

Q&A

with John Protevi, author of *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*.

Q: *Political Affect* looks at three case studies: the Terri Schiavo case, the Columbine High School shooting, and Hurricane Katrina. How did you decide on case studies as a method of doing philosophy?

A: I think case studies are an important and under-used tool in philosophy, as opposed to thought experiments. As generations of philosophy students know, one of the most famous of all philosophical concepts, Descartes's cogito ("I think, therefore I am"), is arrived at via the thought experiment of the evil genius, who can fool you about the real reference of all your ideas. But he can't fool you that you're thinking while you're being fooled. (You can be mistaken that you're sitting at your computer, but you can't be mistaken that you think you're sitting at your computer.)

Contemporary philosophy has lots and lots of thought experiments: not just the brain-in-a-vat, which updates Descartes, but also zombies, teleportation, Twin Earth, Swampman, a whole bestiary and cartography of strange beings and places! But it has very few case studies. Why is that?

I think it's because much of contemporary philosophy is still basically "essentialist." That is, thought experiments aim at identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for an essential distinction. With a thought experiment you try to find the core unshakeable idea that provides the criterion for membership of a thing in a category. What properties does this thing share with other things, but only those other things, in this category? Thought experiments want to end with a particular type of "eureka," the classifying eureka: Aha, this fits here, and that fits there!

But with case studies we're not after essential distinctions at the borders of categories. Instead, we're trying to explore concrete situations and the "problems" they express. Here is where my reliance on

the thought of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze comes in. Deleuze did not think in terms of essences that would slot things into categories, but thought that events are the points of intersection of “multiplicities.” That’s a technical term for Deleuze which roughly speaking means a field in which several processes meet to produce events, much as a crystal or a lightning bolt or a hurricane forms out of a field of multiple processes. In dealing with analogous multiplicities in our social fields we see that (1) any one move changes the conditions for future moves and that (2) no one solution exhausts the potentials for future creatively different solutions.

Now to express the sense of this irreducible complexity, Deleuze thought multiplicities formed “problematic” fields, and these Deleuzean problems, the problems of life, cannot be “solved” once and for all; they can only be dealt with. My friend James Williams uses this example of a problem: “should we raise the interest rate?” You can see how any one move here will change the condition for future moves and that no one move will ever exhaust the problem: we’ll still have to think what we should do with the interest rate, always – or at least until the economic system changes so drastically that other pressures produce other problems. A problem might cease to be a problem, but the world will always be problematic.

So using case studies we come to realize that concrete situations are “problematic” in this sense. The more we explore the Schiavo case, the Columbine case, the Katrina case, the more we realize that concrete situations are “crystallizations” of a problematic field, and that a change here or there, if it occurs at a critical point, might make all the difference in the world.

Q: What do you mean by ‘critical point’?

A: Good question. The real issue at stake is that thought experiments looking at essences have a basically static image of the world. Things have properties, and our job is to find the essential distinctions that enable us to group them with other things with the same core set of properties. But Deleuze thinks we need to look to the processes that produce things with properties. And those processes have “singularities” or turning points.

So what we're doing with a case study is seeing what processes have come together to form this concrete situation and in so doing we find their singularities, those places where if things had been different, the process and hence the situation which is the product of those processes, would also have been different.

Q: But you use a thought experiment in your Schiavo chapter, don't you?

A: Yes. At the end of the Schiavo chapter I propose a thought experiment: how would you want your loved ones to feel if you were in a PVS (Persistent Vegetative State)? I'm not asking what you would do for a loved one in a PVS, but what you would want them to do if you were in a PVS. The difference of this from a standard thought experiment is that it's singularizing, not universalizing. I'm not asking what "someone" or "anyone" or "everyone" should or must do in an abstract situation of "a" PVS case. I'm asking readers to imagine their family members with all the intensity such a singular experience brings with it.

As points of contrast with some well-known thinkers on death, such a thought experiment would be not Heideggerian, for it does not concern the impact of the thought of your death on your actions; nor is it Levinasian, for it does not concern the effect the death of the other will have on you. The thought experiment will however (we would expect) knock you out of your habits of thought—the intensity and accuracy of the experience would “shock you to think” as you think about how your loved ones would feel. (Deleuze always thought it was somewhat unnatural, so to speak, for us to think: we prefer clichés. So you have to be shocked to think by an encounter, he would insist.) Such a shocking encounter would perform what Deleuze would call a “depersonalization.” It sounds paradoxical, but for him, the less you are a “person” in the sociological sense (that is, a person just like everyone else is a person), the more open you are to your singularity, your uniqueness. And it's that unique position in the concrete situation, I claim, that grounds the “right to privacy” that's such an issue in our political and legal institutions.

Q: Your emphasis on the concrete situation sounds like what analytic philosophers call “moral particularism.” Do you agree?

A: I do agree. Deleuze makes a distinction between “morality” as applying principles and “ethics” as navigating situations. I think this notion of navigating a concrete situation by trying to find its singularities matches quite well what my analytic colleagues call “moral sensitivity” and “moral particularism.”

Q: In general, how do you see your book in relation to the “divide” between analytic and continental philosophy?

A: I very consciously wrote the book trying to appeal to both analytic and continental philosophers. The division between these two “camps” is a very complicated historical situation, and I can’t really do justice to it here. I do have a series of posts on this topic on my blog.

Briefly, I don’t think you can come up with a conceptual distinction between analytic and continental philosophy. (I had better not think that, after all that stuff above on case studies and particular processes and singularities!) However, it’s clear that the terms “analytic” and “continental” philosophy have been used as labels for a certain sociological reality of citation and hiring networks. What that means is that neither side cites the authors or questions of the “other side” and that neither side hires the other side’s students, except perhaps as a token. I think this is a wretched state of affairs and has caused a lot of damage to the philosophy profession as a whole.

The key to getting out of it requires a little bit of give and take for both sides, a little professional respect, and a lot of work to find topics that can be approached by philosophers with different training. I think that the “embodied mind” school of cognitive science I deal with in *Political Affect* is a great candidate for bridge-building between analytic and continental philosophy. First, the authors in the embodied mind school (people like Hubert Dreyfus, Francisco Varela, Alva Noë, Evan Thompson, and many others) have always read the great phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-

Ponty), and every continental philosopher has studied them intensely. So that's a point of intersection; what I try to do in *Political Affect* is to show how Deleuze can move the discussion along, supplementing the phenomenological approach with his "neo-materialist" approach. And secondly, the neuroscience and biology at the base of the "embodied mind" school is thoroughly "differential," that is, has dispensed with any notion of a controlling center, either in the brain or the genome. And what more could a continental philosopher raised on a steady diet of Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze ask for than that?

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