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0521606691 - Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics

Paul Guyer

Excerpt

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PART I

MOSTLY BEFORE KANT

1

The Origins of Modern Aesthetics

1711–1735

It is well known that the subject of aesthetics, as a recognized and customary subject within the academic practice of philosophy, received its name in 1735. In that year, in his dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (“Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining to the poem”), the twenty-one-year-old Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced the term to mean “a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses” (*scientiam sensitive quid cognoscendi*) (*Meditations*, §§cxv–cxvi). (Four years later, in his *Metaphysica*, Baumgarten would expand this definition to include the “logic of the lower cognitive faculty, the philosophy of the graces and the muses, lower gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason”; and another decade later, in his monumental fragment *Aesthetica*, the first treatise to bear the title of the new subject, he would combine his two previous definitions to form his final definition of the subject: “Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, lower gnoseology, the art of beautiful thinking, the art of the analogue of reason) is the science of sensitive cognition” (*Metaphysica*, §533; *Aesthetica*, §1). It is equally well known that although Baumgarten was the first to name the new subject and perhaps the first German philosophy professor to give it a regular place in his lectures and treatises, he by no means invented the subject itself. Of course, philosophers since antiquity had at least occasionally argued about the nature of beauty and the value of what we now group together as the fine arts, such as literature, visual arts such as painting and sculpture, and music. But around the beginning of the eighteenth century, there began a torrent of writing about the character and value of beauty and other properties, notably the sublime, in both art and in

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nature itself, a flood to which professional philosophers as well as other men of letters (of course the writers were without exception male) contributed and which has since hardly abated. In particular, the second and third decades of the eighteenth century have a real claim to be the moment of the origin of modern aesthetics. This moment was marked by the appearance in the first of those decades of the *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, in 1711; Joseph Addison's eleven essays "On the Pleasures of the Imagination" in the *Spectator* in June and July 1712; and finally by the 1719 *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* by the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, a work that went through at least five editions in French in the next two decades and was widely circulated in Britain long before its translation into English in 1748, and then in the second by the first treatise of Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* in 1725. None of these writers except Hutcheson was a professor of philosophy. But the issues they raised and the positions they took in these books prepared the way for the more professional philosophical work of much of the rest of the century, and beyond, and thus modern aesthetics should not be conceived of as if it sprang full-grown from the brow of Baumgarten in 1735, but rather as having developed much of its eventual programs and positions in the years from 1711 to 1735. It is thus this period that will be the focus of the present chapter.

Is there a common idea that marks this foundational epoch of modern aesthetics? Some have argued that it was this period which first saw the invention of the idea that what we now almost unwittingly lump together as the "arts" or the "fine arts"; for example, the "poetry, painting and music" of Du Bos's title, constitute some sort of system, an assumption that was necessary to supply a subject for the discipline of aesthetics as the philosophy of art.¹ Others have focussed on the addition of the idea of the sublime to the traditional idea of beauty,² or on the emergence of the idea of artistic genius as a special form of human mentality.³ More

¹ See Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts" (1951), reprinted in his *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 163–227.

² See Samuel Monk, *The Sublime* (1935), revised edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), and for a recent sampler of eighteenth-century writing on the sublime, Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

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recently, it has been argued that it was in the eighteenth-century writings on aesthetics that modern ideas of subjectivity and individuality first came to the fore,⁴ while yet others have argued that it was in the aesthetics of this period that the modern practice of ideology, masking the claims of a single class to domination of society behind a sham claim to universal validity, first emerged.⁵ But without rejecting any of these claims outright (although I think the last one tells us more about the preoccupations of the late twentieth century than of the eighteenth), I will pursue a different tack. As I see it, the central idea to emerge in eighteenth-century aesthetics is the idea of the freedom of the imagination, and it was the attraction of this idea that provided much of the impetus behind the explosion of aesthetic theory in the period.

