

*The Group's recent discussion of 'Two Cultures' highlighted a separation of arts and sciences in English culture and set me thinking about other things I've read recently and what culture is, as something shared by humanity and maybe other things - even bears!*

## **Introduction**

From our previous talks I think we can agree that to call the two cultures 'arts' and 'sciences' is misrepresenting the argument. A (fairly) recent Radio 4 series discussed the shifting meaning of the word culture and, though it would be impossible to stop people using the word how they wish I share the presenter's feeling that there must be limits

By the time we are considering 'Benefits Culture' as though it were a form of what Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) defined as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" I am sure we have lost the point entirely. Popular Culture is often seen as a dumbed down version of the real thing, but this need not be the case if the populace is not dumb. Uneducated groups are capable of developing a worthwhile culture- witness the various unwritten musics, passed on by example rather than explanation.

Some people know how to create culture, others know how to sell it. Simon Cowell is an expert in popular culture, and I think the sort of person Leavis would despise for his crass ability to sell undemanding cultural products. Yes, I popular television and music have to be considered part of culture, but not in the same way that scientific understanding is. Science is popularly confused with technology, science to my mind produces only answers, not objects. The mobile phone, for example, is an technological exploitation of earlier scientific discoveries- the QM explanation of how semiconductors work, the durability of materials, the fatality or otherwise of radiation through the human skull and so on. Popular science is, I fear, in an even more precarious position than popular music or drama and the reason must surely be the very education system Snow and Leavis were arguing about.

The Two Cultures are not so much Arts and Sciences but open ended enquiry in the Arts and searching for answers (where it is assumed that the question is known) in the Sciences. Whatever we call this process, or combination of processes it is clear that humanity is moving onward in some way- despite political impediments. Whether this a natural consequence of our starting point, or a teleological pull towards some conclusion might be forever undecidable, but I have an irresistible belief that discovering and developing ideas and understanding is good. The word

'good' here meaning precisely what Plato and his footnotes meant by the 'good' life. And philosophy is the disease of believing that searching for wisdom will bring it about!

### **Points of View**

Epistemologically we can know what we don't know in science, but in the Arts we don't know that we don't know it. When science assumes the existence of some kind of reality we need either to ask what is real- or, as I am advocating, stop asking questions about what is real and focus on what we actually do know about.

In one sense I know that the trees and buildings surrounding me are constructions of molecules and forces and so on, the stuff science tells us about. But I really don't care about reality if I am able to remain mistaken. Say I was 'really' struck by a meteorite on my way here, my belief that I am sitting here talking is in some way mistaken. I cannot see why I should be concerned about the charred body somewhere down the road that is "really" me if I am able to remain convinced that I am really here.

The only point in positing reality, is to force agreement between conflicting points of view. You tell me I was hit by a meteorite, I say I wasn't – then you point out that it is already next Thursday and my foot is missing and I will tend to agree that your account of reality trumps any explanation I can deduce from the jumbled memories of experiences my life appears to be made of.

I get frustrated by scientists who imply that the explanations they offer ARE the experiences they were asked to explain. Imperceptible differences are, by definition not relevant to me until they become perceptible or more maybe accurately 'deducible'. It is really useful when a scientific approach can lead me to examine the world in a new way. Previously unnoticed things might then lead me to useful predictions about the future, that I would otherwise have been unable to make. I am trying to claim that prediction is what science is for, knowledge is what we have- there is no point in trying to convince me that I don't exist (or any similar idea). There is an interesting social aspect to epistemology; in one sense it is quite reasonable for me to say that 'we know the diameter of a Helium atom' but in another, I bet no one round the table actually does!

If we accept for a moment, and simply for the sake of simplicity, that humans are all the sentient beings that exist; how would the world carry on without anything being aware of anything else? Initially this seems like a non-question, we tend not to think

of inanimate objects as being aware of one another. Why should we do this? I am aware of things, why must this be a property only of me, or of things somehow like me?

I have to immediately acknowledge the absence of a word in my vocabulary to more accurately describe the state I just suggested was 'being aware of' something else. The word 'consciousness' clearly overstates my case, if a definition is needed the lowest regularly mentioned form of consciousness seems to be the thermostat. To purloin from Nagel, is there something that it is like to be a thermostat? On the other hand my chemistry teacher often used to talk about atoms 'wanting' to fill their outer electron orbits, this is obviously some kind of anthropomorphising of the atom, but it has a clear sense of reality behind it. What is the difference between my wanting another beer and an atom's wanting another electron?

