

Making and Finding Oneself

Jan Bransen

ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to develop a philosophically acceptable account of what it means to say that certain claims of self-knowledge generate reasons for action. The paper concentrates in detail on the imagined case of a Dutch farmer who sincerely believes that deep down he really is a Surma warrior, and that this self-knowledge requires him to undergo a series of 'trans-cultural' plastic surgeries. It is claimed that many ordinary practical problems share significant features with this bizarre case. Some useful concepts are introduced and discussed: the idea of an alternative of oneself, a response-dependency account of evaluative properties, and three levels of self-knowledge, involving the ideas of intelligible order, explanatory power and peace of mind.

KEY WORDS: alternative of oneself, evaluative property, peace of mind, personal identity, practical problem, reason for action, response dependency, self-knowledge.

1. Dutch farmer or Surma warrior?

The Dutch performer and director Arjan Ederveen once made a mock documentary about a farmer from the Northern part of the Netherlands who underwent a series of, so-called, trans-cultural plastic surgeries that turned him into a black warrior of the Surma-tribe, a tribe that lives in the impenetrable wilderness of Zaire. These surgeries were the practical result of an extended period of uncertainty that came to an end when the farmer finally made up his mind and came to the indubitable conviction that he really was a Surma warrior unfortunately, and mistakenly, born into the body of a Dutch farmer.

Despite its incredible queerness, the movie succeeds in making the audience inclined to belief the farmer's story. We see interviews with his parents, his wife and children, his counsellor, the surgeon, and with himself, and we come to understand how this man suffered from childhood onwards from deep feelings of alienation from his social and natural environment. We are told that this farmer is admitted to a mental ward where, by lucky accident, he hears the sound of

African drums, which touch him very deeply. An agitated attempt to know more and ever more of the Surma tribe whose music he heard follows. He reads books and watches videos about the Surma, and slowly comes to believe that the incredible fact must be true: he is a Surma warrior born in the wrong place and in the wrong body.

Once we've understood his condition, we almost feel his relief and happiness ourselves when he is told of the possibility to undergo a series of trans-cultural plastic surgeries. And, perhaps more plausible, we almost feel the pain of his wife ourselves, the pain that accompanies the process of converting her husband into a black warrior, a process that implies an irreversible alienation from the man she married.

Ederveen's absurd movie introduces in a dramatic way the problem I want to discuss in this paper, which is the problem of whether there can be such a thing as knowledge of one's real self, and, if so, whether it can provide reasons for action.

2. That's him all over

As a preliminary I should like to make a few general remarks on the importance of the problem and the appeal of Ederveen's movie. It seems to be a fact of life in the Western world at the threshold of the twentieth century that people have much more options to choose from than their ancestors used to have. There are many causes for this tremendous increase: science and technology create options where there used to be none (it is now possible, for example, to choose the gender of our children); economic prosperity multiplies options (we can buy thousand different cars sprayed in a million different colours, and eat an incredible amount of different dishes in hundreds of different restaurants); globalisation confronts us with many unthought-of alternative forms of life; etc.

A related, although different fact of life in the present era is the radical decrease in power of moral authorities. It is related, because this decrease is also one of the causes of the growth in options we face. But it is an important feature of contemporary life in its own right as well. It seems increasingly to be the case that it is up to us to

determine the value of the options we can choose from. This does not, of course, imply a radical subjectivism or relativism. The fact that it is up to us to determine what is of value, does not imply that everything is equally worthwhile or equally worthless, or that nothing could be valuable in itself, or that something could only have the value projected on to it by us. The fact that it is up to us whether something is valuable could mean that you have to know something about us – something deep or essential – to be able to determine which alternative is our option, that is, which alternative is us all over. If this is the case, it means that not any option will do: the right option is the one we should choose if we would choose. And this is not an empty phrase, as everyone knows who discovered hockey is not their cup of tea, or who discovered that John is Mr. Right, or having children not like them, or Utrecht really her city, or Mary a nurse all over, etc. And we have to understand Ederveen's movie as claiming that being a Surma warrior is himself (i.e. the person mistakenly present as if a Dutch farmer) all over. And this appears to be such a deep fact that everyone involved just has to accept the sacrifices that come with the conversion.

