Putting Affect into Perspective

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1). Discerning judgment

A Democratic Theory of Judgment collects, synthesises and supplements arguments that Linda Zerilli has been making over the last decade or so.[1] As in her earlier critique of feminist poststructuralism, Zerilli casts doubt on the idea that issues of criteria, evaluation, and cross-cultural understanding are best thought of in terms of getting a better epistemological stance on things. Indeed, the overwhelming message of her discussion is that issues of judgment are not best framed in epistemological terms at all, at least not as long as that means thinking in terms of searching for transcendent criteria of some sort. A recurring theme of Zerilli's work, in this book and her previous writings, is that problems of foundationalism are often misconstrued in liberal, republican and radical traditions of political thought. Building on the arguments of Stanley Cavell, she affirms that post-foundationalism does not involve somehow controlling for the dizzying vertigo that follows from the disappearance of epistemological certainty. Rather, the critique of foundationalism is an invitation to learn to live with the fact that the world of human affairs is not only held together by relationships of knowledge - whether of certainty or contingency.

Zerilli describes herself as a "feminist critic of strict cognitivist models of politics" (p. 240), and as such it is not a surprise that she engages with the recent affective turn in critical thought, both in cultural theory and in political theory alike.[2] The turn to affect is, in no small part, an explicit rejection of the tenets of meaning-centric poststructuralist theories that she has previously criticised for their residual attachments to epistemological scepticism.[3] Zerilli's locates the outbreak of affect theory in a broader line of thought that seeks to avoid excessively intellectualist images of action, ones that think of "all aspects of human thought and action in terms of cognition" (p. 240). One of her more important insights is to suggest that there is a fundamental divide between two different ways of avoiding intellectualism, two different approaches to rethinking the relations between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how'. There are, as she puts it, "better and worse ways of arguing the anti-intellectualist case" (p. 241). It is to a tradition indebted to ordinary language philosophy that she appeals, in order to redeem phenomenological approaches and certain strands of the philosophy of mind, in preference to the styles of ontological trumping that tend to characterise theories of affect. As she puts it, "ordinary language philosophy offers a ways to refute intellectualism without sliding into a philosophically debatable and politically fraught nonconceptualism" (p. 241). Zerilli asserts that, if read properly, both ordinary language philosophy and existential phenomenology "show not only that propositional intentionality is entangled in and unthinkable apart from practical intentionality but also that there is no sharp line between unarticulated knowing how and explicit knowledge" (p. 247). On the face of it, this might not sound that path-breaking, until one notices that the assertion of sharp

[1] Zerilli, L. 2016. *A Democratic Thoery of Judgment*. University of Chicago Press. All page numbers are to this text.
[2] See Gregg, M. and Seigworth (eds.), 2010. *The Affect Reader*. Duke University Press.
[3] Zerilli, L. 1998. Doing without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary. *Political Theory* 24:4, 435-458.

dividing lines between affect and meaning, feeling and cognition, is in fact quite central to a whole series of contemporary strands of thought, including cultural theories of affect, psychological theories of basic emotions, and social science interpretations of neuroscience.

Zerilli has engaged with the relevance of neurobiology to political analysis before.[4] In this book she places her analysis of affect theory in a broader context of debates about cognitive and noncognitive approaches to action, intentionality and normativity. It is this aspect of the book I want to dwell upon here. I want to draw into view some similarities and differences between Zerilli's argument against strong interpretations of the autonomy of affect with the arguments developed by what I will for convenience sake call the 'nonsite school' of cultural criticism; and I want to draw attention to what is a distinctive style of conceptual criticism that Zerilli pursues in developing her own view of judgement.

2). Aspects of intentionality

In Zerilli's view, the affective turn in critical theory raises the problem of how to think about the entanglement of affect and conceptual rationality. She is surely correct that this is an important question, although she might be being rather charitable in this judgment. It is actually the criticism levelled at the simplistic dualisms underlying nonrepresentational theories of affective embodiment that has flushed out this issue as a problem worthy of further consideration. As she herself effectively shows, in most if not all accounts of affect theory the relationship between affect and rationality is normally presented as already having been settled, in a clear order of causal priority in favour of affect over rationality. Zerilli develops an effective critique of the ways in which affect theory holds fast to a strong separation of the conceptual and nonconceptual, thought and action, cognition and affect, a style of thinking that is most clearly evident in the recourse to 'layer-cake' images of the priority of the latter over the former.