However, the idea of freedom, whether of the imagination or anything else, is notoriously vague and ambiguous. Later in the eighteenth century, Kant was to make famous a distinction between negative and positive conceptions of freedom, that is, a conception of freedom as consisting simply in the absence of determination or control of some specified type as contrasted to a conception of freedom as consisting precisely in the determination or control of action by one specified kind of agent or agency rather than another. Kant introduced this distinction, of course, in his practical philosophy, where he described a negative conception of freedom as the independence of the will from determination by causes alien to the true self, especially determination by merely sensory impulses or inclinations, and the positive conception of freedom as the determination of the will by the legislation of pure reason;⁶ a central theme of Kant's moral philosophy is then that the freedom exercised in and valued by human morality is never simply freedom negatively conceived, but positive freedom, the freedom to conduct ourselves autonomously by a law legislated by pure reason, which is the most distinctive feature of our selves and whose law is thus the purest expression of our own autonomy. But we may also understand Kant's aesthetic theory as dominated by an

⁴ See Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, translated by Robert de Loaiza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). An older work which emphasized *Individualität* as the key idea in eighteenth-century aesthetics is Alfred Bäumler, *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Ästhetik und Logik des 18. Jahrhunderts bis zur Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1923), second edition (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), although Bäumler, who later became a notorious Nazi spokesman, linked individuality to irrationalism, and thus saw the development of aesthetics as a locus of opposition to rationalist universalism rather than associating it with the origins of modern liberalism as does Ferry.

⁵ See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁶ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:446.

apparent tension between negative and positive conceptions of freedom of the imagination and the effort to resolve this tension.

In the initial phase of his analysis of what he calls the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, or more properly the reflective rather than merely sensitive aesthetic judgment, Kant begins with the purported disinterestedness of the judgment of taste, its independence from any merely sensory agreeableness of an object on the one hand and from any recognition of it as good in light of its classification under a determinate concept on the other. This is, of course, a purely negative conception of the nature of aesthetic response and judgment in the straightforward sense that it tells us what it is not, not what it is. Kant goes on to give a more informative characterization of aesthetic response as based on a harmony or free play between the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding, in which the subjective conditions of cognition are satisfied apart from the satisfaction of what is ordinarily the objective condition of cognition, namely, the subsumption of an object under a determinate concept (e.g., the recognition of a three-sided, closed plane figure as a triangle or a four-footed mammal with a certain pattern of dentition as a dog). But this may still be regarded as a negative conception of the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic response, for it emphasizes that the imagination satisfies our general objective in all cognition without being determined or constrained by any particular concept – where Kant takes the concept of a concept itself quite broadly, to include representational content and intended purpose as well as classification, as in ordinary concepts like *triangle* or *dog*.

Just as in his moral theory, however, Kant is not content with a negative conception of the freedom of the human will, but argues that human freedom can only be fully realized as the positive expression of a self-legislated law of reason, so in his aesthetic theory Kant moves from a negative conception of the basis of aesthetic response and pleasure, the free play of imagination and understanding, to one or indeed several positive conceptions of the basis of our pleasure in both natural and artistic beauty – to a conception of art as the expression of aesthetic ideas, and of the experience of beauty itself as a symbol of morality, thus as both the manifestation of the freedom of the imagination and the representation of freedom more broadly understood by means of the works of imagination. And just as the trick in Kant's moral theory is to show that the negative and positive conceptions of freedom are not in fact two competing conceptions of human freedom, but rather two sides of the same coin – for freedom from domination by mere inclination can

in fact be achieved only by self-governance in accord with the law of pure reason instead⁷ – so the key to Kant’s aesthetics is his reconciliation of his negative and positive conceptions of the freedom of the imagination – his theory that it is precisely in virtue of the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic response from determination by ordinary concepts of the understanding that this response is itself suited to serve as a symbol of morality, because it can thereby represent the freedom that is the essence of morality, yet which is not otherwise made palpable to us in the world of our senses.⁸

Just as in his moral philosophy, and for that matter in his critique of pure reason in general, Kant found a way to put together what previous philosophers had held apart – Kant’s most general argument in philosophy, of course, was that intuition and concept, sensory input and intellectual classification, on which previous thinkers had erected two competing schools of philosophy, could only provide human knowledge when firmly yoked together – so in aesthetics Kant found a way to tie together what for many (although, as we will see, not all) earlier writers had been alternative and competing conceptions of the freedom of the imagination in the experience of art and beauty. At the outset of the eighteenth century, we find thinkers excited by a new sense of the freedom of the imagination, but in many cases torn between competing conceptions of this freedom. On the one hand, we find a conception of aesthetic judgment as disinterested, as independent from any of our other practical and cognitive concerns and instead linked most closely to the sheer perceptual form of objects. It was Shaftesbury who introduced the idea of disinterestedness into aesthetic discourse, but it was not in fact he who introduced a truly negative conception of the nature of aesthetic response; this was left to Francis Hutcheson in the following decade, who borrowed the idea of disinterestedness from Shaftesbury but used it to ground a very different theory from that of his supposed master. On the other hand, we find a conception of the imagination as taking a very positive delight in the symbolization of important ideas, a train of thought epitomized by Addison’s claim that we enjoy images of grandeur because the imagination delights in symbols of human freedom. And we find complicated cases like that of Du Bos, whose theory looks as if it begins with a

⁷ See my *Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially chapter 9, “Moral Worth, Virtue, and Merit.”

