

Objectivity and the Parochial, by Charles Travis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 361. H/b £57.00

Travis's *Objectivity and the Parochial* is a collection of eleven previously published essays with a new introduction. The volume is philosophically generous, covering numerous themes including, but not limited to, logic and its laws, empiricism, idealism, psychologism, moral thought, thought and representation per se, truth, and the social character of thought.

Each of Travis's essays is, if not about, then shaped by some idea or remark of a great philosopher. Wittgenstein and Frege are prominent figures as are Austin and Putnam. One formidable feature of Travis's treatment of these philosophers is his charity. He searches for insights. But beware: the views of these philosophers are presented in just one way — Travis's way. There is no engagement with alternative interpretations or secondary literature. I do not see this as a major shortcoming of Travis's work. For it strikes me that the goal is just to explore and develop certain ideas by tethering them to interpretations of ideas of these other philosophers. This is one way of doing historically informed philosophy, and Travis does it well.

What then of the general philosophical themes of this collection? Central to this volume is Travis's concern to save the *objectivity* of thought and judgement from the threat of the *parochiality* of thought and judgement. The idea is that there is no *real* threat, we can hold to both objectivity and parochiality.

'But the thing about a judgement' Travis says, is that 'its correctness is decided *solely* by things being as they are, and independent of how anyone reacts to their so being' (p. 149). Such is the objectivity of judgement. So if I judge that there is cheese on the table, the truth of my judgement hinges just on how things are in the relevant tract of reality about which I judge. What more is there to this?

The content of the judgement that there is cheese on the table is the thought or proposition *there is cheese on the table*. On the picture of thought that Travis presents in this volume it has intrinsic generality. That is:

If a judgement is true (false), it is so in just *one* of indefinitely many ways it might be. The thought tells us what variations on the actual case are thus compatible with being as represented. So it reaches to a *range* of cases, of ways of being the relevant way. (p. 341)

I may judge truly that there is cheese on the table. This judgement, in virtue of having the thought it has as its content, reaches to a range of cases (and excludes a range of cases). As it goes it is true because there is some Mature English Cheddar in the centre of the table. But the judgement would also have been true if the cheese were slightly to the right, or if the table were painted red instead of green, or if the cheese were more smelly, or if it were Brie, and so on for indefinitely many other cases.

Thoughts, then, have an intrinsic generality. What has this generality, Travis also calls *the conceptual*. Then there is the *non-conceptual*, things

being as they are. The non-conceptual lacks the generality of the conceptual, a bit of the non-conceptual does not reach, it has no range of cases (p. 341). When a judgement is true, some bit of the non-conceptual *instances* some bit of the conceptual. I judge that there is cheese on the table, and this is true. This is because the table being as it is instances the generality which the thought involves: *something having cheese on it*. It—the table being as it is—does not itself *have* instances.

How does the parochial enter into this picture? A *parochial* feature of thinking is any feature of thinking which is not a feature of thinking *per se*, so that ‘there is room for there to be *thinkers* whose thought lacked that feature’ (p. 2). Travis thinks that the parochial permeates our thinking (p. 13). We come to see this, Travis argues, when we consider what fixes ‘what content, so what reach, our representings have’ (p. 12). Consider Travis’s example of Pia thinking that Sid is slurping his soup. In thinking this, Pia relates to a bit of the conceptual, she has in mind *someone slurping soup*. But how does she come to have this in mind?

A bad answer to this question, Travis thinks, is to appeal to the idea that Pia also has in mind some *further* bit of the conceptual. Thus one might appeal to Pia having in mind

some rule, or principle, which assigns particular cases when they arise either the status of instancing someone being the relevant way (the one she has in mind [that is, such that someone is slurping soup]), or as *not* so instancing this. (p. 11)

This will not do, it affords us no explanation. The question is how Pia has some bit of the conceptual in mind, and the answer is that she has another bit of the conceptual in mind (some rule). And how does she have this other bit of the conceptual in mind? Apply the same answer, and ‘we are off on a regress’ (p. 11). In this volume, Travis works out what he thinks is a better answer, captured in summary here:

it is shared sensibilities which fix what content, so what reach, our representings have. There is no *further* adjudicator, or measure, of their content ... What fixes the reach of Pia’s representing is ... a shared sensibility (sense for acknowledgement) among [an] extendible community of thinkers (p. 12) ... the reach of our representings ... is fixed by agreement—by shared capacities for acknowledgement, shared sensibilities. (p. 13)

Travis’s idea, if I have understood it right, is that what explains how Pia can have a thought with the content that *Sid is slurping soup*, is not that she grasps some rule governing the concept *slurping soup*, but that she shares a sense, with a community of thinkers, of what it is to slurp soup, and this involves agreement about what does and does not count as a case of slurping soup. Now Pia *may* also grasp a set of rules for the concept *slurping soup*, but this, Travis is claiming, cannot be what having the concept *slurping soup* in mind consists in (and so cannot be what being able to think thoughts to the effect

that so-and-so is slurping soup consists in). The constitutive basis for this is something quite different: shared sensibilities.

