

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Grounding Ethics in Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** In this Editor's column I suggest a more modern aesthetics, in order to fill in some of the promise the current Special Issue on The Birth of the Discipline has in store for us. I base my suggestion more on Kant and Aristotle, though.

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### I. MODERN AESTHETICS

1. Several changes occurred during the so-called Enlightenment, some of which set in decades or centuries before. A mechanisation of our worldview led to a turn to rationality and a change in ethics which was liberated from religious authorities.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's doctrine of the 'four causes' and his idea of the natural place of things were dismissed – even though this doctrine and idea neatly fit the world of perception – a physicalist notion of causation is introduced.<sup>2</sup> The 'arts' changed into the so-called modern system of the fine arts.<sup>3</sup> Works of fine art were no longer supposed to be functional, but aesthetic: intended for the appreciation by an art audience. Art practice developed into an autonomous whole based in feedback mechanisms that regulate artists, art works, art audiences, art institutions and art curators, art criticism and the standards of taste, and the new philosophical discipline of aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

2. When religious legitimation dropped out of our worldview, aesthetics and art were considered to become the next candidates for legitimising the social.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that we revive, and revise that tradition. Within the discipline of aesthetics, a conflict between objectivism and subjectivism arose, which was dissolved by Burke and especially Kant's turn to subjectivism.

3. Kant argued that a judgement of taste can not be based on cognitive or rational concepts, or rules, not on knowledge or ethical principles, nor on partial interests, arousal or affects. Instead, it is based on the subjective purposiveness of the beautiful object. The beautiful object presents itself to one as fully functional for one's cognitive powers, and one judges this by considering everyone else's virtual judgement of taste:

we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that [may] happen to attach to our own judging.<sup>6</sup>

So understood, an aesthetic judgement is an awareness whose phenomenology, allegedly, can be shared with others. The judgement of taste is subjective but not idiosyncratically so. It discloses our sociability, and forms its basis, it grounds our *Geselligkeit*.

I maintain that taste can be called a *sensus communis* more legitimately than can sound understanding, and that the aesthetic power of judgment deserves to be called a shared sense more than does the intellectual one, if indeed we wish to use the word *sense* to stand for an effect that mere reflection has on the mind, even though we then mean by sense the feeling of pleasure. We could even define taste as the ability to judge something that makes our feeling in a given presentation *universally communicable* without mediation by a concept.<sup>7</sup>

4. Sticking with this argument in the *Critique of Judgement*, I think that the ethical – the moral duty within – must be understood as based in the aesthetic. But I do not view the aesthetic as about beauty and like aesthetic values, which are aesthetic in a rather narrow sense, such as when we say that we dislike a film because it is 'merely aesthetic'. The aesthetic is so fundamental to our lives because it concerns itself with what connects people without requiring them to resort to theories or principles. Core issues in aesthetics taken broadly like this are human interaction, gazing at each other, *seeing* the other, i.e. recognising them as the person they want themselves to be seen as. The aesthetic concerns the psychologies of the ones involved in thick moral situations, their mutual power balance, or unbalance (the rhetorical), and how it feels to be in a particular moral situation (the phenomenological).

5. We are already in the habit of talking in such terms about works of art: how an artist made a work such that it: appeals to the spectator; addresses them; induces them to attentively scrutinise its surface, enjoy it, and understand it *as intended* by the artist to make them think about something – opening an autonomous area of thought and feeling. We are not just interested in the message, but in the way it is brought to us (the rhetorical aspect). Just like what happens when we are with someone. We connect our

own psychological reality with that of the individual style and the expression in the work, again, just like we would assess another person.<sup>8</sup> And the central question is What is it like to experience this work before one (the phenomenology)?

## II. TEA BAG QUESTIONS

6. The labels of the tea bags we use at home ask us all sorts of ‘profound’ questions, such as What would you advise your younger self? Indeed, what would that be? It is obvious, to myself at least, that my life has not been flawless and that at many crossroads I might better have taken a different turn. One can only agree with Aristotle’s assessment of the tragedy. He did not only analyse the tragedy in his *Poetics*, the analysis concerned the psychology of human life in general.<sup>9</sup> Tragedy provides ‘universal truths[, where] history treats of particular facts’. ‘By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation.’<sup>10</sup>

We make many a decision of which we do not know all the possible consequences, and they all accumulate to the one action that characterises our life. Everything we do adds to that one action, and we know which action that is only when all is said and done.<sup>11</sup> So back to the tea bag label’s question What would I advise my younger self?

