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Love, Skepticism, and Aesthetic Judgment

Comment on Rick Furtak, Love, Subjectivity, and Truth

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"What we know is shaped by our way of knowing," Rick Furtak writes in the preface to his perceptive and invigorating book on Proust. Thus, there is a "subjective basis [to] our awareness" (2023, xi). One might see one strand of Proust's novel as a prolonged attempt to work out the nature of this subjective basis. Do our "knowledge" and "awareness" amount to some sort of grasp of objective truth? Or does the subjective nature of the foundation undermine any pretension to objectivity, leaving us unable to know anything, perhaps, other than our own interior feelings and experiences? I want to offer a few reflections on these questions, and to draw connections with a couple of modern philosophers I take to matter here. Be warned, I will not be offering a full account of these issues, not only because that would vastly exceed the space I have available here, but because I am still, myself, groping my way toward such an account.

I share Furtak's sense that Proust's readers have all too often concluded, from the fact that Marcel often seems to take the second possibility seriously, that his final position—and, by extension, Proust's—must be essentially sceptical in nature. As he correctly writes, "we also observe countercurrents repeatedly arising, in which love and related emotions are both shown and said to provide a unique type of insight. At times, love seems to be a prerequisite of *veridical* apprehension" (xi–xii; my emphasis).

Still, Marcel *does* often take seriously the sceptical possibility that aspects of our experiences that seem external are actually internal. This is, of course, a Humean thought, and at times Marcel sounds strikingly like Hume:

> Our love is too big a thing for us to be able altogether to contain it within ourselves. It radiates towards the loved one, finds there a surface which arrests it, forcing it to return to its starting-point, and it is this repercussion of our own feeling which we call the other's feelings and which charms us more than on its outward journey because we do not recognize it as having originated in ourselves. (Proust 1981, 655)

This is clearly reminiscent of Hume's observation about the human mind's "great propensity to spread itself on external objects" ([2007], 1.3.14.25). That particular remark, as it happens, appears in Book One of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, as part of a discussion of the nature of causation and necessary connection. In Book Three, Hume makes it clear that he holds a similar view regarding moral qualities:

> Take any action allowed to be vicious; Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises

> in you, towards this action. … It lies in yourself, not in the object. … Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat, and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind[.] (3.1.1.26)

Hume's metaphysics commits him to the existence, in various domains, of a certain sort of deceptive experience: an experience that presents itself to us as something *external* to ourselves—something we notice, take in, or perceive, as if it were an aspect of external reality—which in fact originates within. A number of philosophers have used the term *Projectivism* to refer to such Humean views; I will, here, refer to *Projection* views of love, and take these to be opposed to *Response* views. Response views deny that love is (typically, or necessarily) a matter of projection, insisting that in such cases we really are noticing aspects of external reality—aspects to which our emotions then respond in (hopefully) the appropriate manner. Take something like beauty. On a Response view, I might notice that somebody possesses the (real, perceiver-independent) quality of being beautiful, and fall in love with her in response. A Projection view will say that no one is beautiful in and of themselves; beauty, rather, is a sentiment I make up, project onto some person or other, and then act as if (and, in all likelihood, believe that) I have found it "out there."

On this way of understanding the distinction, then, the issue between Response views and Projection views is largely a question of how love is connected with reasons. A genuinely responsive attitude is one for which there are reasons: take fear or anger, which can be justified or unjustified, appropriate or inappropriate, depending on whether or not one has good reasons. A feeling like thirst, on the other hand, is not in this sense a response, and so is not supported by reasons. While there are, of course, causal reasons that explain why one is thirsty, causation is distinct from justification; if you are thirsty then you are simply thirsty, and there is no sense in asking whether it is reasonable to feel that way.

Proust is undoubtedly concerned with issues raised by the possibility of projection in love. It is worth noting, though, that there are at least two kinds of issues that can come up here. One, the one that Furtak emphasises (and the one I have focused on to this point), concerns the metaphysical question: a sceptical position, here, would hold that love is *never* a genuine response, but always projected onto the objects of our love. This either logically entails, or at the very least strongly supports, various other subjectivist and/or sceptical theses: that love is never appropriate or inappropriate, that there can be no reasons for loving someone, and—nearest to Furtak's concerns—that love has little if anything to do with the possibility of knowledge or accurate perception. Marcel clearly is, at times, bothered by sceptical worries of this sort. At other times, though, I think his worry has a different nature, one that has less to do with the metaphysics of love and its reasons, and more to do with a cluster of issues concerning human psychology, authenticity, and the nature of aesthetic judgment.