I will raise a question about this picture in a moment, but for now we can note how this much is Travis's route to parochiality:

If the reach of our representings ... is fixed by agreement—by shared capacities for acknowledgement, shared sensibilities ... then the parochial *permeates* our thinking ... For take any given such sensibility—say a capacity for acknowledging particular cases as instancing, or not, what *we* mention [or think] when we mention [or think of someone] slurping soup. Lacking just that sensibility could not disqualify a being from being a thinker *überhaupt* ... Not that the world *is* inhabited by thinkers with other forms of thought [such as the fictional Martians Travis mentions throughout the book], but that, given the role of agreement in any thinker's thought, our form of thought can only be regarded as *a* form among others. (pp. 13–14)

Having said this much on behalf of the parochial, one might begin to wonder what is left, if anything, of objectivity. Pia judges that Sid is slurping his soup, and this is true. Can the truth of this judgement hinge *just* on how things are with Sid? Does the role we have already assigned for the parochial not mean that *whether or not* Sid is slurping soup depends in some sense on our shared sensibilities, on what we—a community of thinkers—are disposed to *agree* about him being as he is? Travis thinks not. Objectivity is secure:

It is one thing to ask whether his being as he then is *counts as* a case of *someone slurping soup* ... Here our capacity for acknowledgement, and for agreement, comes into play. It is ... another question whether Sid is slurping his soup. It may be agreed all around that if *he* is producing those noises ... then he *is* slurping; if not, not ... Those whose disagreement as to whether Sid is slurping turns on such matters may be disagreeing on objective matter of fact, though if they continued to disagree after arbitrarily much awareness of how it was that Sid was on that occasion, then they would disagree (*inter alia*) as to what slurping is. (p. 20)

Pia's judgement that Sid is slurping his soup is shaped by the parochial in that for Pia to have *someone slurping soup* in mind involves shared sensibilities. But whether the judgement is true turns *just* on the non-conceptual: on how things stand with Sid. Sid, being as he is, let us suppose, instances *someone slurping soup*. So the judgement is true. But the parochial *does not* ensure that this relation holds between the conceptual and non-conceptual, nor does it shape Sid being as he is (in respect of slurping soup). Thinking may be parochial, but, for all that, objective.

This is a striking picture, exemplified in one way or another in many of the essays in Travis's volume. If I have understood the thrust of Travis's thinking correctly, it looks like it is a rich contribution to the philosophy of thought, and well deserving of critical attention. I would like to end by raising two critical queries.

First, what exactly is it to have the shared sense, or sensibilities that Travis talks about here? What exactly is it for a community to exhibit (or have the capacity to exhibit) the patterns of *agreement* that Travis appeals to? I am left

without the firm grip on these notions that I would like to have having read *Objectivity and the Parochial*. In particular, I wonder how communal agreement is an improvement on the bad answer, mentioned above. Grasping a rule presupposes engagement with the conceptual in a way that means it is ill-suited to explain engagement with the conceptual. But does not communal agreement? Presumably Travis thinks not, but an explanation as to why not would be welcome.

Second, what exactly is the role of the parochial? Two readings of Travis struck me. In some places — first reading — it seems as if Travis just wants it to shape what *our representings* reach. But sometimes — second reading — it seems that Travis wants it to shape what *being F* reaches (and to *thus* shape our representings). How exactly, then, does Travis see the role of the parochial? Is the first or second reading closer to his intentions? To formulate the distinction, we might put it like this. There are three levels: (1) properties, (2) conceptual representation, and (3) the non-conceptual (instances). On the first reading, the parochial matters at level (2). It matters to selecting which properties a conceptual representation is about. (Objectivity is secure because the parochial does not get a look in at level (1), or with respect to the relation between level (1) and (2).) On the second reading the parochial gets in at level (3) (or alternatively, there is no level (3)/level (2) distinction, there is just the conceptual, and the parochial shapes that). And so *the properties* there are for things to exemplify are not fixed independently of us, and our parochial design.

On the first reading the role of the parochial is more tame than it is on the second reading. How radical is Travis? Is the picture really this: the reach of the conceptual, so conceptual representation, but also what we might call *properties*, ways for things to be, is fixed in part by parochial sensibility? Is the view that there is a non-trivial dependence of properties on us? If so, Travis's book presents a defence of one sort of realism, but a challenge to another.

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