Erschienen in: Mind. 2010, 118(472), pp. 1174-1180
https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzp129

Self-Consciousness, by Sebastian Rödl. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. xi + 207. H/b $39.95.

Sebastian Rödl's *Self-Consciousness* is a difficult book to review. Partly, this is due to the fact that the book is located at the intersection of two philosophical traditions. Indeed, in the preface Rödl himself suggests that 'it would

not be inept to read this book as an attempt to comprehend [a] central thought of the German Idealist tradition' (p. viii), but he then sets out to discuss the relevant thought mainly with the help of, in interaction with, and in opposition to, various philosophers who belong to the 'analytic' tradition.

Indeed, the topic at the heart of the present book, the problem of self-consciousness, was central to the work of the German Idealists, and it is of particular interest to many philosophers who work in the analytic tradition today. Furthermore, the problem of self-consciousness has recently also been considered intensively by contemporary philosophers working within the 'German Idealist tradition' — Dieter Henrich, Manfred Frank, and Ernst Tugendhat, for example, have recently all done substantial work on the topic of self-consciousness from within that tradition. Surprisingly, Rödl does not engage with their work, although he does intensively draw on work by contemporary philosophers in the analytic tradition. Under the assumption that he aims to bring both traditions into closer contact, this seems a slightly unbalanced starting point. However, the topic of self-consciousness certainly is a particularly suitable topic for any attempt to bring these traditions together.

The thought which Rödl ascribes to the German Idealists and which he sets out to develop is the idea that 'a theory of self-consciousness is a theory of action, belief, and knowledge' (p. viii). Accordingly, after an introductory first chapter on 'First Person Thought', chapter two of the book considers 'Action and the First Person', chapter three deals with 'Belief and the First Person', in the fourth chapter ('Reason, Freedom and True Materialism') Rödl develops some more general views as to the potential nature of self-consciousness on the basis of the results of the two preceding chapters; chapter five deals with 'Receptive Knowledge' and finally, in the sixth and last chapter of the book, he links what has been said so far to issues about 'The Second Person'.

The 'principle claim' which Rödl aims to defend in the course of his book is:

> that first person knowledge of action and belief is not *receptive*; one does not know an object first personally by being affected by it. Rather, first person knowledge of acts of thought is *spontaneous*. In contrast to receptive knowledge, which is of an independent object, spontaneous knowledge is identical with its object: my knowing first personally that I am doing such and such is the same reality as my doing it, and my knowing first personally that I believe that such and such is the case is the same reality as my believing it (pp. viii ix).

This statement in turn provokes two questions: First, what exactly does it mean to say that knowledge of action and belief is spontaneous, and why should we accept this claim? Secondly, how might the assumption that knowledge of action and belief is spontaneous help us in understanding self-consciousness?

Rödl himself characterizes spontaneous knowledge in contrast with receptive knowledge: everyday objects such as tables and chairs and everyday events which occur around us might be the objects of receptive knowledge, while a subject's own actions and beliefs are the objects of her spontaneous knowledge. The object of receptive knowledge is independent of the relevant piece of knowledge and has to 'affect' the subject in order for the subject to have the relevant piece of knowledge at all. In contrast, so Rödl holds, 'my spontaneous knowledge and what I thus know are *one reality*' (p. 14).

In an attempt to elucidate the latter claim, we might turn to Rödl's suggestion that 'I know in a first person way that an object is *F* by being that object, i.e., by being *F*. If and only if I know that someone is *F* in a way that satisfies this formula, I know without mediation that *I* am *F*' (p. 17). Thus, to rephrase,

> I have unmediated spontaneous knowledge that I am *F* if and only if I know that a certain object is *F* by being that object and by being *F*.

But then, how is the word 'by' used in this formula? One might plausibly hold that I do, for example, know that the computer in front of me is white *by* perceiving the white computer in front of me. In this case, the word 'by' indicates some kind of mediating relation — it indicates that my knowledge of the computer's colour is somehow mediated by a relevant perceptual experience. I might also come to know that John is unmarried *by* knowing that John is a bachelor and that all bachelors are unmarried. In this case, my knowing that John is unmarried might be said to be *mediated* by the relevant piece of reasoning. Spontaneous knowledge, in contrast, is meant to be unmediated. Thus, the word 'by' as it occurs in the claim that 'I know that I am *F by* being that object and *by* being *F*' must not be interpreted as indicating a mediating relation. Instead, the word 'by' might express some kind of primitive relation, or some kind of *unity* — a primitive relation or some kind of unity between the relevant piece of knowledge and the knower. However, in this case the present suggestion seems nothing but a reformulation of the claim that 'my spontaneous knowledge and what I thus know are *one reality*' (p. 14). Thus, the present 'formula' does not seem to further our understanding of what it might take to have spontaneous knowledge in general. [Alternatively, we might consider the suggestion (made by the author in personal communication) that 'that I know that someone is *F* by being *F* means that being *F* equips me with that knowledge'. The present suggestion, however, does not seem to answer the question which I try to formulate in the text above, namely the question how we are to think of the *link* that is meant to obtain between my being *F* and my knowing that I am *F*. For it seems that the present suggestion provokes the question what it might possibly mean to say that my being *F* 'equips me with' the relevant knowledge, which seems equivalent to the question what the word 'by' might possibly mean in the claim as formulated above.]

