

Literature, Actions and Agents, University of London, 18/01/2013

My first conference of 2013 began amongst a flurry of snow. The bracing walk and the beauty of London's streets when dusted in white had me ready and raring to go. Even a misstep into the standard, freezing-cold slush-puddle wasn't going to dampen my spirits! Indeed, once warmed with coffee and brief conversation about the terror that is trying to get anywhere in England once it starts snowing, I was perfectly poised to receive and absorb the first talk.

Peter Lamarque opened proceedings with a talk that explored the various ways philosophers have thought about the expression of emotion in poetry and how the insights of these views might be reconciled. The warring sides in the debate seem to be roughly separated into author-centred and work-centred standpoints. The former, traditionally associated with Romanticism, declares that when a piece expresses an emotion an actual emotion is being expressed and shared. The latter, found more in the work of New Criticism, plays down any connection between the words of the poem and the expression of an actual emotion due to its attempted detachment of the poet and poem. After giving a comprehensive survey of many of the major lines of thought in this field of inquiry, Peter maintained that the way in which Jenefer Robinson and F. R. Leavis have examined certain texts has managed to encompass and reconcile some of the core insights from both sides of the debate. They do so by preserving the notion of agency, or a "controlling intelligence", in the poem whilst retaining the distance between the poem and anything biographical about the poet.

Humberto Brito then presented an exploration of what constitutes a judgement of the kind "person P is x". In other words, how and why do we make judgements of what kind of person another is? Most stimulating for my own thesis was Humberto's attempt to formulate one aspect of our experience of learning when engaging with a novel in terms of these judgements. It seems that novels and fictional texts can potentially give us information about the way humanity interacts in certain situations and come to recognise what kind of person does a certain thing. One source of knowledge thus pertaining to "person P is x", it seems, comes from the testimonials of the literature we read. Ultimately, the thrust of his paper was that genuinely understanding a person and making an insightful or responsible judgement takes time and is a loop-holed, episodic, and prolonged action. This may seem obvious when presented in such blatant terms, but the difficulty and intricacy of such judgements is something we too often forget in the immediacy of life and social interaction.

After a brief caffeine boost, Eileen John (my supervisor) shared with us the groundwork she is laying for her research into the area of argument and conversation in literature. Using examples from various short stories, Eileen raised questions about what it takes for an argument to succeed or fail, what we think we are doing as arguers, what we bring to an argument as an individual, what the social demands of conversation place upon us as arguers, and what constitutes arguing in 'good faith'. Eileen also concluded with a suggestion that what is possibly of most importance in these fictional arguments and in life's debates is the

moral progress the arguer shows rather than merely the achievement of what they set out to establish.

Alberto Arruda then led into lunch with a paper which sought to make a distinction between knowledge of a categorical kind and knowledge of an epistemological kind. Drawing upon examples of mediation (when I ask you to pass me a glass of water for example) and the works of philosophers from Augustine to Anscombe, Alberto spoke of the need to distinguish between a person knowing what another is doing because they know what category of thing the other belongs to (I know the bird is flying for example as I have some idea of what flying looks like, what a bird looks like, that the thing in the sky fits the descriptions that would put it in the category of bird, and that what it is doing fits in the category of flying) as opposed to knowing what the other is doing in virtue of knowing what it is like to do that action as an existing thing from that category (for instance, I know that my right is your left and my up is your up in light of the fact that I recognise our categorical similarities and acknowledge that you have the attributes I do necessary for you to experience similarly to myself). The latter, epistemological knowledge appears to often supervene upon the former, categorical knowledge.

Ana Almeida brought us back from lunch with a fascinating talk that drew upon many points unfortunately well beyond my own knowledge, but it was full of phrases and images that washed over me before firing up the imagination and a desire to know more. Sometimes that's the best kind of talk. Ana spoke of self-contradiction as a principle of 'simultaneity of opposites' and how one's 'multitude of persons' ("I am everyone at the same time") become one's own interlocutors. She also discussed how this multitude extends to others, how the other may act as my organ, and how an 'artificial family' is created as these multitudes interact and come together. Within this family exists everything that defines my identity and it is a system where each individual is a Leviathan, in the Hobbesian sense, bound together by Whitmanian relations. I think it's time to head to the library and extend my knowledge base if I'm to unlock the tantalising points of this paper!

Constantine Sandis followed Ana with an argument that sought to push beyond the traditional worries about action, will, and agency using the novels of Anthony Powell. He wanted to argue that there is much more to agency than just the examples of whether I am an acting agent if I will my hand to raise and it raises. Instead, the question is 'when do you begin being an agent in control of your life?' Is it just raising my arm using my will, or is it something deeper than that? In Powell's 'men of action', Constantine argued, we see those who do not simply act but impose their will upon the world. They are not 'patient followers' or products of their time. Nor do they simply 'find themselves doing things'. Powell does also poke fun at these characters but an analysis of them in relation to much of the passivity around them is enough to prompt questions about finding a deeper form of agency. In its crudest form the questions appears to be, "am I an active agent if I find that I am not in control of my life, regardless of whether I can will my arm to raise or not?"

John Hyman finished off the day with a paper which focused upon two questions:

- 1) Are explanations of intentional action caused or teleological?
- 2) What bearing do so-called deviant causal chains have on Q.1?

His answers were “Both” and “None” respectively. After a thorough presentation and exploration of the problems caused in a variety of philosophical works by deviant causal chains, he presented his own answer to the issue. Indeed, his answer seemed to have a few people in the room stirred (an “exciting” response to the issue as one audience member put it) so in fear of not wanting to publicise his ideas you’ll just have to ask him for them yourself. I’ll just let your philosophical taste buds tingle for a little longer.