⁸ I have argued for this interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics in my *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially chapter 3.

purely negative conception of aesthetic response, as a mere release from tedium and *ennui*, but who transforms that into a positive account of the pleasure that we take in the engagement of our emotions. But, although both Addison and Baumgarten were to anticipate him, not until Kant do we find within professional philosophy a fully achieved synthesis of the negative and positive conceptions of the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic experience, but especially in the experience of art – a synthesis that was to prove quite fragile, and largely came apart again in the nineteenth century, as witnessed by a contrast like that between Schopenhauer’s conception of aesthetic contemplation as offering a release from the pain of quotidian existence on the one hand and Ruskin’s conception of Gothic architecture as an image of the freedom of everyone involved in its production on another.

But that would be a story for another occasion; here, my attention will be confined to the first two decades of modern aesthetics, the period from 1711 to 1719 already mentioned, and the ensuing years from 1725 to 1735, which will bring us to the first works of Hutcheson and Baumgarten. What I will argue is that in this period we find evidence of the competing conceptions of the freedom of the imagination that I have described, which would eventually be reconciled by means of Kant’s appropriation of Baumgarten’s conception of the character of specifically artistic representation, although Baumgarten himself, while clearly recognizing the complexity of aesthetic objects and our response to them, had not used this recognition to reconcile the two conceptions of the freedom of the imagination developed by his immediate predecessors.

I. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson

Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1677–1713), grandson of the leader of the Whigs in their struggle against the ascension of James II and tutee of John Locke, his grandfather’s physician, secretary, and political operative, is widely credited with having introduced disinterestedness as the criterion of aesthetic response and judgment.⁹ Shaftesbury did not actually use the terms “interest” or “disinterestedness” in connection with what we now call aesthetic phenomena, but Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), who invoked the name of Shaftesbury

⁹ See Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterest,’” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961): 131–43, and Jane Kneller, “Disinterestedness,” in Michael Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press), Vol. 2, pp. 59–64.

in the preface to his 1725 *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, did when he wrote:

The Ideas of Beauty and harmony, like other sensible Ideas, are *necessarily* pleasant to us, as well as immediately so; neither can any Resolution of our own, nor any *Prospect* of Advantage or Disadvantage, vary the Beauty or Deformity of an Object: . . . in the external Sensations, no View of *Interest* will make an Object grateful, nor View of *Detriment*, distinct from immediate *Pain* in the Perception, make it disagreeable to the Sense . . .

(*Inquiry*, Sec. I, §xiii)

Hutcheson's statement seems a natural extension of passages in Shaftesbury where the earlier writer argues that our pleasure in something beautiful is distinct and independent from all thoughts of *control* and *use* of the object and of the *possession* on which our ability to control and use an object might depend. Thus, in the dialogue *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody*, which together with the earlier *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* constitutes the heart of his *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury's spokesman Theocles argues to his interlocutor Philocles:

'Imagine then, good Philocles, if being taken with the beauty of the ocean, which you see yonder at a distance, it should come into your head to seek how to command it and, like some mighty admiral, ride master of the seas. Would not the fancy be a little absurd?'

...

'Let who will call it theirs,' [continued] Theocles, 'you will own the enjoyment of this kind to be very different from that which should naturally follow from the contemplation of the ocean's beauty. . . .

But to come nearer home and make the question still more familiar. Suppose, my Philocles, that, viewing such a tract of country as this delicious vale we see beneath us, you should, for the enjoyment of the prospect, require the property or possession of the land.'

'The covetous fancy,' replied [Philocles], 'would be as absurd altogether as that other ambitious one.'

'O Philocles!,' said he, 'may I bring this yet a little nearer and will you follow me once more? Suppose that, being charmed as you seem to be with the beauty of those trees under whose shade we rest, you should long for nothing so much as to taste some delicious fruit of theirs and, having obtained of nature some certain relish by which these acorns or berries of the wood became as palatable as the figs or peaches of the garden, you should afterwards, as oft as you revisited these groves, seek hence the enjoyment of them by satiating yourself in these new delights.'

