From the editor

Aesthetic normativity and suitable prompting

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Abstract: In this Editor's column I apply some of the insights I got from Richard Wollheim over the years, and from a recent *Teams*-chat with students in my class. Most notably: the role of suitable prompting in aesthetic normativity. In a sense, these insights help me understand this remark from Wittgenstein: 'The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by.' *(Philosophical Investigations*, 232e.)

1. Some time ago people would ask me what turned me into the philosophy of art, and I would tell them the following anecdote. Once, when I was about eight years old, I was in the same room with two of my brothers, five and ten years older than I was. Wil adored Jimi Hendrix, as did I when I was with him. Frank, the oldest, was not too fond of Jimi. Instead, he loved The BeeGees, as I did too, when I was near him. This time, they got into a fight over their musical preferences and I felt trapped, as they asked me what I liked best. I felt like I would always betray one of them, whatever answer I should give. So, wisely, I kept my mouth shut. Of course, one could also say that I was a coward – for a long time I would have agreed. Not anymore.

I always thought of this episode as the one that introduced me to the problem of aesthetic normativity: you must always be prepared to defend your aesthetic preferences. Those who are not are either snobs or sentimental in some other way. The anecdote answered the question I kept getting from people who could not imagine someone to be interested in aesthetics or the philosophy of the arts.

I have come to think though that the anecdote made me frame the problem wrongly as a social issue. Although I still think there are social aspects to our debates on aesthetic matters, these debates are never *about* these social issues – or better: they should not be about them. When they are, this is a contingent, empirical matter. Aesthetic normativity is about hearing the merit of the playing in the music, seeing the painter's hand in the painting, and so on: perceiving the maker in what they made, and in how they made it. Artistic merit connects with the authenticity of noticing what artists did, or do.

2. I was reminded of the anecdote by a chat discussion in a recent class on individual style in painting.[1] One student, let us call him Klaas, mentioned that he could not follow our philosophical discussions about aesthetic normativity. Why discuss whether it might have been the cubist painter Picasso who painted *The Victory Boogie Woogie*, rather than the abstract artist Piet Mondriaan? What difference would it make for the painting as such?[2] He wanted to understand this.

I had projected *The Victory Boogie Woogie* on the screen to ask the students to consider how their understanding of it would shift once they were told – wrongly – that it was by Picasso, whose *Guernica* we had discussed in an earlier meeting. I wanted the students to realise how the picture would become harder to understand – to put it mildly – against the background of Picasso's œuvre as it is against Mondriaan's. The œuvre and the individual style of a painter prompt one to realised intentions in their works. They tell us what to look for, and how to look for it. Klaas could not see any of this make a difference to his aesthetic appreciation of *The Victory Boogie Woogie*. Should he look differently on account of such external information? How could that change what he should be seeing?[3]

3. Over the years I collected exemplary cases to illustrate philosophical issues in my classes. One of these is a music-video from the 1970s of Fleetwood Mac (the original band) performing *Need your love so bad*. They are not actually performing. Instead, they make moves in the television studio to fit the music that is being played from a record. Peter Green, the lead-guitarist, re-enacts his own singing. And you can see, that, instead of thinking about this woman whose love he needs so badly, his mind is with the timing of his lip movements. You can clearly see this.

One could say that the performance is not leading us deeper into the song and its contents, but, rather, away from it – to the studio where the recording is taking place. It is a fake, a forgery: not art but something infringing on its vulnerability. What we see in the video does not prompt us to aspects or elements in the song that we hear. As a consequence, our appreciation of the song is misdirected, thinned out, inauthentic. We are prompted away from the beauty of the song.[4]

4. Another clip I show in my classes is one I took from the Rolling Stones film *Gimme Shelter* (1970, Albert and David Maysles). We see the band

sitting in the studio, tired, listening to *Wild Horses*, a song they had been recording. In the central *plan séquence*, filmed with a hand-held camera, we see Keith Richards listening, eyes closed, mouthing the text, and appreciating what he is hearing; then, via Mick Jagger, Charlie Watts noticing his drumming attentively (though he is slightly distracted by the camera); followed by Jagger, again, who is clearly happy with the result (and with being filmed). We see how they listen to their own playing – enjoying it and physically responding to the sounds. We see them listening just like we do. Only, they know exactly how to listen to the musicians in the music. They prompt us to it, authentically, and suitably.

5. Wollheim argues that a work of art, if it is in an artist's individual style, realises the artist's intentions. Above, I have been assuming this view when saying that we are out to hear the musician in the music, see the painter in the painting. And the two music-videos were meant to bring that point home.

