Evaluative Aesthetic Judgements

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Are Beethoven's late quartets great works of art because they move us deeply, or do they move us deeply because they are great works of art?

Evaluative aesthetic judgements—for instance, that Beethoven's late quartets are great works of art—either are potentially true claims that the objects or events in the world to which they refer possess certain aesthetically valuable properties or are simply reports or declarations of what, aesthetically, the speaker of them prefers, enjoys, likes, dislikes, is moved by, is left cold by. If evaluative aesthetic judgements can truly be about properties possessed by external objects, then it follows that we are moved by Beethoven's late quartets because they possess, in themselves, aesthetic value; on the other hand, if evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports by the speaker of his or her attitudes toward things, then it follows that Beethoven's late quartets are aesthetically valuable because we are moved by them.

Now the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are about properties possessed by external objects faces what I believe to be insuperable metaphysical and epistemological difficulties; thus, I hold a version of the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports or declarations of speakers' aesthetic attitudes. But this latter thesis also faces metaphysical and epistemological difficulties. Foremost among them is that of understanding common practices of giving reasons for and of disputing over evaluative aesthetic judgements. Can one hold a version of the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports of attitudes and yet maintain that disputes over them are possible? Or must one who holds a version of this thesis think that differences in evaluative aesthetic judgements are misdescribed as disputes?

I accept and, indeed, would insist that the phenomenon of dispute over evaluative aesthetic judgements is real and that there are better and worse reasons for making any particular such judgement. My contention in this paper is that the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports of aesthetic attitudes is, in fact, consistent with the view that there can be real disputes over them. Such judgements, I hold, can be challenged and defended with reasons on any of three levels: the level of descriptions of the work; the level of interpretations of the work; and the level of evaluation itself.

Nonetheless, it is a consequence of the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports that not *all* differences concerning them that appear to be disputes need actually be disputes. Sometimes, the judgement made by a person that this is a great work of art and the judgement made by another person that this is not a great work of art can both be entirely warranted.

I

There are, I think, at least three reasons for rejecting the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are potentially true claims that the objects and events in the world to which these judgements refer possess, in themselves, certain aesthetically valuable properties. The first is that for them to be true, there need to exist such metaphysically strange entities as value properties. The idea that there exist such properties does not comport well with a physicalistic world view. The second reason is that we do not need to posit the existence of such properties in order to explain or predict the effects particular aesthetic objects have on particular perceivers. Such properties would, then, appear to be cogs that turn free of other cogs in the machine. The third reason concerns difficulties in specifying how aesthetic value properties could come to be known. The thesis that they exist and can be known by us might require that we posit the existence of a special sense by which they are perceived.

On the other hand, the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports or declarations of what, aesthetically, the speaker of them prefers, enjoys, likes, dislikes, is moved by, or is left cold

by *does* comport well with a physicalistic world view. It requires the introduction of no entities different from or stranger than the ones recognized by the physical and human sciences, and of no senses other than the standard ones. Moreover, though this is not an argument in support of it, this latter thesis lacks a certain blindness to the point of making evaluative aesthetic judgements that is perhaps present in the former thesis. After all, to judge evaluatively that something is, for instance, sexually arousing is not simply if even to note a fact about that thing; it is, rather, to declare that one is aroused by it. To judge that the wall is red is not to betray anything about one's attitude toward that wall; to judge that *The Crying of Lot 49* is wonderful, though, centrally is to betray an affective attitude toward it.

II

Two people can make different evaluative aesthetic judgements in connection with the same object; moreover, they might suppose that they are disputing with each other over the judgements they have made. But for them *truly* to be disputing, at least some of the following must be true:

1) it is possible for each to give reasons in support of his or her judgement, and not merely a report of the non-rational causes that brought him or her to that judgement
2) the reasons each offers might not support his or her judgement, at least not as well as the other's reasons support the other's judgement
3) in the endeavour to settle the dispute it is appropriate that each returns to the object and describes it to the other
4) through the exchange of judgements and reasons for them each might change his or her mind
5) changes of mind made on the basis of reasons can constitute more than mere changes; they can be developments or improvements in discernment, discrimination or taste

Now, if the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports of speakers' aesthetic attitudes is both true and inconsistent with enough of 1) through 5), then, it would seem, there could not be any actual disputing over evaluative aesthetic judgements. Differences over evaluative aesthetic judgements might lead to exchanges that *appear* to be disputes, but that is all. But *why* would one be inclined to think that that thesis is inconsistent with any of 1) through 5)?

