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978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

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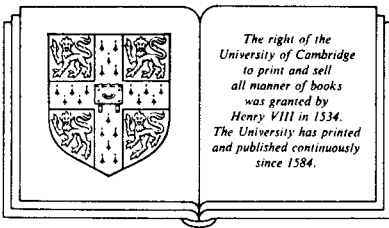
Pleasure, preference and value

Studies in philosophical aesthetics

EDITED BY EVA SCHAPER

Professor in Logic

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Introduction

In the last three decades, philosophical aesthetics has undergone something of a transformation. Back in 1954 William Elton, the editor of a collection of essays entitled *Aesthetics and Language*, openly admitted to the scarcity of good work applying philosophical expertise in an area as yet hardly disturbed by the techniques of linguistic analysis. The talk was of the ‘present stone age of aesthetics’, of barrenness, dullness, dreariness, pretentiousness and vacuity, and contributors to that volume seemed more than a little apologetic about turning their hands to the subject at all. Thanks to their labours, and the labours of others in the field over the next two decades, aesthetics, one dare hope, has once more achieved respectability as an object of philosophical study, and with the new vitality has come a more just assessment of the much-maligned tradition. The contributors to the present volume may not agree with the recent somewhat exaggerated claim of Joseph Margolis that ‘aesthetics is the most strategically placed philosophical discipline of our time’ (*Art and Philosophy*, 1980), but they clearly find the subject rewarding and anything but dreary or dull.

Our three-word title is indicative not so much of a philosophical remit for the meetings from which the papers emerged, as of what, in the event, turned out to be persistent themes variously taken up and developed by the participants. The concept of pleasure, of course, has always and rightly been regarded as a crucial one in aesthetics. Bob Sharpe’s paper and that of Eva Schaper concentrate on the role of pleasure in aesthetic judgement; Ted Cohen, exploiting a parallel between the enjoyment of jokes and the enjoyment of art, throws light on the thrill of felt rightness; Barrie Falk, probing the communicability of feeling, takes pity as his example of an emotion felt, evoking the shade of Aristotle: can we really enjoy or take pleasure in the piteous, the sad, or the tragic as it is presented to us in art?

Preference and its grounds is another prominent theme. Appraisals of taste traditionally so-called, value judgements and art critical evaluations all have to produce their credentials in the reasons and the rightness or appropriateness of the reasons adduced for them. Anthony Savile’s paper

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links this explicitly with loving attachment to beauty, Eva Schaper's with taste preferences, and Malcolm Budd's paper, concentrating on the case of poetry, raises the question whether we can aesthetically prefer works which embody beliefs perhaps even antithetical to our own.

Where value belongs in the scheme of things, including aesthetic value, is the subject matter of John McDowell's critique of a once prevalent dogma – the separation of fact and value. The subjective/objective distinction, time-honoured but deeply suspect when it canonizes a world-view dominated by science, forms part of this critique, and it also figures in James Cameron's inward/outward contrast and his lament over the epistemological solitary as reflected in autobiography owing much to the Cartesian heritage.

One spectre, I notice with pleasure, haunts these essays: Kant's. This is no accident in the case of Barrie Falk's paper and Eva Schaper's: the approach here is explicitly Kantian though not primarily exegetical. Bob Sharpe, Anthony Savile and Ted Cohen are more obliquely aware of the Kantian ghost.

I shall not attempt to summarize the individual contributions; instead, I shall indicate what are for me points of particular interest. John McDowell takes up the common belief that our aesthetic experience is at least in part an awareness of value which we encounter in the world as belonging to (in John Mackie's phrase) the 'fabric of the world'. Though not concerned explicitly to defend this belief, he clears the ground of some of the obstacles to doing so. He takes issue with Mackie's claim that the belief just mentioned is illusory, and that value is only how the real appears to us. This basic distinction between reality and mere appearance, where only that is real which counts as 'objective' in the sense of being independent of any sentient creature's experience of it, McDowell also detects in Bernard Williams's recent attempts to defend Descartes's 'project of pure inquiry'. Such a defence, if it could succeed, would go far towards dismissing value from the world as it really is; but McDowell's argument is that this world-view is basically incoherent anyway.

Philip Pettit takes aesthetic characterizations such as aesthetic descriptions of pictures to be reports of experience, and argues that they standardly come out as assertions 'in the strictest and most genuine sense of that term', i.e. as utterances which can be shown to be either true or false. This is tricky ground indeed, as Pettit concedes when he acknowledges the difficulty for his position created by the use of metaphor in aesthetic descriptions: metaphors are precisely not literal assertions. Pressing as he does a realist claim, he has to defuse the anti-realist objections. And that too is no easy task since Pettit accepts the premise from which the anti-realist argues, that is, the essentially perception-

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relative nature of aesthetic descriptions, and their perceptual elusiveness. This would suggest rather that aesthetic descriptions are non-assertoric, at least in the sense that they are not tied to beliefs but to responses in immediate experience. You have to 'see' that something is graceful or sad or charming, and no argument can show that it *is* so. Pettit, however, argues for an alternative account which would allow us to maintain aesthetic realism after introducing suitable constraints on 'rectified' aesthetic descriptions.