In the absence of an epistemologically sound test for consciousness (awareness, or whatever we are to call it) I am tempted to apply Occam's Razor- which might cut in either of two places. I know as absolute brute fact that I am aware. This I take as *a priori* (maybe analytic *a priori*?) I cannot, in fact, doubt that I am having experience, even if hypothetically someone might, I personally, here and now cannot. I could let the razor cut there, leaving me a solipsist. No one and nothing else would be able to convince me that there was any consciousness or awareness in the world. This strikes me as simply introducing a counter intuitive belief merely because it is possible to do so.

## Descartes

But this is what Descartes did do. Having spent some days in 1619 in a stove heated room doubting things, Descartes had the insight that he was doubting things ... and if he was doubting then he must exist. By this stage I think Rene had made three fundamental mistakes that put Western Philosophy on the wrong path for nigh on four hundred years.

- 1) I cannot trust my senses. Frankly, I do and so does everyone else, but as Kant pointed out, if my senses are consistently wrong then I am consistently wrong, there is no way I can take off the green glasses. All my interests are therefore in the green world not some other place or time that I have no possible access to.
- 2) Though Euclid might have been a good example for Descartes, now that we realise Euclidean geometry is not the only logically consistent system possible, we also realise that it is not necessarily relevant to the real world. Absolutely self-evident truths are not necessarily true (have I just shot myself in the foot here?!)

- 3) I am a being with a body and a mind that are aspects of the same thing. I cannot make any sense of the world except from my bodily point of view. I can change my point of view in a literal or metaphorical sense, but life without a bodily location or an eternal soul with no concept of duration is just not 'real life'. If I am to have *post mortem* experiences once my body has decomposed then I have lost Kant's categories of space and time, my experiences would have to be utterly unlike those I am used to.

So when it comes to positing experience in things other than human minds, I suggest using Occam's razor at the other extreme of the scale. Rather than being a solipsist, if we accept that I know that I experience other things, I know this is a property of me, why should I assume that I am unique? There seems to me to be no reason why other things might not be aware of one another in some sense, even if we do not, or never will be able to understand that sense.

I accept that Kant's categories of space and time determine how I have experiences and that the implied noumenon is no more than implied. This is why we have to be careful what the word 'aware' means, I probably ought to use a different word, or even invent one. I certainly do not mean that tables and chairs have sense organs detecting the existence of other objects from reflected light or vibrations in the air.

Is it possible to imagine what it would be like to detect objects without recourse to our human sensory mechanisms? Say, the way a bat does? We tend to anthropomorphise, even in some bizarre cases to the extent of wondering whether Sherlock Holmes was a lesbian! Fictitious characters are experiences, in many ways analogous to people, but lacking a physical body. (*Napoleon in War & Peace!*) We know what it is like to be a well written character in a good novel... and I **do** mean *know*. There are things I might infer about what a fictitious character might do, but this is not the same as knowing what it is like to be someone, it's more like treating people as Skinnerian Black Boxes. This seems even more strange when we consider that what someone is like ... is not ... what it is like to be that someone.

Music shows us what it is like to have emotional experiences we are not having, and maybe never have had or will have, but this is a digression. A personality is a real thing that we detect or understand or somehow appreciate without a direct sensory input to detect it. You can't see a personality. Maybe a clearer example is grasping the idea that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides, or seeing the answer to a crossword clue. All of these are forms of understanding the world, that we don't understand in the way we understand the mechanisms of vision or hearing. Even in obviously sensory apprehensions, like seeing what is in front of me, there is the last mysterious step which Descartes attributed to the pineal gland.

## **Bears**

There are eight species of bear (Black, Brown, Polar, Sloth, Spectacled, Sun, Moon and the Giant Panda) living on Earth. From the point of view of this discussion they might be defined as 'animals much as we are but with more fur (generally)'. I hope no one is disappointed that these are not what I plan to discuss. I am interested in our ability to generate personless personalities, like Mary Pain, who is described by Wikipedia:

Mary Plain and her bear family feature in a series of stories by Gwynedd Rae. The main characters are Mary and her human friend, the Owl Man. (The name refers to his spectacles.) He is kind and indulgent to Mary. He often takes her on outings. Mary and her friends can speak, but although anthropomorphic in that respect and in other aspects of their behaviour, the author is careful to point out that she is not a teddy bear. Similarly, although Mary learns to write she does not wear clothes. Mary and her family live in the Bear Pits at Berne.

