

Understanding Value Conference, 11th-13th July 2012, University of Sheffield

Wednesday

The first day of the conference only had the one talk – Chris Hookway spoke to us on ‘Freedom of mind, self-trust, and the possession of virtues’. He argued that the most important aspect of the sceptical challenge in epistemology is not the issues it raises in relation to our having knowledge, but those it raises for our ideas of cognitive autonomy or self-control. He proceeded to give examples of impediments to our conception of freedom of mind that involved barriers to our ability to freely act upon the information we have, use it rationally, take responsibility for it, or utilise other epistemological virtues. In order to at least to begin to combat this issue Hookway suggested the development of self-trust as an essential component of rational success. Without this preliminary trust in our epistemic capacities we will never get past the first impediments to being in control of what we do. This is one reason we should be looking at a virtue epistemology that targets our judgement and seeks to transform us into effective judgers, rather than looking simply at what we do and do not know with what degrees of certainty.

Thursday

The morning session consisted of two talks. The first was given by Lee Whittington on ‘Luck, Achievements, and Pragmatic Encroachment’. Whittington explored the idea of final value (that a thing’s value lies in itself, not in something extrinsic to it), how knowledge as an achievement might count as finally valuable, and how the issue of being a lucky knower factors into this debate.

The second talk of the session was Ian Kidd’s ‘Recovering Edification as a Source of Value’. Kidd argued that something edifying (that is, something educative, exertive, and improving) is a source of value. Not only this, but he claimed this edification should be something which institutions, practices, and policies measure their value upon. When it is taken as a measuring-stick, he went on, many modern institutions fall short of acceptable standards, particularly our education system.

The other postgraduate presentation I was struck by that day was Lani Watson’s ‘Questions of Epistemic Value’. Watson’s aim was to highlight the significance of questioning in the debate surrounding the nature of epistemic value. She, very roughly, maintained that: a) success alone does not give final value to cognitive achievement but value also resides in the achieving; b) the cognitive activity that makes up this achieving consists in the application of cognitive ability; c) cognitive ability is constituted by questioning; and d) therefore, the final epistemic value of cognitive achievement is derived from questioning.

The day ended with a presentation by Miranda Fricker on ‘What is the point of Blame?’ Blame, at the moment, is somewhat looked down upon in the wake of what we have come to call ‘blame culture’. There *are* some bad and inappropriate forms of blame Fricker conceded, but what she wanted to maintain was that blame, when handled properly, is essential in moral life in two ways: 1) the mechanism of blame has a function of aligning moralities, and 2) it has the function of constructing shared moral reasons. The social aim of blame, Fricker contended, seemed to be to *inspire remorse*. You’re not just trying to make the other person suffer. You want them to feel bad through remorse

for specific reasons. You are striving for a meeting of minds over the significance of what they did. Of course, this requires that you communicate blame, for blame can just stand alone as a personal judgement and you may never feel yourself validated in expressing that blame for a variety of reasons. However, this meeting of minds is what lies at the heart of the two constituents of moral life mentioned above.

Friday

To begin the final day I went to William York's talk on 'Origins, Originality, and Value in the Arts'. York focused upon how the guiding assumption of psychological and cognitive-science approaches to explaining aesthetics and aesthetic value (namely, that value is found "inside the frame") stands in heavy tension with the way in which knowledge about the originality of a piece of art affects its value for us.

Helen Bradley then followed up with a talk entitled 'Is Philosophy an Artistic Value of Film?' Bradley argued that whether a film is the object of critical reflection (it does not philosophise itself but is philosophised about) or the subject (the film actively *does* philosophy in itself or with us), the philosophical activity does not add to its artistic value, for in assessing the philosophical merits or input of a film there is no necessary participation from its 'filmic' or 'artistic' qualities.

The first talk that resonated with me in the afternoon was Robert Simpson's 'Dual Axiological Character'. Simpson discussed the various ways in which epistemic and moral value might interact or overlap and ultimately wanted to champion an instrumental view – i.e. aiming at one area of value may well cause us to come into contact with the other area as they affect each other in some way.

I then heard Peter Shum deliver a presentation called 'On Virtuous Beauty'. Shum fascinatingly connected how we experience the geometrical beauty of pieces such as Monet's 'Still Life with Flowers and Fruit' with how we encounter the grace of a virtuous person. To perceive a person, Shum maintained, is to become aware of form and layering in a certain sense insofar as we experience them as well-rounded, balanced, or having a certain symmetry. He even went on to fit this into the Kantian framework of disinterestedness.

The final talk of the conference was given by the great Peter Lamarque, who I expect to feature heavily in certain parts of my thesis, on 'Not Being too Formalistic about Aesthetic Value'. This was somewhat a defence of himself as he says he is often misconstrued as a formalist by many of his commentators. Lamarque committed himself to a type of aesthetic empiricism, insofar as he held that no aesthetic difference can occur without an experiential difference, but invoked notions of modality, response-dependence, anthropocentric value, and kind-relativity in order to keep himself separated from formalism. Much of this contributed to and was supported by his view that a lot of 'artistic' literature gets its power and value not from its form but its subject matter.