

The old and new in knowledge and desire

Michael S. Brady

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.

Ronnie de Sousa’s work has had a great impact on my thinking about emotion, and along a number of dimensions. His writings on emotional rationality, on the relation between emotions and attention, on the similarities between emotion and perception, and on emotional justification, have been a springboard for much of my thinking on the issues, and much of what I have written. So I am grateful indeed for his lifetime of producing philosophical work that is rich, stimulating, complex, suggestive, and genre-defining. De Sousa himself has had a very positive impact on my life as an academic in another way. For he was one of the referees for my 2013 book *Emotional Insight*, and his positive, helpful, and generous review went a long way to persuading Oxford University Press to publish. So that’s at least two things I owe him. Given this, it would be natural for me to focus on some of the ideas that de Sousa inspired in that book, in my contribution to this Festschrift. However, the time for treading old ground, and repeating (and perhaps expanding on) previous work is not something I particularly want to do here, both because I find it heavy going (as I’m sure the reader might), but also because of a puzzle or problem that Ronnie himself raises in his chapter ‘Repetition and Novelty’, from the collection *Emotional Truth*.¹ This is 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, after all, 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, we don’t solve the problem of emotional ruts by pursuing the novel and surprising, not least because (as de Sousa realises) such things can themselves be disappointing. Moreover, we can find not only comfort, but also great value, in emotional repetition and habituation. Instead, we avoid tedium and tyranny through the pursuit of *meaningful* goals; and both the old and the new in knowledge and desire can be meaningful. In the first section, I’ll outline how de Sousa presents the problem of balancing repetition and novelty, and the solutions which he himself finds less than satisfactory. In section two, I’ll look at the emotion of curiosity in some detail, and show how a particular and plausible account of curiosity suggests that it is meaningfulness, and not novelty, that alleviates tedium. Section three will explain why this is so. I argue that novel but easy answers and experiences fail to constitute achievements, and thus fail to be meaningful for us.

¹ Oxford University Press. 2011. 277-290.

And I bolster this account, in section four, by showing how we can find meaning and satisfaction in repetition and familiarity. I illustrate this by considering the different kinds of philosophical careers one might have. I conclude, in section five, by suggesting that de Sousa's own career and philosophical pursuits exemplify the most valuable kind of philosophical outlook: one in which one seeks the novel and surprising, but in some of the most difficult and challenging domains.

1.

We are, as de Sousa notes, creatures of habit, and patterns and rhythms dominate our lives: "Rhythm is everywhere in nature, at every scale from cosmic phenomena to the oscillations of atoms. Our every call has its own clock, governing its own repetitive rhythms." (278-9) But progress requires novelty, change, surprise. Without minute errors in the copying mechanisms of our chromosomes – 'without that random element of novelty in the context of overwhelming conservation and repetition – there could be no change and so no evolution.' (279) This is but one instance of what he calls "the dialectic of sameness and difference". At the emotional level, we are also creatures of habit, and our emotions are generated by similarity to their original eliciting conditions. This is de Sousa's notion of 'paradigm scenarios'. He writes: "Adult emotions ... are rooted in original episodes, associated with a characteristic feel (including, but not limited to, bodily feelings and impulses), with a cast of characters who played the original roles." The thought is that an emotion, for instance guilt, first occurs in response to some particular object or event in a particular circumstance or context, which make up an 'original dramatic vignette', to use William Lyons's words.² It is this scene or vignette, and the thoughts, feelings, and motivations that are associated with it, which together determine the emotional response as the one that it is. For de Sousa, "paradigm scenarios determine the *meaning* of the emotions of which they constitute the prototypes."³ (34) As a result, our present emotion responses are grounded in their similarity to the original vignettes.

