

Introduction: aesthetics and ethics

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I

This book brings together a number of new essays in an area of growing concern, namely the intersection or overlap of aesthetics and ethics. Recent developments aside, for the past thirty years or so in Anglo-American philosophy, aesthetics and ethics have been pursued in relative isolation, with aesthetics being generally regarded as the poorer, if flashier, cousin. The attention aestheticians have recently given to moral aspects of art and art criticism, and that ethicists have recently paid to aesthetic aspects of moral life and moral evaluation, give hope of ending this rather artificial isolation, though without necessarily forcing us to accede in Wittgenstein's gnomic dictum that "ethics and aesthetics are one."

The intersection of aesthetics and ethics can be understood to comprise three spheres of inquiry. The first is that of problems or pre-suppositions common to aesthetics and ethics, the two traditional branches of value theory. The second is that of ethical issues in aesthetics, or in the practice of art. And the third sphere is that of aesthetic issues in ethics, theoretical and applied.

As it turns out, the concerns of the present collection do not span the full intersection of aesthetics and ethics as just explained. For reasons of both unity and manageability, the decision was made to foreground aesthetics in the present venture. The result is that the essays fall under the first and second, but not the third ways of understanding the intersection of the two fields.

Under the first rubric, then, are questions about the logical, psychological, and metaphysical underpinnings of ethics and aesthetics,

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and whether they are comparable in the two cases. Is there objectivity in ethics and aesthetics? If so, what form does it take, and to what extent does it allow for settling differences by rational methods? Are there aesthetic and moral properties, that is, real features of the world that empirical investigation, broadly understood, can establish the presence of? Are there moral and aesthetic truths, and how are they discovered and defended? What is the place of universality in ethics and aesthetics, as compared with logic or science? How does aesthetic value relate to the notion of value generally? Does aesthetic value rest on some more encompassing sort of concern, to which it contributes, or does aesthetic value, as paradigmatic of what is intrinsically valuable, instead anchor values of other, seemingly more fundamental sorts?

Under the second rubric are questions about the ethical aspects of artistic activity in all its phases – creation, performance, distribution, criticism, and consumption – and of the aesthetic life generally. Can art have moral value, and if so, is such value relevant to its assessment as art? Is it possible for art to be aesthetically excellent and yet morally depraved? Might moral enlightenment come about, perhaps uniquely, via engagement with some forms of art? To what extent are artists accountable for messages implicit in their works or for the effects of their works on audiences? Under what conditions, if any, is artistic censorship justifiable, or even mandatory? Are there no limits on what can, or should, be appreciated aesthetically or dealt with artistically? What, generally, are the moral responsibilities of players in the aesthetic sphere? Is there anything one might call an ethics of response, involving obligations perceivers have toward individual works of art, art as a whole, or themselves as aesthetic agents?

The essays in this collection by Richard Miller and Peter Railton fall clearly under the first rubric, while those by Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, Karen Hanson, Berys Gaut, Mary Devereaux, Arthur Danto, and Lynne Tirrell fall well enough under the second. The essay by Ted Cohen straddles the divide, serving as a bridge from the most abstract inquiries of the opening two essays to the more concrete investigations of the remaining seven, which tend to focus on particular art forms or particular works of art. Of course, the specific concerns of the essays crisscross in ways that somewhat belie the neat separation under rubrics just proposed. One charge of this introduction will be to outline those concerns as they manifest themselves in each essay and to suggest where the elective affinities among them lie.

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II

The rich opening essay by Richard Miller situates aesthetic judgment in the dual context of moral judgment and scientific judgment. Moral and aesthetic judgments are sometimes said to present a strong contrast to scientific judgments in partaking of none of the objectivity of the latter; the former judgments, it is held, are wholly based on and serve only to express merely personal sentiment or feeling. Miller rejects that picture and argues instead for the objectivity of both moral and aesthetic judgments, whose objectivity he finds to be roughly on a par with, if of a lesser sort than, that which scientific judgments can attain.