These same issues of realism and anti-realism are latent in Eva Schaper's paper, which stands in sharp contrast to Pettit's on the issue of truth conditions for judgements of taste or aesthetic appraisals. The account here is Kantian but it would be foolish to claim that it was Kant's. Precisely where Kant would stand on this now much debated contrast is matter for dark conjecture.

Barrie Falk takes up another strand of Kant's thought: the communicability of feeling. He introduces the features of resonance and salience to illuminate what it means to relate to a situation emotionally. This opens the way to an understanding of why art works engage us so deeply: the fleeting poignancy of emotional experiences can be captured and prolonged in clusters of thought. Art works do not just communicate feelings but through them we may find ourselves in possession of truths about what the world is like. The idea that through subjective involvement with works of art our knowledge may be enriched in a way which only the experience of art can provide echoes those aspects of Kantian doctrine which most closely approach Aristotle's insights into the centrality of the notion of the plausible in fiction.

Bob Sharpe's contrast between 'solid joys' and 'fading pleasures' is not, as the title might suggest, critical of the relation between aesthetic experience and pleasure maintained in preceding papers. Rather, his is a study of the many ways in which pleasure for the wrong reasons can mislead and confuse the critic and the performer of art works. Sharpe speaks of providing a pathology of our reactions to art from the merely sentimental to what he calls 'false pleasures'. Indeed, his essay broadens out into a discussion of whether pleasure is properly to be regarded as an emotion at all, and here he engages in lively controversy with Bernard Williams and Terence Penelhum on causal and reason-giving accounts of pleasure. Sharpe seems to think that only a causal account could satisfactorily deal with those cases in which we misidentify our pleasures and those in which we misjudge the role of pleasure in our critical response to art.

Anthony Savile too is concerned with the link between experienced response to beauty – the aesthetic response – and the objectivity of values

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so discerned. What particularly engages his attention is the endurance of beauty in art over time, in spite of changes in habits of thought, sensibility and aspiration. It is not Kant here, but Kant's pupil Schiller, who helps Savile to make his point that the permanence or evanescence of critical assessments are a direct function of recognition, or the lack of it, of what he calls the benignity of beauty. Schiller's conception of beauty, he maintains, is capable of explaining that overworked platitude: a thing of beauty *remains* a joy for ever. Even when the benign possibilities displayed in works of the past are no longer open to us, we can love them still because we have the capacity for sympathetic understanding of those for whom they were once real. This also throws light, he suggests, on the poignancy that frequently colours our experience of past achievements in art.

The joke in Ted Cohen's hands proves fruitful material in unexpected ways. Cohen does not say that jokes are works of art, though he thinks some might be, and certainly he is convinced that metaphors may be quintessentially works of art. He does find that jokes are 'curiously like' works of art. Thinking about jokes in the way we might think about art, we may receive genuine illumination on some otherwise baffling features of both. Here considerations broader than those usually thought of as belonging to aesthetics emerge. Thus, a comparison between assenting to the conclusion of a sound argument and laughter at a joke's punchline proves not to be a digression, and the linking of intimacy with the community achieved in successful joke telling suggests, surprisingly, a contact of ideas between being moved to laughter and being moved by beauty. The community of personhood which Kant saw as ultimately the fundamental ground of the universal claims of aesthetic judgements, in spite of their irreducibly subjective nature, finds unexpected if still tentative support here.

Malcolm Budd's problems are those of the acceptability or unacceptability of beliefs that may be expressed in poetry. He carefully disambiguates the references to beliefs expressed in poems by distinguishing a poem's persona from its author – either or both being capable of 'speaking' in a poem, with their beliefs coinciding, varying, or even clashing. In the light of these distinctions, he clarifies the notions of sincerity and of insincerity of beliefs. The fictional status of poems, though relevant to these considerations, turns out not to afford *carte blanche* to the sins of poet and reader alike, sins of sentimentality, hypocrisy, wilful deception and self-deception. Imaginative integrity is equally difficult for poet, poem and reader, but once achieved, it affords a compelling reason for the reader's assent not being withheld – at least not the assent of the reader whose sensibility is a match for his intellectual powers of discrimination.

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James Cameron claims that modern autobiography, that is, autobiography since Rousseau, is 'autopsychology' and not just a history of a life told in the first person singular. He sees a connection between the inward-looking accounts of the self displayed in modern autobiography and the dominant philosophy of the last few centuries with its egocentric orientation. The self as a distinct and idiosyncratic centre of consciousness, in search of itself as much as of 'its' world, is a product of a conscious or unconscious world-view with its peculiar perplexities, the most alluring as well as the most frightening being 'epistemological solitude' which feeds on as well as reinforces scepticism. This conception of the self and its self-made world lives on as a compelling picture long after the doctrinal basis has been questioned or undermined, and the lure of it is vividly memorialized not only in autobiography but also in some of the great fictional creations of searching selves.

All papers in this collection are here published for the first time. Draft versions of them were presented at a number of meetings of members of the Thyssen Philosophy Group and their guests. On behalf of the Group I express our thanks to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung and its director Professor Dr Rudolf Kerscher. It was their generous financial support and constant encouragement that made these stimulating meetings possible.

Glasgow
May 1982

EVA SCHAPER