**On the exhaustion criterion of difficulty, with Wittgenstein, Robert Graves, and Kripke**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* The philosopher and builder Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks that architecture is more difficult than philosophy. He suggests an exhaustion criterion for how difficult a discipline is: a field is more difficult the more exhausting it is. I make a case against this claim. There was once a demand to prevent the Greek myths from establishing themselves in the curriculum by means of "our own rival myths." It is difficult to compete with a renowned Greek myth, but if one does produce a rival, it may well not be exhausting to do so.

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*Good morning,*

*No, good afternoon*

*—And it will be evening soon!*

I opened a biography of the celebrated philosopher Wittgenstein and conveniently came upon this remark by him, which I "lifted" and entered into this paper:

> You think philosophy is difficult enough but I can tell you it is nothing to the difficulty of being a good architect. When I was building the house for my sister in Vienna I was so completely exhausted at the end of the day that all I could do was go to a 'flick' every night. (Cited in Monk 1990: 450)

The remark suggests, if not assumes, an exhaustion criterion of difficulty:

> *(Exhaustion criterion)* A discipline is more difficult the more exhausting it is to pursue.

What to make of this criterion? I shall try to appreciate the criterion a little, before challenging it.

Imagine a person who has some talent in two fields. They pursue one field without exhaustion and are a respected contributor to that field. They switch to the other field but find pursuing it exhausting. I think for such a person it is natural to compare the fields by using the exhaustion criterion. At least I find it natural. Some personal experience may be of interest. If I were not writing papers, I think I would be writing computer programs and I find producing a program which barely achieves my desired end exhausting: a simple game, etc. Technically the results are unimpressive. Then I think: computer programming is much harder than philosophy. And I think of my most downloaded paper and wonder whether the games I managed to somehow make are higher achievements.

Maybe the exhaustion criterion looks right, if one understands everything, and maybe it is a politically astute criterion for many, whether absolutely right or not. Nevertheless, there is a case against it, which I suppose a lot of philosophers would realize. (I don't have in mind the issue of "How can we measure exhaustion when it is close between two disciplines?" From my experience, I believe undergraduate students would pose this thorny question.)

To grasp the case, it is useful to begin with a quotation from Robert Graves, from a splendidly-written introduction to his retellings of the Greek myths. Graves asserts that these myths became a point of reference in place of English legends:

> The mediaeval emissaries of the Catholic Church brought to Great Britain, in
>
> addition to the whole corpus of sacred history, a Continental university system
>
> based on the Greek and Latin Classics. Such native legends as those of King
>
> Arthur, Guy of Warwick, Robin Hood, the Blue Hag of Leicester, and King
>
> Lear were considered suitable enough for the masses, yet by early Tudor times

the clergy and the educated classes were referring far more frequently to the myths in Ovid, Virgil, and the grammar school summaries of the Trojan War. (Graves 1960)

Academics judge Graves to have provided an unreliable guide to the Greek myths, one critic going so far as to describe his work as a monument of pseudo-scholarship (Dimmock 1955: 454). I too have a concern about his account. I wonder whether there were people back then who were not so keen on the Continental system. Were there not opponents? (Was not England England?) And did not some of them make statements to the effect, "We do not need these Greek myths. If you like stories like that, we can produce some here"? And they tried to. If you are interested in introducing something from abroad, often some people will try to offer a local alternative. But where are the results of those efforts? I presume there was delay while the opposition was given time to produce rival stories, but they failed to produce competitive alternatives and so the Greek myths became an established part of the curriculum on this island. This speculative history makes it easy to envisage the following combination:

(a) People want a task done.

(b) Few, if any, can do this task.

(c) If someone can do it, there is no reason to think it is exhausting work for them.

Given (b), the task seems suitably described as difficult. (It is difficult to compete with the Greek myths, isn't it, or even just one of their renowned myths?) Given (c), an exhaustion criterion of difficulty seems mistaken.

Wittgenstein is famous in some circles for being a genius. I am not sure what Robert Graves's status is, by this evaluation scheme. I wish to turn to a figure also famous in some circles as a genius, namely Saul Kripke, who recently passed away – a tarred genius, rightly I presume. Kripke opposed the descriptivist theory of how names refer (1980 [1972]: 96).

According to the theory, a speaker who uses a name associates it with a description and if that description picks out a person who exists or once existed, it refers to that person. For example, with the name Homer one might associate the description "Blind ancient Greek poet who composed the Odyssey" and it refers to whoever met that description. Kripke opposes this theory and replaces it with his own theory, or model, if that is a better choice of word. Long ago someone said, "I name this child Homer." Others acquainted with Homer used that name with the intention of referring to him. These others interacted with some people who were not (directly) acquainted with Homer but still used the name in discussions, such as when saying, "I can't believe Homer did that." They used it with the intention "I want to refer to whoever they are referring to," they being some people acquainted with Homer. News of the poet spread. Yet others heard about Homer and used the name with the intention of referring to the same person as "they" are referring to, but this time "they" were people unacquainted with the poet. And so from our current use there is a long chain of intentions to refer going right back to people acquainted with Homer, with the object of reference being the person named at the start. It is the chain which establishes reference rather than the description one associates with the name. This feels like a philosophical myth one might encounter in an ancient Greek text. Perhaps if Kripke and some others had been around in "Great Britain" some centuries ago, it would have been a lot harder for the Greek myths to make it into the curriculum.

"One" more thing. Early on in this paper I quoted a remark and then I evaluated a criterion it suggests, if not presupposes, but where is this remark from? Is it just something said in a conversation? I probably should not have used it then. Presumably, there is in some publication an appeal to the same criterion, though probably by a different author.

**References**

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