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AESTHETIC VALUE

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It. *Valore estetico*; Fr. *Valeur esthétique*; Germ. *Ästhetischer Wert*; Span. *Valor estético*. At the most general level, “aesthetic value” denotes a specific kind of value, one which is associated with a pleasure felt in connection to *how* an object or situation appears. The historical roots of the expression are complex and far-reaching, with each of its two terms referring to an important domain in the history of philosophy. For one, insofar as it is a “value”, reflection on “aesthetic value” can be considered a subset of an axiology, of a “theory of value”. For another, the term “aesthetic” traces its own philosophical roots back to Baumgarten’s postulation of “aesthetics” as an autonomous philosophical discipline in 1735. Specifically, it was first Hume (and his inquiry into a “standard” for aesthetic appreciation) and then Kant (who criticized aesthetic judgment’s claim to a-*conceptual* universal agreement) who offered influential accounts of the potential for autonomous reflection on the possibility of a specific value rooted in aesthetics, paving the way for further developments.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Delimiting the definition of aesthetic value is difficult, because it seems to oscillate between the subjectivity implied in something which must be felt and the objectivity implied in claiming that specific principles form the basis for the evaluation process. This situation is also reflected in the contemporary debate about its nature, where emphasis can be placed either on the subjective experience of the one contemplating the object, or on the specific set of properties or qualities inherent to the object under contemplation.

On the objective side, one of the most debated points concerns whether or not there are aesthetic properties that would underpin the emergence of the aesthetic value. Some authors take a realist stance in this regard (see, for instance, Zangwill 2001 and Zemach 1997 for moderate and extreme realisms,

respectively); Levinson considers these supervenient on nonaesthetic properties, with the former dependent on, but not reducible to, the latter (see Levinson 1984). Besides, aesthetic properties can be understood either as intrinsically “evaluative” (De Clercq 2002: 169) or as merely motivational to aesthetic appreciation (Beardsley 1970), and again, according to Carroll’s content-oriented view, it is even possible to have an aesthetic experience grounded on the object’s features without reference to any affective-axiological moment (Carroll 2002: 163).

While recognizing the foundational role of aesthetic properties, Goldman instead shifts the focus to the subjective response of what he calls “competent subjects” (clearly reminiscent of Hume’s “ideal critics”), coming to suggest that they are in fact “relational properties” (Goldman 1995: *passim*). Others take this argument even further, contesting the very existence of aesthetic properties. Adopting Genette’s notion of “aesthetic relation [*relation esthétique*]”, Schaeffer affirms that the so-called aesthetic properties are not objective but rather “relational properties ‘supervening’ on the properties of the object and reflect our positive or negative appreciation of these properties” (Schaeffer 2015: 43).

In this respect, as regards the subjective side, it is important to note that aesthetic *evaluation* cannot be based on too broad a notion of pleasure; crucially, it must not be merely equated with enjoyment, as this would lead to a simplistic, purely hedonistic construal of aesthetic value that negates its unique nature. Such an approach would be both too narrow (by excluding experiences to which we assign legitimate value without enjoying them: see Gaut 2007: 29) and too broad (by encompassing experiences we enjoy without necessarily appreciating, such as hearing a funny joke).

For this reason, some authors have made significant efforts to identify a specific emotion characterizing aesthetic value. Walton, for example, inquires into the peculiar “pleasure of finding something valuable, of admiring it”. He starts by making a clear distinction between “enjoying” and “appreciating”, that is, “tak[ing] pleasure or delight in judging” something “to be good”, coming to define it as “marveling” (Walton 2008: 12). In the same direction, the peculiar emotion of “wonder” as the one “constitut[ing] appreciation” in art has also become a subject of great interest to empirical aesthetics (see Fingerhut, Prinz 2018).

Nevertheless, one clarification is in order. In the debates mentioned above, much of the discourse on aesthetic value focuses almost exclusively on art; in many cases, the expressions “aesthetic value” and “artistic value” are unduly employed as synonyms. As has been noted (see for example Ingarden 1964), the former must be distinguished from the latter. In a broad sense, aesthetic value can be experienced everywhere, in both artistic and nonartistic experiences—not only when it comes to appreciating nature, but also in our everyday and scientific practices (Stecker 2006: 1; Matteucci 2017: 226).