Perhaps the chain of reasoning that inclines philosophers to think that the thesis that evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports of speakers' aesthetic attitudes is inconsistent with some of 1) through 5) proceeds like this: The thesis in question assimilates evaluative aesthetic judgements to reports of affective states or of preferences of taste. But affective states are not standardly objects of epistemic appraisal. They just occur—because of causes, of course, but those causes are not reasons. One asks for the cause of the other's feeling or sensation, not the reason that supports the other's judgement about its nature; affective states can be explained, but first person reports about them can be neither justified nor criticized. Moreover, preferences in taste are even less commonly objects of epistemic appraisal than affective states are. It makes little sense to argue with someone that Coke tastes better than Pepsi. What sort of reason could support the claim that the Pepsi drinker was making a mistake? That one prefers Pepsi to Coke has an explanation, one that would proceed in terms of physiology and chemistry or sociology and psychology; but this explanation hardly counts as a justification for the judgement that Pepsi tastes better than Coke. To say, then, that evaluative aesthetic judgements are simply reports of aesthetic attitudes is to move them entirely out of the realm of epistemic appraisal.

But is it true that affective states and preferences of taste are immune to epistemic appraisal, to justification and criticism? No, it is not. There is, to begin with, the fact that many affective states rest on beliefs, suppositions, and other cognitive attitudes, cognitive attitudes any of which might be false. One's joy, when based on one's belief that one has the winning ticket, can rightly be appraised as inappropriate should one actually not have the winning ticket. Moreover, one's joy

would not be warranted even if one has the winning ticket, should one think that having the fortune to which the ticket entitles one will be more trouble than it is worth. One's affective attitudes can be out of step either with reality itself or with one's beliefs about it. But not only are affective attitudes bound in thick webs to cognitive attitudes; they are also bound in thick webs to other affective attitudes. One's sad feeling of loneliness might be out of step with other attitudes one has, one's desire to be alone, say, or one's warm feeling of closeness to another. Thus it might be appropriate, if one is to achieve greater harmony among one's attitudes, for one to lose either one of one's feelings or one's desire.

Even the simplest preferences are subject to a rudimentary form of appraisal or evaluation. A preference for, say, the taste of carrots is a liking for a certain set of flavours. One might in fact not like some particular member of that set, the sweetness of carrots, say; but, because one does not fully notice their sweetness, one can successfully ignore it. Still, that sweetness is there in their taste, and in time it might come to impress itself too firmly on one's attention to be ignored any longer. One might, at that point, change one's mind about carrots. One's past self was not, in any strong sense, *wrong* to like carrots, but one was nonetheless then missing something of which one is now firmly aware, and this awareness has altered one's behaviour.

Particular tastes and affective attitudes can, then, be appraised as to some degree appropriate or inappropriate, in light of facts about the world or the agent's beliefs, or, more interestingly, in light of the other tastes, preferences, or affective attitudes of the agent whose tastes or attitudes they are. They can be appraised as appropriate or inappropriate by the agent him or herself or by a second person. And disagreements between a first and second person can be disputes.

Still, if evaluative aesthetic judgements are to be assimilated merely to expressions of simple tastes or preferences, to those, for instance, for colas or carrots, the sense in which disputes over them are truly disputes would certainly be an attenuated one. To make the case that such

judgements can be the subjects of deeper dispute I need first to describe just what I take the nature of evaluative aesthetic judgements to be.

III

Let me begin by saying what evaluative aesthetic judgements are not. They are not evaluations of the importance of the work in the history of art or in the history of a particular genre or artist; they are not evaluations of the political or cultural value of the work; they are not evaluations of the cleverness or skill of the creator of the work; and they are not evaluations of the sensuous experience afforded by the work. Clearly, whether a particular work is itself good or bad as a work of art has nothing to do with whether its artistic or social legacy was felicitous or baleful. And while a smart turn of phrase or the sound of a well-played cello might be important constituents of one's aesthetic experience of a work, judging the phrase smart or the sound of the cello pleasing is not in itself to make an evaluative *aesthetic* judgement.