It will help to be able to focus on specific examples. On page 12 of his book, Furtak quotes three remarks, which come from two distinct passages in *Swann's Way*. Furtak, I think, takes these remarks to support a generalized scepticism regarding the idea that love might be affirmatively linked with knowledge. Elements of that sort of scepticism may well be present, but on my reading they are at the very least intermingled with other concerns, as I will try to make clearer below.

> Furthermore, from early on in the novel Marcel shows the concern that a love, such as Swann's for Odette or his own for Gilberte, may "not correspond to anything outside itself, verifiable by others," our need "to find reasons for [our] passion" leading us to identify after the fact qualities that are

> "worthy of love," when we do not initially *begin* to love the person for these reasons. This provides Proust's truth-obsessed narrator with yet another reason to doubt his infra-red vision. (2023, 12)

"Infra-red" is Marcel's metaphor for the "indefinable quality" inherent in "everything that surrounded Gilberte"—a quality invisible to ordinary observers, but apparent to him precisely on account of his love for her. That Marcel chooses a *colour* to play this role ties the passage nicely to the end of the above quoted passage from Hume, while reminding us that Hume assumes, there, a perhaps too-simple analysis of the metaphysics of colour: many philosophers, while perhaps acknowledging colours to be subjective in *some* significant respect, would deny the flat claim that they are therefore not real qualities of objects.

Here is the first Proust passage from which the remarks quoted above are drawn (the "he" refers to Swann):

> He was well aware that his love was something that did not correspond to anything outside itself, verifiable by others besides him; he realized that Odette's qualities were not such as to justify his setting so high a value on the hours he spent in her company. And often, when the cold government of reason stood unchallenged in his mind, he would readily have ceased to sacrifice so many of his intellectual and social interests to this imaginary pleasure. (1981, 258)

And here is the second:

> Everyone needs to find reasons for his passion, to the extent of being glad to recognize in the loved one qualities which (he has learned from literature or conversation) are worthy of love, to the extent of assimilating them by imitation and making them additional reasons for his love, even though these qualities are diametrically opposed to those his love would have sought after as long as it was spontaneous—as Swann, before my day, had sought to establish the aesthetic basis of Odette's beauty. (444)[1]

In the second passage it is taken to be a common human trait that when in love, we feel a need to find reasons for our love. Some might take this to suggest that "reasons for love" are never anything more than *post hoc* rationalisations—the generalized scepticism I mentioned above. But Marcel does not seem to be suggesting that this is true of *all* putative reasons for love. Indeed, he seems to point to a particular class of reasons—"those his love would have sought after as long as it was spontaneous"—as an exception to this complaint. The qualities that really are just *post hoc* rationalisations are clearly distinct from the spontaneously appreciated qualities: the former are both "additional" to and "diametrically opposed" to the latter.

The clearest object of Marcel's concern in this passage, then, is not (directly) related to the issues that separate Projection from Response views; it is not a general concern about the epistemic nature of the emotions, nor one concerning the metaphysics of the relevant sentiment or the reasons for it. Instead, the focal concern seems close to authenticity, as is signalled by the mention of other people whose endorsement or approval the lover desires. The lover already *has* reasons for loving his beloved; the question is why he should feel the need to go in search of additional ones. And this is especially so given that those additional ones will not be *his* reasons—i.e., the reasons he already feels and takes to be compelling—but reasons that he predicts *others* will judge to be acceptable, reasons that are "verifiable by others besides him." Rather than relying on his own judgment,

1. I have isolated the embedded claim from its surrounding context, in which Marcel contemplates and draws conclusions about his own behaviour.

rather than being moved by what he can very well see are attractive qualities, he goes in search of qualities that other people have told him are loveworthy, demanding that his beloved match standards set by others.

