense to him underlies the possibility that those motivational states can serve, in an explanatory framework, to make sense of his action to others or retrospectively to himself²³.

So, we could say that a story makes sense to an audience inasmuch as it expresses its motivational states. Motivational states and needs may not overlap; in fact, they typically don't overlap, since needs are a rather objective matter that has to do with the survival conditions of an organism or a group. And, indeed, an agent can have self-destructive impulses or, more commonly, impulses that depart from what best could serve her needs. But, regarding making sense, what really matters is not so much an agent's real needs but her motivational states. So, I suggest to stick to the latter and leave aside any appeal to a more objective notion of need.

We may now go back to the dispute with minimalism and reply that no particular kind of story can intelligibly claim primacy over the rest, since the ability to make sense is relative to an audience and escapes the control of the will. So, there may be audiences best served by a minimalist story, while some others may need to make sense of certain facts in a different way. Of course, there is much to be said in each particular situation in favor or against any given kind of story, but we have a general argument to deny the overall primacy of a minimal narrative.

Let me now explore some implications of this analysis for the interconnections between sincerity and authenticity. We must firstly give up the idea that agents do face facts that are determined regardless of any narrative, however minimal. For

²³ Ivi, p. 237.

facts, all facts, involve some minimal narrative. A consequence of this is that the ability to face facts goes hand in hand with the capacity to make sense. So, the issue becomes what kind of story makes sense of a certain situation, including an agent's actions or experiences. Secondly, it seems that when granting an agent's sincerity but challenging her authenticity, we are somewhat taking a similar step as when agreeing on the facts but disputing how to make sense of them. This does not imply, however, that sincerity and authenticity are disparate, independent phenomena, since they both turn around the notion of making sense, as we have seen. Moreover, it seems that sincerity and authenticity are complementary notions because we cannot really individuate authenticity except by contrasting it to mere sincerity, and the other way round. So, it seems that we can conclude that the authority view was right in its shift toward self-knowledge as an achievement for there is no change of topic after all, but an elucidation of the ways in which sincerity and authenticity are interconnected.

It is important to stress that the account of sincerity I have just sketched makes room for the epistemic privilege of the first person perspective for privilege does not require infallibility, since the mini-narratives that structure the facts we sincerely self-ascribe can also be challenged, even though it may be a constitutive condition of agency that such mini-narratives are not called into question in normal circumstances. Besides, the notion of authenticity opens the door to a mismatch between what an agent takes herself to be and what she actually is and, consequently, we are invited to grant a privileged access to the former that is denied to the latter. The possibility of this kind of mismatch becomes the more pregnant the more one departs from mini-narratives and seek to make sense of wider aspects of one's own life. The issue I would like to address next is how this mismatch can be discerned and eventually overcome by the agent herself or, in other words, what kind of exercise in self-awareness may contribute to this purpose. Here is where the Williams' notion of acknowledgment comes into play, as well as

Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience. I will conclude that a certain kind of self-perception lies at the heart of our agency and is, thereby, strictly first-personal, even though no systematic epistemic privilege can be vindicated.

3. Acknowledgment and Obedience

I have just rejected that a sincere self-declaration could intelligibly be construed as a report concerning a fact whose identity is just there to be found out, regardless of any mini-narrative. This association of a fact to be sincerely reported with its integration within a pattern or mini-narrative, has a significant impact as to how the quest for authenticity is to be conceived. It implies a rejection of the primeval concept of authenticity according to which the agent's reality lies just out there to be discovered, like a fact temporarily placed out of sight:

The whole point of authenticity as a characteristically modern value has lain in the attempt to regain in some reflective form the unexpressed certainties which are supposed to have structured the pre-modern world. But, however authenticity is expressed as an ideal, it is clear that its demands will not necessarily coincide with the demands of anyone else, or anyone else's authenticity²⁴.

What sort of certainty can be retained, though, once the concept of authenticity is anchored to the idea of making sense and the corresponding notion of resistance to the agent's decisions and, in other words, to her will? If it can't just be discovered, how else is one's authentic self to be discerned? I regard Williams' notion of "acknowledgment" as quite helpful in this respect. To elucidate what this notion might comprise, I will appeal to Williams' own elucidation of this concept in combination with Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience and her vindication of a concrete kind of attention.