Mary's behaviour is much like that of a small child, with the Owl Man acting as a surrogate parent, guiding her through life and helping her out of trouble.

Most fictitious bears (Rupert, Paddington, Winnie the Pooh) are much the same, they are fictions that we know, and being widely known early in our acculturation can be used as analogies to describe real people or events (isn't Frank Spencer really Paddington less the beariness?).

Is the good life that we philosophers seek accessible to bears? In our pluralistic ecologically conscious world I think it has to be. There are differences between men (from Mars) and women (from Venus), but there are other cultural differences, from places uncontaminated by Descartes. My limited experience of Africa suggests that some Africans have a much more teleological grasp of the world than I find in London pubs. The purpose of my life might be seen to be to create or support the next generation- does a Snow/Leavis type education encourage such a belief?

I feel that having one's life purpose is to continue the species is like making a watch with no hands; endless generations producing nothing but continuity and further generations. There may be beauty in the mechanism, or even in just the idea of how it works. But if no one is out there, needing to know the time, why perfect an intricate clockwork process? Maybe life would have some inherent merit analogous to aesthetic merit.

On the other hand, if life has an end, or more accurately maybe, a direction0

## **Conclusion**

Inasmuch as I know what it is phenomenology is the common thread to my three themes. We cannot understand the world scientifically without interpreting it, and

the interpretation comes from an inescapable viewpoint. Investigating the human condition, the viewpoint if you like, is what so called 'Arts' study is all about. Unlike science it is open ended, not aiming to answer questions so much as to raise them. There is something that it is like, a phenomenological experience that might, as far as we know, be an attribute of anything or everything that exists. Bears we might describe as fictitious still do exist- in the way that I claim Santa does- a kind of viewpoint without a 'real' viewer

The world of bears is where we actually live, semi consciously anthropomorphising, or bringing experiences into categories that we can understand. The brute world is an incomprehensible mess, we can grasp parts of explanations here and there, but a mere human brain is not capable of really enjoying a cup of hot tea whilst simultaneously accepting it as a really good Brownian Motion Generator

#### Thought Experiment One

If I stamp on your foot, no matter what part your brain plays in the process the pain remains in your foot. Your mind is (at least partly) in your foot. Analogously any other 'thing'

#### Thought Experiment Two

We can know what it is like to be Paddington Bear, despite his ursine nature and the fact that he does not exist. Something about the idea of PB induces us to project experiences onto him. This tends to suggest that Panpsychism is plausible even when false (because Paddington does not exist as a physical thing), how do we avoid this?

#### Thought Experiment Three

Marjorie Morningstar is the story (by Hermann Wouk) of a teenage girl who daydreams through a series of men to end up a suburban housewife. Is Eva's belief that Wouk understood her position really an indication that he told her how to see herself. Did she know what it was like to be herself before someone told her what girls a little older than herself might feel? Not necessarily the novelist, maybe just the society (however fictitious) portrayed by the novelist

What is it that I am interacting with, what is 'the outside world' or the real world? Culturally I can interact with a pint of beer as a collection of chemicals (If I am a

scientist intending to classify the experience) or the result of a traditional process (if I am an artist exploring possibilities) or a social problem or....

We can all interact with Paddington Bear, who is not a bear, but has a personality. A personality seems to be something analogous to a soul, spirit or mind that we attribute to other people (and bears) on the grounds that I am sure I have one myself. (My 'self' what is that?)

In an attempt to get some kind of grip on the concept of Dasein, and bracketing the cause of my experiences to simply explore the phenomenology I am have yet to see why some people (even some philosophers) insist that humanity is somehow distinct from the rest of what Spinoza called 'God or nature'.

I have experiences, and post Cartesian folk philosophy, combined with a common but irrational belief in an afterlife pushes me to believe that I and the experience are distinct, and that the experiences are experiences of something radically different from me the experiencer. I'm trying to start an argument here, so I shall state bluntly that they are not!