If so, however, we might think that we face a problem of how genuinely novel emotional responses are possible. On the one hand, human beings desire novelty and excitement; and the more curious and open to new experiences they are, the stronger their desires. But when it comes to desires for new emotional experiences, the outcomes are often not what we wanted. de Sousa writes: "Madame Bovary illustrates [this]: she was not alone in her longing for the excitement of new love, and not alone in finding disappointment." (280) The puzzle would seem to be that since emotional responses are generated by their similarity to paradigm scenarios, any 'new' emotional responses will have to be similar to the original dramatic vignettes – so a 'new' love will have to be similar to the original vignette for love, or else not be love at all – and as a result will fail to satisfy the desire for genuine novelty. Hence the disappointment. De Sousa thinks that this mirrors the epistemic difficulty identified by Plato in the *Meno* around the acquisition of new knowledge. De Sousa writes: "Novelty in knowledge, Plato argues, is not rare; rather it is *impossible*. For if I didn't already know the object of my search, I could not even recognise it if it fell into my lap". (280) The thought is that any 'new' knowledge would have to be closely related to one's original knowledge-base in order to recognise it; but if so, it would seem to be something that one already knows, and hence isn't new after all. If this is the case, and returning to the affective realm, are we not then doomed to living lives of emotional repetition, of being stuck in emotional ruts? Even if we crave novelty in our emotional lives, isn't this craving destined to be disappointed?

de Sousa considers a number of different answers to this problem: he examines, only to find them wanting, (i) embracing the intellectual life, (ii) the possibilities of living in the moment, and (iii) art and therapy. Let us take these in turn.

(i) De Sousa writes: Many have thought that the emotional life is doomed to repetition. The intellectual life, on the contrary, need never fail of its promise of novelty. Novelty seems more clearly to be an intrinsic value in matters of intellect and knowledge than in matters of feelings. So it used to seem obvious to me that intellectuals have more fun than romantics." However, he thinks that the contrast between the intellect and emotion isn't as stark as this makes out. Novelty does seem to matter from an intellectual or epistemic standpoint; but it's not simply new facts or new truths that are held to be valuable; but new and *interesting* facts and knowledge, and

² Lyons, W. 1990. Review of *The Rationality of Emotion, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50 (3) 631-633.

³ De Sousa, R. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*, MIT Press, p. 34

what is interesting seems to be a function of our affective or emotional lives. At the same time (and as I'll illustrate later on), many academics would seem to prefer the old and familiar. As de Sousa puts it, "mathematicians and physicists frequently do their ground-breaking work in early youth. Sometimes, goes the cliché, mature scientists resist – indeed, perhaps resent – new models and paradigms." As a result, we might have good reason to doubt that the intellectual life is more conducive to alleviating boredom and tedium than the emotional.

(ii) de Sousa writes: "Perhaps the problems I have been worrying about would vanish if we could only live in the present. It wouldn't matter then if we repeated the past: we would be liberated from regret, and everything would have the fresh savour of the new." But even if such a thing were possible, it is hardly an ideal of living. De Sousa illustrates this by presenting the tragic case of Clive Wearing, a musician who lost his ability to store any new memories. He was living in the present, to be sure, but his existence was not of contentment and freedom from regret, but a "torment perpetually renewed, like a nightmare parody of Nietzsche's eternal return." As we'll see later, a life lived in the moment would seem to lack the capacity for achievement that is central to a meaningful life. This way of avoiding emotional tedium would seem to come at too high a price.

(iii) A third option is provided by aesthetic experience, and the possibility that we can cultivate and develop novel emotions in aesthetic experience, freed from practical concerns, and then transfer these to our every day lives. De Sousa writes: "The enlargement of our emotional experience, with its possibility of genuine novelty, works only when we are sufficiently detached from the possibility of real action". Such detachment and cultivation of new experience in an aesthetic mode might allow for the new sensibilities to be brought into existence in our practical modes, in a way that mirrors the promise of psychoanalysis to generate robust habits in therapy that can be fixed and deployed outside of the therapist's office. De Sousa seems sceptical, however, as to the extent to which 'art can improve life', and for emotions inculcated in artistic appreciation to enter into and generate real life emotions. As a result, art and therapy might not easily address our problem either.

I think that we can answer this problem in another way, and in so doing illustrate the fact that it is not novelty itself that will prove satisfying, and by the same token not repetition or familiarity in our emotional lives that we will find tedious. It is only under certain conditions that we rightly want the former, and are appropriately averse to the latter. This connects, moreover, with the *meaning* that novelty and repetition can have in our lives: both the old and the new in knowledge and desire can make our lives meaningful, if certain other more important things are in play. In order to see this argument, let us consider in a little more detail the desire or impulse for novelty or excitement, in its familiar form of curiosity.

2.

