

Aesthetic Investigations

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An Old Dog Rants Backwards: 1

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Abstract: What is wrong with causalist approaches to our valuing.

Those familiar with my more general views will be unsurprised to find me ranting about the need to find philosophical room for the normative, as well as the causal. In this respect, this typical thread in my ranting aligns in effect with two points made by Frege in noting that ‘[e]rror and superstition have causes just as much as correct cognition.’¹ For, first, one cannot appeal to the causal story to insist on the veridical character of our ‘experiences’ of the world; and second, more crucially, we cannot reduce our normative process to such causal explanation: just ‘[a]s I do not create a tree by looking at it, . . . neither do I create a thought by thinking. And still less does the brain secrete thoughts, as the liver does gall’² Urging otherwise risks ‘. . . blurring the boundary between logic and psychology’, a boundary (with natural scientific explanation) fundamental to the province of philosophy.³

Now, it seems to me that in the fairly recent past there has arisen a new way of making a similar mistake: but one that may seem to have avoided the concerns of a journal such as *Aesthetic Investigations*—given its focus on the philosophy of art and philosophical aesthetics—since the new ‘mistake’ has typically been applied to moral philosophy. The error I am thinking about is well-instantiated in the project of two papers, chosen as representative of the trend: (a) Young and Durwin 2013; (b) Goodwin and Darley 2008.

Both use broadly empirical methods to investigate whether a meta-ethical commitment to kinds of moral realism might alter both one's moral judgments and one's degree of commitment to them.⁴

I have never really known what most psychology does: with Wittgenstein, I have always suspected that it was an untenable mixture of 'empirical methods and *conceptual confusion*'.⁵ But the difficulty here is not that: for one can see that what is being investigated in these papers—it is what people *think* or *believe*, including the impact on their degree of conviction, such that '... priming a belief in moral realism improved moral behavior'.⁶ So, in the end, the concern for the authors of these papers begins from, 'What *do* people think?'. Perhaps that is legitimate as sociology: but could it have a place in philosophy? If 'most people' agreed on a certain mathematical result, that alone would not make it right. And my concern in philosophy is only with what they *ought* to think (that is, with the truth)—and that *is* what they ought to think, since the alternative is to be deceived or deluded (as, say, in the case of the Yeti, if there are no Yetis). After all, if moral realism is false, any 'believers' have found a new way to delude themselves—or others.

This seems to me where a concern with the conceptual (in philosophy) contrasts with a concern with people's *views* or their *practice*: yes, they *do* say such-and-such . . . but are they right so to do? And we cannot turn philosophy into a game of *Family Feud (USA)*/*Family Fortunes (UK)* by trying to match our answer to what 'most people' think. To decide on the rightness of their claims, we must address what precisely they say (looking at its implications, and such like), not merely reiterate their words. So if one asks 'Why do people say this?', my answer has been, 'because they think it true'. And only that answer looks like a *justification* here—false beliefs offer at best explanations of why they are believed. Moreover, if the views are false, that explanation for our interest in them disappears.

So the Young and Durwin paper explicitly discusses whether I would behave better if I were a moral realist, and concludes I would. If correct, this offers a practical reason (a bit like Plato's myth of the metals) to trick people into being moral realists. But I do not think any trick is needed: people should be moral realists (in the correct version) if moral realism is true: and not if it is not. The fact that they might behave better if misguided cannot have a bearing. And, indeed, I am unhappy about the way in which the result is arrived at: I take truth to be too important to knowingly permit delusion. (This seems to me to be the issue with religion: given that [on my view] the claims of religion are false, it does not matter if believing them helps you live better or behave better. And if they *are* true, that cannot be because the belief helps one live better—assuming it did!)

So think about the religious case, as discussed in the Goodwin and Darley paper: as the Abstract states the target in the experiment, 'Groundings which emphasize the religious . . . underpinnings of ethical belief . . . predicted greater ethical objectivity'.⁷ If I had a magic wand, I would want people to realize that

the grounding idea is misconceived—where this went double for any putative *religious* grounding. As above, I do not care how best to ‘engineer’ people towards a certain view, as what is needed is that each come to recognize *the truth* for his/her self.

Of course, like views about the Yeti, all of these views remain held by people; and it makes sense (I suppose) for sociology and social psychology to study those people in this respect. But were I right that views such as these are false, I do not see how there can be *philosophical* investigation of them.⁸

At this point it might seem that at least aestheticians are spared from my rant: they, at least, have no part in the debate mentioned above. Yet what else is the explanation of trying to use fMRI to understand dance audiences?⁹ But such studies concern the person’s ability to recognize perceptually (that is, to *see*) such difference. For I, at least, would readily concede that a trained dancer’s account of movements might well be more accurate than¹ that of those lacking this training—after all, the dancer has typically seen those movements more regularly.² And, for the same reason, the female dancer may well be more perceptive when considering moves typical of females in ballet.¹⁰ But such investigations rely on what these observers recognise³. The hope, though, seems to be, somehow, to track aesthetic/artistic responses to patterns of neural response. But, again, I do not know, nor really care, about the causal stories here: what remains important are the normative ones—the sort of things⁴ art ⁵critics might help us with. For they operate at an appropriate explanatory level for one’s coming to understand dances. And only they will reflect what it is *appropriate* to find in this dance, or to say about it.