In developing this critique, Zerilli affirms significant parts of the criticism of affect theory developed by Ruth Leys.[5] She also registers a significant disagreement with the implied direction of Leys' own critique. One area where Zerilli converges with Leys is around the issue of disagreement. As Zerilli points out, from a noncognitivist position (of which affect theory would count as one example amongst others) - where evaluations are is all about feeling and subjective preferences cut off from a realm of objectivity - "disagreement about values" (p. 12) is not strictly possible (p. 12). For Zerilli, disagreement necessarily has an intentional character: "We can and do ask if a particular valuational response is appropriate to its object" (p. 16). In this concern with the ways in which noncognitivism elides the possibility of disagreement by cutting evaluation off from any intentional orientation to a realm of objectivity, Zerilli is largely in accord with the position articulated by Leys in her own critique of affect theory. Leys holds that advocates of the autonomy of affect are unable to take normative stances because, from their perspective, differences of feeling are just that – mere differences, not disagreements about a shared world. What most concerns Leys is the way in which affect theory evacuates the social field of any possibility of

[4] Zerilli, L 2015. The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgment. *New Literary History* 46:2, 261-286.
[5] Leys, R. 2011. The turn to affect: a critique. *Critical Inquiry* 37, 434-72.

argument and debate. In essence, affect theory proposes that one cannot argue or disagree – about the meaning of a text or a political issue – because what people feel is not open to rational justification. Affect theory reduces normative values into merely personal tastes.[6]

The concern with defending the possibility of disagreement as the very core of theories of intentionality and interpretation is a defining theme of the 'nonsite school' of cultural criticism with which to Leys' work is associated.[7] Leys' argument, both against cultural theories of affect and her broader genealogy of the sciences of emotions, is broadly in accord with the arguments of literary theorists including Walter Benn Michaels and Todd Cronan, who have challenged the terms in which affect, feeling and emotions have been presented as fundamentally undermining any concern with intentionality in the analysis of cultural forms from literature, painting to photography. For these thinkers, appeals to the causal power of affect and feeling have the effect of closing down any space not just of intentionality but also therefore of interpretation.[8] As Cronan puts it, "Without an appeal to intention – trying to understand what someone meant by something (a sign, a mark, a gesture, a sound, a word, an idea) - there are no grounds for disagreement".[9] Claims about the affective dimensions of art, or literature, or 'media' in general, are concerned not with interpretation or meaning, but with what happens to subjects of experience. The assertion of the sensory immediacy of affects means that questions of interpretation - and therefore the possibility of disagreement - become moot.

While Zerilli shares this concern with reaffirming the importance of disagreement to political action, she is rather wary of the precise direction in which Leys takes her critique of affect theory. She suggests, with some fairness I think, that what is missing from Leys' critique is an understanding "of the temptation to embrace nonconceptuality as the only adequate response to intellectualism" (p. 251).[10] That might be so, and Zerilli is right to give credit to the animating concern with understanding the 'tenacity' of oppressive social norms. But the more substantive concern that Zerilli has with Leys' critique of affect theory is with the implicit account of intentionality it appears to invoke. Zerilli worries that Leys seeks to reassert a notion of intentionality as concept possession, a notion she is herself concerned in this book to complicate. As she puts it, a critical response to affect theory "must do more than reaffirm intentionality – the relation to thought to its objects – in one or other of the ways now familiar in the philosophy of mind" (p. 260). This issue – how to theorise intentionality - is, I think, an important cleavage amongst critics of affect theory – and it is certainly the case that much of the work associated with the 'nonsite school' is primarily focussed upon redeeming a rather traditional concept of artistic intentionality, one in which intentionality is closely associated with claims to objective truth.

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[6] Leys, R. 2017. *The Ascent of Affect*. University of Chicago Press, p. 348.
[7] See https://nonsite.org/. See also Barnett, C. 2019. Must we mean what we do? *History of Human Sciences*, In Press.
[8] Michaels, W.B. 2004. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton University Press.
[9] Cronan, T. 2014. *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 17.
[10] For what it's worth, my own views on wherein lies the attraction of theories of affect is presented in Barnett 2019.

