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Sensibility

Timothy O'Leary

In *Daybreak* (1997, 103), Nietzsche explains that he denies both morality and immorality, not because morality is a sham and a self-deception, but because even though people genuinely *feel* they act morally and immorally, this feeling is not justified. Hence, he concludes, “We have to *learn to think differently* — in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*.” Gilles Deleuze expands this point to a general characterization of Nietzschean critique: “The point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility” (Deleuze 1983, 194). We can formalize these themes as the claim that critique is the transformative engagement with the (moral) sensibilities of our time. How far can we push this idea, by considering such simple examples as our changing feelings about plastic bags – and the TV series *Mad Men*?

One way of explaining the pleasure that many viewers experience while watching *Mad Men* is that the form of life it portrays is so close to our own and yet so distant. Unlike a series such as *Downton Abbey*, for example, *Mad Men* represents a world that many of us were born into and yet it seems to be significantly alien in many ways. That difference is one that could be described in terms of sensibility, and in particular of moral sensibility. It is not just a matter of our sensibility as the audience; that is, the ways in which we perceive, judge, praise, and condemn the social

150 mores of the early 1960s. It is also the unavoidable sense we get that *their* experience of their own world is radically different from what our experience of it would be if we returned to it now. In other words, the series confronts us with an important fact: moral sensibility has a history, and that history is subject to quite rapid transformation.

The idea that we can identify the sensibility of an individual, a sub-culture, or even a whole era, and then track the transformations it may undergo, is not particularly new. It has appeared in different forms in literary studies, history, anthropology, cultural studies, and also in certain strands of philosophy (most notably in eighteenth-century and some contemporary moral theory). However, despite this long and varied tradition of thought (and perhaps *because* it is so long and varied), one could be forgiven for suspecting that the concept of sensibility has become so vague and inchoate that it creates as many confusions as it hopes to dispel. Hence, although it might seem acceptable to use it when casually discussing popular entertainment, as I have just done, one might question whether it is advisable to use it in a philosophically informed investigation of our contemporary ethical terrain, which is what I propose to do.

In this brief overview, I will try to show that the concept can indeed be useful in such an investigation. I will suggest that thinking in terms of moral sensibility allows us to understand important aspects of the relation between ethics, history, and critique that many philosophical approaches are incapable of taking into account. I will begin by proposing a rough, preliminary definition of the concept.

Sensibility is a concept that encompasses three elements: modes of feeling, perceiving, and valuing. All three must be given their place; and it must be recognized that all three are in constant mutual interaction. Sensibility, therefore, comprises: a) sensation and emotion; b) systems and practices of knowledge; c) moral and aesthetic appraisals. At every level, sensibility is profoundly

historical. It is probably not necessary here to establish this claim with respect to b) systems of knowledge and c) modes of appraisal, but what about a) sensation and emotion? Surely the human sensations and emotions are constant – at least in the historical, if not in the evolutionary, sense. But even here, there has been a great deal of scholarly work in the fields of history and anthropology of the senses and the emotions that seems to firmly establish the case for continuous historical change in the way the human body engages with and experiences its environment. Sensibility, therefore, denotes constantly changing modes of receptivity and sensitivity towards the world. But it is not simply passive; it is also an active ability. It betokens an active engagement with the world: it is a set of abilities to perceive, discern, judge, and experience.

In 1966, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault pointed out that “At any given instant, the structure proper to individual experience finds a certain number of possible choices (and of excluded possibilities) in the systems of the society; inversely, at each of their points of choice the social structures encounter a certain number of possible individuals (and others who are not)” (2002, 415). In other words, at each particular place and time there is a certain range of subjective experience that is made more or less likely by the social structures of that time. And, as the social structures change, so too does the range of possible human experience. What this gives rise to, as Ian Hacking has pointed out, is the possibility of studying the historical transformations that open up and close off potential human experiences (2002, 23). And, if we do that in the domain of moral experience, we will be engaging in a critique of moral sensibility.

Let’s take a simple and banal example from the increasing moralization of everyday consumption in many advanced economies around the world. Consider the way that the use of plastic shopping bags has come to be seen, and experienced, as an immoral form of behavior. How did it come about that the choice of a shopping bag could engage the moral sensibility of

152 so many people today? I would suggest that this experience of buying the plastic bag is identifiable as ethical not only because it involves the practical application of previously accepted moral principles but also because it activates a whole range of concerns and practices relating to self-formation. These concerns and practices are activated within a broader framework that includes forms of knowledge about climate change and also an emerging set of norms of behavior that cajole us into “environmentally responsible” actions. At a basic level, therefore, we are being cajoled into becoming particular kinds of people: informed consumers who are guided by a new twenty-first century moral sensibility. The act of buying the plastic bag is not intrinsically moral in nature; hence, it is simply that recent shifts in moral sensibility have made it more likely that the experience will crystallize, or come into focus, as having a strong moral component.

What can we say about these observations, if we take moral sensibility as comprising the three elements identified above: a) sensation and emotion; b) systems and practices of knowledge; c) moral and aesthetic appraisals. In relation to the first element, we can ask how is the experience of, and our emotional response to, plastic transforming in contemporary societies? And, how do different forces, such as environmental activism and government policy, propel, and guide this transformation? In relation to the second element, what modes of knowledge (of varying degrees of scientific “certainty”) inform our moral responses? What is the history of these knowledges, of their formation, dissemination, and, perhaps, contestation? In relation to the third element, what is the nature of the value judgments that are being made, how do the judgments of others relate to corresponding judgments of oneself, and how do moral and aesthetic elements intertwine in these judgments? What changes are these modes of judgment undergoing at the present?

Taking this perspective on our contemporary ethical terrain opens up the possibility of a new critical task: to investigate what we can now call the conduct of moral sensibility. The conduct

of moral sensibility has two senses: first, the ways in which our sensibility is guided, formed, developed, expanded, narrowed, refined, and blunted, by a whole range of forces in the world and in ourselves; and second, the ways our conduct, that is, our behavior, is guided by the modes of moral sensibility we embody. These two aspects are in constant, mutual interaction. The investigation of this conduct gives us the basis for understanding the contemporary contest of moral sensibilities. In other words, it makes possible a genealogy of the moralizing and de-moralizing of the world, a critical, transformative engagement with the moral sensibilities of our time. Having learned to think our present differently, we might then come to meet Nietzsche's challenge – to *feel differently*.

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