

Catching an Author's Vision

Joseph Schumpeter and John Maynard Keynes

If we ask why we may be finding a particular reading or author difficult, William James's¹ following idea may be able to help:

"Any author is easy if you can catch the centre of his vision"

His concept of 'vision' provides a useful reading tool for catching the sense of where the author is working from and where the author is seeking to bring us. By 'vision' James means:

"...modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life... and on the whole preferred – there is no other truthful word – as one's best working attitude" (1909/1996:87, 20-21).

This 'vision' - 'feeling the whole push', 'seeing the whole drift of life' in James's felicitous phrasing - is an aspect of what James refers to as an author's 'philosophy', that is, how a person "*defines the world*" and he regards it as "...the most respectable contributions to the world in which we play our part" (1909/1996:23).

"The kind of philosophy a man chooses depends upon the kind of man he is. For a philosophic system ... is animated with the spirit of the man who possess it."

- Johann Fichte (1794) -

James sees an author's vision as being "*forced by one's total character and experience.*" He says that a 'philosophy' is "*the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it*" (1909/1996:20).

¹ James (1842-1910): "the most famous living American psychologist and later the most famous living American philosopher of his time", "one of the leading thinkers of the late nineteenth century"; and "an original thinker in and between the disciplines of physiology, psychology and philosophy". Sources in order: (1); (2); (3).

At times, an author's vision may be implicit and possibly left so without the author being aware of it. As a result, it will be up to the reader to discover it. This is especially the case when reading works written in the 'mode of discovery' - as opposed to works written in the 'mode of exposition', like school textbooks. For those readers most familiar with expository books, such as textbooks and manuals, which tell us *what to think* and *what to do* ("information downloading", as Robert Kegan calls it), working through the argument of an author writing a work of discovery can become a daunting task.

Where an author is working out a new line of reasoning which is *intended to, and can, change how we think* about something, such as Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), we have to 'think with the author', as Arendt herself would say, in order to understand her argument and point-of-view.

Thus, an overall goal in reading a serious work of argument and analysis is to conceptualise the vision in such a way that its elements take their places and, with names attached to them, facilitate recognition and manipulation. That will then also help us look for the way the author makes the vision concrete, the 'technique' as James called it, which is the second aspect of an author's philosophy. In that way we work out our own fair understanding of an author's work.

The specific mode of reading adopted should allow for working with the author who is working out a new way of how to think about something for us.

For instance, in *History of Economic Analysis* Joseph Schumpeter powerfully and famously used the idea of vision to convey John Maynard Keynes's achievement in his masterpiece *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936).² In the same way as James, he considered that:

² Schumpeter does not acknowledge James in either of the two books drawn on here.

“Every comprehensive ‘theory’ of an economic state of society consists of two complementary but essentially distinct elements. There is, first, the theorist’s view about the basic features of that state of society, about what is and what is not important in order to understand its life at a given time. Let us call this his vision. And there is, second, the theorist’s technique, an apparatus by which he conceptualizes his vision and which turns the latter into concrete propositions or ‘theories.’ In those pages of *Economic Consequences of the Peace* we find nothing of the theoretical apparatus of the *General Theory*. But we find the whole of the vision of things social and economic of which that apparatus is the technical complement. The *General Theory* is the final result of a long struggle to make that vision of our age analytically operative” (1946/1965:268 emphasis added).

About Keynes as a thinker and, specifically, *The General Theory* he memorably connected Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919?) to *The General Theory*:

The social vision first revealed in the *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, the vision of an economic process in which investment opportunity flags and saving habits nevertheless persist, is theoretically implemented in the *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (Preface dated December 13, 1935) by means of three schedule concepts: the consumption function, the efficiency-of-capital function, and the liquidity-preference function. These together with the given wage-unit and the equally given quantity of money ‘determine’ income and *ipso facto* employment (if and so far as the latter is uniquely determined by the former), the great dependent variables to be ‘explained.’ What a *cordon bleu* to make such a sauce out of such scanty material (1946/1965:280, footnote omitted).

Catching the centre of an author's vision is easy if one is helped by reading with 'good will'³, as Keynes himself put it: if one is open to going from a world of limits into expanded possibilities, to cultivating attentiveness to written words, to considering its connotations and to examining its antecedents. As Mark Edmundson⁴ reminds us:

“When you say yes to an author's vision, you're entering into a marriage of
minds” (2004: 94)

References

William James (1909) *A Pluralistic Universe*. Longman, New York. Reprinted: University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1996.

Joseph A. Schumpeter. John Maynard Keynes 1883-1946. *American Economic Review* XXVI (4), September 1946. Reprinted in *Ten Great Economists: from Marx to Keynes*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1965.

³ John Maynard Keynes 'Notes to Terminology' *Collected Writings*, XXIX: 36-7

⁴ Mark Edmundson (2004) *Why Read?* Bloomsbury, London