Confines of Democracy

Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein

Edited by

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A REPLY TO HEIDI SALAVERRÍA

Richard J. Bernstein

Heidi Salaverria cites one of my favorite passages from John Dewey: “The word ‘taste’ has perhaps got too completely associated with arbitrary liking to express the nature of judgments of value. But if the word be used in the sense of appreciation at once cultivated and active, one may say that the formation of taste is the chief matter wherever values enter in whether intellectual, esthetic or moral.” This is a passage that struck me when I first discovered Hannah Arendt’s writings on Kant’s Critique of Judgment — and especially her discussion of reflective judgment. Although Arendt scarcely knew the works of Dewey and the pragmatists, her reflections on judgment resonate with the view of judgment expressed by Dewey. And I think that this conception of judgment needs to be placed in a much larger intellectual context.

Both Dewey and Arendt (in different but related ways) were reacting against a tradition in philosophy that tended to think of all judgment as being a version of what Kant called determinate judgment. And there has been a prevailing bias in much of modern philosophy that if something is not a determinate judgment then it is “merely” subjective. Consequently there has been a tendency to denigrate judgments that do not satisfy clearly specified objective criteria. This is not simply a theoretical issue but a practical one. In many areas of human life there is a suspicion and skepticism about the appeal to judgment. We can even see this increasingly at work in academic institutions where one seeks “objective” criteria of evaluation such as the number of articles published in prestigious peer reviewed journals. Unless there are clear “objective” criteria to justify a judgment, it is considered to be unacceptable. Now although Arendt’s interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Judgment is idiosyncratic, it is also brilliant. Arendt had a deep insight about the importance of judgment in all aspects of human life. She felt that in extreme situations such as those of totalitarianism one could not rely on existing rules but only on one’s cultivated individual judgment. Although the first part of the Critique of Judgment is primarily concerned with aesthetic judgment, she claimed the Third Critique was relevant for grasping what is distinctive about political judgment. Heidi Salaverria is correct in noting that most philosophers in the pragmatic tradition have neglected the Third Critique. When they deal with Kant (pro or con) it is primarily the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason that is the focus of their attention. But Heidi shows how relevant the Critique of Judgment is for understanding theses that are central to the pragmatic tradition. So I agree with Heidi that Arendt’s understanding of reflective judgment, which requires
an appeal to the *sensus communis*, helps to sharpen the pragmatic idea of *critical* common sense. Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead were skeptical of appeals to reason that do not involve the formation and reformation of critical habits. Dewey’s entire educational philosophy is based on the commitment that it is possible to cultivate new creative critical habits in a proper school environment. And these critical habits can enable us to make discriminating judgments in particular novel concrete contexts. Social and political change cannot be accomplished by reason alone —by appeal to arguments— but only by the transformation of habits and social practices. In this respect the pragmatic tradition is clearly relevant to contemporary debates about social and political reform.