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Feelings, Judgment and the Common Pursuit

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Report by Jeremy Watson

Is philosophy wrong-footed by considering abstract notions rather than the actual pursuits and practices that give rise to our talking in abstract terms? That was the question posed by Professor Simon Blackburn who said he would invoke the “Great Man” – David Hume – to examine how being more specific about what is contained within an abstract notion can prove useful in the common pursuit of true judgment.

Hume talked about a division in our feelings about things and people. If I call someone an enemy or a rival, I am speaking about his relationship to myself. But if in addition I call him unprincipled or a villain, then other people are also expected to see them in a completely different light. They are being asked to concur with one’s view of that individual. Hume talked about this as developing a “common point of view.”

In this process, there can be both positive and negative feelings. If a man is called a villain, it engenders a negative attitude. Franz Brentano, the 19th-Century German philosopher, was among those who noticed that emotions and feelings were directed onto people and states of affairs. Sadness is a feeling that something is amiss and that needs to be addressed – it is the “egg” that incubates an action. It may be a negative feeling – the reverse, perhaps, of a positive feeling such as hope – but it is a catalyst for change in the same way.

This was important to Hume and other Pragmatists, because they too believed that feelings were not just fleeting sensations; they were a reaction to a state of mind that were a goad to action. Like Brentano, Gilbert Ryle, the 20th-Century British philosopher, also thought that feelings are very different to sensations.

Professor Blackburn said he had raised this because many contemporary philosophers get this wrong. Among them is Derek Parfit who, in one example, says we have no reason to enjoy, or be moved, by great music. This is because he takes enjoyment to be a sensation, lying outside of the field of reason. People cannot have reasons for a sensation, they simply come and go. That’s a mistake, Professor Blackburn said, and Parfit could have learned this from Brentano and Ryle. There are reasons to enjoy great music – in fact the very features that make it great music are enough. Another author who thinks like Parfit is the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum – author of *Upheavals of Thought* – who thinks that emotions and feelings are simply judgments or appraisals, which ascribe to things outside an individual’s control and are important to the flourishing of that person.

That is a neo-Stoical way of thinking, said Professor Blackburn, and a direct denial of what Brentano was saying. He said feelings are not perceptions of value, but a personal reaction to what it is about the world you are noticing. So there is Brentano and Ryle on one side and Parfit and Nussbaum on the other.

But if feelings are more complex than simple sensations, can they help us to arrive at common truths? If you start with the abstract notion of truth, then the idea of truth in feelings becomes elusive; however,

if you ask specific questions, then a role for the notion may emerge. As C.S. Peirce, the founder of the American Pragmatist School, put it: “We must not begin by talking about pure ideas, vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without human habitation, but with men and their conversation.”

So if we think about aesthetic truth – truth in matters of taste – following Peirce’s dictum, then we will get a better handle on what it is to think in terms of truth in matters of feeling, Professor Blackburn suggested. One of the great works of criticism of the concept of judgment was written by Kant, who made a distinction between being “agreeable” and being “beautiful”. When it comes to the agreeable, it is his judgment only, his taste. But he goes on to say that when he calls something beautiful, he wants others to share his delight. He demands their agreement and if he doesn’t get it he says they have a lack of taste.

But Kant devoted much of his critique on matters of taste and judgment to reconciling two views that cannot necessarily be reconciled. Although we all have common faculties of cognition, it does not necessarily follow that we all like the same things in the same way. Indeed, while there may be some harmony of judgment in some cases, there is no universal standard. An example, said Professor Blackburn, is that we may share the same cognitive faculties as our fellow humans in India, but we do not necessarily like the same music.

That is where critics come in. When you think about criticism – Peirce’s “men and their conversation” – you see there are people who are capable of teasing out the truth of an artistic or musical work that derives not from common cognitive faculties, but from learning and expertise. Critics can enhance our understanding. But Kant’s idea that agreement is demanded from everyone is too strong, said Professor Blackburn. There is room for divergence of opinion.

Henry James, the novelist, wrote an essay about Florence, in which he says he learned from the Victorian art critic John Ruskin that he should not have enjoyed the city. Ruskin thought the great Italian Renaissance cities were in a spiritual and physical spiral of decline. Ruskin issues a demand, as a good Kantian, that everyone should agree with his view, but James rebels against this.