Williams introduces the notion of acknowledgement to account for the way an agent relates to, say, her national or religious identity. A certain agent might just discover at some

²⁴ Ivi, p. 183.

point that she is a Jew, but regard this condition as a trivial fact about herself as much as the color of her own eyes might be. After the Nazi ascent, many Jews ended up regarding themselves as such, but they could no longer address their Jewishness as a trivial fact about themselves. They had to “acknowledge” that their lives had been shaped by it:

A relevant notion here is acknowledgement. Someone may come to acknowledge a certain affiliation as an identity, and this is neither a mere discovery nor, certainly, a mere decision. It is though he were forced to recognize the authority of this identity as giving a structure and a focus to his life and his outlook. There were circumstances in which what was earlier a mere recognition of a fact may come to compel acknowledgement, as when many assimilationist Jews in the 1930s came to acknowledge a Jewish and perhaps a Zionist identity under the thought that there was no way in which without evasion they could go on as though it made no difference that they were Jewish people²⁵.

To elaborate on the notion of acknowledgment, Williams appeals initially to the contrast between discovery and decision, but this distinction fails to provide a positive account of a kind of attitude that could have at the same time an epistemic and a practical import. The idea “being forced to” points to a more unified experience, though. In some previous writings, Williams introduced the notion of practical necessity in order to grasp a rather similar experience²⁶. This sort of necessity has to do with a kind of motivation that the agent doesn’t experience as coming from within herself, that is, as depending on one or another desire or drive she may eventually have, but as “a confrontation” with something:

The experience is like being *confronted* with something, a law that is part of the world in which one lives [...] It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come “from outside” in the way that conclusions of practical necessity

²⁵ Ivi, p. 203.

²⁶ See Williams (1981), (1993), pp. 75-76.

always seem to come from outside-from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others²⁷.

How is the world that the agent confronts to be conceived of? For, quite paradoxically, Williams claims that practical necessity must come both from outside and from deeply inside. How is this sort of experience at all possible? Williams says very little on the positive side. He tends to insist on a number of dichotomies that we must skip, but these negative claims are in need of more positive account if we are to understand what practical necessity or acknowledgement actually consists of. In this section, I will try to make some progress in this direction by examining Weil's distinction between two notions of obedience.

Weil seeks to depart from a model of the self deeply entrenched in Western societies, namely, that according to which a truly valuable life must be ruled by reason to the detriment of passions. One must elucidate the principles of reason and then keep one's passions at bay thanks to the effort of the will. The notion of authenticity in this model is confined to the agent's faithfulness to the principles of reason that all rational agents are supposed to share, whereby the notion of authenticity becomes deprived of the scent of the specific to each particular individual, except for the many ways in which one may go astray. Champions of this model assume that it fosters morality insofar as they are convinced that the principles of reason include the principles of morality and also that the effort of the will can always prevail. Weil argues, though, that

²⁷ Williams (2002), pp. 190-191. In a similar way, Williams claims: «The recognition of practical necessity must involve an understanding at once of one's own moral powers and incapacities, and of what the world permits, and the recognition of a limit which is neither simply external to the self, nor yet a product of the will, is what can lend a special authority or dignity to such decisions – something that can be heard in Luther's famous saying, for instance, but also, from a world far removed from what Luther, Kant, or we, might call "duty", in the words of Ajax before his suicide: "now I am going where my way must go"» (Williams 1981, pp. 130-131).

this last conviction rests on a poor understanding of the role of the will in the dynamics of the self. Once this role is properly elucidated, it becomes clear that an alternative model of the self is needed if morality is to be promoted. For this purpose, let me firstly challenge the privileged role traditionally ascribed to the effort of the will in our ability to lead a moral life and, secondly, sketch how an alternative model, focused on the idea of attention, will not only foster our ability to act morally, but our capacity to articulate a more authentic life. These two steps are somewhat present in the following passage «Action is the pointer of the balance. We must not touch the pointer but the weight. Exactly the same rule applies to opinions. If we fail to observe it there is either confusion or suffering»²⁸.

Action is what we want to transform or, more generally, the overall direction of our own lives. If we touch the pointer of the balance for this purpose, we will only temporarily alter the course of our actions, but once the pressure is released a pendular movement will take our lives back to the old track. Touching the pointer amounts, in Weil's reflection, to an effort of the will that is thus construed as energy consuming and, therefore, as limited in amount and also as shallow, since it is unable to transform the motivational structure of the self. How could this transformation be induced instead? By redistributing the weights in the pans, one might say; but how can that be done? And here a cryptic remark comes up: Exactly the same rule applies to opinions.

