

## RESEARCH STATEMENT: DAVID HILLS

My interests center in aesthetics, the part of philosophy that persuaded me to become a philosopher in the first place. But they have a significant bearing on more centrally located and densely populated parts of philosophy as well.

1. The discrete states of mind studied by propositional attitude psychology presuppose and are made possible by various background understandings of ourselves, our surroundings, and our ongoing activities in these surroundings. Such understandings have content, of a sort: they are about the things they concern, but the manner in which they are about those things fails to equip them with determinate conditions of truth or falsity, satisfaction or frustration. Such understandings are constituted by conduct, patterns of conduct, and habits of conduct: they're a matter of what we're implicitly up to, not a matter of what we explicitly think and want and intend. The reflective reconsideration of an understanding tends to proceed via the reflective reconsideration of particular propositional attitudes in which it finds expression.

In their different ways and in their different jargons, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gilbert Ryle, and Wittgenstein all called attention to the relation between background understandings and the propositionally contentful mental states they make possible, the relation between the (relatively unfamiliar) intentionality of conduct and the (relatively familiar) intentionality of the mental. All four thinkers held that shared background understandings were a precondition of coherent agreement or disagreement in beliefs, wants, intentions, and the rest. But they had little to say about the details.

One way to begin the search for details is to explore the role *a shared capacity to take delight in the same things* plays in rendering coherent collaborative moral, theoretical, and aesthetic inquiry possible. The cultivation and maintenance of such shared senses of fun is a major preoccupation of human social life: *having good taste* is more closely akin to *being a good sport* than we tend to realize. This topic is already under investigation in philosophical theories of taste propounded by Hume and by Kant; I think it can and should be under investigation in the theory of metaphor as well. My two major long-term projects investigate the place in our lives of some kind of presumptively shared sense of fun: what it achieves for us, how it figures in our background understandings of ourselves and our surroundings, and how it gets maintained or modified or undermined in the ongoing course of human social life. The first is an account of metaphor; the second is an interpretive study of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

*The Metaphor Project:* It seems to me that metaphor is a device that works by equipping entire sentences with special non-literal truth conditions and particular words and phrases with special non-literal truth conditional contents. Individual metaphors owe their non-literal truth conditions to their status as moves in games of make-believe, games people with sufficient shared culture can and regularly do play together on a pick-up basis. For instance, what would take for *Juliet is the sun* to be metaphorically true is whatever it would take for that same utterance to be literally fictional in the game of make-believe Romeo is playing (and inviting us to play with him) as he speaks these very words. What makes such pick-up play possible, what makes it possible for the members of a group to understand themselves as playing a single game together despite never explicitly agreeing on its rules, is a presumptively shared sense of fun: I can and do keep my own imaginings in step with those of my fellow players by consulting my private sense of what would be the most fun to imagine under the circumstances, since I can and do presume that in certain respects and up to a certain point, my own private sense of fun tends to agree with those of my fellow players.

*The Kant Project:* Interpretations of Kant's account of beauty judgments in the Critique of Aesthetical Judgment have tended to reconstruct the Deduction of Taste while abandoning the Antinomy of Taste as a lost cause — preserving Kant's account of why we all necessarily *can* take a free satisfaction in the same objects while abandoning his subsequent account of why we all *should* do so and how we may therefore contend with one another over the beauty of particular objects. Some reasons for skepticism about the more ambitiously normative part of Kant's account are rooted in suspicions that it would render Kant's total account inconsistent. (How can a sheer susceptibility to satisfaction and dissatisfaction be subject to rational normative assessment in the first place? If a sincere beauty judgment is to directly express my own felt satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an object, how can that same judgment be sensitive in any meaningful way to arguments offered by others? If I am to stop up my ears to the arguments of others when attempting to make a judgment of taste, shouldn't they stop up their ears to arguments of mine when attempting the same thing? And if they do, what becomes of the *demand for* or *claim on* the agreement of others that was supposed to be a distinctive feature of judgments of taste?) Other reasons for skepticism are rooted in the brevity and obscurity of Kant's characterization of the concept appeal to which is supposed to make contention over objects of taste possible: an *indeterminate idea* of a *supersensible substrate* of nature and humanity. Once we see this obscure-sounding language as an attempt to connect Kant's treatment of taste with his numerous discussions of the special way *physicotheology* conceives the relation between God and nature, a much more charitable interpretation of the Antinomy of Taste becomes possible, one with the

additional virtue of clarifying and deepening the connections between beauty and empirical systematicity in Kant's critical philosophy. Among its key features:

