

Aesthetic Investigations

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Aesthetics is the Grammar of Desire

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Abstract: This essay presents (i) the nature of aesthetic judgement, (ii) the significance of aesthetic judgement and finally, (iii) the relevance of art to understanding aesthetic judgement.

INTRODUCTION

The day I learnt the basics of grammar as an eight year old was a joyous day for me. I felt my heels hit the ground more firmly as I walked home from school. My head was full of the idea of nouns, verbs, objects and predicates. I loved that there was a set structure that underpinned the language we all employed to communicate and to think. As I also loved drawing and painting, I began to wonder whether there was also a universal structure which underpinned the power of art.

When as an adult, I adopted the terms and references of the philosopher, this topic could be articulated as an interest in the nature of aesthetic judgement. It includes considering how artistic value and meaning are attributed to artworks, how cultural artefacts and imaginative constructs may be seen to motivate ethical or socially oriented behaviour and the basis of the standards by which we judge one judgement more correct or apt than another. The structure of aesthetic judgement could not represent a clear analogy with linguistic grammar given the indeterminacy of the terms by which we evaluate or judge. However, the role that art plays in furthering or re-conceiving experience, providing new or revised ways of carving up experience, suggests that there is a rational basis to aesthetic judgement.

This essay presents (i) the nature of aesthetic judgement, (ii) the significance of aesthetic judgement and finally, (iii) the relevance of art to understanding aesthetic judgement.

I. AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

Aesthetic judgement combines what we might refer to as reasons and desires. Reasons can be understood as objective and open to critique on the basis that the inferences involved can be made explicit. Desires are normally held to be subjective in the sense that they are not based on reasons but rather causes; or to put it another way, they are based on impulses impenetrable to reason. You can curb impulses but you cannot change the content of a desire through reason, or so it has been assumed. Desire, by such accounts, is an irreducible aspect of experience (you cannot analyse it into smaller units). You might explain the nature and content of desire with evolutionary theories, but this is not the same thing as analysing it by which you might critique and revise it.

The assumption is that desire is motivational whereas reason is not. Popular philosophical positions are that moral judgement is defined by reason while aesthetic responses are in the realm of desire. Hence, a key problem of moral philosophy is to re-unite the objective grounds of identifying the right thing to do with a motivation to do it. A key problem of philosophical aesthetics is to show how the stuff of desire—the feelings, emotions and other subjective states which have motivational force—can interface with rational grounds and hence make aesthetic evaluation more than private, idiosyncratic and irresponsible.

Standards

A common debate regarding aesthetic evaluation is based on a false dilemma between relativism and objective standards. Relativism precludes progress because there is no basis upon which to judge an object better than any other while objective standards also preclude progress because once identified they would preclude innovation and creativity. The correct account is more nuanced than this. It involves a third alternative found in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Kant addresses the possibility of value judgements by focussing on the comparative nature of judging. Aesthetic judgement demonstrates that the process of judging facilitates a continual calibration of terms among a community, and as such, implicates imagination and the indeterminacy of terms. The ground of objectivity, according to this understanding of aesthetic judgement, is in the process of judgement itself, which in turn, implicates the constraints of communication within a community context.

The writing of Jürgen Habermas is relevant to understanding aesthetic judgement because he identifies the context of giving and asking for reasons and reveals, inadvertently perhaps, a role for the indeterminacy of evalua-

tive terms.¹ Habermas locates the comparative nature of judgement in the ideals embedded in the structure of language, specifically the drive for correctness and consensus. John Dewey's ethics resonates in this idea. For Dewey, the objectivity of value judgements is identified in the constraints of community-enquiry to the extent that the processes exercised involve inductive reasoning.² Both Habermas and Dewey adopt the notion that the basis of objectivity in value judgement is to be found in the processes involved in either communicating or cognizing a judgement. The relevant or pivotal point here is to be found in the nature of judgement itself. Judgement is comparative. It involves weighing up cognitions, impressions and feelings in light of terms whose structure is held in common with those with whom one is able to communicate one's judgement. The very act of judging calibrates one's terms of reference to those of one's peers. In the case of aesthetic judgement this goes even further.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

Aesthetic judgement does not so much unite reason and desire as conceive them from the beginning as inseparable. Aesthetic judgement is not itself an exercise in ethical judgement but it concerns the evaluative content of concepts which in determinate contexts such as those engaging moral judgement, constitutes a reason for action.

A key assumption of many pragmatist accounts of meaning and knowledge is that our concepts are not neutral. They have embedded in them information which is not merely descriptive. In addition to the descriptive content, there is content which determines attitudes and orientations toward the object of description. This is content which constitutes an evaluative component. In cultures and historical periods when we live within homogeneous societies, or when we belong to a culture which promotes a mono-perspective in most matters, those of the dominant class would hardly notice the value content of their concepts. From the position of a privileged class, the prevailing concepts are seen as simply given and objective; those disadvantaged by the conceptual framework are implicitly judged to be objectively inferior. On the other hand, in societies in a state of flux, and where norms, values and understandings are in constant tension between various groups, the populace can come to perceive that their concepts are not purely descriptive but embed attitudes and norms.