Our views are certainly not changed at will, they are the product of our understanding of the corresponding subject matter. I am forced to believe that the keyboard is on my desk as I type this sentence. I can't deny it. I can't intelligibly choose not to believe it. The same happens with the conclusion of a mathematical proof. It is imposed upon me, but it is not a kind of imposition that degrades me; on the contrary, by understanding it my life is enriched. This sort of imposition involves, according to Weil, a kind of obedience, namely,

²⁸ Weil (1963), p. 44.

obedience to something I confront: an order that is out there for me to acknowledge. The ability to obey implies a sensitivity on the side of the self. This opposes to the kind of imposition and obedience that is standardly associated with passions: they just come from within, they are idiosyncratic and yielding to their necessity degrades the self. As Weil puts it:

Obedience. There are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship of things. In the first case we do what we are driven to by the imagination that fills up empty spaces. We can affix a variety of labels to it, often with a show of truth, including righteousness and God. If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not any nothing of necessity and we have no sense of obedience²⁹.

Human beings seem to be subject to two sorts of orders that come with the corresponding notions of necessity and obedience. The order of gravity shapes our lives only insofar as we are prey to a certain epistemic distortion: we take for real what it is just a creature of our imagination. This confusion derives from our difficulty to confront a certain fact, namely, the void. Filling up the void with the products of our imagination is an activity we must refrain from if we are to honor the second sort of order, namely, the relations of things. We let ourselves be guided by the actual relations of things only insofar as we are able get rid of the temptation to distort them due to the laws of gravity. There is an obvious epistemic benefit in this attitude, but also a gain in agency. The order of gravity degrades the self, whereas an agent's ability to act on the basis of the relations of things, like when accepting the result of a mathematical proof, makes of her the master of her life. For this connection between agency and faithfulness to the relations of things to be at all plausible, Weil must have a rather specific understanding of what is included within the relations of things.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 43. See ivi, p. 38.

The relations of things does not simply comprise what natural sciences may recognize as a fact, but must encompass the moral features of our actions and other evaluative features as well. But these features are not in the world the way particles and motion are. Evaluative features depend on our response to the world in a more interwoven manner than particles do. We cannot identify an action as cruel, generous or shameful except by reference to some emotional responses on our side³⁰. There is no need, however, to construe these responses as completely idiosyncratic. It is true that they can vary from one to another individual, from one to another context, but they cannot intelligibly vary in a way that is arbitrary from a moral point of view. Two people can actually disagree about the legitimacy of the death penalty, but for their view to be at all moral their disagreement must be grounded on features that are recognizably moral. This imposes an order not only on the world but on the agent's experience as well. Only those aspects of our experience that are shaped by this sort of narrative discipline must be taken into account in the way the relations of things are individuated³¹.

We are now in a position to explicate why what comes from outside in our practical deliberations comes from deep inside as well. For we are dealing with an outside order that is individuated in light of our actual responses, although not all actual responses qualify for this purpose, only those that comply with a certain order. We thus get a sense of the contribution of the inside to the outside order, but what about its depth? An aspect of its depth has already been pointed out: our moods and whims are to be excluded, something more orderly must be taken into consideration. But this order needn't be very profound. It may be rather stereotypical, so that the agent's life is trapped within certain stereotypical practices and, therefore, the idea of order by itself makes little sense of what she really is

³⁰ See Strawson (1962), Stroud (2011), ch 4.

³¹ For a detailed discussion of the concept of narrative discipline, see Corbí (2012), chh. 4-5.

or, in other words, of what counts as an authentic life for her. So, a notion of depth is required that goes beyond a number of stereotypical demands. That notion can be derived from the relations of things inasmuch as stereotypical demands may respond to an order, but trivially it is not the order that the relations of things impose. The stereotypical order is constitutively a kind of order to which our imagination, to put it in Weil's terms, must have contributed to and, therefore, belongs to the order of gravity and fails to grasp the relations of things. Let me now present the order of gravity in some more detail, so that we can better apprehend how obedience to the relations of things is to be enhanced and how it contributes to the articulation of the outside and the deep inside that is constitutive of an authentic life.

4. A Certain Kind of Attention

Weil construes the order of gravity as a closed system. Like a physical system, it is governed by a set of laws that accounts for every event within that system. Human beings belong to the order of gravity and can't escape it except by an alien intervention, namely, the grace «All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception»³².

Of course, a really closed system cannot coherently admit of any external interference. The idea itself of grace makes no sense from the perspective of gravity. But, once we recognize that our psychic forces must be identified within a pattern or a mini-narrative, then we can understand how our psychological dispositions are permeable to changes in our narrative and, in this respect, the order of gravity can no longer be regarded as fully closed, but the product of some well-entrenched narratives that can, nevertheless, be modified. Room is thus made for interferences from outside the order of gravity and, derivatively, for our capacity to escape that order. But, how can this be done? Let me present the negative program first.