In spite of well-known and venerable critics – including the saints Aquinas and Augustine – curiosity's reputation has undergone something of a revival. Educationalists such as Susan Engel want to praise curiosity as a vital element in memory and learning. Philosophers and scientists too have talked up our natural interest in the truth or our intellectual curiosity as being the ground, along with practical concerns, for information-gathering and knowledge-acquisition. So curiosity's general value is apparent to many people. For our purposes, curiosity seems particularly important, given the kind of emotional state that it is. Following Paul Silvia, we can categorise curiosity as having a certain core relational theme – the interesting – and as responsive to certain *variables*. When we are curious, we evaluate something as falling under these. One of the variables is *novelty*. As Silvia writes, people are curious about things that are "new, ambiguous, complex, obscure, uncertain, mysterious, contradictory, unexpected, or otherwise not understood."⁴ This is not to say that curiosity is the only motivational force that inclines us towards novelty. The prospect of the pleasures involved in experiencing new things can surely have an important motivational role; indeed, this is part of de Sousa's way of framing our problem. However, it is also true that pleasure is also directed towards the familiar and comforting: think of our inclination to visit the same places on holidays, order the same meal in the same restaurant, listen to the same kind of music, be drawn to the same kind of person; here our goals are precisely to take pleasure in what is known and familiar. Indeed, there is significant empirical evidence to indicate that whereas we are curious about the novel,

⁴ Silvia, P. 2006. *Exploring the Psychology of Interest*, Oxford University Press, p. 24.

unexpected, and mysterious, we are more inclined to take pleasure in or like what is known, expected, and familiar. As a result, we ought not to characterise curiosity as a desire to know that is simply driven by the prospect of pleasures of knowing; as far as pleasure itself is concerned, that might be better served by other things. We'll return to this point shortly.

There is another variable that is central to curiosity, however, and this is *coping potential*. This refers “to estimates of resources, power, abilities, and control in relation to an event.” In particular, curiosity responds to an appraisal of whether we “can understand the ambiguous event. Upon appraising something as unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous, people probably appraise the likelihood that the poorly understood event will become coherent and clear.”⁵ Curiosity therefore involves two appraisals or assessments: one of novelty, and one of the capacity to understand the object, event or topic that the emotion is directed towards. The curious are not simply interested in the new, unexpected, and mysterious; they are interested in new, unexpected, and mysterious topics, questions, and events that they think that they can grasp and understand. If the latter is lacking – if the subject quickly appraises some topic or question as one that she has little chance of understanding – then curiosity and interest quickly wanes. Witness the reactions of many people to Stephen Hawking’s *The Brief History of Time*, to take a notable example of a topic that people were initially highly curious about, but soon lost interest due to the difficulty and complexity of the book and theories therein. But it is not just the new and incomprehensible that disappoint the curious. It is plausible to suppose that the new and *too easily comprehensible* will also disappoint the curious as well. Think of those who are intellectually curious about some topic, but where the answers are (too) easily attained. Perhaps the answers are genuinely unexpected and novel; but it can hardly be a satisfying end to an intellectual quest if the answers come all too easily to the inquirer. Or think, to take an example of desire, of the hedonist who finds her desires for new pleasures all too easily satisfied, because all too easily available. When we too easily get what we want, we might well find out that it wasn’t really what we wanted after all.

I want to propose that the tedium or tyranny of emotional or intellectual ruts, the problem of emotional or intellectual repetition, isn’t really the problem of there being nothing new under the sun in our emotional or intellectual lives, or the problem of the impossibility of genuinely new emotions or new knowledge. de Sousa admits that new emotions are possible, built upon the backs of old. And the problem of knowledge as expressed in the Meno isn’t really a genuine epistemic problem we face, as new knowledge is clearly possible. For our curiosity – our seeking out the novel and the unfamiliar – can instead be frustrated in a number of ways. This will happen when: (i) we don’t find anything novel; (ii) we do, but it’s incomprehensible; (iii) we do, but it’s all too easily understood. In each case, we fail to engage in meaningful activity or pursuit. It is meaning that alleviates tedium, not novelty. The problem that de Sousa identifies, therefore, is not really a problem of balancing novelty and familiarity. Instead, it’s a problem of seeking out knowledge and experiences, both new and familiar, that are meaningful. Or so, at least, I want to suggest.

3.