As Wittgenstein noticed, ‘[m]ental processes just are strange.’¹¹ So that, concerned about artistic judgements (say, of dance-works), we should not rush to any particular comparison as just obviously the right one; and especially a comparison with physical or biological processes. In explanation, Wittgenstein imagines someone saying:

⁶The clock shows us the time. *What* time is, is not yet settled.
And, as regards the point of telling the time—that doesn’t come
in here.⁷¹²

So the comparison with our knowledge of human psychological processes acknowledges their diversity: for example, how sometimes what one says

¹ik heb hier "that" vervangen door "than"
²hier ontbrak een punt. Die heb ik ingevoegd
³heb ize vervangen door ise
⁴heb "sorts of thing" vervangen door "sort of things"
⁵ heb koppelteken vervangen door spatie
⁶heb quotation marks verwijderd
⁷idem

expresses a desire ('I want a glass of beer', said to a bartender, is not a description of my state of mind); or a belief ('I think John is in LA' is not mere autobiography); or a feeling ('My leg hurts' is sometimes informational, but sometimes simply an expression of the pain). To assume that a single model must do here, since these are all in some sense psychological processes, is to give in to what, later, Wittgenstein diagnosed as ' [a] main cause of philosophical diseases—[namely] a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example.'¹³

Moreover, Wittgenstein rightly deplored the tendency to put off *sine die* the detail of matters where the broad contours are assumed; that is, as:

... the conception that there are questions the answers to which will be found at a later date. It is held that, although a result is not known, there is a way of finding it.¹⁴

Later he elaborated the basis of the problem as he saw it:

... [t]he first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we'll know more about them—we think. But that's just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a certain conception of what it means to know a process better ...¹⁵

So we seem to know the *form* of the answer: and that form typically comes from natural science.

Further, if we are told that, while not the whole story, this account of brain causality is *part* of the relevant explanation of human mental processes, we should respond as Wittgenstein did, faced with such an enumerative conception: that 'then the question would arise: Is that *all*?'¹⁶ For, faced with the claim to have explained some part, we are surely owed both an explanation of the parts currently *unexplained*, and a way to recognize when the enumerative exercise is complete. Neither is forthcoming; and, to me, could never be provided in principle, since these 'parts' cannot form a finite totality.

It seems David Davies and I broadly agree on the fruitfulness of attempting to understand dance by reference to empirical work in neuroscience, to judge by his contribution to the JAAC symposium on Dance, Art and Science.¹⁷ At the least, in his paper, David classifies us both as pessimists.¹⁸ However, David is only a moderate pessimist (197) while I am accused of 'extreme pessimism' (199). Then David concludes:

... as ever, the moderate pessimist will council modesty when the philosopher of art elects to dance with neuroscience.¹⁹

I hear the rebuke implicit in this remark: it is positively immodest of me to behave as I do, voicing my extreme pessimism. Now I must agree that there is an element of outrage in my pronouncements, perhaps disproportionate to the evils perpetrated. My only defence here is that, when I see the vast amounts of money (in the UK, chiefly government money) that such neuroscience-based research attracts, I am frankly jealous: how can the warnings of Gottlob Frege and (especially) Ludwig Wittgenstein have gone unheeded?

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NOTES

1. Frege 1984, 351.
2. Frege 1979, 137.
3. Frege 1984, 352.
4. The second paper is also interested in the impact of locating a religious basis for one's moral judgements.
5. Wittgenstein 1953, Part Two xiv, *Philosophy of Psychology* § 371.
6. Abstract to Young and Durwin 2013.
7. They make the same claim for other groundings, equally contrary to the Euth⁸yphro argument—an argument I take to demonstrate that morality cannot have an extra-moral grounding.
8. Which is why I understand a social psychology of religious belief, but not a philosophy of it.
9. Calvo-Merino et al. 2005.
10. Montero 2006; Calvo-Merino 2008.
11. Wittgenstein 1953, § 363.
12. Wittgenstein 1953, § 363.
13. Wittgenstein 1953, § 593.
14. Wittgenstein 1979, 182 [December, 1931].
15. Wittgenstein 1953 § 308.
16. Wittgenstein and Waismann 2003, 325.
17. JAAC Vol. 71,⁹ No.¹⁰ 2 Spring, 2013.
18. Davies 2013.
19. Davies 2013, 201.

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⁸heb "r" verwijderd

⁹heb komma ingevoegd

¹⁰heb punt ingevoegd

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