

Self-ignorance and Self-improvement: Sketching a Reevaluation

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the phenomenon of self-ignorance in the context of self-improvement. At least since the Delphic command *gnothi seauton*—“Know thyself!”—and certainly since Socrates, the idea that gaining self-knowledge constitutes moral (and not just epistemic) progress has been part of philosophical orthodoxy. The corollary to this bit of doctrine is that self-ignorance is something to be avoided, and never willfully sought. I will sketch a challenge to this orthodox view—first by describing some ways self-ignorance might, in the right circumstances, actually help our projects of self-building and self-improvement. Then, having given a fuller and fairer picture of the role self-ignorance *can* play in human life, I will make some gestures toward the moral reevaluation it deserves.¹

Before going any further, though, I should lay out a few key assumptions, which I take to be relatively uncontroversial:

- 1) Whatever the self is, it is at least partly constituted by things like desires, priorities, preferences, abilities, dispositions, concerns, and commitments.
- 2) Such features of selves can be described in more or less accurate ways. (E.g.: it would be accurate to say of Susan B. Anthony that she cared deeply about social justice; it would be inaccurate to say of Shakespeare that he appreciated a well-mixed mojito.)
- 3) We can take up these descriptions and apply them reflexively: we have opinions and interpretations of ourselves, which may be more or less accurate.²

¹ Of course, this paper is far from the first attempt to challenge the orthodox view of self-knowledge and self-ignorance. One thinks of Nietzsche, for instance: ““I have done that,” says my memory. “I cannot have done that,” says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 68)

² I am leaving totally aside the well-known puzzles about self-deception. For one thing, the problems they address are not directly germane to my present concerns. For another, self-deception should be distinguished from self-ignorance. Self-deception can interact and overlap with self-ignorance, but the latter is my specific quarry in this paper.

- 4) These self-descriptions are central to our projects of self-improvement: one needs some picture of the current state of the self in order to form and pursue a self-transformative course of action.

This paper will stick closely to everyday kinds of self-ignorance, but it should be noted that this phenomenon can occur in forms so extreme as to be pathological—for instance, in persons with severe dissociative disorders. Such people may find it difficult, even impossible, to live as an integrated, coherent self. These unfortunate cases show us terribly wrong we can be about ourselves, and how terribly we can suffer as a result. Acknowledging such cases may render us more willing to face the (hopefully) less radical kinds of self-ignorance in our own lives, and to reckon their practical consequences.

2. Self-Ignorance and Self-Confidence

Since a general survey of this topic isn't feasible here, I will focus on the phenomenon of *self-confidence*. My strategy is to illustrate and motivate the notion that self-ignorance can play a more constructive role in human life than the orthodox view has tended to suppose.

Suppose Joan wants to be self-confident because she sees self-confidence as holding two sorts of value. First, a kind of prudential value: Joan judges (let us say correctly) that being more self-confident would better help her achieve certain of his goals. Second, self-confidence has value in itself: it is an attribute of the kind of person that Joan wants to be.

Now, we (and Joan) might wonder whether genuine self-confidence requires that one be *accurate* in one's high self-assessment. Intuitively, the answer is no: after all, we readily attribute self-confidence to people whose high self-opinions may, for all we know, be incorrect—even to those people whose high self-opinions we *know* to be incorrect. If Joan's goal is to be self-confident with respect to, e.g., her wit, then she should aim at thinking herself witty—but that opinion need not be

accurate. In fact, if Joan is *not* witty, being self-confident in this respect will require that her self-opinion be *inaccurate*—that is, it will require self-ignorance. Self-ignorance will be a constitutive feature of her self-confidence.³

Joan's case shows that there can be valuable attributes of the self whose reality may be constituted—rather than obscured—by self-ignorance. True, we might speak of Joan's having *false confidence*, but this locution is misleading; false confidence isn't like false teeth. What is false—i.e., inaccurate—is Joan's *belief* about her wit; her self-confidence is the genuine article, and genuinely has the kinds of value she judged it to have. Joan's self-confidence helps her better achieve her goals, and she is now closer to the person she wants to be.