I want to argue that emotional and intellectual tedium isn’t simply a matter of familiarity and commonplace experiences or truths. For the new and unexpected in desire and belief can be tedious, disappointing, and unsatisfying too. Why should this be so? It is relatively easy to answer the question of why new but incomprehensible experiences and information – ones which we cannot understand – fail to satisfy. We saw above that curiosity is responsive to two variables – novelty and coping potential – and if we judge that we are unable to understand some topic or experience, then our interest quickly wanes. But what of easy answers to our intellectual inquiries, or all-too-readily available experiences that satisfy our desires? Why do these prove so disappointing and unsatisfying? The answer, it seems to me, is that such answers and satisfactions fail to constitute *achievements*; and it is achievement that is central to a meaningful intellectual and emotional life. Moreover, since both the old and the new can be meaningful, then our real task if we wish to avoid tedium is getting the right levels of meaningfulness in our experiences and inquiries. To see this, we need to look in a little more detail first at meaning in a life, and then at the notion of achievement.

⁵ Silvia. 2006. p. 57.

Following Thaddeus Metz, we might hold that a meaningful life is a life of “certain kinds of intellectual reflection, moral achievement, and artistic creation”⁶. It is important to note that such elements represent, for Metz, ways in which we transcend our animal self, move beyond seeking pleasure as such, and realise “conditions worthy of great esteem and admiration”⁷. This is one of the reasons why we think that pure hedonism or pleasure-seeking is antithetical to meaning, and, not unrelatedly, why pure hedonism or pleasure seeking is ultimately unsatisfying. Intellectual reflection, moral achievement, and artistic creation are, moreover, the kinds of things that can be categorized as ‘purposeful achievements’, and so fit in with a common-sense view of a meaningful and satisfying life as one that is purposeful rather than aimless.

Now seeking the new in knowledge and desire might suggest purposefulness. But merely attaining the new in knowledge and desire does not suffice for purposeful *achievement*. This is because achievement involves more than the mere satisfaction of intellectual and practical wishes or desires. Instead, and as Gwen Bradford has plausibly argued in her excellent book from 2015, achievements have two essential components: they involve *difficult processes*, and result in a product that is *competently caused*.⁸ With respect to intellectual and practical achievements, the latter element requires that curiosity and desire are satisfied by the inquirer, and the person desiring, respectively. With respect to the former, Bradford writes: “One feature that appears to distinguish ... achievement – and, I will contend, all achievements – is that it is *difficult*. If tying my shoes presented a particular difficulty for me to overcome ... then my success might count as an achievement too. If writing a novel were so easy that anyone could do it, we wouldn’t think of it as an achievement. Finding a cure for cancer is turning out to be difficult task. Writing a dissertation, running a marathon, or even smaller scale achievements, such as winning a game of chess, baking a soufflé, or cultivating a bonsai—all of these achievements are difficult to do. Were it the case that any of these activities were easy, we wouldn’t think of them as achievements ... This suggests that difficulty is a necessary component for achievements.”⁹ What is needed for purposeful achievement is, therefore, not simply attaining the new in knowledge and desire; it is attaining these things when they are both difficult to attain, and the result of competent causation. This is what, I propose, is needed for us to avoid falling into emotional tedium.

In the following section I’ll support this line by showing how it is compatible with finding meaning and satisfaction in repetition and familiarity. An advantage of this account is that it explains how those who are intensely curious, and those who are not, can equally lead meaningful lives and avoid tedium. This strikes me as a plausible and welcome outcome, insofar as it suggests that a plurality of ways of living are compatible with a meaningful and fulfilling life, and that we can avoid dichotomies between risk-taking vs. safety-seeking, adventure vs. contentment, and openness to radical new experiences vs. satisfaction with one’s lot. Given that our emotional temperaments and dispositions along these lines are arguably fixed and outwith our control, this is a good thing; it means that it’s not just the fortunately curious, or happily content, who can live meaningful lives.

4.

To see that that it is meaning, rather than novelty in and of itself, which is the best cure for emotional tedium, let’s return to the topic with which I began this chapter, namely the question of novelty and familiarity in philosophy, and consider what is a recognisable philosophical career, albeit not one that de Sousa exemplifies. Many philosophers plough a relatively narrow furrow, focusing on the same questions in the same subject area. Such an academic might make a career out of defending Kant’s categorical imperative, or Descartes’ ontological argument; they might be intimately familiar with all that can be said about Mary’s Black & White Room, or Rawls’s maximin principle, or know each and every word of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. It is surely possible – indeed, it often happens – that this person is happy and satisfied with what is familiar, with repetition (the same words; the same arguments; the same interlocutors). To be sure, the narrow field is *all that they know*, at least philosophically. But such a narrow focus, such familiarity and repetition, is perfectly compatible with philosophical work that is far from tedious – indeed, that can be filled with meaningful discoveries and exciting

⁶ Metz, T. 2013. *Meaning in Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 60.