The significance of this is that we need not have simplistic notions of the motivating force of desire. If we conceive of reason and desire as separate, we end up treating ends as arrived at through reason and then need an add on, where the add on is conceived as self-interest. In contrast, desire can be conceived as grounded in belief rather than irreducible. And belief can include the entertainment of possibilities of the kind we associate with the work of the imagination. That is, desire might be shaped through imagination.³

When “aesthetic judgement” is the topic of enquiry, the term “desire” is replaced in philosophical discussions with the term “pleasure”. Strictly speaking desire and pleasure are not the same thing. Desire is the anticipation of pleasure broadly construed and would seem to originate in an absence of something. Furthermore, our conception of desire typically treats it as motivating action. While “desire” and “pleasure” might both refer to the grounds of motivation, aesthetic judgement is discussed in terms of pleasure because aesthetic judgement addresses the cultivation of the kind of intersubjectivity which characterizes a social unit. As such the object of desire is determinate while the object of aesthetic pleasure is indeterminate. I return to this again in the next section.

The aims and objectives of my own writing on aesthetic judgement is to reveal its relevance to forming or unifying (construing or configuring) a particular constellation of feeling, ideas, values and associations in such a way that the resulting unity institutes a norm, convention or concept by which that constellation can be communicated. Its communicability is the grounds of its rationality and the serving of a community’s interests (anticipated through imaginative constructs) is the pleasure which drives it. For the purposes of this essay I will revert to using the term “desire” so as to dovetail the discussion into moral philosophy. Below I explain how a desire might be understood as directed to indeterminate objects.

III. RELEVANCE OF ART TO UNDERSTANDING AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

Returning now to Kant’s aesthetic legacy, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant provides a concept of community relevant to multi-cultural groupings.⁴ In other words, understanding aesthetic judgement promises to inform our understanding of the possibility of community between those who hold diverse cultural commitments. To understand the structure of aesthetic judgement, Kant turns to an area of culture where its exercise is most obvious. This is in the making and reception of artworks.

When an artwork exercises aesthetic judgement it does so by demonstrating a desire in a form which is communicable but removed from the ends it might seek to achieve. In this form, we are able to reflect upon our desires in a way not normally open to us. Normally desires are caught up in the dynamics of action and self-interest. As the fuel of motivation, we hardly identify them at all. Instead we think in terms of ends. However, the set of ends is not the same as and larger than the set of desires. While we identify ends, and deliberate on means, whether this gives rise to action (in virtue of giving rise to a desire) is another matter entirely (a matter that has been intractable to philosophers and social reformers). As art, desire is given a form which can lead to articulation, critique and revision. That is, previously unarticulated and unformed desires can be externalized, and the

relationships to background knowledge and experience can be calibrated to our particular social norms. My suggestion is that desire be understood as a constellation of thoughts, values, impressions and beliefs. A desire can be cultivated by changing the relationship between or the configuration of these elements within the constellation. The implication is that desire is not an irreducible aspect of experience. The constellation of elements that constitute desire represent the basis of our motivations.

Aesthetic judgement involves finding a communicable form for desire which leads to the kind of engagement which prompts reflection. This typically involves a number of interactions and processes such as discussion between peers, attending to how others have responded and revising or justifying to oneself or others one's own response. Through aesthetic judgement, desire is grounded in norms. It is cultivated to norms or conventions.

Responses to art involve aesthetic judgement when the ground of one's response is rational, rather than idiosyncratic, private or whimsical. Rationality in this case involves aligning subjectivities between peers, not to the point of identity but rather communicability. If an artist, film maker, writer (creator in any medium) creates a form which does not engage the audience in this way, for example, the artwork might be experienced simply as diversion or as reinforcing one's prejudices, then, the artist has failed to engage the audience in aesthetic judgement. The suggestion is not that artworks make clones of us all where desire is concerned. Rather the suggestion is that through aesthetic judgement (and this is often exercised in relation to artworks) we calibrate our terms of reference. We do this by calibrating what is noticed, treated as significant and related to other aspects of our experience, knowledge and background. Art is an occasion for creating a new grouping or constellation among our ideas, impressions, feelings, values and associations which can lead to new concepts, and in turn, the establishment of new motivational sets.