Evidently, Ederveen has the best answer to the question how it could be possible for a Dutch farmer to sincerely believe he should convert himself into a Surma warrior: this is the best thing to do because deep down this person really is a Surma warrior. But, of course, this is also a very unsatisfying answer, because we haven't the faintest idea what it means. This gives me the aim of this article: to understand the ways in which claims of self-knowledge can generate justifying reasons for action.

3. Metaphysical queerness

It is evident that, although we might be able to imagine the kind of liberating process the Dutch farmer is going through, and although we might be acquainted with dramatically less disturbing examples of similar conversions, most of us will be too worried by the incredible queerness of this movie to think it plausible. The radical divergence between on the one hand the Dutch farmer's everyday life and appear-

ance and on the other hand his so-called real self as a Surma warrior will be a source of profound disbelief. For one thing, many of us will have difficulties accepting that persons can have mature and specific selves that are radically independent of the social and cultural environment in which they live and grew up. That is to say, we can imagine that persons are forced to live a life that does not fit them, a life that frustrates the satisfaction of most of their wants and needs, or, even more serious, that hinders the development of most of their capacities. We will be familiar with the stories of homosexuals that could not come out, and with the stories of women that could not but spend their lives in the kitchen. Consequently, we can imagine that it makes sense to say that persons can have real selves that are seriously incompatible with their everyday life and appearance. But what might seem too unlikely to be conceivable, is the presence in a Dutch farmer of a mature self that has all the detailed characteristics of a type of person that has its social and natural habitat in such a specific part of the world as the wilderness of Zaire.

Yet I think we have to take care not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The problem of the Dutch farmer is after all, although very extreme, quite similar to all these everyday problems in which we have to make choices that will have tremendous impacts on the course and direction of the lives we shall live. I will, therefore, propose the following reformulation to be able to sidestep metaphysical difficulties and to save the problem from Ederveen's weird fantasies. When the Dutch farmer says he really is a Surma warrior, I shall take him to say that (1) he is a person that should live the life of a Surma warrior, (2) because 'being a Surma warrior' is one of the alternatives of him¹, and (3) this alternative is most valuable.

4. The concept of an 'alternative of oneself'

The concept of an 'alternative of oneself' is the key to a metaphysically innocent understanding of the way in which self-knowledge can be normatively significant. The concept is best introduced by means

¹ I introduced and developed this concept in Bransen (1996, 2000).

of a distinction between two types of options: alternatives *for* oneself and alternatives *of* oneself. The first type can be identified without references to the agent for whom the alternatives are options. The second type of alternatives, however, cannot be identified without reference to the agent for whom these alternatives are options. Let me explain.

Suppose I'm looking for a new coat and am in two minds about whether to choose a brown or a blue one. I can think about both options without thinking of me and even without thinking of my own preferences. I can think the blue one is more beautiful, without being aware of the fact that this implies that I consider blue to be more beautiful than brown. Both coats are alternatives for me. They are alternatives for me in exactly the same way in which they could be alternatives for numerous others. To describe them as alternatives I need not refer to myself, or to anyone else, for that matter.

Many situations in which I have to choose can be described correctly without mentioning me and without paying attention to what is characteristic of me. If someone asks me whether I want coffee or tea, it makes no sense to think I first should find the answer to the question what is characteristic of me. Of course, the fact that I choose coffee, or tea, is informing about and is informed by what is typical of me, but it would be out of place to emphasise that. Of course, choosing coffee rather than tea is a choice for 'me getting coffee' and not for 'you getting coffee'. In that sense there is always an implicit reference in such a choice to the one who chooses, but it would be mistaken to think such a reference reveals something significant about the identity of the one who chooses.

This is mistaken in the case of choosing coffee, and it would, most of the time, be mistaken in such cases as choosing a coat, although one could imagine situations in which even such a choice would be significantly informed by the chooser's identity. This could for example be the case when a teenager needs a new coat and is worried about the possibility that she will wear this coat while meeting the guy that will turn out to be her partner for life. In that case, the options will not be the brown or blue coat, but the future scenarios in which it will be a characteristic fact about the teenager's identity that she wears a brown or a blue coat.

Personal and Moral Identity

Musschenga, A.W.; van Haaften, A.W.; Spiecker, B.;
Slors, M.V. (Eds.)

2002, VI, 327 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0764-4