This seems, of course, a rather bad way of going about things. Suppose Swann cannot find any sort of theory or aesthetic standard to vindicate his belief that Odette is beautiful. Would he then be required to abandon that belief? Suppose that a search of the relevant literature fails to turn up any evidence that your beloved is worthy of love; she doesn't seem to match any of the qualities of character specifically identified as loveworthy in those books. Still, *you* find her worthy of love. (Or at least, that's how you found her before you started paging desperately through novels.) Why is your personal judgement that she is lovable worth less than the judgement of some novelist or professor of aesthetics? Again, note that we can acknowledge this concern about (in)authenticity without in any way rejecting Response views. What it seems to call for is that we find the *right kinds* of reasons, not that we reject reasons altogether.

This might be resisted. After all, it might be claimed, the whole *point* of reasons is that they are universal: a reason, by its nature, compels and is authoritative for *everyone*, not just you. So to care about reasons for love *at all* is *ipso facto* to care about one's ability to justify love to a broad audience; in principle, to everyone. It seems to me, for reasons I will get to shortly, that this argument—call it the Universality argument—falls short of its mark. For now, let's just note that the very phenomenology of love suggests that *something* is wrong with it. Wondering whether other people will approve of your romantic choices is one thing; wondering why you love the person whom you love is quite something else. It seems entirely possible not to care about the former at all and to still give a great deal of thought to the latter. And at any rate, the very experience of finding someone beautiful, or loveable, seems to include the feeling of *getting it right*: you are seeing them as they really are, you are seeing something about them others cannot see—if you really love them, in fact, you *know* you are right to do so, and you simply don't care what others may think or feel. (Of course, Hume admits that projective experiences *feel* as if we are discovering something that comes from outside, and in that sense getting things right: that's part of the point of the Projectivist analysis. The question is whether to accept that analysis.)

Feelings that attach to beauty, which seem so central in such cases (and are so important to Marcel, and to Proust), are in a way paradigmatic of the philosophical perplexities here. For the experience of beauty seems to involve both subjective and objective elements, and it is not obvious how the two are to be reconciled. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is largely animated by this tension. Kant admits that the search for external validation seems out of place when it comes to what he calls judgements of taste, and is well aware of the potentially distorting effects of the desire for the approval of others:

> It is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others and first inform himself about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the same object. … Hence a young poet does not let himself be dissuaded from his conviction that his poem is beautiful by the judgment of the public nor that of his friends. … To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one's own would be heteronomy. (2001, 163)

Kant is clear, moreover, that inappropriate attempts at legitimation would include not only citations of such empirical facts as the fact that others share your judgment, but also philosophical arguments based in conceptual claims about beauty—the kind of thing, presumably, Swann was looking for in seeking "the aesthetic basis of Odette's beauty":

> If someone does not find a building, a view, or a poem beautiful, then, first**,** he does not allow approval to be internally imposed upon himself by a hundred voices who all praise it highly. He may of course behave as if it pleased him as well, in order not to be regarded as lacking in taste. … But what he does see clearly is this: that the approval of others provides no valid proof for the judging of beauty. … Second, an *a priori* proof in accordance with determinate rules can determine the judgment on beauty even less. If someone reads me his poem or takes me to a play that in the end fails to please my taste, then he can adduce Batteux or Lessing, or even older and more famous critics of taste, and adduce all the rules they established as proofs that his poem is beautiful; certain passages, which are the very ones that displease me, may even agree with rules of beauty (as they have been given there and have been universally recognized): I will stop my ears, listen to no reasons and arguments, and would rather believe that those rules of the critics are false or at least that this is not a case for their application than allow that my judgment should be determined by means of *a priori* grounds of proof, since it is supposed to be a judgment of taste and not of the understanding or of reason. (164–65)

Thus, neither the experience-based judgments of others, nor any theory or proof, can convince me that something is beautiful when it does not seem that way to me—or vice versa. You can find out whether something is beautiful only by directly experiencing it. It would be easy to conclude from this that judgments of taste are entirely subjective. What Kant says, though, is a bit different: "The judgment of taste is not determinable by grounds of proof at all, *just as if* it were merely subjective" (164; my emphasis). The "just as if" is essential, for part of Kant's claim about judgments of taste is that such a judgment makes a universal claim, which distinguishes it from a mere preference. "This is delicious!" expresses a merely, and purely, subjective response, but "This is beautiful" makes a claim with which others are expected to agree. And in his statement of this idea, we find a corresponding "as if" clause: "The judgment of taste determines its object with regard to satisfaction (as beauty) to the assent of everyone, as if it were objective" (162). Kant is searching for an account of aesthetic judgment that somehow reconciles objective and subjective elements—just the sort of account that Proust often seems to be seeking with respect to love.