7. No matter how hard I try I cannot find any one advice. I thought of this girl I had a crush on when I was 17. We had been in the pub with our friends, and I had all but ignored her for fear of rejection. After we left together, I told her about my feelings for her. She seemed touched, but did not hesitate to tell me that she could not start anything with me because I reminded her of a good friend who had died in a crash with his moped. I could not have told my 17 year old self to stop with these crushes, because they flocked my mind. Should I tell myself to ignore this girl and choose someone else? But surely I had a crush on her, and this crush was all mine, I could not simply switch to another girl – on the ground of which objective argument? And suppose I had obeyed any such advice of my future self, then I would have missed the existential sorrow that engulfed me, a grief about not being recognised, mixed with anger. I had lived in the direction of this type of situations for a multitude of reasons. These affections all defined me. Had someone – my future me – have prevented this particular failure, it would – it should – occur on another day, in another guise. Whatever issues I had with myself and my surroundings were mine to suffer and learn from.<sup>12</sup>

8. Everything that happened between me and my friends in those days was grounded in the aesthetics of my social life – and this fact characterises each and everyone of us. How do we see each other? Was I seen the way I would have wanted to be seen? Did I deserve to be seen the way I wanted to be seen – or rather, in the way people saw me? I guess I deserved all of that,

for being the kind of person I had become by then.

We all have a right to be seen as the person whom we feel we are – though perhaps we do not always know our feelings too well. We are how we respond to other people’s responses to us. I would say that the right to be recognised as the person whom we feel we are is always under negotiation, with the other as well as ourselves. So we look at each other and do our best to connect with the other, and in the process we constantly reassess what we think the other is seeing, and what we think we are seeing in the other. Looking at each other is not a state, but a process based in the psychologies of those involved, and the negotiation is its rhetorical aspect. The criterion of success is just how it feels for both of you.

9. To be clear, looking at each other forms the core of social life, so the core of social life is based in psychological, rhetorical and phenomenological aspects of perception, in short, in its aesthetics. Perhaps we can say that we practise these processes – in all their aspects – with art. As said, I do not view aesthetics as the philosophical discipline concerned with only the more narrow aesthetic values like beauty, ugliness or the sublime or its respective norms of success.

10. I propose, then, to develop an ethics that starts from the tragic nature of how each one of us lives our life.<sup>13</sup> We are all underway to become who we are to be, given that every choice that we make is embedded in our psychology and its subjective history. Some narrative works of art show us literally how this works, these works fit Aristotle’s defence of poetry over anecdotal history.<sup>14</sup> But all art tends to be viewed in terms of their psychological, rhetorical and phenomenological aspects, such aspects as are also at work in moral behaviour. Therefore, next to debating the logic of our ethical principles, we should always also look at the particular predicament someone is in when they are confronted with the need to make a choice. At the core of morality lie our aesthetic judgements.

In this special issue on *The Birth of the Discipline* we see ample opportunity to understand the attention for the criteria of taste as narrowed. Looking back once again, may help us look forward. I thank Endre Szécsényi for bringing this selection to *Aesthetic Investigations*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>E.J. Dijksterhuis 1986.

<sup>2</sup>I am not defending Aristotle against mechanistic science though, to be clear. See Aristotle 1984, II 3, 194b-195a3, 23-24.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Oskar Kristeller 1978a and 1978b.

<sup>4</sup>I don’t mean Hume’s standard of taste, but standards developed in art practice which pertain to the art forms and the masterworks conforming to the phenomenological specifications of these art

forms. Van Gerwen 2014.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Taylor 1985. Odo Marquard 1962, 238 argued ‘daß die Ästhetik seit Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts und dem Anspruch nach bis Heute zur diensthabenden Fundamentalphilosophie wird.’

<sup>6</sup>Kant 1987, p. 160, §40:2.

<sup>7</sup>Kant 1987, p. 162, §40:4.

<sup>8</sup>Wollheim 1993.

<sup>9</sup>Rorty 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Aristotle 1986, Chapter 9. ‘Poetic Truth and Historical Truth’, 43-44.

<sup>11</sup>‘Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action that is . . . complete in itself . . .’ Aristotle 1986, Chapter 6. ‘A Description of Tragedy’, 38-39.

<sup>12</sup>The tea bag question was, in the end, rather shallow.

<sup>13</sup>Wollheim 1984.

<sup>14</sup>Nowadays one should think of film, which adds the phenomenology of the gaze and of the affordances of things and events to stage-performed tragedy.

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