

Significance for whom? Objectivity and Community in Heritage Practice

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**(in)significance: a discussion about
values and valuing in heritage**

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Cultural Heritage Professionals make judgments about the *significance* of objects.

What is the metaphysical status of this property?

On the one hand, heritage practices and policies seem to presuppose a *realist* view.

After all, objects are investigated via specialist forms of knowledge & expertise, to discover significance ...

... which seems to imply that:

- objects possess significance independently of our wishes;
- judgments of significance should be responsive to that property;
- judgments of significance are right or wrong depending upon the nature of the object

These ideas all seem to suggest a *realism* about significance (that significance is 'intrinsic' to objects in some way).

On the other hand, here is a line of thought that seems to be in tension with this realism:

1. Any judgement about significance presupposes beliefs about the relative importance of different aspects of the past;
2. That is, judgments about significance presuppose some commitment to an historical narrative;
3. Any such commitment involves (implicit or explicit) ethico-political judgments about what matters here and now;
4. This in turn implies that whenever we say 'Object O is highly significant' we are really saying 'O is highly significant *to us*'.

In other words, if significance judgments depend on some prior ethico-political commitments, then this seems to suggest a *relativism* about significance rather than a realism.

However, relativism doesn't seem like a comfortable place to stay, for it can seem to suggest that

- at some fundamental level, significance judgments 'float free' from the world and from ideas of 'evidence' ...
- significance judgments are therefore ultimately arbitrary, decided by politics ...
- therefore claims to expertise in this area are bogus (being merely rhetorical / ideological covers for power) ...
- ultimately, significance collapses into something purely personal and idiosyncratic: *significance for me*

In such a relativism, there no longer seems to be a place for concepts of expertise, professionalism, or public institutions of heritage ...

So: Is there a place to be found between a (naïve?) realism and a (pernicious?) relativism?

To find this place, it's worth looking more closely at the schema

Object O is significant to us

And asking: **Who is the 'us'?**

Following Bernard Williams, we can distinguish those descriptions of the world that are very local (i.e., imply a narrow sense of 'us') from those that are much less so (i.e., imply a much broader sense of 'us').

For example, consider an apple.

On the one hand, I can make judgements about this apple's weight, volume, etc. **These judgments appeal to a very wide sense of 'us'** (perhaps as wide as 'all rational, competent observers'). There are standardised, shared methods we use to reach and confirm such judgments.

On the other hand, I can remark to a friend that this apple reminds me of the face of Professor X. **This judgment appeals to a very narrow sense of 'us'** (perhaps as narrow as 'my friend and I'). People outside of that 'us' may not see the resemblance at all, but this in no way implies that they are incompetent observers, and there are no standardised methods for showing them to be 'wrong' in not seeing it.

This thus gives us a spectrum: from descriptions / judgments that are very local to those that are far less local –or, to use a different lingo, from judgments that are very ‘perspectival’ to that those that are much more ‘universal’.

Where on this spectrum do judgments of significance in cultural heritage sit? How ‘local’ are they? What sort of ‘us’ do they appeal to?

(The broader the ‘us’ the more we can accommodate realist intuitions; the narrower the ‘us’ the more perspectival or relativist the position becomes.)

Some more questions for further investigation:

- How do different significance judgments, in different contexts, appeal to different senses of 'us'?
- How localised can this 'us' be and yet still allow us to make sense of notions like *expertise, knowledge, professionalism, and public institutions*?
- To claim any 'us' is to speak for, on behalf of, a community –it is thus an exercise of power. What sorts of ethico-political responsibilities towards communities does the making of significance judgments involve?
- To claim an 'us' is partly to *recognise* a community that already exists, but it is also to *construct* that community. How can we best make sense of these two aspects involved in significance judgements?

References

Bernard Williams, *Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A. W. Moore, Princeton University Press, 2006 (and other writings).

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