Zerilli's position that we do not 'cognize' evaluative facts is certainly at odds with the strong account of aesthetic intentionality defended by writers such as Michaels and Cronan. She holds that this affirmation need not lead to pure noncogntive approach to judgment. She argues that feelings and affects are 'world-giving' as she puts it, "bound up with discovering the facts and thus with rational ways of judging" (p. 15). This formulation actually has some close affinities with the account of embodied rationality that Leys has herself recently affirmed, in her endorsement of the 'embodied world taking cognitivism' presented by the philosopher Phil Hutchinson.[11] As Leys puts it, "The resulting account of emotions is a cognitivism that emphasizes the ways in which humans and other animals are alive to aspects of the world – not to the disenchanted world of the modern natural sciences that stands external to minds, but to cognitivized, conceptualized world." (p. 132). My point is not that Zerilli and Leys are in complete agreement. But by reading them alongside each other, it becomes clear that between them they might well be redefining the philosophical territory upon which the relevance of affective dimensions of action and their relationship to rationality should be concerned; more specifically, both consider the debate between John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus over rationality and mindedness to be the place where the key issues are most clearly elaborated.[12]

3). Logical geographies of action

In her treatment of the implications of the Dreyfus-McDowell debate for political theory, and in other dimensions of her argument in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, one can see a distinctive style of conceptual analysis at work in Zerilli's own thinking. It is one in which she consistently seeks to reconfigure the temporal and spatial imaginations at work in different strands of political theory. In a number of chapters in the book, Zerilli outlines how discussions of judgment are often wrapped up in accounts of how to understand the values of different cultures or different identities. There is certainly a strong association between the idea that judgment is as a matter of subsuming particulars under universal concepts that are already agreed upon, and the idea that one cannot comprehend or should not even presume to judge what is foreign or unfamiliar to one's own experience. The resulting worry about relativism arises, she argues, from mistaking the challenge of making judgments in situations of practical action for the ability to provide philosophically fool proof principles for such judgments in any context – this is another variant of the epistemological assumption that action must be firmly grounded in certain knowledge. Zerilli proposes that relativism is a false problem, one that arises from remaining captive to the wrong picture of how it is possible to share a world together with others. It is a picture in which the idea of judgment as the rule governed application of agreed standards leads either to interminable worries that particular perspectives will undermine the very possibility of judging or to the ethnocentric disavowal of judging in the face of various scruples about giving offence.

It is here, in the treatment of how judgment across different perspectives is to be imagined, that Zerilli's elaboration of Hannah Arendt's understanding of the political becomes important. Zerilli argues that judgment should be thought of as inherently political not in the sense that it is necessarily about explicitly political topics, nor in

[11] Leys, 2017, pp. 13-20.
[12] Schear, J.K. (ed.). 2013. *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*. London, Routledge.

the sense that it involves expressing one's own opinions, but in the sense that it involves addressing oneself to others. Thinking of judgment in this way requires us to think of the use of criteria as "fundamentally anticipatory rather than antecedent (justificatory) in structure" (p. 183). In making this conceptual move, Zerilli switches the temporal register in which issues of judgment are presented, and, in so doing, she also refashions the image of the space across which the application of criteria is projected. Judgments are now to be understood as claims addressed to others in anticipation of some sort of response, without either knowing in advance the form of such a response or being able to compel assent. Judgment is thereby reconfigured as a performative act of opening and sustaining social interaction, of affirming a shared world.[13]

The recasting of the spatial pictures through which issues of judgment, intentionality and normativity are discussed is, to my eye at least, a recurrent feature in Zerilli's book. Throughout the book, Zerilli argues that the apparent problems of pluralism, relativism, and subjectivism arise from particular ways of framing the relations between the cognitive and the non-cognitive, the conceptual and the nonconceptual, meaning and affect (e.g. pp. 10-17). Across otherwise very different traditions of thought, for example, she finds a recurring attachment to bifurcated models of mind that lead to the idea that values are purely subjective (in either good ways or bad ways) and that affective states are purely noncognitive. In short, Zerilli is concerned with refashioning the 'logical geographies' that characterise the conceptual frames that shape discussion of human action.[14] By this, I mean that she attends to the ways in which relations between insides and outsides, or between different systems, or between distinct processes are imagined. Indeed, paying careful attention to the logical geographies of theories of action might be taken to be a defining characteristic of the strand of *ordinary* philosophising with which Zerilli identifies, in contrast to the assertive ontologizing that characterises affect theory. So, for example, in her engagement with the Dreyfus-McDowell debate, Zerilli alights in particular upon the subtext to that debate, which revolves around the ways in which spatial metaphors are mobilized by both sides. Dreyfus talks about upper floors and lower floors, and McDowell's work reconfigures ideas of inside and outside to reconfigure mind-body relations in his argument that perception is conceptual 'all the way out'.[15] Zerilli's argument, specifically in relation to Dreyfus's critique of 'mentalism' in accounts of embodied rationality, is that what one might think of as the vertical spatialization of concepts leads to a series of misunderstandings and prevents a more nuanced, non-reductive understanding of the ways in which affect and conceptuality are entangled. The combination of an architectural vocabulary of levels with a vocabulary of temporal priority of embodied feelings over rational thought is the recurrent rhetorical feature of a whole genre of affect theory, and it connects it with a much broader public discourse of psychologised neuro-commentary.