Still, our present considerations might sharpen our understanding of the problem which is said to stand at the centre of the present book. And indeed, the book's 'principle claim' might still be successfully defended if it was possible to explicate and support Rödl's more specific claim that each of us has spontaneous knowledge of his or her own actions and beliefs. Rödl himself summarizes his position on this issue as follows: 'I know that and why I believe or am doing something by exercising my power of belief and intentional action. There is no room for a *further power* of being aware of my beliefs and actions because acts of the former powers as such are acts of knowing of these acts'. (p. 121) Two chapters of the book (namely, Chs 2 and 3) are dedicated to explicating this claim. However, as it stands the claim has various flaws (and, I am sorry to say, so do the two chapters which are meant to support it). First, it seems unclear what it could possibly mean to talk of an 'act of knowing'. (We can come to know something, or actively try to come to know something, or we might know something, but it seems impossible to engage in an *act* of knowing.) Waiving this problem, the claim that beyond my 'power of belief and intentional action', 'there is no room for a *further power* of being aware of my beliefs and actions because acts of the former powers as such are acts of knowing these acts' seems false. For example, I might lift my arm standing in front of a mirror. I might know in some 'immediate way' that I am lifting my arm, but in addition I might also come to know that I am lifting my arm by seeing myself doing so in the mirror. Thus, in the present case, I have a 'power' of 'being aware of my action' which does lie beyond my 'power of intentional action'.

Nevertheless, it might still be true that I can 'know that and why I believe or am doing something' in a special way, namely 'by exercising my power of belief and intentional action' (p. 121). For reasons of space, I suggest we here focus on the case of action, which Rödl discusses in chapter two of his book. Rödl there makes use of the (Neo-Aristotelian) assumption that an intentional action is the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning. At least to the present reader, this idea does seem rather appealing. However, confusion sets in when we are told that the fact 'that practical reasoning concludes in an action means that it concludes in *a thought that is a movement*. Our aim is to understand the nature of such a thought or, equivalently, the nature of such a movement' (p. 19). Metaphorical comments of the present kind (which are, unfortunately, ubiquitous in the present work) are irritating and, more importantly and worse, obfuscating. They also make it rather difficult to engage with the material at hand in a respectful and serious manner.

Be this as it may, the comment at hand indicates that Rödl wants us to think of actions as of particular kinds of thought. This impression is reinforced in a later passage where we are told that 'an action expresses a thought about what to do, not in the sense of being its effect, but in the sense of being this thought. Actions do not point to a state of mind as to their cause. Acting intentionally *is* being of a certain mind' (p. 49). Again, the claim that 'acting

intentionally *is* being of a certain mind' does, although phrased rather metaphorically, have intuitive appeal (at least to the present reader) and would certainly deserve further careful consideration. However, the claim that 'an action expresses a thought about what to do […] in the sense of being this thought' which Rödl offers in support of that plausible idea is puzzling. For while it does seem plausible to accept that at least sometimes a subject's thinking a thought might be an action, it also seems plausible to accept that there are many other actions (e.g. taking the rubbish out) which at least at first sight clearly should not count as thoughts. Thus, at least as long as no further comment is offered, it seems wrong to hold that any intentional action is a thought.

Be this as it may, the present remarks are meant to elucidate the claim that an intentional action is the conclusion of practical reasoning, and we might, for present purposes, just take that claim on board. A charitable reconstruction of Rödl's further thoughts on the topic might then run as follows:

(i) The claim that an intentional action is the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning implies that a subject who acts intentionally 'thinks [that] what she is doing is to be done' (p. 55).

(ii) But then, a subject who thinks that what she is doing is to be done is also able to explain what she is doing.

