

INTERVIEW WITH PETER GOLDIE

Peter Goldie received his BPhil and his DPhil from Balliol College, Oxford. He is currently the Samuel Hall Chair of Philosophy at the School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester. His main areas of research are in the philosophy of mind, ethics and aesthetics. This interview addresses aspects of four core themes of Goldie's work, ranging across these disciplines: emotion, narrative, personality and virtue theories of art.

1. Emotion

Praxis: How does your view of emotions relate to cognitivism?

PG: I'm not a cognitivist in the sense that some people take their view to be, which is in some sense identifying emotions with cognitive states. But they, cognitivists, have something in common with noncognitivists, which is that they both hold that an emotion is some particular kind of state, some state other than emotion itself. So the cognitivists say that it is a judgment or a belief or an affective perception or a concern-based construal or some other kind of state. The anti-cognitivists say that it is a perception of a bodily state or a feeling state or something. So they have in common this identification of emotion with some other particular kind of state at a moment in time. And there are three problems with this. One is that they go against Bishop Butler's famous maxim, which is: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." Secondly, they identify the state which is emotion with something "inner." So, if you think about virtually all emotion theories that are on the go at the moment, they identify emotion with something inner, something mental or bodily, more or less inside the skin. And it strikes me more and more that I'm not absolutely clear why that should be, why emotions should end at a certain point, namely, the inner. For example, actions are never taken as being part of the emotion; they are always thought of as being their product. I think that's interesting and open to question. A simple analogy. (We might come on to this when we talk about narratives.) If you took a narrative of a car crash: if you just discussed what happened to the car, there would be something strange about that. And the third thing that I'm not happy with about both kinds of view

is that, in taking emotion as a kind of state, they give priority to the emotion at a time. So an emotion over time is just some accumulation of states, perhaps with causal relations between them. In contrast, I think the right way to think of emotion is as something that is primarily diachronic and that emotion at a time is only to be understood derivatively from that.

Praxis: In rejecting the cognitivist idea of identifying an emotion with a particular kind of cognitive state, do you also reject the idea that emotions are intentional in the sense in which we ordinarily characterize the intentionality of cognitive states? In particular, do you also reject the claim that emotions have mental content? When we talk about emotions, should we not talk about content in the traditional way but rather come up with a different view of their intentionality?

PG: No, I'm perfectly happy talking about contentful states and intentionality in the traditional way. The thing that I am unhappy with is identifying emotion with any *individual* contentful state of any particular kind – whether it's a belief, a judgment, an affective perception, or something else. So that's the thing I'm objecting to. It's not like I'm trying to completely turn philosophy of mind on its head.

Praxis: If you accept the notion of intentionality in the traditional sense: Normally, intentional mental states are being characterized as of either of two kinds. That is, their intentionality is characterized either in terms of “mind-to-world”-direction of fit – responsibility for the “fit” between mind and world lies with the mental state: it has to accurately represent how the world is – or in terms of “world-to-mind”-direction of fit – responsibility for the fit between mind and world lies with the world: it has to change a certain way such as to conform to the state. Both directions of fit are normally conceived to be mutually exclusive. Now, some people have argued that the emotions do not fall into either category. So just to give an example: In feeling fear, in experiencing a situation as dangerous, one might think that the state I am in is evaluable as to whether the situation really is dangerous for me – which would be a case of mind-to-world direction of fit. But in experiencing it as dangerous I also experience a certain need to avoid the danger, which makes me run away, for example. So that same feeling also seems to invoke a goal – namely avoiding danger – and hence specifies a way the world would have to be changed for it to be satisfied. So there is some kind of world-to-mind direction of fit, too. Would you agree that the emotions challenge the idea of mutually exclusive directions of fit?