Evaluative aesthetic judgements are, rather, evaluations of the aesthetic experience that the work can afford the agent who makes them. (*Can* afford, because any particular encounter with a work might fail to afford one the experience from which the evaluation arises.) They are, that is, judgements of the quality of aesthetic experiences. But what, then, is an aesthetic experience?

I follow Monroe Beardsley in holding that an experience is an aesthetic experience if it is directed by the qualities and relations of a perceptual or intentional field and involves both a sense that one is using one's mind to make intelligible a set of what are perhaps conflicting perceptions or thoughts and a certain detachment of affect, a sense that one is not so much feeling an emotion as coming to know what that emotion is like.[1] The first criterion removes from consideration those

[1] Beardsley lists five features of aesthetic experience. Only object directedness, he says, is a necessary feature of such experience, and it together with any other two is sufficient. I've taken object directedness, active discovery and detached affect together to be necessary and sufficient. See Monroe Beardsley, "Aesthetic Experience," *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Cornell University

encounters with objects or events that engender, for instance, sweet or sour memories. One might, of course, seek out an object that does provide one with the experience of a warm memory, but that experience is not an aesthetic one.[2] The second and third criteria imply, I think, that an aesthetic experience is an experience of an object or event under an interpretation. Of course, what it is to bring an object or event under an interpretation is not entirely clear. I'm attracted by Collingwood's suggestion that we bring an object or event under an interpretation when we take it to be an expression of what it feels like to have a certain view of things, though this is certainly no less obscure than many other suggestions. In any case, what the necessity of interpretation removes from consideration are, precisely, sensuous experiences, whether pleasant or painful, experiences such as one might have simply of a carrot's taste or a cello's sound.

IV

An evaluative aesthetic judgement is an evaluation of the aesthetic experience afforded by encountering, through an interpretation, a perceptual or intentional object or event. One's experience, then, is appropriate to its object to the extent that one's interpretation of that object is well founded. Interpretations themselves rest on descriptions of the object, of the qualities and relations possessed by it. Clearly, then, interpretations can be faulty in at least two different ways. First, they can be based on wrong or incomplete descriptions. Some part of the object under interpretation might not be, say, smooth or clear or distressing or a sonata or rococo or grotesque or a recapitulation of an earlier part, and that some part is smooth or clear or a recapitulation might be missed. Second, the descriptions on which an interpretation is based can provide less than adequate support for it. Of course, all interpretations go beyond the descriptions that support them, but this doesn't mean that an interpretation cannot be fanciful, even if based on accurate and complete

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Press; Ithaca, 1982), pp. 288-9.

[2] Unless, of course, the content of that memory is an intentional field the qualities and relations of which direct one's attention, and so on.

descriptions. To show that an interpretation is fanciful might require confronting it with another interpretation, one that finds a different pattern among elements described. But that there might be no theory-independent standards by which to evaluate interpretations should not incline us to think that interpretations cannot be evaluated at all.

Many disputes over evaluations of works of art are, I think, at root disputes about whether the work is properly or completely described in one way rather than another. Perhaps even more disputes concern the propriety of particular interpretations. If I am right that evaluative aesthetic judgements rest on interpretations, interpretations which themselves rest on descriptions, then, clearly, even if evaluative aesthetic judgements are reports of affective attitudes, they are appropriate subjects of criticism and justification.

I would, however, add a final word on the topic of description and interpretation. No object can be both blue on top at a particular time and not blue on top at that time; thus, of these two descriptions at most one is correct. No object can, as a whole, express both a sense of the benign indifference of the universe and a sense of the malevolent interest of the universe; thus, of these two interpretations at most one can be warranted.[3] Nonetheless, that an object is blue on top need not be of any particular interest to some viewer of it. And that an object under one valid interpretation expresses the benign indifference of the universe does not mean that under all valid interpretations it expresses the benign indifference of the universe. Differing, though not contradictory, descriptions and interpretations can just pass each other by like ships in the night. Even at the levels of description and interpretation, then, not each exchange that appears to be a dispute need actually be one. Two disputants might well come to realize that neither has misdescribed or misinterpreted a work and, thereby, come to understand why the other makes the evaluative aesthetic judgement she does.

