Review of “Confusion: A Study in the Theory of Knowledge”

David B. Martens
University of the Witwatersrand

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Book Review


Camp defends at length, in detail, and with considerable historical erudition and technical sophistication “an account of what an attributer of confusion is doing” when the confusion attributed is of what Camp calls the “ontological” kind—“taking one thing to be another.” (43, 3) He allows that “several other approaches have promise and ought to be explored” and acknowledges that his own approach raises difficult questions about “the relation between truth and reason” that “simply must be answered, though not here.” (160, v, 217)

In Part I (chs. 1 and 2) Camp makes a case that ontological confusion was of central concern to early modern philosophers, is common in everyday life, and should be of concern to philosophers now. Precisely this kind of confusion was feared by Descartes, for example, who warned that “I must be on my guard against carelessly taking something else to be this ‘I’, and so making a mistake in the very item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all.” (Meditation II, Cottingham translation) Descartes feared, in other words, that it might be possible for me to take something else to be myself in the same way that in a dimly lit parking lot it is possible for me to take someone else’s car to be my car. Now, “It is perfectly obvious”, notes Camp, that an ontologically confused person has “made a mistake”, merits “some kind of intellectual criticism”, and “would be better off not being confused”. (4) “But it is not perfectly obvious what kind of intellectual criticism you deserve for making your mistake, or why your mistake dissolves [when it does].” (4) So an explanation is required.

In Part II (chs. 3 and 4) Camp considers and sets aside an initially attractive philosophical approach to ontological confusion and sketches the outlines of his own approach. The initially attractive approach holds that to be ontologically confused is simply to have false (or at least untrue) identity beliefs and that the liability of a confused person to criticism, the disvalue to that person of being confused, and the abatement of her confusion are simply the liability, disvalue, and abatement of false (or at least untrue) beliefs. Camp, however, accepts certain arguments due to Dennett and to Evans and concludes that “attributions of confusion are not attributions of false or untrue belief at all.” (36) So he feels compelled to elaborate an alternative approach on which an attribution of confusion concerns not the subject’s beliefs but rather her inferences, and on which an attribution of confusion is not a truth-evaluable statement but rather a noncognitive expression of a certain sort of evaluative attitude or political position that the attributer takes and recommends be taken towards the subject. In general, Camp notes, “The form
of a political position is, ‘Let’s treat these people this way.’” (44) In particular, “An attributer of confusion is taking [the position] that the [allegedly confused] subject should be interpreted [in such a way that] the distinctness of the objects the subject is said to be confusing should not be held to invalidate reasoning that otherwise is of a valid form”. (43)

In Parts III and IV (chs. 5–10) Camp argues that “if we wish to find a semantics that fills in the details of a confusion-attributer’s charitable proposal.... we cannot employ a classical validity criterion: validity understood as guaranteed truth-preservation.” (121) In Part V (chs. 11–13) Camp offers his own proposal for a “paternalistic semantics”. (143) This “is a four-valued epistemic semantics, a lightly customized version of Nuel Belnap’s ‘useful four-valued logic’”, in which the semantic values preserved by valid inferences are “indicators of profitability and costliness” determined relative to the opinions of actual “authorities” about the topic of the allegedly confused subject’s alleged confusion. (49, 143) Apparently the relevant notion of an authority is indefinable, for Camp says that “Nothing will do but to have some exemplars of people who do possess the particular brand of authority, of trustworthiness, required to determine the semantic values.” (144) This is less perplexing if one substitutes the phrase “people who are unconfused” for Camp’s word “authorities”. Seen in this light, Camp’s account explicates the notions of being confused and of being an attributer of confusion in terms of the ostensibly more basic notion of being unconfused. Now, though the notion of an authority, of an unconfused person, is indefinable, it “is essential about ‘authorities’...that their opinions carry weight as practical advice”. (133) Moreover, an expressivism about attributions of authoritativeness is natural given Camp’s expressivism about attributions of confusion. So, apparently, to attribute authoritativeness or unconfusedness to someone really is to say “Let’s obey this person” or at least “Let’s give weight to this person’s practical advice.” (217)

In Parts VI and VII (chs. 14–19) Camp discusses various applications and implications of his approach. If one had any doubts before about Camp’s expressivism, those doubts will surely intensify here as Camp, having in effect cashed out “reason” as “politically correct thinking”, struggles to “add...up” reason and truth. (217)

David B. Martens
University of the Witwatersrand

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