According to Miller, moral and aesthetic judgments display objective validity insofar as they make rationally defensible claims to *non-perspectival* truth about the moral rightness of actions or the aesthetic value of works of art, a nonperspectival truth claim being one whose pretension goes beyond merely affirming how things are for the judge. Where the objectivity of moral and aesthetic judgments falls short of that characteristic of scientific judgment is in not yielding the *universality* of such judgments. That is, the objectivity that moral and aesthetic judgments enjoy fails to ground a reasonable expectation of *convergence* among qualified seekers after the sort of truth in question. In the aesthetic case, Miller suggests, this owes to the unavoidability of critical blind spots among even optimally qualified judges. Still, aesthetic and moral judgments can be understood as invoking or positing a range of properties or features of the world, often conditional or dispositional ones, that are independent of the state of mind of the judge and that function to make such judgments true or false.

That aesthetic, as opposed to moral, judgment can lay claim to any degree of objectivity, however, seems problematic in light of the following. Such judgment is founded on a response to the direct presence of an object that is, as Miller, following Kant and Sibley, puts it, *unprincipled*. That is to say, the response is one governed by no universal rules connecting perceptual features and aesthetic virtues – or at any rate, none to which the subject has access or can make appeal – and cannot be made, as moral judgment might sometimes be, on the basis of a description of what is to be judged.

The solution to this problem is found, Miller says, in recognizing that aesthetic appreciation, though in this sense unprincipled, has a certain defining *structure* and that one's response, if properly aes-

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thetic, is indicative of a real potential in the object to affect subjects generally. The mark of positive aesthetic response is *enjoyment* – enjoyment that derives from a nonpractical though learninglike engagement with an object. Such response is a rational basis for ascribing to a work the objective capacity to afford enjoyment of at least that degree, and a work is aesthetically valuable in proportion to the highest such learninglike response it can sustain. Yet because of the ever-present possibility of critical insusceptibility or obtuseness, despite optimal training and preparation, there is an asymmetry in judgments of aesthetic value, one related to the failure of valid aesthetic judgments to attain universality; a positive response, if truly aesthetic in form, reliably testifies to the existence of aesthetic value, but a negative response does not reliably testify to its absence, since a responsive blind spot may very well be at work.

For Miller, aesthetic judgments compare with moral and scientific ones, not only in sharing some of the same measure of objectivity, but in yet a deeper way. On Miller's conception of aesthetic appreciation as aimed at a satisfying learninglike response to an object – a conception that echoes Aristotle and Dewey as well as Kant – there is an important connection between aesthetic matters and our cognitive interest in discerning the traits of the natural and human worlds. Aesthetic engagement, on such a conception, is a form of cognitive play in which various features of inquiry – such as discovery, surprise, conjecture, unification, analysis, and synthesis – manifest themselves at turns, but without there being any practical end, scientific or moral, in view.

We also get something like a scale of aesthetic value by asking ourselves, in light of this parallel between aesthetic appreciation and scientific and moral investigation, what processes of aesthetic engagement an intellectually curious and morally serious person would most care about. Miller speculates that aesthetic experience may not only parallel cognitive and ethical inquiry in structure, but also serve as a release valve for the inevitable frustrations and limitations of real-world inquiry in science and morals, and as a surrogate realization of our desires for mastery and closure in those domains. At the end of his essay Miller addresses the related questions of what the role of reasoning in regard to aesthetic response can be, given its lack of governing by principles, and why we are usually determined to get our aesthetic judgments right, avoiding the errors of both under- and overvaluation, despite there being no arguments from which such judgments emerge as conclusions.

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The equally rich essay by Peter Railton is also centrally concerned with the objectivity of aesthetic value judgments and their comparability in that respect with judgments of moral value. Railton and Miller also agree, tellingly, in locating the root of aesthetic value in the potential of objects to rewardingly engage, in a perceptual-cognitive way, creatures such as us, constituted as we contingently are.