⁷ Metz. 2013. p. 37.

⁸ Bradford, G. 2015. *Achievement*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁹ p. 12.

developments. Think of the great satisfaction and sense of achievement possible when such a philosopher comes up with a different understanding or interpretation of arguments in the *Tractatus*, for instance, or a new way to present the ontological argument, or a novel take on motivational internalism. Apart from illustrating the obvious truth that novelty and innovation are possible even in the most well-worth topics and inquiries, the central point is that there are very great joys in such discoveries, precisely because such things constitute *achievements* rather than simply being novel. Discovering new things in areas with which we are very familiar are meaningful, *because* they are hard won in difficult arenas and competently caused. Those who work with the familiar and well-known need not be in an intellectual rut, therefore; and their intellectual lives and endeavours need not be intellectually and emotionally tedious.

We might strengthen this argument by illustrating what an interest in the new and novel looks like when it is divorced from a desire for achievement, such as (in the intellectual realm) a deep understanding of important truths. Such an interest in the new and novel for their own sakes would seem to be characteristic of the dilettante: a person who seeks novelty and amusement rather than edification, whose interests and tastes are shallow rather than deep, who dabbles rather than inquires. Dilettantes count as such precisely because they shy away from what is difficult, challenging, problematic, and hence because they shy away from those things which constitute achievements, and which make the new in knowledge and desire meaningful. Such dedicated followers of fashion certainly exist of course, in the intellectual realm as elsewhere. But it is not clear that the behaviour of the dilettante is any less tedious than those who plough a narrow path, or that those who are constantly seeking the new are any less stuck in a rut than those who have narrower interests in the old and familiar. Those who seek the new, but eschew difficulty and meaning, would seem no better off than those who fail to see anything new under the sun.

What is true of the intellectual or philosophical inquiries is equally true of desire. Some of the deepest satisfactions and pleasures that are available to us are those associated with long-term personal relationships – with people we know intimately, whose thoughts and ideas, habits, foibles, traits, and desires are all exceptionally familiar. Familiarity and intimate knowledge do not preclude the greatest emotional pleasures, therefore. Moreover, we can readily identify the emotional dilettante, the person continually flitting from one lifestyle fad to another, constantly seeking novel experiences and pleasures, and forever moving on when relationships, religious practices, different experiments in living, become challenging or arduous. The emotional dilettante, constantly seeking the new, lives a shallow and meaningless life for precisely this reason. Novelty in desire and experience is not by itself a worthwhile, meaningful goal. And those who are constantly seeking the new and novel seem no less in a rut than those who suffer from emotional tedium and over-familiarity.

5.

I have just argued that the intellectual endeavours of those who work in relatively narrow, well-trodden paths need not be tedious – indeed, can be filled with joyful discoveries. Still and all: there seems something preferable to being the kind of philosopher who has more catholic tastes and who seeks to make progress in a number of different areas. For one thing, such a willingness to engage with difficult new topics and explore new territories would seem to evince a strong measure of intellectual courage, and admirable risk-taking. For another, the most important philosophical problems would seem to involve making progress in and having facility with a wide range of sub-disciplines; indeed, to involve stepping outside of analytic philosophy altogether and engaging with findings from other disciplines. So the more a philosopher seeks to address the most important/ difficult issues, the more admirable and virtuous they might appear. Even if, therefore, significant meaning and satisfaction can be found in the familiar, there might be even more value in having a more encyclopaedic vision, and broad-ranging interests in what is new in desire and knowledge. It seems to me that Ronnie de Sousa exemplifies to a high degree this more valuable kind of philosophical outlook and approach. His philosophical career is a prime example of how we might pursue the new, surprising, and exciting, whilst avoiding dilettantism. For de Sousa's wide and eclectic philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific inquiries seem characterised by a deep desire to engage the most difficult questions, to understand and make progress on the most complex issues, to bring different disciplinary interests to bear in fruitful ways. His own works thus give the very best kind of illustration

of how intellectual and emotional tedium might be avoided: by pursuing what is new and novel, but doing so with the strongest commitment to face up to, address, and overcome intellectual challenges.

University of Glasgow

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