Of course, things don't always work out so nicely: self-confidence may have all kinds of deleterious effects, and the risk of such effects seems higher when that confidence is misplaced. It would be better, we think, to have high opinions of oneself that are also *accurate*. This is the ideal urged by the self-perfectionist line of thinking, from Aristotle to Emerson to Cavell. But this ideal simply isn't within reach when the beliefs required for accurate self-knowledge clash with the beliefs required for confidence. This is Joan's predicament: because she is not witty, she cannot (yet) be both confident *and* correct about her wit.

3. Self-Confidence, *Faux* and Real

Here is a trite little story: Bill, a nerdy high school freshman, wants to ask Suzy, his dazzlingly out-of-his-league classmate, to the big dance. He seeks out a wise upperclassman, who offers him sage advice: "Dude, ladies like self-confidence." For Bill, though, this advice is only half helpful—he knows he hasn't much to be confident about. Lacking other options, he decides to *affect* self-confidence—that is, to bluff. A seasoned poker player, Bill knows that the more he lets himself

³ We should note that Joan's desire to be self-confident about her wit is distinct from the desire she may or may not have *actually to be witty*.

think about the fact that he is bluffing, the less convincing his bluff will be. He therefore resolves to banish or ignore (as best he can) the nagging thought that he is only *affecting* confidence—if he can fool himself, even briefly, his prospects for fooling Suzy will be that much better. With a self-deceived swagger, Bill at last approaches Suzy and pops the big question; she, finding his confident manner appealing, says yes.

Let's suppose this successful episode reinforces the behavioral patterns Bill has adopted, and the (false) beliefs about himself he has tried to cultivate. These patterns of behavior and belief engender further positive changes in Bill's life, which have further reinforcing effects. Somewhere in the back of Bill's mind is the thought that his self-confidence is only feigned—but his belief in its genuineness feels so good, and his confident behavior is going so well for him, that this thought becomes easier and easier to ignore. Over the long haul, Bill's dispositions to act confidently and avow himself to be confident stabilize and solidify; they put down roots. And somewhere along the way, Bill goes from only feigning self-confidence to *really having it*. When his confident manner and readiness to avow his own self-confidence have become sufficiently robust and steady—then these are truly parts of his *self*, and not just an act he is putting on.

Notice the weird but vital role self-ignorance plays in this story of self-transformation. At the story's start, Bill neither has self-confidence nor believes himself to have it. By the end of the story, Bill has acquired self-confidence and the belief that he has it. Lacking other options, and needing only to *appear* self-confident, Bill instills in himself the false belief that he is a confident person. That belief shapes his behavior, which changes his fortunes for the better. His changing fortunes reinforce his behaviors and beliefs, which continue to change his fortunes for the better—and so on, until we can say that his self-confidence is no longer merely an affectation, but the genuine article. The only feasible way for him to have the true belief "I am self-confident" was to first engender in

himself the *false* belief “I am self-confident.” The tactic of purposive self-ignorance not only solved Bill’s confidence problem; it also wound up resolving its own problematic nature.

4. Toward the Normative Questions

The stories of Joan and Bill are meant to dramatize some of the ways self-ignorance, even willful self-ignorance, can be a boon to our projects of self-transformation. The orthodox position—that self-ignorance is to be avoided, and never to be sought—has tended to neglect these sorts of possibilities. But now that we’ve seen a bit more clearly the kinds of role self-ignorance *can* play in our projects of self-enhancement, perhaps we can move toward a fairer hearing of the role it *should* play. In some circumstances, like Joan’s, one may wish to embody an attribute that is partly constituted by self-ignorance. At other times, cultivating self-ignorance can be a first step toward some goal of personal transformation and, when deployed appropriately, engender a kind of self-transforming feedback loop: it can give one the confidence to behave *as if* one had a particular quality or attribute (which one really does want to have), and as that confidence and its resultant behavioral dispositions stabilize and solidify with positive environmental feedback, one may actually come to possess the quality or attribute in question.⁴

Of course, there are worries that need to be addressed as we assess this essentially instrumental kind of value. First, the proviso “when deployed appropriately” is important. In many cases, the kind of positive feedback loop that so helps Bill simply won’t be available or advisable. Shaquille O’Neal might, by a massive effort of self-deception, convince himself that he has what it takes to be a champion horse jockey. But even if his self-ignorance were complete enough to profoundly change his patterns of behavior, his inevitable failure *qua* jockey would bring him