In art schools, students learn to communicate mental content that is not communicable through literal use of language; or explicit direct inference or argument. This mental content might be thought of as ways of perceiving and desiring. The artist's task is to find a form by which this content is communicable. The artist then uses the materials and media available, to make sense of their view, perspective, experience or perception. In making her mental content an external object or artwork, the artist invites the audience to find meaning in the artwork. Typically the artist receives feedback from her audience and this feedback either directly or inadvertently informs her next artwork or body of work. The artist responds to critique in the way she creates her next work.

The thesis that art is immaterial is related to this idea. Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) argued along these lines and this view was given a modernist reading by Robin Collingwood (1889-1943) when he championed the French post-impressionist artist Paul Cezanne in virtue of the immateriality of his art.⁵ Collingwood explained that not all people could perceive the art of

Cezanne even when looking at his paintings.⁶ This idea was given artistic form in the West by non-objective and conceptual artists in the 1950s through to the 1970s. According to Sean Lowry, a contemporary Australian conceptual artist, “[b]y exhibiting blankness, an artist can highlight the way in which interpretation often depends upon an invisible informational backstory”.⁷ Lowry produces artwork that explores the role of the material object in this immateriality; and in doing so, reveals the way a material object can be an occasion for perception which is significantly under-determined by the visual object. Artwork of this kind goes beyond an exercise of aesthetic judgement to engage philosophical reflection on the nature of aesthetic judgement.

Aesthetic judgement is the space of the constellations of ideas, feelings, values and associations formed around the concepts we hold of objects, events and actions. Aesthetic judgement raises the mass of data we accumulate into communicable form; and hence facilitates critique, revision and hence the possibility of progress.

Whenever we attempt to put ourselves into another’s shoes, so to speak, we in effect unwind our terms of reference to try to see or value the world or a particular issue from another’s perspective. This involves letting go our entrenched constellations of associated ideas and values in order to imagine alternative groupings. When we do this we exercise aesthetic judgement. We engage in trying to find a form, albeit a mental construct, by which to construe the event or issue in a way which would make the other’s judgement comprehensible. However, in order to better understand this capacity, it would help to hone in on a field of endeavour in which the exercise of aesthetic judgement is often central; hence, our focus on the artworld. I complete this essay by introducing two Australian artists who collaborate to create sculptures, installations and videos which reconfigure how we perceive and experience objects and events.

At the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro represented Australia with a work entitled *Life Span* for which they glued together a solid block of 175,218 video cassettes. The number of video cassettes if viewed back to back would take the equivalent of 60.1 years to view, which was the average human life span in 1976, the year the VHS was released.

Healy and Cordeiro’s work is typically site specific. *Life Span* was installed in a deconsecrated chapel of a former nunnery in the Castello district in Venice. Seventeenth century Baroque wall and ceiling paintings of the Resurrection and Ascension create the context for Healy and Cordeiro’s work. The video cassettes tower above us like a shiny black mausoleum. Healy explains that the video cassettes reflect the continual information processing, collecting and overwriting of memory, which in some respects, constitute a life.⁸ The temporal dimension of a life is here given a spatial metaphor in terms of a solid block with each unit representing a certain time span. A life conceived as a finite set of rather uneventful memories is reflected in the banal labels on the video cassettes. The conception of a life as a series of memories,



Figure 1: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro: *Life Span*, 2009.

soon to be redundant, contrasts with the ponderous and moving conception of an afterlife presented by the site's Baroque paintings. Yet *Life Span* has a gravitas of its own. Looking up at *Life Span*, taking in the Ascension painting on the ceiling, we are left with a strange amalgamation of possibilities and a wonderful array of the narratives human culture creates. An instance of a life-form which will become extinct reflected in the fact that the VHS is now redundant is brought into stark relief against a life form conceived as the centre of the universe, demonstrated by the glorious Baroque paintings on the walls and ceiling.

The aesthetic experience of the work, that is, the ideas, tropes, possibilities and narratives set in train by perceiving the work, is not something that can be effectively conveyed in essay form because aesthetic judgement requires experiential aspects, which in the case of this work, involves perceiving the work from various angles with the baroque paintings behind. What this discussion does exemplify however, is the way aesthetic judgement involves delving into constellations of ideas, feelings, values, and associations formed around the concepts raised by a work.

CONCLUSION

Aesthetic judgement names a process involved in cultivating new constellations of ideas, feelings, values, and associations. As such, it is relevant to understanding desire as rationally grounded. Striving to communicate our subjective states, in turn calibrates them with those with whom we strive to communicate. In virtue of this process, our sociable nature is given a capacity to act for ends that may not immediately serve our individual interest.

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NOTES

1. Habermas 1990, 1993, 2000b.
2. An excellent reconstruction of Dewey's ethics can be found in Putnam 2002.
3. The theory of imagination implied here is

- presented in McMahon 2014, 127-144.
4. Kant 2000.
 5. Croce 1992.
 6. Collingwood 1958.
 7. Lowry 2015, 63.
 8. McMahon 2009.

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