'The fancy of this kind', replied [Philocles], 'would be as sordidly luxurious and as absurd, in my opinion, as either of the former.'

(*Characteristics*, pp. 318–19)

So Shaftesbury certainly proposes that our pleasure in the beauty of objects, here natural objects or views thereof, is independent of any expectation of the use or consumption of those objects that might in turn be dependent upon the possession of the objects. But it would be a mistake to suppose that he means to restrict himself to a negative characterization of the nature of aesthetic response, let alone to a negative characterization of the free play of the imagination as the foundation of aesthetic response, and thus that he means to separate the sources of aesthetic response from other fundamental forms of human thought and action. On the contrary, Shaftesbury means his insistence upon the independence of aesthetic response from promises of personal use or advantage to associate or even identify our response to beauty with our response to other forms of value, above all with the response to goodness which constitutes the moral sense. Shaftesbury discusses the sense of beauty in order to introduce his account of the moral sense, but his view is not at all what Hutcheson's was to be, namely, that there is a sufficient analogy between the sense of beauty and the moral sense to make the evident immediacy and necessity of the former a good argument for the immediacy and necessity of the latter; his view is rather that our sense of beauty is an instance of the very same sensitivity to the wonderful order of the universe that is also manifested by the moral sense. As Philocles observes, "beauty . . . and good with you, Theocles, I perceive, are still one and the same" (*Characteristics*, p. 320), or as Theocles says, with Shaftesbury's own italics, "with us, Philocles, it is better settled, since for our parts we have already decreed that *beauty and good are still the same*" (p. 327).

Shaftesbury's introduction of the criterion of disinterestedness, then, is not the beginning of an argument for the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic response from any form of external constraint, but rather the beginning of an elaborate argument for a disinterested pleasure in the order of the cosmos that is manifested in our feeling for both beauty and virtue. The key claims in this argument are, first, that what we love in all forms of beauty and virtue, free from the limits of personal interest, is order and proportion, but, second, that what we really admire in admiring order and proportion is not so much the manifestation of order and proportion in the object in which they are manifested itself, but rather the creative intelligence which is behind them, ultimately the divine intelligence which is behind all order and proportion, even when the immediate manifestation thereof might be produced by a human agent, for the latter is itself nothing but a product of the underlying divine intelligence. The first step of this argument is stated when Shaftesbury locates

the object of our sense of the beauty of works of both nature and art in the order and proportion they manifest:

Nothing surely is more strongly imprinted on our minds or more closely interwoven with our souls than the idea or sense of order and proportion. Hence all the force of numbers and those powerful arts founded on their management and use! What a difference there is between harmony and discord, cadency and convulsion! What a difference between composed and orderly motion and that which is ungoverned and accidental, between the regular and uniform pile of some noble architect and a heap of sand or stones, between an organized body and a mist or cloud driven by the wind!

He makes it explicit that we have an immediate sense for such order, and that it is the same sense that is at work in our appreciation of art and of nature:

Now, as this difference is immediately perceived by a plain internal sensation, so there is withal in reason this account of it: that whatever things have order, the same have unity of design and concur in one, are parts constituent of one whole or are, in themselves, entire systems. Such is a tree with all its branches, an animal with all its members, an edifice with all its exterior and interior ornaments. What else is even a tune or symphony or any excellent piece of music than a certain system of proportioned sounds?

(*Characteristics*, pp. 272–4)

Having in this last passage identified order with design, Shaftesbury then goes on to argue that what we really love in loving order is the designer, the mind or intelligence which we take to be the source of such order:

[T]he beautiful, the fair, the comely, were never in the matter but in the art and design, never in body itself but in the form or forming power. Does not the beautiful form confess this and speak the beauty of the design whenever it strikes you? What is it but the design which strikes? What is it you admire but mind or the effect of mind? It is the mind alone which forms. All which is void of mind is horrid, and matter formless is deformity itself.

(*Characteristics*, p. 322)

Shaftesbury does not actually explain why if we are struck by the beauty of a design we must also or even ultimately exclusively love the designer, but perhaps this seems to him a natural and inevitable transition of the mind from effect to cause. In any case, the same assumption that our sense of beauty naturally follows the chain of effects and causes is at work in the concluding flourish of his argument, in which Theocles argues that there are actually “three degrees or orders of beauty”: first, the “*dead forms* . . . which bear a fashion and are formed, whether by man or nature,