

IMAGINATION, ATTITUDE, AND EXPERIENCE IN AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT¹

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In this paper I wish to defend a particular form of the traditional, and now almost wholly unfashionable, notion of an aesthetic attitude. It may seem that this notion is a rather quaint fossil of the now outdated disputes that raged in the early days of analytic aesthetics. I shall argue, however, that it offers the non-cognitivist the best basis for understanding the nature of aesthetic judgement. I shall not be concerned here with directly countering realist arguments for the existence of objective aesthetic properties, nor with confronting the error theorist or sceptic who denies that aesthetic utterances are in any meaningful sense judgements. Putting these extreme positions aside, the problem facing the non-cognitivist, of course, is to explain how aesthetic judgements *qua* expressions of some ‘yet-to-be-defined’ aesthetic response or other, take the propositional form of genuine assertoric judgements that *describe* objects in a certain way. I believe that if the imagination is given a prominent role in these responses we can provide a plausible explanation of this phenomenon. To show how this can be, I draw upon the theory of the aesthetic attitude developed by Roger Scruton in his book, *Art and Imagination*. Essentially, what I propose is a form of quasi-realism regarding aesthetic judgements, and although I shall not be concerned with developing aesthetic quasi-realism here, I think that Scruton’s own theory can best be interpreted along these lines.²

¹ This paper was presented at the Graduate Philosophy Conference, Southampton University, 2003.

² For a discussion and defence of the quasi-realist theory of aesthetic judgment see C. Todd (forthcoming) ‘Quasi-realism, Acquaintance, and the Normative Claims of Aesthetic Judgment’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, where some of the issues raised below are discussed in greater depth. The only other philosopher I know of who explicitly links quasi-realism with an explanation of aesthetic judgment, and mentions Scruton’s theory in this context, is Hopkins (2001).

I

Aesthetic attitude theories derive their impetus from the fact that the vocabulary of aesthetic appraisal can in principal be tacked onto anything, which is seen as an indication that anything at all can be appreciated aesthetically. They thus take their point of departure from our linguistic intuitions regarding the broad connotations of ‘aesthetic’, combined perhaps with the historical variety of tastes, cultural relativism, and worries about the nature and existence of ‘objective’ aesthetic properties. The thought behind the concept of the aesthetic attitude is that the adoption of some sort of special attitude might account for the (apparently) unitary nature of aesthetic appreciation and appraisal.

The aesthetic attitude is usually characterised by the central notions of ‘disinterestedness’ or ‘appreciation of *x* for its own sake’. As far as they go, these two notions, or at least the latter, offer *prima facie* plausible ways of demarcating what is special about aesthetic interest and appreciation from other (non-aesthetic) types of appraisal, such as the moral or cognitive or purely sensual. Moreover, the idea of an aesthetic attitude suggests that we can adopt such an attitude to any object at all. However, are there really no conditions an object must satisfy if it is to become the object of aesthetic appreciation? There is a central confusion running through the literature on this subject.³

We are well acquainted with the idea that perception is always cognition-laden and that the attitudes we adopt, or that are evoked in us, are responsible for the different values and meanings we attach to the world around us. Attitudes are dispositions, and it is an important question how much control we have over adopting certain attitudes at any given time towards any given thing. But the idea of adopting an attitude at will is far from clear. For being ‘subject to the will’ can in fact mean one of two things: on the one hand, it may indicate that we can choose to cultivate a certain way of looking at things, namely disinterestedly or ‘for their own sake’, by developing the habit or disposition through training so that it comes into play in certain contexts and circumstances, or when confronted by certain objects. On the other hand, it might mean that we can arbitrarily

³ My treatment of the following issues is indebted to the articles of Kemp (1999) and Dickie (1964).

adopt a certain attitude to anything at all whenever we like, irrespective of context or object.

Yet another distinction that needs to be made clear here, however, concerns the notion of appreciation, which suggests on the one hand the *activity* of enjoyment of some thing, and on the other hand some *dispositional* attitude of ‘aesthetic interest’. Now it may indeed be theoretically possible to adopt the aesthetic attitude towards some object or event, and it clearly makes sense to think that sometimes, perhaps, we may through an effort of will force ourselves to regard any object at all with an eye to appreciating it for its own sake. We might call the position that holds that any object so regarded just will be appreciated aesthetically a *strong* version of the aesthetic attitude.

It is clear, however, that even if we can adopt an aesthetic attitude at will towards any object, only some objects may actually repay the attention and become thereby objects of aesthetic appreciation. We might, for instance, try to regard a certain picture or a cricket match disinterestedly (for its own sake) and, for one reason or another, remain completely unmoved and indifferent to it. It is thus also clear that, for any number of reasons, we may not *in actual fact* always be able ‘at will’ to regard things disinterestedly; if we are too personally involved with something, interested in it exclusively for various emotional, political, or economic reasons, for example, or simply too familiar with it, we may not be able to take the necessary step back.