Like many recent thinkers drawn to make the positive case for truth in matters of aesthetics, Railton takes inspiration from Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste*, with its landmark attempt to reconcile the subjective basis of judgments of artistic worth with their evident claim to being, in many cases, simply right. Obviously, as both Hume and Railton recognize, if judgments of aesthetic value were merely expressions of preference, there would be no debate about them, and no objective import to them when true. Both the authority of aesthetic judgment, that is, its pretension to prescribe preferences validly, and its explanatoriness, that is, its promise to account informatively, if qualifiedly, for preferences actually had, require us to conceive of aesthetic judgments as more than just registerings of personal likes and dislikes.

In seeking the roots of value objectivity, Railton asks whether anything in the “characteristic functions and presuppositions of value attribution” is incompatible with a naturalistic view of the world and our place in it. In his view, the answer is no. Leaving aside the narrowly conceptual question about value attributions – that is, what exactly their semantic or logical differentiae are in contrast to mere ascriptions of preference – Railton focuses instead on our *practices* of attributing value, aesthetic and moral, with an eye to discovering how the objectivity of such attributions could be grounded, given our natures, the nature of the world, and the nature of the interaction between us.

Railton begins with the ineliminable subjectivity of value, understood as a fact about point of view: there is no value without *matter-ing*, and there is no *matter-ing* without a *subject* to whom things matter. The challenge is then set as to how there can be such a thing as *matter-ing objectively*. The answer would seem to be that some thing matters objectively insofar as the subjectivity or point of view presupposed in a claim of value for the thing possesses an objective character. The task then becomes to say what it is for a subject or viewpoint to be objective. Is it a matter of cognizing a domain of objects and properties independent of the subject, or reasoning in

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accord with rationally appropriate rules, or perceiving matters in a disinterested and comprehensive manner?

At this point Railton turns for support to Hume, and most specifically to Hume's idea of "true judges," ones whose sentiments of approval and disapproval are more probative, more indicative of real worth, than those of others. Such judges approach objectivity most notably in the third of the senses just sketched, that of *impartiality*, for they judge of an object as it answers to the human capacity for response generally, and not merely in their individual cases. As Railton observes, aesthetic objectivity understood as impartiality has a "horizontal" as well as a "vertical" character: "[I]t is a matter not only of what now pleases the refined judge, but what would please other refined judges at other times, and indeed what would please a very broad range of less refined individuals whose attention has been suitably engaged." In addition, insofar as beautiful objects are such as to produce pleasure in subjects upon being perceived, at least under the right conditions, there is also a place for something like the first sense of objectivity sketched earlier, objectivity as some sort of *match* (correspondence, fit) between the external world and the faculties of the perceiver, and for something like the second sense as well, insofar as the perceiver is called upon to *reason* from experience in regard to the specific beauties the object may present. The "true judge" is thus one whose impartiality of perspective, refinement of discrimination, and rational assimilation of experience optimally suits him or her to discern the degree of match between perceptual objects and human sensibilities, understood in terms of the potential of the former to gratify the latter. "True judges" or ideal critics provide a standard of taste, not through their judgments' constituting what is aesthetically valuable, but through their judgments' reliably indicating the presence of the sort of match between object and subject that is, as Railton suggests, the real basis of aesthetic value.

It is important to note that the refinement, impartiality, and experiential rationality displayed by ideal critics makes them better at *detecting* what objects answer best to the potential for gratification of our cognitive faculties, without making them essentially different from us in what that potential *is*. For were it not so, the judgments of such experts would have little bearing on or authority in our aesthetic lives. It is because we can cultivate that potential in ourselves with no advance limit that we are interested in the identification of what is best fitted to engage our faculties to the fullest. The postulate of a common basic cognitive–sensory–affective response capacity

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across persons, despite variation in ability to discern objects most apt for engaging with that capacity, explains a good deal about our social practices of aesthetic evaluation. It makes sense, in particular, of our eagerness to learn of the aesthetic judgments of others, especially those we feel are well positioned to inform us about what we may be missing but need not continue to miss.