³² Weil (1963), p. 1.

The order of gravity follows the logic of compensation, like chemical reactions searching for equilibrium:

Human mechanics. Whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering (either by ill-treating someone or calling forth their pity) in order to reduce it, and he does really reduce it in this way. In the case of a man in the uttermost depths, whom no one pities, who is without power to ill-treat anyone (if he has no child or being who loves him), the suffering remains within and poisons him. This is imperative, like gravity. How can one gain deliverance? How gain deliverance from a force which is like gravity?³³.

Time and imagination play a crucial role in the logic of compensation. If we cannot reasonably expect to be compensated at present for our efforts or our distress, we tend to project such a compensation upon an imaginary future. Religious views typically provide the most robust source of imaginary compensation: « We must leave on one side the beliefs which fill up voids and sweeten what is bitter. The belief in immortality. The belief in the utility of sin: *etiam peccata*. The belief in the providential ordering of events – in short the “consolations” which are ordinarily sought in religion»³⁴.

If we are to escape the order of gravity, we must renounce the logic of compensation and face our sorrow by avoiding any imaginary compensation: «Affliction in itself is not enough for the attainment of total detachment. Unconsoled affliction is necessary. There must be no consolation -no apparent consolation. Ineffable consolation then comes down»³⁵.

This is the negative program. What else can we do? How can one avoid seeking consolation? What kind of attention is

³³ Ivi, p. 5.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 13.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 12. Weil stresses, for instance, that militiamen in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) invented stories of success to confront death: «The militiamen of the *Spanish Testament* who invented victories in order to endure death: an example of imagination filling up the void. Although we should gain nothing by the victory, we can bear to die for a cause which is going to triumph, nor for one which be defeated» (ivi, p. 16).

required? Weil is not very specific in this respect. She abounds in examples that point to a certain direction, but this kind of attention is not easy to conceptualize because it has been relegated in our Western cultures to the peripheral³⁶. Weil claims, for instance, that this kind of attention has to do with a certain kind of “passivity”. Not the way we are passive when yielding to our passions, but a sort of passivity that makes room for “a new aspect to dawn”: «A certain way of doing a Latin prose, a certain way of tackling a problem in geometry (and not just any way) make up a system of gymnastics of the attention calculated to give it a greater aptitude for prayer. Method of understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns»³⁷.

We can't make an aspect emerge at will. The effort of the will is useless, even counterproductive, to this end. The agent must expose herself to the situation and wait patiently for the aspect to dawn. We are thus placed in the vicinity of the phenomenon of aspect perception, that is, we are dealing with a sophisticated version of the duck-rabbit case. An agent can be blind with regard to a certain aspect, even though it is there to be seen by the right perceiver. Weil encourages us to cultivate our sensitivity to the moral aspects of a situation, so that our capacity to respond morally may be enhanced, since it is part of our ability to properly perceive a certain moral situation that we are motivated to respond in a certain way. The emergence of the response is part of the aspect to dawn. We are, as a result, in a position to renounce the effort of the will as the fundamental motivational force, since it calls for a compensation, and relies mainly on what one can't help doing once one has properly perceived a moral situation: «We should do only those righteous actions which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, which we are unable not to do, but, through well directed attention, we

³⁶ And, yet, I have argued that our scientific practices, which are surely central to our world-view, rely on this kind of attention. See Corbí, Prades (2000), chh. 5-6, Corbí (2003), ch 9.

³⁷ Weil (1963), p. 109. See *ivi*, p. 106.

should always keep on increasing the number of those which we are unable not to do»³⁸.

In that case, the need for a compensation does not arise because one acts not for a purpose but out of certain kind of necessity, namely, the one that is constitutive of our ability to perceive the relations of things: «To act not *for* an object but *from* necessity. I cannot do otherwise. It is not an action but a sort of passivity. Inactive action»³⁹.

This acting from a certain kind of necessity, namely, the necessity that imposes itself as a result of *seeing* the relations of things, can help us to understand the sort of imposition that lies behind the idea of authenticity. Resistance on the side of our psychological dispositions was presented as a symptom or a hint that the agent's decisions or projects have departed from what one really is. Resistance can then be construed as an invitation to discern, to elucidate what sort of decision or commitment may fit with the relations of things. This response will impose itself upon the agent as a result of exposing herself to the details and nuances of the situation and trying to dismiss any imaginary consolations that might prevent her from facing the void. Only such a response will stem from the relations of things.