PG: The idea of direction of fit – beliefs going in one direction, desires in another – has got very strong intuitive appeal although it is interesting that there has been a number of good papers done recently which have drawn the whole idea into question. Leaving that to one side for the moment, I think that it is interesting to think about how there could be states which somehow have both directions of fit. Ruth Millikan (1995) famously talks about the honey bee dance both pointing to where the honey is – which is one direction of fit – but also somehow saying “Come on, fellow bees, let’s get out there and get the honey!”, which is the other direction of fit. And she calls them “Pushmi-Pullyu”-states, after the imaginary animal in the Doctor Dolittle-books. And at the end of her paper, she speculates that judgments involving “thick” concepts might be of this kind. And that is precisely what Bernard Williams (1985) talks about when he talks about judgments involving thick concepts being both world-guided and action-guiding, both in the same way. So a judgment like “That’s shameful.” is both world-guided – it’s about the thing that was done that was shameful – and action-guiding, that is, guiding you in some kind of appropriate response. I find that very attractive. Now, whether they are conceptually distinct, those two directions of fit put together, whether they are different states or whether they somehow have a natural fit which can come apart like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – I don’t have a strong view about that. Although I would like to say that in emotion those two directions of fit are so intimately related that an internalist – a motivational internalist – can, as Simon Blackburn puts it at one point, win the war even if they don’t win every battle.

Praxis: As some theorists working on the emotions have claimed, one reason why emotions are still not a mainstream topic in analytic philosophy (or at least analytic philosophy of mind) is that our emotional lives are simply too messy and that this somehow defies the idea of a systematic philosophical account of the emotions. What do you think is the right philosophical approach to take towards the emotions? Should we first of all seek an “exploratory” approach (referring to the title of your book, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Goldie 2000)), that is, an account which (at least in the first instance) calls our attention to the variety of emotional phenomena, emphasizing their distinctive features, the many different ways in which we explain and respond to emotions in everyday life or even the many different ways in which the emotions get depicted in literary narratives? To which extent is it legitimate to simplify and generalize in this area for the sake of systematic philosophical theory-building?

PG: In a way I think this can be generalized to philosophical approaches. It can be generalized to, for example, belief and desires. One might say philosophers want to have a systematic account of belief and then they take a paradigm of a belief (or what's thought to be a paradigm of a belief) and then assume that all beliefs are like that. And it could be that a philosophy of mind that was properly sensitive to the "messiness" of our beliefs, using your word, would actually show that the notion of belief is going to fragment in all sorts of ways and that there isn't some simple core notion of belief which is "holding-true" or "has such-and-such direction of fit." So I think in a way emotions are like that but in spades, so to speak. So you do not just have the messiness of belief and then, of course, even more so the messiness of desire but you have got the messiness of all of the rest of the stuff that is going on in emotional experience. And so understandably philosophers say, well, let's start with something simple, like belief, desire, pain – and let's put emotion to one side and then I think the danger is that philosophy of mind forgets that this was a procedural approach in order to start with something simple. And then they go on and start to act as if that is all there is. And so suddenly emotions are to be analyzed in terms of beliefs and desires. Suddenly beliefs are just something simple and a straightforward category. So I think there are reasons here why thinking about the emotions should throw up all sorts of question about certain procedural approaches in philosophy of mind. And then of course there is the question about whether philosophy of mind should be seeing itself as somehow building systems that are going to make possible a science of emotion. But that's another question.

2. Narrative

Praxis: One field of research in philosophy of mind (and other areas of philosophy) in which one might think there is an attempt at coming to terms with some of the actual complexity of our mental lives (or lives in general) is the topic of narrative explanation and narrative thinking. Narrative explanations of mental events are sometimes claimed to aim at a kind of intelligibility that is different from the kind of intelligibility associated with the standard view of common-sense psychological explanation in the philosophy of mind.

In a recent article of yours, "Narrative Thinking, Emotion and Planning" (Goldie 2009), you claim that a certain form of narrative thinking – which involves people – can reveal the emotional import of what is narrated both for those people implicated in as well as those engaging with the narrative. Do such 'people-narratives' offer some kind of privileged way

of revealing emotional import – that is, which emotional response is called for by a certain situation or event?

For example, how would describe the way in which my episodically remembering the circumstances of my being burgled some months ago reveals the emotional import of that happening compared to the way in which my simply entertaining the thought that at that time a certain offensive and upsetting event occurred reveals that import? Simply thinking that a certain situation or event exemplifies a certain evaluative property (the property ‘proper’ to a certain emotion, or its ‘formal object’) will tell me what emotional response it called for by that situation. What does a narrative account of that situation or event, such as my episodic memory, reveal that the simple thought does not reveal?