- (a) A beautiful object is one that is *as if sent* by a suitably empowered and suitably motivated "author of nature" to give felt encouragement to an unverifiable yet irrefutable presumption we humans act in the light of whenever we engage in open-ended collaborative inquiry: the presumption that the world in which we find ourselves is *as if made* to our own (shared) cognitive measure, *as if made* to prove comprehensively comprehensible in the long run to creatures with the specific shared capacities and limitations characteristic of human inquirers as such.
- (b) The considerations offered to me by other spectators when we contend with one another about the beauty of a particular object don't figure as premises for some *concluding* on my part that beauty is present in it; instead they guide my ongoing efforts to maintain as best I can the special motivational conditions under which I can *find* beauty to be present in the object: conditions under which any satisfaction I take in *an object's being* as it is will ipso facto be a satisfaction taken in *the object's beauty*.
- (c) The famous *sensus communis* of the Deduction of Taste turns out to be a specially fundamental sense of fun I presumptively share with *all my fellow humans*, a sense of fun that is at once exploited and maintained throughout the course of open-ended collaborative inquiry.

2. My work in progress also includes various shorter and more modest studies in the history of modern philosophy. Two themes run through them. One is that the successes of contemporary probability theory, decision theory, and strategic analysis have blinded us to the merits of *early modern models of rationality*, models which implicitly deny the existence of general purpose measures of belief strength (on the one hand) and desire strength (on the other) for reasons we late moderns ignore at our own peril. The other is that early modern epistemology was more tightly integrated with early modern moral psychology — and friendlier to argumentative moves we now associate with American pragmatism — than historians have tended to recognize. These shorter studies include:

- (a) A study of Descartes that attempts to explain the notion of *evidence* he rather quietly introduces in the *Meditations*, treating it as an epistemic aim coordinate with but distinct from the more familiar ones of *clarity* and *distinctness*. I believe that such a study can shed fresh light on some very old puzzles about the rationale for and detailed implementation of Cartesian methodical doubt.

(b) A study of Hobbes that portrays the basic repertoire of Hobbesian motives (safety, felicity, power, assurance, glory) as flowing in a direct and principled way from Hobbes's underlying materialist picture of human individuals as imperfectly self-perpetuating systems of physical motions.

(c) A study of Bentham that points out and assesses a previously unnoticed argument for the principle of utility, an argument which is surprisingly contractualist in flavor and which turns on a more general account of Bentham's, also previously unnoticed, of what it is to accept *any* moral principle.

(d) A study of Locke that tries to tease out the delicate attitudes toward doubt, assurance, and interpersonal reason-giving involved in his repudiation of Cartesian pre-emptive skeptical argument.

3. For as long as I can remember, I've been convinced that ambitious philosophy and ambitious art criticism need one another in ways both modes of thinking have been reluctant to acknowledge — convinced that neither mode of thinking can really prosper without ongoing help from the other — convinced, if you will, that philosophy needs to contain more criticism and criticism needs to contain more philosophy. I've long been on the lookout for opportunities to reintroduce these unwilling intellectual partners and keep them on speaking terms with one another. This longstanding concern of mine helped to inspire each of the projects I've just described, and I like to think its presence is reflected in the detailed texture of my teaching and writing.

In part this is a matter of small-scale expository tactics: a matter of using a painting of Gauguin's to explain Dilthey's historicism or the opening of *Remembrance of Things Past* to explain Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, a matter of urging students to notice and interpret the distinctive *literary* strategies at work in Anselm's presentation of the ontological argument or in Hume's presentation of his famous skeptical reasonings. In part it's a matter of trying to persuade practicing critics that philosophy contains descriptive and explanatory resources they can't afford to pass up if they want to make the richest possible sense of particular works of art. In part it's a matter of trying to persuade those who work on mainstream problems in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of action that attention to the detailed workings of particular works of verbal and nonverbal art isn't something they can safely postpone until supposedly simpler cases of speaking and thinking and acting have been wrestled to the ground.