⁴ That our propensity for self-ignorance, intentionally induced and otherwise, may have some previously unappreciated benefits has been a topic of interest for contemporary researchers in social and evolutionary psychology. See, e.g., Alexander 1987; Johnson *et al.* 2002; Sedikides *et al.* 1998; Starek & Keating 1991; Taylor & Gollwitzer 1995; Trivers 1991, 2000; van Leeuwen 2007; Welles 1986; Whittaker-Bleuler 1988; Wrangham 1999; Zuckerman 1979.

inexorably to the truth. As with Bill, Shaq's self-ignorance would eventually self-correct—but not in the way he would want.

Another worry may be raised in connection with the idea that by essentially faking an attribute, one may eventually come to possess it—a strategy encapsulated by the Alcoholics Anonymous slogan, “fake it until you make it.” One might reasonably wonder if adopters of this strategy ever truly “make it,” or if they can, at best, only come to fake it exceptionally well. The worry is that self-ignorance might not actually enable the attainment of an attribute or the achievement of a goal—it would only allow one to (mistakenly) think that the attribute had been attained or the goal had been reached. I submit that, beyond a certain point, the distinction is meaningless. Imagine a recovering addict, clean for years and, judging from all her observable behavior and avowals, sincerely and wholeheartedly committed to remaining sober. But suppose we ask her pointedly, “How can you be sure you've really *changed*? Isn't it possible you're still just faking it, though you've learned the act so well that it fools yourself and everyone else besides?” Her reply might well be, “Of course it's possible, but *I don't think I could tell the difference*. At the start, I used to feel like I was faking it; now, I feel like I have genuinely changed. If all I'm doing is still just fooling myself, I suppose that's possible—but the possibility doesn't hold any danger for me, because this is the way I have *come to live*.” If the changes in one's self and one's self-conception have been profound enough and have remained stable enough, the distinction between faking it and making it seems to dissolve.

So, if carefully managed, self-ignorance can have a kind of instrumental value. But I want to suggest, though quite sketchily, that it may have a more fundamental kind of value, one connected to the very idea of self-transformation and self-improvement.⁵ My suggestion is that we are always and

⁵ This is not to say that harmony between self and self-interpretation is not of great value—indeed, some degree of it seems central to our continued existence as psychologically solvent beings.

inevitably something of a stranger to ourselves, and that this basic self-ignorance is actually constitutive of our experience of agency. A strange friend to this suggestion can be found in Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego*, in which Sartre describes how our ability to surprise ourselves issues from a fundamental, inescapable gap between the *I* and the *me*:

“The spontaneity of the ego does escape from itself...so that the ego is always surpassed by what it produces, although, from another point of view, it *is* what it produces. Hence the classic surprises: “*I*, I could do that!”—“*I*, I could hate my father!”—etc. Here, evidently, the concrete totality of the *me* intuited up to this time weighs down the productive *I* and holds it back a little from what the *I* has just produced. The linkage of the ego to its states remains, therefore, an unintelligible spontaneity.”⁶

Self-transformation necessarily involves a kind of *spontaneity*—the breaking or creation of a habit, the cultivation of an aesthetic taste, or the development of a talent. When we change ourselves, even in ways we have planned and intended, we surprise ourselves. We are surpassed by what we produce.

I don't wish to step into the nasty problems about the metaphysics of free agency, but I do want to submit that Sartre has glommed onto something important here: a linkage between self-ignorance and freedom. Our fundamental self-ignorance—the fact that we remain to ourselves an “unintelligible spontaneity”—is what constitutes the experience of ourselves as free agents, as “active power” in Thomas Reid's sense of the term. Philosophy has long venerated this freedom, and rightly so—but to venerate free agency while denigrating self-ignorance is to ignore the deep connections between the two. To live as a free and active power requires that one's “real” self always remain just beyond one's ken. If we could know ourselves with perfect, static Cartesian

⁶ Sartre 1960, p. 80.

transparency, our sense of ourselves as free, spontaneous, self-surprising agents would evaporate.

Perhaps, as Sartre claims, we cannot really know ourselves, and perhaps that's a good thing.

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