It is important to stress that, among the aspects of the situation to be attended to, there is the particular and subtle way in which the agent emotionally and bodily responds to what is out there. The gestalt to be formed must take into consideration that it is a particular agent with a specific character that must respond. Only a gestalt of this kind might really acknowledge and constitute a guide for her life. This involves, needless to say, a certain amount of self-examination that apparently bring us back to the detectivist view. Still, the notion of "self-perception" I am vindicating does not presuppose, contrary to what the detectivist claims, that there are inner facts just waiting to be discovered, because the aspects I am referring to form a part of a gestalt, that is, a certain kind of narrative, the elements of which

³⁸ Ivi, p. 39.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

can only be determined by the way they relate to each other. The authority view is thereby challenged because, contrary to what it claims, some forms of self-perception are strictly first-personal. In fact, what I have argued is that such forms of self-perception lie at the heart of our agency: they come both from outside and from deep inside, even if there is room for much uncertainty, as we have seen⁴⁰.

5. To Sum up

This paper is meant to be a contribution both to the current debate on self-knowledge in the analytic tradition and to a defense of the philosophical virtues of a closer interrelation between the analytics and the continentals. Regarding the latter, I hope to have suggested how fruitful this interrelation could be insofar as some distinctions in Simone Weil play a crucial role in my contribution to the current analytic debate on self-knowledge. What are the main aspects of this contribution, though? It is clear that the traditional analytic debate on self-knowledge has recently been enlarged to encompass issues that, far from emphasizing the epistemic privileges of the first-person perspective, highlight how self-knowledge can be a major achievement. In light of the interconnections between sincerity and authenticity, I have argued that this shift does not amount to a change of topic, contrary to what some might claim. The idea of authenticity makes room for a mismatch between what the agent takes herself to be and what she really is; whereas the notion of sincerity seems to be confined to what she takes herself to be. I have objected to an understanding of sincerity in

⁴⁰ Some might object that my approach takes it for granted that some mental states (i.e., those that are subject to a narrative discipline) have a dual direction of fit and, therefore, that value and fact have unduly been blended. There are, indeed, standard objections against this assumption that I have no room to address here. Let me mention, though, that the authority view, which I am trying to revise, has no trouble granting it as well (Dunn, 2006, ch. 2). Moreover, there is no reason why my previous remarks could not be construed as grounds for this assumption, even though they may fail to counteract some standard objections as they stand.

terms of a report and have, therefore, challenged the idea that agents are confronted with inner facts that are just there to be discovered. The idea of a mini-narrative has come into the picture as a rather pervasive element in the individuation of such facts. This has induced me to stress the importance of the notion of making sense and the role it plays both in sincerity and authenticity. Given some constitutive features of making sense (i.e, that it is relative to an audience and it cannot be experienced at will), I have argued that there is no overall privilege of a minimalist story and that part of what must be ascertained is the kind of story that is more appropriate on each occasion to an agent's ability to lead an authentic life.

I have finally addressed the issue as to how an agent may discern the kind of narrative that makes sense to her. For this purpose, I have examined two notions of obedience that Weil distinguishes: obedience to the order of gravity and to the relations of things. Contrary to what she claims, there is no need to conceive of the order of gravity as strictly closed, once we acknowledge that our psychological condition is not composed of facts that are there to be discovered, but presupposes the agents commitment to one or another mini-narrative. What kind of interference is then possible? How is the agent to enhance her ability to honor the relations of things? A kind of attention seems to be in order. The agent must first expose herself to some situations; seek to leave aside any consolations and thus wait for some morally relevant aspects to dawn. Attention must be paid not only to the outside aspects of the situation, but to how it affects the agent herself given her specific character. Only after all those aspects have been heeded, can we be motivated to act in a certain way and can our action be regarded as authentic, that is, as respectful to the relations of things.

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Abstract

In this paper I propose a certain account of how the epistemic privilege of the first-person perspective relates to a certain kind of authority upon oneself. I will challenge Robert Dunn's and Richard Moran's view on this subject matter, and sketch an alternative approach. For this purpose, I will firstly take advantage of Bernard Williams' notions of acknowledgement and making sense and, secondly, I will make use of Simone Weil's distinction between the two senses of obedience and the associated notion of attention. In contrast with Moran's and Dunn's view, I will conclude that a certain sort of self-perception lies at the heart of our agency and, therefore, in our capacity to lead a relatively authentic life. I will argue that this kind of self-perception escapes the standard worries about a private mind but is still specifically first-personal.

Keywords: Self-knowledge, Authenticity, Obedience, Williams, Weil