Of course, the assumption of commonality in our underlying cognitive–sensory–affective makeup – what Railton calls the *infrastructure* of a field of aesthetic value – is open to challenge. Still, were that assumption far from the mark, would our evaluative practices have the shape that they do? Railton suggests not, advancing his case through consideration of how unrecognizable the world of taste would be on contrary assumptions. It is, he concludes, a rather good bet that “there will be some things that excel in their match with our sensibilities, and that can become a source of durable pleasure or interest as familiarity grows, independently of otherwise large variations in personal experience, situation, or culture.” The aim of our aesthetic discourse and interaction is, in large part, the identification of those things, together with advice as to how best to appreciate them.

Railton endeavors to show that there is nothing in his naturalistic reconstruction of the standard of taste that is at odds with either the phenomenology or normativity of aesthetic judgment, or the necessary involvement of concepts, such as that of beauty, in experiences of explicitly *aesthetic* character. He also indicates how, on his account, there is truth to both sides of the old conundrum as to whether a thing is aesthetically good because it elicits approval, or elicits approval because it is aesthetically good.

Not all questions of comparative aesthetic value permit decisive settlement, even if the infrastructure of aesthetic value that common human sensibilities provide is in place. There may be no answer to whether vanilla ice cream is superior to chocolate, Dante a better writer than Milton, or Goya a greater artist than Bergman. A Humean account, Railton observes, “is able to suggest why this might be so: neither, really, is a better overall match for widespread human capacities and sentiments.” Nor can we expect strictly universal agreement on the artistic virtue of even a Mozart, or uniformity in the aesthetic judgments of even ideal critics across differences in age, humor, gender, and social background – as Hume himself famously noted. Yet, as long as there is sufficient commonality, Railton argues, at least within broad groups, our practices of aesthetic evaluation will not

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lack rationale. In addition there is evidence, from the not inconsiderable number of works of every variety that have in fact withstood the “test of time,” that the ambition of aesthetic judgment to locate objects that widely and durably answer to human capacities for intrinsically worthwhile experience by no means remains unfulfilled.

In the final sections of his essay Railton turns to the nature of moral goodness, construed as what is conducive, generally and impartially, to intrinsically good human life or intrinsic human well-being. In parallel with his understanding of aesthetic goodness, Railton proposes a functional characterization of intrinsic human good as residing in activities or states “that afford a robust and general *match* with human motivational and experiential capacities to produce the kinds of lives people intrinsically prefer.”

Though moral assessment appears to differ from aesthetic assessment in a number of ways, such as the nonhypothetical character of the moral and the centrality to morality of balancing and aggregation, Railton manages to show that analogues of these features are present in the aesthetic case as well. Yet despite similarities in grounding and structure, aesthetic and moral value are not, after all, one and the same. Railton concludes his essay by outlining the differences, ones that turn, in his judgment, on matters of scope, scarcity, and obligatoriness. These differences, though, do not threaten the real, if relational – that is, human-sensibility-indexed – objectivity secured for aesthetic and moral evaluations alike.

Whereas the focus in the essays by Miller and Railton is on the intersubjectivity of aesthetic judgments as compared with judgments of other sorts, that is, on the degree of convergence we may rightly expect on the *interpersonal* plane, the essay by Ted Cohen sets that traditional problem to one side in order to address the issue of convergence of aesthetic judgments on the *intrapersonal* plane, that is, within a given individual.

Like Miller, Cohen is convinced that whatever objectivity aesthetic judgments may carry, there are no formulable principles governing the making of them, no exceptionless rules underwriting inferences from descriptive features to aesthetic virtues. Cohen’s conviction on this point is anchored directly in an argument of Arnold Isenberg, to the effect that a description of an object can never provide adequate reasons for an aesthetic verdict about it, since descriptions, however detailed, are by nature implicitly general, whereas the qualities that

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really underlie the verdict are absolutely specific, unique to the object and its clones. This lesson, which Isenberg derived from reflection on the interpersonal case, in which critics strive to bring others to share their aesthetic opinions, is applied by Cohen intrapersonally: though the aesthetic judgments of a given individual across a range of objects may exhibit some degree of uniformity or likeness, there is no principle that strictly governs them, or at least none that can be usefully extracted from them. In other words, Cohen claims, the attempt to find logically sufficient but still general reasons for the things one prefers, as opposed to those one does not, is doomed to failure; the descriptive net cast is never fine enough, never adequate to ensure that anything with all the features stipulated will invariably meet with one's aesthetic approval.