It is true, however, that, through the many ways in which people appreciate works of art, the meaning and artistic merit of these works may grow on us in particular ways. A curator might think that it is the exhibition's function to prompt, or even steer an audience's appreciation, and that the resultant experiences is what counts as its success, rather than a faithfulness concerning the work. Ideally, both fall into place with each other.[5]

Such a view though risks watering down the notion of aesthetic normativity.[6] Another way to understand the role of a work's exhibition is by assuming that the artist made the work to be seen in a certain way, and that ever since its first exhibition we are prompted to its aesthetic aspects and qualities. In my view, Wollheim sums up incisively what is at stake here:

> 'The central question to be asked of criticism is, What does it do? How is a piece of criticism to be assessed, and what determines whether it is adequate? To my mind the best brief answer ... is, Criticism is *retrieval*. The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. The creative process reconstructed, or retrieval complete, the work is then open to understanding.'[7]

6. Perhaps, the retrieval may never be complete. But what would that mean, exactly? Are we mistaken in expecting to reach a complete retrieval – because we are unable to turn our insights into propositions that state objective facts that can be verified and proven in the work? Retrieval is not supposed to lead to objective truths, but to aesthetic, i.e. subjective ones.[8] Of course, the retrieval may also fail in certain cases, for instance, when the work has little artistic merit.[9] We may be *nearing* the work (which was already finished by the artist), or *moving away* from it when a certain fashion turns us in a wrong direction, and may later return to the work, or may have lost all hope of ever grasping the work because we keep looking for the wrong

things. 'Wrong', because they were not intended, and are not really visible in the work, no matter how hard we think we *can* see them.

I also follow Wollheim in his view that the intentions that an artist realises in their work may have been unconscious. What characterises them is their visibility in the work. Wittgenstein, too, seems less interested in the life of intentions in a person's mind, than in how they surface in the person's actions – or works, I add.

> 'Do not ask yourself "How does it work with me?" – Ask "What do I know about someone else?"'[10]

7. What I took from Wollheim's quote on retrieval and from the one coming next – apart from understanding that the suitability of our responses is what aesthetic normativity is all about – is the openness that we should entertain towards other people's prompts. Whatever something or someone prompts you to derives its suitability from the fact that in its wake you can actually see the work that way. Time and again you may mistake people's prompts for suitable ones if you merely *want* to see the work as these people suggest (even though you cannot really see it that way). Realising your mistake may take ages – though, probably, it won't. Seeing the work and the intentions it realises requires ongoing authenticity on our behalf as well.

> 'A suitable spectator is a spectator who is suitably sensitive, suitably informed, and, if necessary, suitably prompted.'[11]

8. My two brothers – in the anecdote above – taught me how to hear the artistic merit in Jimi's guitar playing, as well as the compositional merit of the songs the BeeGees performed – as well as recognising how different these merits are. Unfortunately, at the time, my brothers were not open to each other's prompts, which obviously (at least, to me this is obvious) had its grounds in their brotherly quarrels which simply overruled the *aesthetic* openness required. Aesthetic normativity does not straightforwardly sustain social relations, but our social relations may make us benevolently see the art in different ways. However, as the anecdote illustrates, they may also hinder such openness. And Wollheim says it again in another quote in his 'Criticism as Retrieval'.

> 'Pictorial meaning, I have been claiming, always rests upon the state of mind of the artist, and the way it leads him to work, and the product that the work brings about in the mind of the suitably informed and sensitive spectator.'[12]

So it is okay that people anywhere in the art world struggle over works of art but whatever they want others to recognise about some work ought to be noticeable in the work lest the prompts are unsuitable. All this goes to show how difficult and lively aesthetic normativity is in practice.

9. Now, what is the aim of empirical aesthetics? Is it to solve aesthetic normativity – as if that needs solving – by zooming out and producing a set of objective claims and their statistical occurrence? Or is it the effort to subtract certain prompts, and the percentage with which they occur among people (who are not necessarily interested in aesthetic or art historical debates but who nevertheless know how to look at things and have thoughts about them)? In the first sense aesthetic normativity is suggested to be replaceable by reasoning, whereas in the second the prompts, more modestly, are put before us inviting us to assess their suitability for ourselves.

The suitability of prompts cannot be assessed objectively (though their unsuitably can be so assessed) – that is exactly the point of the notion of aesthetic *normativity*. So ...Without the search for the authenticity of the art, the suitability of the prompting, and the authenticity of the appreciation involved in what people say, empirical aesthetics sounds like a dead end. What might be lost is of more consequence than we may think.

