

## Past and present: two illusions

[From [NewAPPS](#).] A recent post here by [Helen De Cruz](#) and a not-so-recent post elsewhere by [Eric Schwitzgebel](#) will serve as hooks from which to hang some thoughts about two complementary illusions: the transparency of the present, the opacity of the past.

Helen, a lutenist, asks whether she can “ever claim to understand” the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century music she’s playing. There is a “gap” — a gap familiar to anyone who has undertaken to perform early music — between us and the works.

Schwitzgebel, on the other hand, is not much worried about our access to old texts.

Maybe empirically oriented philosophers typically don’t regard themselves as expert enough in history of philosophy to write about it. But I think we hobble ourselves if we allow ourselves to be intimidated. The standard of expertise for writing about Descartes or Kant in the context of a larger project — a project that isn’t just Descartes or Kant interpretation — shouldn’t be world leadership in Descartes or Kant interpretation. It should be the same standard of expertise as in writing about a contemporary colleague with a large body of influential work, like Dennett or Fodor.

In a way I agree with Schwitzgebel. A “world leader” in Descartes scholarship knows far more, in some respects, than you or I need to know in order to read the *Meditations*. But what exactly *is*

the “standard of expertise” required in writing about one of our contemporaries?

I will suppose that the act of reading a text engages a range of innate and acquired capacities. The innate capacities “factor out”, so to speak, in considering differences between reading old and new texts, and so I will leave them aside. The acquired capacities include knowledge of the script the text is written in (and of various typographical conventions used to indicate emphasis, division into parts, etc.), competence in the language or languages used by its author, expertise in the subject-matter, common sense knowledge, and so forth. In the case of music, “reading” is performance, a special or perhaps an overlapping type of act that engages analogous capacities — familiarity with accent markings, notation for ornaments, and so forth, in addition to the ability to perceive pitch and rhythm.

When we read our contemporaries (or — cursorily, unreflectively, lightly, which is not to say unfruitfully — old texts) typically almost the whole *organon* of capacities engaged in reading remains in the background. A blot on the page of a printed book brings to awareness, perhaps, our exercise of the capacity to recognize letters and words. An unfamiliar word sends us to the dictionary. A bit of knotted syntax requires us to stop and painfully parse. But in the normal course of events those glitches, and the accompanying awareness of what we are trying to do and how, are local, infrequent, sparse.

We tend to think of the difficulties the text presents as being owed either (in worse cases) to the author’s incompetence or (in better cases) to

the profundity of the thoughts being expressed. *Reading*, in other words, remains a mostly effortless act to which we pay no attention; but (in the better case) another, additional act may occur does require an effort which does more often rise into awareness: call this something else *comprehension*.

The present, then—our comprehension of our contemporaries—enjoys a transparency that the past—our comprehension of texts from the past—often lacks. Merely to read Aquinas—let alone comprehend his thought—you need to have acquired Latin, you need at least some slight idea of how a Scholastic disputation works, you need some grounding in Christian theology and (depending on the text) Aristotelian philosophy. No-one now acquires these skills at their forebear's knees. Instead we acquire them by a distinct process of *education*.

Schwitzgebel is right in supposing that the capacities required to understand Descartes or Kant do not differ in kind from the capacities required to understand Dennett or Fodor. But to acquire for Descartes the level of skill I now make use of—“automatically”, it now seems, after many years of exposure—in reading Fodor, it does not suffice to have sound common sense or even a good graduate education in philosophy. I do not deny that the “common reader” can benefit from reading the *Meditations* or the *Groundwork*. Every year the common readers in my undergraduate history course make their way, more or less laboriously, through those two works; and to judge from their papers, they do comprehend them—to a degree.

Perhaps for the purposes Schwitzgebel has in mind (gathering data for experimental philosophy) the commonsense or “educated person” level of comprehension may suffice (but consider the acknowledged difficulties of writing useful questionnaires for cross-cultural studies). Philosophers usually want more—in reading Fodor or in reading Kant, it's not enough to merely “get the gist”. We want to understand, as deeply as the text warrants, how the arguments work, how the concepts are to be defined or delineated, what motivates the author to frame the problems as they did, and so forth.

It is an illusion, then, to treat comprehension of our contemporaries and of our ancestors as distinct sorts of act engaging distinct capacities. The present is no more transparent than the past is opaque. Both are translucent.

Nevertheless the sense one sometimes has that there is a “gap” between oneself and the mind of the author—I help myself to that loose phrase merely to avoid long discussions of what, in fact, the object of comprehension is—has some basis in the circumstances of reading. *Be Here Now*, said [Ram Dass](#); but we can't help, in one sense, being here, being now. That is our great advantage in comprehending Fodor or Dennett. They and we are here now. We have an enormous head start when we delve into *Brainstorms* or *Modularity* (notice that “now”, in this instance, includes books published over thirty years ago: just as there is a specious present in individual perception, so to in collective comprehension there is a specious “now”, “horizon” as some say—and to see how complicated that might be,

consider Montaigne's relation to the Ancients he lingered so long with). Even the philosophical tyro requires only minor additions to his or her vocabulary (a few dozen technical terms, say, added to a store of tens of thousands of lexical items). We also, if we're philosophically trained, have a head start in reading Descartes or Kant, who are, after all, part of *our* (i.e. the Western) tradition.

But, as Helen's example illustrates, sometimes the materials requisite for acquiring the capacities needed to comprehend a work are lacking. No one knows much at all about what the music of the ancient Greeks sounded like, or how the very few notated pieces that have come down to us are to be interpreted. There are sources for music theory but very little for performance. In this case the past really is mostly opaque. In the case of lute music, the tradition was interrupted, and had to be carefully reconstructed, with all the uncertainties attendant to such a project. But even where the tradition is, as in classical piano performance, unbroken, we may still wonder if the enormous changes in the culture surrounding the performance of classical music have not resulted in the loss of *something*, perhaps something essential to "getting" what Chopin was up to.

One further impetus to believing that between the past and us some insuperable obstacle impedes comprehension is just that, being *here*, I cannot be *there*. No-one seriously supposes that to comprehend Chopin, you must *be* Chopin; but we sometimes veer in that direction. If there are subjective facts à la Nagel, they are knowable

only by "being there" — only by being the sort of thing in question, bat or frog. So too to understand Dowland's *Flow my tears*, a vast body of experience and expertise, not easily delimitable in advance, must be available to me; and perhaps the only way to acquire *all* of it would be (would have been?) to *be* a late sixteenth-century gentleman in the England of James I (or the Denmark of Christian IV?). That we cannot do. But neither can I be a fifteen-year-old in Wapping today. The obstacle here does not pertain to the past as such. The potential for it exists wherever there is non-identity.