It is not that James is against the practices of criticism. Indeed, James loved the role of the critic, talking about criticism being the gateway to appreciation and appreciation the gateway to enjoyment. In the same way, T S Eliot, the poet and social critic, had this commonality in mind. Both echo Hume and Peirce, because they are talking about actual practices, not just talking about beauty in the abstract.

Blackburn gave as an example a remark of André Gide, about the paintings of Jean Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, the 18th-Century master of the Still Life. Gide said that Chardin painted “la vie silencieuse des objets” – the silent life of objects. This wonderfully perceptive remark alerts us to the sense of time and timelessness in Chardin; it enables us to see something in his work (and, for instance, in that of Vermeer of Delft) that we might otherwise have missed; it increases our perception; and moulds our responses.

So critics are important in the common pursuit of truth. To give another example, in his essay on Wordsworth’s sonnet *Calais Beach*, the Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis talks about the boring repetitiveness of the words – purposely engendering a sense of a still ocean on a summer’s evening. The monotony is made much worse by the final six lines that add “saccharine to syrup” and make the whole thing distasteful. This shows that James’s contention that appreciation is the gateway to enjoyment works both ways, said Professor Blackburn. Leavis’ critique had taken away some of his enjoyment of reading *Calais Beach*. By contrast, Leavis’ critique of another Wordsworth sonnet, *On Westminster Bridge*, shows how, by contrasting the great city asleep with what it is when it wakes, the poem is better felt, more interesting and, eventually a much greater achievement than *Calais Beach*. The contrast teaches us something and enhances our enjoyment. Without Leavis, Professor Blackburn said, his feelings about both would have remained the same; but now, having learned from Leavis’ expertise, he would not want to return to the former state of affairs.

All this, said Professor Blackburn, is the common pursuit of true judgment. The critics are trying to point out aspects of a work that they hope will create shared feelings. This is important in societal terms, as it

may be crucial, on some occasions, to reach a commonality of view. The pursuit of true judgment, rather than being the chase after an abstract notion, is a procedure for resolving disagreements and divergences.

In conclusion, Professor Blackburn said there are feelings – and truth of feelings – that are worth fighting for, worth refining and worth getting right. That's what the pursuit of matters of truth is. Once you have done all you can to define the qualities of a thing worth appreciating, found agreement, and agreement that is lasting, you have found the truth of feeling. So Hume started it, Eliot continued it, Peirce gave us the methodology to pursue it and that is where we have arrived.

Q&A

Q: What happens when people can't agree?

A: Hume himself, in an essay, talks about tastes that differ. His charming example is that a young man might prefer the amorous poems of Ovid, but when he is in his forties may prefer Horace and when he is fifty, Tacitus. So tastes may change as people mature, but there is no blame on any side. This is known as 'no-fault disagreement', even though it should be known as 'no-fault diversity'. Hume says that "We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition". There is nothing wrong with that. What would be wrong would be for either of these people to dismiss the taste of the other. They should content themselves with agreeing both on what is good about Ovid and on what is good about Horace or Tacitus.

Q: Can you reflect on the election of Donald Trump?

A: There was an American backlash against Washington and the experts. But whether Donald Trump will be as bad as imagined remains to be seen. There appear to be some serious dark forces that have been unleashed, and we live in dangerous times.

Q: In the common pursuit of true judgment, does modern art do the "dirt" on life?

A: This goes back a long way. One of the things that Plato was worried about was whether the glamour that attached to the Achilles figure was very dangerous and a bad model, even though it appealed to the young people of the time. He was well aware of the damage popular art could do. Bad art can be insidious and, by coarsening or misdirecting people's feelings, can do great damage. But we must remember that artists reflect their times as much as change them.

Q: Leavis transforms attitudes to poems. Poetry in general can do that. Is there a difference between poets and critics?

A: Poets do transform feelings. There is a great continuity between them and critics. Henry James' works are almost continuous with his criticism. There is no hard and fast line between the work of a critic and the work of an artist. Likewise, there is no distinction between "doing" philosophy and criticising it.

The Vote of Thanks was offered by Professor Alan Alexander OBE, General Secretary of the RSE.

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