PG: This is something I am working on at the moment. Let me begin – and then I’ll get to the example – with something that emerges from narrative theory (which I think is very important). And that is that it is very important to separate out the point of view of the narrator from the point of view of a character or a person in the narrative. And even in a piece of autobiographical narrative there are still necessarily two points of view: your point of view as narrator and your point of view as a “character” in the narrative. In your narrating the circumstances of your being burgled, the narrative can reveal your point of view in in fact not just two, but three ways. Firstly, it can reveal, it can express, your point of view at the time. For example, how you felt at the time you discovered the burglary: you were coming in ready for nice glass of cold wine and you saw everything disappeared and you felt devastated... It can also reveal and express how you feel now about how you felt at the time. And it can do that in two ways. Firstly, it can do that in the content of the narrative. Secondly, it can do that in the way the narrative is told. In other words, through the way you express the narrative, not just the contents but perhaps in your gestures. There is an interesting thing about ineffability there. Somebody might say that a certain feeling is ineffable – that you cannot communicate it in words – but you still find that even though it is ineffable you might in fact still be able to communicate it through the way you say it, through, for example, your gestures. So I think narratives have expressive and revelatory power in all of those ways, which one doesn’t find in simple causal explanations. The role of the narrator is particularly important here. When one comes to remembering I think there is a psychological correlative of that narrator-character-interface which is very interesting and something I am working on at the moment.

Praxis: Just to quickly follow up on the topic of ineffability and the expressive powers of narratives. So do you think that a good literary narrative – say of the kind you find in

Proust or in Russian literature – is capable of expressing “all there is about an emotion” – especially in phenomenological terms. Is there something ineffable about emotion or do good narratives tell us all there is about what it’s like to have an emotional experience?

PG: That is actually something that Ronald de Sousa is hoping to get a research project on, in which I hope to be involved. There are at least two schools of thought here. One of them is what Ronnie very nicely calls the “ideology of the ineffable”, the idea that one finds a lot in romantic poetry that there are certain kinds of emotion that just can’t be expressed. And that is thought to be a good thing. On the other hand, there is a view along the following lines: How does something feel? – Well, you give a description of how it feels and that’s how it feels; there isn’t anything left out. And of course there is another position which might be that certain feelings are ineffable and that that is a bad thing. I don’t have a settled view about this. I think they are all very interesting positions and I’m not sure what to think except that some writers – you mentioned Russian novels; I would add perhaps Joseph Conrad to that – have a way of saying something that communicates just so much more than is in the words: “He felt it with his heart. He felt it with his mind. He felt it with his very soul.”

3. *Personality*

Praxis: In your book *On Personality* (Goldie 2004), you agree with people like John Doris that social psychological research has shown that character traits, as conceived in the Aristotelian tradition, are not as robust and reliable as we may think they are. However, it seems that there are deep differences between Doris and you on the normative implications of such empirical findings (particularly implications for virtue ethics). Could you tell us more about these differences?

PG: First of all, I’m not as convinced as the psychologists are that they are, so to speak, on to something new, that they discovered something that we didn’t know before. Let’s take it that they have shown that character traits are not robust, leaving to one side for the moment that they are not robust *in the way that we thought they were*; that’s another issue. I think that it is true that they are not robust; but I don’t think that it means that the notion of character, as we ordinarily operate with it, is otiose. We operate with it, often in our own thinking, by setting ourselves certain ideals, certain patterns of behaviour that we, so to speak, expect of ourselves, and that’s ‘expect’ both in the normative and in the predictive senses. So, we think of ourselves as honest, perhaps; and setting up an ideal in such a way

helps one to monitor one's own thoughts and feelings and actions, and pulling oneself up short, so to speak, say, when one says to oneself "hang on a minute, I thought you were an honest person, but here you are thinking about doing these kinds of things." So I think that, even though character traits understood in a certain way might be idealised, it doesn't mean that they are hopeless ideals, ideals that we hopelessly aim towards.

Praxis: You said at the beginning of your answer that social psychologists were not on to something new. Could you elaborate on that?