One can find this attention to the spatial grammar of theories of action, embodiment, and rationality in different parts of Zerilli's argument in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. For example, a pivotal theme running throughout the book, one that connects the Arendtian theme of 'representative thinking' with the discussion of

[13] See also Barnett, C. 2017. *The Priority of Injustice*. University of Georgia Press, Chapter 2.
[14] I am borrowing the phrase, improperly, from Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*.
[15] See also Hurley, S. 1998. *Consciousness in Action*. Harvard University Press.

issues of cognitivism and noncognitivism, is how to understand the idea of *perspective*. Drawing on James Conant's work, Zerilli reasserts the ordinary sense that perspective refers to the idea that objects take on different appearances depending on the angle from which they are viewed. Far from being ruinous of the possibility of a sense of a shared objective world, Zerilli argues that any distortion arising from any given perspective can be corrected by taking on board other perspectives. The crucial philosophical point here is that perspectives are always "perspectives *on* something" (p. 267). Far from ruining a sense of objectivity, Zerilli argues that the very possibility of sharing an objective world depend upon plural perspectives, an argument that overlaps with Arendt's account of what it is to share in a common world: "Rather than as serving as reminders of a limit, of our confinement in our human-all-too-human modes of subjectivity, perspective and affective interpretations are now taken to be the very means by which we can overcome the restrictions on seeing how things actually stand in the world that may be associated with our particular location in it" (p. 32-33).

Zerilli's redemption of the ordinary sense of perspective, in order to affirm an understanding of embodied, affectively imbued intentionality, suggests that the possibility of speaking of a shared world arises not from abstracting upwards – vertically - from particular contexts towards some sort of context-transcendent principles of judgment, but by moving between perspectives in one way or another – horizontally, as it were. And to follow through on this conceptual move requires an additional imaginative adjustment. The identification of vertiginous relativism as a problem generated by affirming plural perspectives follows from holding fast to a picture in which it is assumed that belonging to a particular culture or being located in a particular context is to find oneself *enclosed* within a tightly bounded conceptual schema of some sort. But Zerilli argues, citing Steven Affeldt to the effect that "a context is not a room" (p. 149), that context is not best imagined as either a figure for the threat of pure contingency, nor as a last resort guarantor of determinative meaning. Rather, she endorses Stanley Cavell's much cited account of the projection of meanings learnt in one situation into *new* contexts[16], underscoring again the central Arendtian theme of initiation, beginning – of natality – in Zerilli's conceptual reconfiguration of issues of action. On these grounds, it turns out that context is best thought of as a figure of openness and creativity (as Derrida taught us too).

Zerilli's account of the political stakes of contemporary philosophical debates about embodiment, intentionality, normativity and rationality is, in short, characterised by a particular style of criticism, one which attends closely to the spatial and temporal ordering of concepts. In developing an account in which the possibility of judgment is made conditional on the capacity to project meanings into new contexts which is not guaranteed in advance, Zerilli's book is best located within a broader movement of resurgent social theories of action and re-socialized philosophies of practical reason that promise a route beyond the shared epistemic hang-ups of poststructuralist theories of signification and ontologies of affect alike.[17]

[16] Cavell, S. 2002. *Must we mean what we say? (Updated Edition)*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 52.

[17] See Barnett, C. 2014. Geography and ethics: from moral geographies to geographies of worth. *Progress in Human Geography* 38, 151-160; and Barnett, C. 2012. Geography and ethics: Placing life in the space of reasons. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(3), pp. 379–388.