Kant's attempt, though, is hindered by his assumption that reasons, by their very nature, must be universal, a fact that brings us back to the Universality argument. In combination with the diversity and apparent relativity of our aesthetic responses, the alleged universality of reasons seems to suggest that such responses are not the sorts of thing for which we can give reasons. But why think that reasons are necessarily universal, at least in any straightforward sense?[2] At the very least, it is far from true that all valid reasons appear to *require* everyone to respond in the same way. Some reasons seem to be such that they render certain actions or feelings eligible for performance without rendering them rationally required: thus, an action or feeling might be *justified* by reasons (suggesting that if I were to do it, I would have acted intelligibly or reasonably) without its being the case that I *had* to do it, or feel it, on pain of irrationality.[3] (Or, in the case of supererogatory actions, on pain of immorality.) This is one way, though not the only way, in which reasons based in beauty stop short of being "fully" universal. Part of the explanation, in my view, is that values like beauty are genuinely pluralistic: because many things must be in place in order to experience something's beauty, there is more beauty in the world than any single perceiver will ever be able to appreciate. This is true both over the course of a life and at any particular moment. Thus, different people will find different things beautiful, and this need not imply

2. See Jollimore 2024, on which the following discussions draws.
3. Jonathan Dancy (2004) refers to these as "enticing reasons." Margaret Little (2013) refers to them as "non-deontic reasons" and/or "non-requiring reasons" (see also Little and Macnamara 2020).

either that any of them are making a mistake (which is not to say that mistakes are impossible in this area), nor that a response to beauty is nothing more than a projection of a subjective sentiment.

The idea that beauty possesses normative force—that it is able to make claims on us—in no way depends on the idea that those claims are universal in scope. Any particular manifestation of beauty may be accessible only to some, but to those people it will be genuinely normative, standing apart from them, and their ordinary goals and concerns, as something to which they are called to respond appropriately, authentically, and indeed passionately. As Richard Moran writes, in a paper that traces relations between the aesthetic views of Kant and Proust:

> To begin with, not every sense of requirement is universal in form, and the obligations we feel to certain people, places, or other objects of love, are often such that we can find it impossible even to explain them to another person, let alone justify to them in such a way that they could come to find themselves under the same obligation themselves. … Something we are prepared to call beautiful is not measured purely by its ability to satisfy our given desires, but is rather something to which our pleasure or desires themselves may be answerable, may need to conform themselves to, or be instructed by. (2017, 78)

I very much like Moran's suggestion that what renders the demands of beauty genuine *demands* (and perhaps, by extension, what does this for the demands of love) has to do with direction of fit: beautiful things call for our desires to fit *them*, rather than bending to fit our desires. Beauty is an engine for our aspirations, something we feel we must live up to. (That is, when we perceive it. Unperceived beauty simply leaves us cold, flying underneath our radar.) This strikes me as very much the right direction to move in. A full account would, of course, require us to go considerably further. My own suspicion is that such an account would resonate much more harmoniously with Response views than with Projection views; that the relevant direction of fit is mind-to-world at least suggests as much. But I also suspect that we are not going to be able to settle the issue between Response and Projection theories *until* we reach a better understanding of our judgments regarding beauty (and other qualities we see as potential justifiers for love), and of the interactions between the subjective and the objective in these particular contexts.

Even after all the metaphysical matters are settled, many difficult questions will remain standing. Simply establishing that there are in fact reasons for love hardly settles questions like: which reasons count as good reasons? How, precisely, do they call on us to respond to them? What do we do when these conflict with other putative reasons? And, perhaps, most pertinently here: when, precisely, *should* you be worried about the fact that nobody but you seems to find this particular person loveable? (Or about the fact that they don't fit what you thought were *your own* standards and values? What do you do if you find yourself, like Swann, in love with someone who isn't even your type?) When might the desire for others' approval represent well-grounded caution rather than lack of self-confidence? Getting the metaphysics straight might help us here, but these are also questions about character, and authenticity, and how to live. Though these, too, are philosophical questions, they are posed in a different register. Answering them might be viewed as a joint project between philosophers and novelists, and we should be grateful for the work of philosophers like Rick Furtak, who are adept at building brilliant bridges between these domains.

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