PG: If you get right back to very early narratives, a lot of them were about setting up certain experiments "to show that people were not what they thought themselves to be." Characteristically, of course, these experiments were to show that women weren't as faithful as they promised to be. The husband would pretend to be away on a long journey, and then he would come back in disguise, make love to his wife, and thus discover that she wasn't what he thought she was. And the classic experiment in this, and there are many other examples in 18th and 19th century literature, is Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, where Don Alfonso gets the two male lovers to agree to do whatever he wants if he can set up an experiment to show that the female lovers are not faithful. And they agree to do that for a wager. Don Alfonso sets up the experiment which, like most experiments in social psychology, are based on a deception: the lovers pretend to go up to war, come back disguised as strangers, make love to the opposite partner. Successfully, the marriage ceremony takes place, and then, suddenly, the original lovers come back, and Don Alfonso claims to have shown 'Così fan tutte', "Thus do all women." And it's quite clear that he sees this as a kind of social experiment. It's absolutely no different from the experiments encountered in social psychology. Of course, they are operationalised in a way that we don't get in Mozart's opera. But to suggest that this is a discovery is naïve, disingenuous, jejune.

Praxis: Do you think that there are no empirical ways to show that our talk of character traits, and our beliefs about virtue, should be revised or eliminated? Is there any kind of experimental study that could show that talk of character traits should be given up?

PG: One can open it up to a general question about our ordinary ways of thinking, what sometimes people call disparagingly as the 'folk' way of thinking, as if the folk are somehow some poor, rural peasants who don't really understand how the mind works. Maybe another way of thinking of it, rather like you find in J.L. Austin's work, about how one should use ordinary language, is that ordinary language, which is the language that

we all use, is *informed by* science, informed by what we know; it's constantly being revised, picking up on things that science finds out. Ordinary is neither scientific language nor the other extreme, some kind of folk conception, speaking of the rural peasants that are unprepared to revise their way of thinking. So, I have a general view that our concepts, such as our ways of thinking about character, even about personal identity, are constantly open to changes as a result of the way the world changes, including in particular, science. So, our concepts are in some sense different from what they used to be.

4. *Virtue theories of art*

Praxis: You have recently developed a virtue theory of art, analogous to a virtue theory of ethics, along Aristotelian lines (Goldie 2007). Could you tell us about the major motivations behind such an agenda?

PG: The essential idea, I suppose, is that traditionally, aesthetics has focused, for very understandable reasons, on the artwork, the art object itself—the play, the picture, the sculpture. Rather analogously to the traditional way in which ethics has focused on *the action*—what matters here is the action, although, of course, in ethics, people look behind the action to the motivations that brought the action about, like Kant would say that what matters is having the right kind of motive, pure practical reason. And similarly in aesthetics, people look to some extent behind the artwork to the motivations of, and production of, the artwork. So, for example, it is often argued that a forgery is of less value, even if it is a perfect forgery, than the original, because of the motivations of the person producing the work. But in ethics, as you know, there's been an increasing focus, not just on motivations behind action, not just on action, but on the states of character which are the kind of underlying dispositional states which, for Aristotle at least, were essential for action to be virtuous; so it's not enough that action itself is good, or the motives are good, but it's got to be done from a stable and steady state of character. That hasn't really had an equivalent focus in aesthetics. So, the idea is that, not just for art production, but also for art appreciation, what matters is being the right sort of person, having virtues of art, or aesthetic virtues. So, to be a good appreciator, one needs to be a certain kind of way, have certain kinds of dispositions, and that's important. Take an example developed by Matthew Kieran in a recent paper on snobbery: the snob might be really good at picking out and discriminating good artworks, but his motivations are wrong, they are suspect (Kieran 2010). And actually, when one looks more at the kind of way we talk about typical artistic virtues and vices, there is much of that discussed in ordinary discourse, but not

very much in philosophical discourse. We talk about people being snobs, we talk about people having an over-refined taste or crude taste; and these are states of character of the person which would explain why they make the judgment that they do and why they pick out or why they produce the artworks that they do. So, the idea is to see to what extent parallels can be drawn between the ethical and the aesthetic case.

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