[3] An object might, of course, express what it feels like to vacillate between the conviction that the universe is benignly indifferent and the conviction that it is malevolently interested.

V

Let us suppose that two disputants *have* come to realize that neither has misdescribed or misinterpreted a particular work; let us also suppose that each has, thereby, come to understand why the other makes the evaluative aesthetic judgement she does. Finally, let us suppose that this understanding inclines neither to revise her own evaluative aesthetic judgement. The first continues to be moved by the work, the second to be left cold by it. Is this the end of the matter?

It might well in fact be the end of the matter, but it need not be so. Evaluative aesthetic judgements can, I think, be criticized and justified independently of criticisms of their supporting descriptions and interpretations. This, I suggest, is because it is possible to ask of a person, including oneself, whether that particular person *should* be moved or left cold by the work, even when there is no reason to fault the interpretation through which that person encounters it. If, as I have said, affective attitudes are bound together in thick webs, then there can within these webs be strains and tensions. Some attitudes might not repose well with other attitudes; a person's emotions and evaluations can be in conflict with other of that person's emotions and evaluations. Now if it is the case that affective attitudes can fail to repose well with each other, then it can make sense to ask whether it is best that some person make the particular evaluation she or he does. Perhaps it would be better, from the point of view of the internal coherence of her affective attitudes, that she judge differently than she does. Of course, there might be no unique way coherence within a set of discordant affective attitudes is to be achieved; revising one's evaluation might work, and so too might losing or redirecting one of one's desires or emotional commitments.

The sense in which one is wrong to value something as, or as much as, one does is not a sense that requires that the object be, in itself, unworthy of being valued. It is, rather, the sense in which, for instance, a person can be wrong to love someone as much as she or he does, when that person knows that that love threatens her or his contentment at being self-sufficient. This, however,

is just the sort of sense of "wrong" needed by one who rejects the idea that a work of art can, in itself, be worthy of being valued.

Consider, in order to make clear the sense in which it can be inappropriate or wrong to judge as one does, an agent who is typically moved by works possessing a high degree of one of, or a combination of some of, unity, complexity and intensity. Such an agent can be asked, and can ask herself, whether, given her standards as revealed in her judgements, she should react affectively to some particular work in the way that she does. Does her evaluative aesthetic judgement concerning it—that, say, the work is moving because disparate elements are unified in it—cohere with other judgements she has made or is prepared to make? Is she prepared to be moved by other works whose disparate elements she finds unified? In short, is her judgement in line with her own standards? If not, which would it be best for her to change, her judgement or her standards? Answers to each of these questions are appropriate objects of debate.

VI

To conclude: A not inaccurate interpretation of this paper is that its author proposes that evaluative aesthetic judgements be thought of on the model of declarations of intentions and, thus, be judged right or wrong, warranted or unwarranted, in a manner similar to that in which intentions are judged well-considered or ill-considered, wise or foolish. A critic, after considering the judging agent's description and interpretation of an object, is to take an internal perspective and to ask how well the evaluative aesthetic judgement the agent makes of the object comports with other affective attitudes the agent has and other evaluative judgements she or he is prepared to make. Thus, instead of asking whether an object evaluatively judged wonderful is, in itself, truly wonderful, the critic is to ask whether it is appropriate, warranted or best that the judging agent (who might, of course, be the critic herself) should experience wonder in contemplating this object. In this way, the author thinks he has explained how it is possible to give reasons in support of or against particular evaluative aesthetic judgements, why changes of mind over such judgements can be based on reasons and not only

brought about by mere causes, and how changes of mind, when based on reasons, can constitute developments or improvements in an agent's taste or discernment.[4]

[4] I thank Sophie Beaulé, Michael Feld, Stephen Haller, Karen Pilkington, and Catherine Talmage for helpful comments.