

The old and new in knowledge and desire

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Abstract In the chapter ‘Repetition and Novelty’, from the collection *Emotional Truth*, Ronnie de Sousa raises the problem of how to strike the right balance between novelty and familiarity, between things which promise to be surprising and those which promise to be comforting. We are, on the one hand, creatures of habit: our emotions are strongly tailored to repetition and habituation, and our understanding depends upon it. However, emotional understanding, gained through repetition and habituation of emotions, has an obvious downside: it threatens to be dull. We face, as de Sousa puts it, ‘the tedium or tyranny of emotional ruts’. To avoid this, we seek out the new, the novel, the surprising. But pursuit of the new brings with it its own dangers: the novel is often disappointing, the promised goods empty. How, then, can we strike the right balance between the need for repetition (and understanding) and the desire for novelty and surprise? In this chapter, I’ll consider Ronnie’s own ideas for how to solve the problem – involving the possibilities of living in the moment, embracing the intellectual life, and art and therapy, each of which he finds problematic in some way – and then propose my own, somewhat different, solution. On my account, it is the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goods that is the key to alleviating tedium, rather than the novel or surprising themselves.