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What is an Academic Judgement? (0241)

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Academics make academic judgements virtually every working day. But what exactly *is* an academic judgement? As a starting point, one might have recourse to appropriate statutory documents: for example, the 2004 Education Act mentions that student complaints do not count as a ‘qualifying’ complaint if it relates to matters pertaining to an ‘academic judgment’ (HEA 2004, P. 5, Section 12). The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) helps to provide a gloss on the term:

Academic judgment is not any judgment made by an academic; it is a judgment that is made about a matter where the opinion of an academic expert is essential. So for example a judgment about marks awarded, degree classification, research methodology, whether feedback is correct or adequate, and the content or outcomes of a course will normally involve academic judgment. (OIA, 2018, Section 30.2,)

But although it is heartening to see that some deference is paid to academic judgment, little light is thrown on what it actually is. This can, of course, be useful: for example, the University of Cambridge’s complaint procedure quotes the OIA definition (Cambridge, 2018), without further elaboration. Providing no-one is prepared to question the nature of academic judgement, who are we to complain? But, at the risk of disturbing sleeping dogs, I propose to enquire more closely as to what constitutes an academic judgement.

My approach will be broadly philosophical because the very concept of a judgement seems to require it (as opposed to questions about who is entitled to make such judgements, or what kind of experience is needed to make them). We are fortunate in this regard because there is a philosopher, generally held in high regard, who devoted a lot of his time investigating the concept of judgement. His name: Immanuel Kant.

Kant makes a distinction between what he terms determinate (or determining) and reflective judgements. In the case of a determinate judgement he says: “If the universal (the rule, the principal, the law) is given then the power of judgement, which subsumes the particular under it, is determining” (Kant, 2000, p. 66-67). This implies that we order and organise particulars (e.g. pieces of evidence) through concepts. For Kant, a determinate judgement is not only classificatory – for example, we might use a conceptual structure to determine instances of causation and to distinguish these instances from mere succession or correlation. There are two further features of determinate judgements: first they are *objective*, in the sense of being propositional – they purport to say ‘how the world is’. Second, they are universal in the sense that in making a determinate judgement I am claiming that everyone will reach the same conclusion as myself. Of course, others may disagree but the idea is that, in principle, these disagreements are adjudicable (Steinberger, p. 38).

In the case of reflective judgements, something different is going on. In this case, “if the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgement is merely reflecting” (Kant, 2000, p. 67). This means that we try and make sense of something “in terms of the sort of unity in order to make possible a system of experience” (p. 67-8). Essentially, this implies that we think of a piece of data, a theory, a concept in functional or relational terms: for example, Kant thinks that when we reflect on natural phenomenon we situate nature in a purposive or teleological framework. More generally, we can think of reflective judgements as contextual: we look for links

and relationships in order to make sense of the object of study, to bring some sense of order and unity to bear.

An academic judgement, I suggest comprises both determinate and reflective judgements. Sometimes students make the mistake of supposing that all judgements are determinate and one of the more difficult tasks that academic teachers have is showing how judgments can be reflective in the sense described: we try and show students the links both within and across disciplines. Often, the most creative work is produced through reflective judgment through the dismantling of longstanding interpretations and theories.

There is, however, one further type of judgement that needs to be mentioned: that is what I term practical judgement. The roots of this kind of judgement can be found in Aristotle for whom *phronesis* (practical reason) was concerned with how the best course of action is to be determined (Aristotle, 1980: Book 6). This requires an understanding of the normative context in which the ends of action are to be understood. For some disciplines, practical judgement looms larger than in others, since we want to see if a student is able to evaluate possible actions and interventions. But academics exercise practical judgement every time they take into account the particular circumstances of a student when they frame and assessment of that student's work.

Two further points are worth making.

First, academic judgements are what might be termed second order judgements or meta-judgements (see Kant, 1933, p. 105-6 on the 'meta' character of judgements): they are an assessment of the student's own judgements (or lack of) in terms of *their* ability to perform determinate, reflective and, where appropriate, practical judgments. Moreover, an academic judgement itself may be subject to further judgement as well. It is this second-order quality that gives academic judgements their apparent mystery ('it's just whatever academics do' seems to be the import of the OIA's statement, as we have seen).

Second, the whole process of judging can be skewed if it is supposed that the only form of legitimate judgement is determinate. One problem with overly-detailed assessment criteria is that often it is assumed that all judgements must be of this kind. If this assumption affects and permeates teaching and curricula the danger is that academic study itself becomes impoverished.

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