Aesthetic normativity is at the core of what it means to be human, I think. Kant argued that aesthetic judgements is the foundation of our *Geselligkeit*, because in them we share our subjectivity. Aesthetic normativity is where people meet whilst in the process of perceiving the world. We do not converge as easily, or intuitively in our knowledge claims, assumptions, preferences, ethical principles, or social desires. Aesthetic normativity, in contrast, may help us get over our cognitive stock, sometimes biased; it may get us to see other people as persons, rather than merely as types or even objects.[13]

10. When the chat discussion I mentioned above surfaced in my course, we had already discussed Wittgenstein's remarks about aspect perception as well as Wittgenstein's suggestion that there might be people who are blind to the dawning of an aspect. On that occasion, Klaas had told us that he had been diagnosed as having Autism Spectrum Disorder. He suggested that Wittgenstein might be thinking of autists with the 'aspect-blind', but he also noted that he had no trouble switching from the duck to the hare in the famous ambiguous image. Perhaps that illustrates why Wittgenstein is talking about a technique here.[14] If you concentrate on the eye and have it look either to the left or to the right, either the duck or the hare will dawn on you.[15]

But Wittgenstein also mentions, in this context of discussing aspect-blindness, a harder conceptual issue:

> One might say of someone that he was blind to the *expression* of
> a face. Would his eyesight on that occasion be defective?
> This is, of course, not simply a question for physiology. Here the
> physiological is a symbol of the logical.[16]

Klaas remarked that he did have trouble understanding facial expressions, as well. Some of the remarks Wittgenstein made about the recognition of facial expressions did resonate with him. As said, he also could not grasp the

relevance of an œuvre for the aesthetic appraisal of a work.[17] Talking about the incapacity to recognise what goes on in a face, Wittgenstein remarks 'I do not want to settle this.' – one wonders why.[18] I gather he backed away from this issue because it is such an important – and complicated – *philosophical* issue, and it lies at the core of what it means to be human.[19]

11. Perhaps then, aesthetic normativity is only for those among us who do not have certain problems in the region of Autism Spectrum Disorder; for those who *can* understand what goes on in another's facial expression and can converse about that; for those who can share the subjectivity of their perceptions, as well as the perceiving of expression, generally. It would be relevant for the majority of people.

Even so, this does not mean that the majority of people all know how to deal with aesthetic normativity most profitably. Sometimes we simply stick with a preference and ward off any prompts in other directions. I do not think we can do without aesthetic education. Aesthetic education is the process wherein we are taught that there is something like aesthetic normativity and that one can get better at it over the years with whatever help one can get from writings about arts and artists, and from aesthetic discussions with other people about works and artists. And we must recognise how it is 'something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself'. One has to look for oneself and recognise what is happening.

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NOTES

[1]Which was based in large part on Richard Wollheim 1993.

[2]The discussion was not about factual matters; it was clear that it was Mondriaan who made the work.

[3]Wittgenstein's discussion did concern a kind of seeing that was permeable for thought. Wollheim too, discusses this in Wollheim 2001, 24: '...the central phenomenological feature of seeing-in ...is its permeability to thought, whether the thought is caused by the marked surface or is prompted by another. And it is this feature that in turn accounts for the wide scope of seeing-in, wider, as we have seen than that of seeing face-to-face. It is the permeability of seeing-in to thought that accounts for the wide range of things that can be represented and for the wide range of properties they can be represented as

having.'

[4]I realise that these synchronised music-videos, recorded after the fact of the music making in the television studio, sometimes in front of an audience (present to the re-enactment), were experienced at the time as an advancement over merely listening to a record. At least we could now see the musicians. That slight advantage came with a price.

[5]If we were to conclude, instead, that it is not the artist but the reception of the work that finishes it, we risk bringing the work out of sight.

[6]As does Roland Barthes 1981.

[7]Wollheim 1980, 185.

[8]I know Wollheim would not put the distinction in terms of an opposition between objective and subjective truths. But the results of suitable prompting, and the psychological reality of an artist's individual style are subjective truths – subjective

but shareable.

[9]Either way, no outcome of the critical retrieval will make us the ones who finish the work instead of the artist.

[10]Wittgenstein 1953, 206:c.

[11]Wollheim 2001, 13.

[12]Wollheim 1988, 188.

[13]I know I am jumping ahead of my argument, and I won't even return to this thought now, but see Van Gerwen 2020.

[14]'The substratum of this experience [of aspect perception] is the mastery of a technique.' Wittgenstein 1953, 208:e.

[15]'what I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects.' Wittgenstein 1953, 212:a.

[16]Wittgenstein 1953, 210e:a.

[17]'Aspect-blindness will be *akin* to the lack of a "musical ear".' Wittgenstein 1953, 214e:c. Not all must be lost for Klaas, though. He loves the music of Led Zeppelin.

[18]Wittgenstein 1953, 213e:f.

[19]Empirical aesthetics seems to disagree about the philosophical nature of this issue. Then again, so does many an empirical scientist. I am thinking of Paul Ekman and Friesen 1978 and their 'Facial Action Coding System', a set of pictures of parts of faces that supposedly constitute particular facial expressions. As though someone who is aspect-blind could reason their way out of their incapacity. Even though this might, time and again, fool someone. For those who don't understand what I mean, this *is* an inclusive argument.

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