Furthermore, if we are right in thinking that some objects will reward our aesthetic attention, then, if we understand the aesthetic attitude as the possession of a certain disposition to appreciate certain things aesthetically, we can make better sense of the fact that some objects may simply *strike* us as being aesthetically worthy without our *choosing* to adopt any such attitude at all. Our attitude of appreciation may, so to say, be simply thrust upon us. Yet, if this can happen, it might seem to be the case that we do not often exercise any great control over the aesthetic attitude at all, and that it is misleading to talk in anything but an abstract theoretical way of being able to adopt the aesthetic attitude at will towards any object.

The two types of attitudinal attention just outlined need not be mutually exclusive. It may well be the case that we can adopt a certain attitude ‘at will’, at least theoretically if not always practically, even if, as a disposition, it is more often than not ‘activated’ in the

presence of some objects - those that reward our aesthetic attention - and not others, without our really exercising any conscious control. The crucial point here, however, is that even if we can in principle adopt the aesthetic attitude whenever we like, once we understand that only some objects will actually repay our aesthetic attention, and that these may do so in a way that ‘induces’ aesthetic appreciation in us, the idea of an aesthetic attitude cannot offer us a sufficient explanation of aesthetic appreciation. Rather, even if it is a necessary condition of aesthetic appreciation that we possess a certain disposition to regard things as potentially of aesthetic interest, the nature of the objects on which such attention is fixed must play a central role in our account. Clearly, therefore, if some range of objects can be identified as repaying aesthetic interest, or better still, as having the prime function of doing so, we will go a long way towards understanding the nature of aesthetic appreciation.

In this light, it might naturally be thought that art works, of all objects, best reward aesthetic interest and induce aesthetic experience more readily than anything else. As Schopenhauer says: ‘art plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world’s course and holds it isolated before us’.⁴ Yet, if art is thought to play a special role in aesthetic appreciation, by, as it were, lending itself especially to it, rewarding our aesthetic interest and hence inducing the aesthetic attitude or at least facilitating it, and if we can only fully grasp the notion of aesthetic appreciation by reference to the nature of the objects of that appreciation, it might be thought that the very idea of an aesthetic attitude is rather superfluous to explanatory requirements. For we need only appeal to the nature of objects, such as art works, to explain the nature of our interest in them. In which case, the aesthetic attitude could be accounted neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for aesthetic appreciation, and at best it will collapse into the rather *weak* position that being in the aesthetic attitude is simply a precondition for the awareness of aesthetic properties. The problem of providing plausible accounts of the judgement and appreciation of art has, therefore, been the real bane of aesthetic attitude theories.

The chief problem lies in explicating the relation between the supposed ability to voluntarily adopt the aesthetic attitude to any object, which is needed to explain how anything can be viewed aesthetically, and the passive ‘arousal’ of aesthetic experience by

⁴ Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 1: 185.

objects that specifically reward the attention directed at them. For it seems that if the aesthetic attitude is construed too ‘actively’, we will not understand why some objects should reward appreciation more than others. But if it is too ‘passive’, the objects themselves will assume centre stage and we will be able to do without the aesthetic attitude altogether. It is, in other words, unclear exactly how much work the aesthetic attitude is supposed to do in delineating the aesthetic nature of our appreciation.

In effect, this is a deep problem about the interaction between attitude and object - of determining how much the aesthetic object of appreciation is ‘given’ to us and how much it is a result of being in an aesthetic attitude. The choice to be made has sometimes been framed in terms of deciding whether a *causal* or *intentional* story is to be told about the nature of our aesthetic responses and judgements. In fact, however, we do not have to decide between a causal and intentional story, for the relationship between attitude and object of appraisal is to be a two-way street in which subject and object both play important interactive roles, where we may be able to adopt some attitude or other, to ready ourselves for appreciation, but that we must be helped in developing and sustaining it by the nature of the object. We can see this works in the following way.

II

Expressivist theories do not often clearly distinguish the expression of attitudes from the expression of experiences. But rather than seeing our aesthetic judgements as directly expressive of a variety of different aesthetic attitudes, it is more plausible, I believe, to regard them as expressive of some experience which is the result of viewing an object in a particular way; that is, viewing it with the aesthetic attitude, where this in turn means viewing it as an object of aesthetic appreciation. For this reason, it seems that we ought to make the aesthetic attitude a rather minimal notion, a necessary rather than sufficient condition of aesthetic judgement. We can best do this, I suggest, by adopting the most comprehensive and plausible aesthetic attitude theory available, that of Roger Scruton.