Does this mean that one should not seek to discern an order in one's set of aesthetic likes and dislikes? That one should simply reconcile oneself to an unprincipled particularism regarding one's aesthetic being-in-the-world? This is a question, in effect, about the ethical implications of the claimed absence of rule-governedness in matters aesthetic in one's own case, and is answered by Cohen in the negative. The attempt to formulate the objective basis of one's own varied assortment of judgments, even if fated never to succeed, is of value in itself, in that it testifies to one's faith in that set of judgments reflecting an aesthetic *personality* of some sort, rather than being merely a random collection of likes and dislikes. That is to say, the integrity of the self as a locus of aesthetic judgment seems to demand of us that we at least try to discern some order, some rhyme or reason, in our aesthetic responses, that we at least endeavor to work out why, exactly, we admire or relish one thing and not another. If there is a moral imperative to be consistent in one's aesthetic reactions, it seems, it can be no more than that.

Though in the nature of things, Cohen says, we never can work out the why exactly, in the process we learn a great deal about ourselves and the objects that elicit our responses. In addition, others may be helped, through the presumptive reasons we uncover in interrogating our responses, to refine their grasp of their own aesthetic personalities, in harmony with or in opposition to ours. Furthermore, two people may converge in preferring a given thing, yet on divergent grounds; in such cases, articulating presumptive reasons, though it never comes to an end, serves to foreground differences in aesthetic personality that interest us.

What, though, are the minimum conditions for possession of a

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coherent aesthetic personality, for there being a personal aesthetic *style*, so to speak, evinced in one's collection of aesthetic choices? Although there is perhaps some pressure on one to attempt to rationalize the collection, that is, to locate behind those choices serviceable *prima facie* reasons for them, the collection may nonetheless reflect a genuine aesthetic persona without that. Cohen suggests, in a tentative vein, that the minimum condition for a personal aesthetic style may lie in the "going together" of one's various choices, such "going together" cashing out, perhaps, in the predictability of some such choices from others, within or across categories. But Cohen resists the implication that such predictions, when successful, rest on underlying principles expressing the full and adequate reasons for those choices in which our aesthetic selves are manifested.

III

The essays by Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie address an issue of long standing, whose roots are in Plato and Aristotle: that of the relevance of morality to imaginative literature and of imaginative literature to morality. The issue, which can be divided into two parts, is this. First, how can fictional narratives, being neither true nor pretending to truth, afford moral insight, instruction, or improvement? How can they give us knowledge of human nature, or of anything else? Second, if imaginative literature has a moral dimension, does this open it to moral assessment, and if so, how does the moral assessment of literature stand to the aesthetic assessment of it? The approaches of Carroll and Currie to this complex issue are singular and innovative, though Currie confines himself mainly to the first part of the issue as just sketched.

In his wide-ranging essay, Carroll argues that fictional narratives can indeed yield moral amelioration and that narrative is thus rightly subject to moral assessment, though there is no moral value to narrative *per se*. In making his case, Carroll opposes the view he defends, which he labels *clarificationism*, to other, more extreme views on the relation of art to morality, namely *autonomism*, *Platonism*, and *utopianism*. Autonomism holds that art and morality are entirely disjoint and that the latter is irrelevant to the former, while Platonism and utopianism take art as a whole to be subject to blanket moral assessment, negative in the former case and positive in the latter. Clarificationism, by contrast, maintains only that *some* narrative art, properly engaged with, can deepen moral understanding, through