(iii) Furthermore, a subject who explains what she is doing on the basis of her thought that what she is doing is to be done *knows* about the facts that feature in the relevant explanation.

(iv) But then, a subject who explains what she is doing on the basis of her thought that what she is doing is to be done 'is able to give the explanation by being its object. This means that action explanations by the acting subject deploy the first person pronoun and are unmediated first person thoughts' (p. 58).

(v) Thus, a subject who explains what she is doing on the basis of her thought that what she is doing is to be done does have unmediated knowledge of acting in the relevant way.

(vi) Hence, knowledge of action is spontaneous.

Various steps in the present argument might need further consideration, but for present purposes we should focus on premiss (iv). A subject who explains what she is doing on the basis of her thought that what she is doing is to be done, so premiss (iv) claims, is able to give the relevant explanation *by* being its object, which in turn is said to imply that the resulting explanatory thought is an *unmediated* thought. But then, so we might ask (once more), what relation does the word 'by' refer to here? What, on the present view, is the relation between, on the one hand, the subject's being the explanation's object and, on the other hand, the resulting explanation? It could not possibly be a mediating relation, for this would contradict the claim that the resulting explanatory thought is *unmediated*. Accordingly, presumably the word 'by' should once more be read as indicating a primitive relation, or some kind of

unity or identity here. However, what could it possibly mean to say that an explanation and the subject who offers the relevant explanation stand in a primitive relation, form a unity, or are identical? The text does not offer an answer, and as much as I would like to help out, I am at a loss as to how we might possibly develop an answer on Rödl's behalf here. Thus, we are left in the dark as to what it could possibly mean to say that a thought (or a piece of knowledge) about a certain action is *unmediated*, which in turn means that we are left in the dark as to what it could possibly mean to say that knowledge of action is spontaneous.

Nevertheless, waiving the present problem and assuming (rather optimistically) that some sense might be made of the claim that knowledge of action *is* spontaneous, we should finally try to understand how, according to Rödl, the assumption that knowledge of action is spontaneous might help to develop an account of self-consciousness. 'When I know that someone is doing something through reasoning about what to do', so Rödl claims, 'then there is no room for the question whether it is I of whom I know this' (p. 60). In cases in which I know that someone is doing something through reasoning about what to do, 'the manner of knowing settles which object I know in this manner. Here the form of predication leaves no room for a separate act of specifying an object' (p. 126). Thus, so the present thought seems to go, when I explain what I am doing through reasoning about what to do, 'there is no room' for a further act of identification of the agent whose action is explained, which implies that I have unmediated knowledge of myself as myself, and a subject who has such unmediated knowledge of herself as herself does have self-consciousness.

However, consider clinical cases of 'thought insertion'. For example, assume a patient has opened a door, and when asked why she has done so, she explains that her long deceased father, who is sometimes 'thinking thoughts in her head', did 'think in her head' that the door ought to be opened. Whom should the action be ascribed to? From an observer's perspective, we will ascribe the action to the patient, but the patient herself might well ascribe the action to her father. In the present situation, therefore, there *is*, from the agent's own point of view, room for, and indeed a need for, a further act of identification of the agent whose action is explained, even though the action has been explained 'through reasoning about what to do'. Thus, as it stands Rödl does not give us any particularly good reason to accept that when I explain what I am doing through reasoning about what to do, I have unmediated knowledge of myself as myself, and accordingly, consideration of the present set of cases does not advance our understanding of self-consciousness, either.

More generally, we therefore have to conclude that Rödl does not offer a convincing answer to the question what exactly it means to say that knowledge of action is spontaneous, and why we should accept this claim; nor does he manage to show how the assumption that knowledge of action is

spontaneous might help us in understanding self-consciousness. Thus, as far as the case of action goes, Rödl does not manage to develop his 'principle claim' convincingly. And indeed, although there is no time to show this here, similarly negative conclusions have to be drawn with respect to Rödl's discussion of his 'principle claim' as applied to the case of belief.

To conclude, then, while it certainly might be promising to consider the topic of self-consciousness by combining work which has been done on the topic in both the continental and the analytic traditions, the present attempt at doing so does leave room for further work. First, more might be done in an attempt to specify which phenomena both these traditions investigate under the header of self-consciousness. Next, more could and should be done in an attempt to elucidate the view, as formulated by the 'principle claim', which the present book aims to defend. Lastly and most importantly for the success of the present project, more could and should be done in an attempt to offer arguments in support of that 'principle claim', and to defend it against various possible objections, some of which have been mentioned here.

Department of Philosophy
University of York
York YO10 5DD
UK

DOROTHEA DEBUS