Scruton begins with the traditional, intuitive idea that what demarcates aesthetic interest from other sorts is that it involves the appreciation of something *for its own sake*, and he spells this notion out thus:

a desire to go on hearing, looking at, or in some other way having experience of X , where there is no reason for this desire in terms of any other desire or appetite that the experience of X may fulfil, and where the desire arises out of, and is accompanied by, the thought of X .⁵

The vital point to note here is that the ‘character of aesthetic appreciation will be entirely dictated by its object’, for the ‘principle manifestation of aesthetic interest is attention to an object, which, since it cannot go beyond the object in the manner of practical or theoretical judgement, must come to rest in the perception of the object itself’.⁶

As it stands, of course, this does not tell us very much. But this interplay between mind and world, between the freedom of our aesthetic responses and the causal constraints imposed by the object, Scruton thinks lies squarely within the parameters of the activity of imagination. He defines the imagination by appeal to these two conditions:

- 1) Imagination involves thought which is unasserted, and hence which goes beyond what is believed, beyond ‘what is strictly given’, and to this extent our imagination is indeed subject to some extent to our will.
- 2) ‘Not any way of going beyond the ‘given’ will count as imagining X ’, however, for imagination is a rational activity and involves relating thoughts to an object in a way *appropriate* to the object.⁷

When combined with the idea that aesthetic interest is the appreciation of an object for its own sake, we can understand the central role that imaginative attention must play in aesthetic judgement; we go, as it were, beyond the given, but only in a way appropriate to the object. Scruton provides the example where my admiration for the character of Marcus Aurelius becomes embodied, part of the appearance as it were, of the bust of Aurelius which I look at in a museum. Here, ‘my attention ceases to stray beyond what I see to the thoughts that are inspired by it, but comes to rest in the perception itself’. And thus, in ‘aesthetic appreciation we might say that the perception of an object is brought into relation with a thought of the object...this is one of the main activities of

⁵ Scruton (1974): 148.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

imagination...an aesthetic attitude towards a present object will lead to the thoughts and emotions characteristic of imagination... the object serves as a focal point on which many different thoughts and feelings are brought to bear...'. In this way the activity of the imagination shows what is involved in appreciating something 'for its own sake'.⁸ In so far as the imagination is free, therefore, we can choose to adopt the aesthetic attitude, but the resulting experiences and judgements will largely be determined by the nature of the object itself.

For this reason, it is not surprising that the general nature of an aesthetic attitude as I have just outlined it could not, by itself, possibly explain the intricacies of aesthetic judgement and evaluation. This is particularly so regarding the case of art works, given the range of myriad factors playing some role or other in the complicated institutional art-world - economic, social, political, and perhaps even aesthetic. It is clear that judgements concerning art are encrusted by deep layers of convention, comprising the art world and its critics, historical context and contingency, and are governed by all those connections between the world of art and the broader society, with its politics, economy and culture, of which art forms an important part.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic attitude can, I would suggest, make some sense of how the institution of art appreciation arises in the first place, by giving us an idea of how a certain way of regarding objects enables them to cater to our aesthetic interest. It is evident that in describing the relation between attitude and object in the case of art appreciation, the attitude seems to be, so to say, institutionally prescribed. That is, we achieve a certain distance from our practical and other concerns and enter a disinterested space of attending to objects for their own sake simply by virtue of the fact that art 'takes place' in museums and galleries - we are institutionally isolated from the everyday world and 'forced', as it were, to 'attend aesthetically'. And obviously the idea of appreciating something for its own sake is of great importance in our experience of art works, objects which are (on the whole) created and exhibited and observed as fulfilling just this function.

This remains true even if the purpose of some works is to shock, entertain or otherwise educate us by representing or referring to real life events and the world outside art; or

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154-5.

even if works of art are, or have been, created for specific purposes, such as to eulogise some particular person, to earn money or prizes, or simply to adorn a wall. Certainly art works may make references to this ‘real’ world, provide knowledge about it, or have been created for ‘non-aesthetic’ or purely artistic reasons (whatever that might mean), but this reveals merely that our appreciation of art should not and cannot be completely divorced from the rest of our experiential lives. This is made sense of by Scruton’s criteria of the imagination. ‘Disinterest’ has often been construed too puritanically, but if we understand by it that all sorts of relevant associations are imaginatively brought to bear upon some object, we can make better sense of the aesthetic value of art. Certainly, it may be that our attitudes, our aesthetic tastes and preferences, are so highly culturally and socially contingent, such that any talk of the aesthetic attitude equipping us with the ability voluntarily to see any object at all as being of aesthetic interest, is simply misguided. But the idea of an aesthetic attitude does offer at least a minimal explanation of the phenomena, an explanation we ultimately need to understand the complex problems surrounding the notion of aesthetic judgement.

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