Artistic values, in turn, cannot be reduced to aesthetic value, insofar as several different kinds of values are involved in the creation, the reception and the circulation of works of art (see Heinich, Schaeffer, Talon-Hugon 2014, which lay out a list of the most relevant values artistic evaluation entails, including “authenticity”, “morality”, “originality”, “rarity”, and “virtuosity”). In well-known cases, in fact, art expressly rejects any connection to aesthetic values, at least in principle (one need only recall Duchamp’s intent for his ready-mades to be utter “anesthetic”); the question remains whether a work of art can truly

achieve this aestheticity degree of zero, even when this is its stated intention (for an examination of conceptual art in “aesthetic terms”, see for example Costello 2007). In a similar vein, some philosophers strongly reject the idea of aesthetic value playing any significant role in art evaluation, and even refuse to assign aesthetic value any importance whatsoever. For Dickie, the “aesthetic” is something entirely unrelated to, and developed completely separate from, the concept of “artistic” (see Dickie 1974). A similar position in this respect is expressed by Goodman (1968: 261), for whom “conceiving of aesthetic experience as a form of understanding”, as he does, “results both in resolving and in devaluing the question of aesthetic value” (Goodman 1968: 262).

Besides, it is important to specify that, in these art-oriented cases, often the expression of “aesthetic value” ends up denoting a general appreciation of the work of art, which can be due to any number of different reasons that can be then made explicit. Such an employment of the concept is analogous to that of the “ancipital” word “beautiful”, which can be used either on a general evaluative level, to mean that we appreciate a work of art overall, or on a descriptive level, to mean that the work manifests itself beautifully (see D’Angelo 2011: 125; Lopes 2018: 6). Indeed, the former level is exactly the one at which “beauty” and “aesthetic value” can be viewed as “synonymous” (Stolnitz 1960: *passim*).

At this very level, and in more general terms, an inquiry into the boundaries of aesthetic value should clarify the nature of not only its relationship to the “artistic”, but also to other values, notably the “moral” and the “cognitive” (see Lopes 2005; Walton 2008), in order to verify if and to what extent it is possible to talk about a mutual influence or permeability between it and them, in some forms of “interactionism” (in these instances, “moralism” and “cognitivism”, respectively).

As regards the moralist direction of inquiry, for instance, Walton maintains that “moral and aesthetic value can interact” (Walton 2008: 14), and Gaut talks about the possibility of detecting “aesthetically relevant ethical values” (Gaut 2007: 64). It is worth recalling that this point concerns not only positive moral values but negative ones as well, i.e., the issue of how moral demerit can diminish aesthetic evaluation or render it impossible (another point that can be traced back to Hume); in Gaut’s “ethicism” view (a ‘moderate’ moralism), for instance, having an “aesthetically relevant ethical flaw” makes a work “aesthetically flawed” (Gaut 2007:10).

As for “cognitivism”, Walton includes the cognitive among the values that can underlie and motivate “aesthetic” appreciation of a work of art, for example through its power to bring about “new understanding” in appreciators (2008:13). Conversely, Lamarque defends a form of “autonomism” of the “aesthetic value”, a position articulated in his thesis of the “intrinsic value” of literary works of art (Lamarque 2009: 259). However, aside from the issue concerning the different forms of “interactionism” and “autonomism”, there is another sense in which the relation between aesthetic and cognitive value can be construed: namely, aesthetic value in the sense of a *value produced aesthetically*.

In fact, within the artistic field, we can appreciate and wonder at how art can *aesthetically* think (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 66) and make us think on an emotional-axiological level, in keeping with the Kantian notion of “aesthetic idea” (on the cognitive dimension of the pure aesthetic judgment, see Crowther 2010: 9). In this sense, a work of art can bring the recipients to grasp values (including, but not limited to, moral and

cognitive values) exhibited aesthetically (i.e. through an aesthetic form of presentation), fostering an evaluation process that is both affective and cognitive without being conceptually mediated or circumscribable (see for instance Pippin 2020, specifically as regards cinema and, more generally, Goldman 1990: 31-34).

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