

## SCHLICK ON AESTHETICS

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While Schlick devoted most of his writings to the philosophy of science and the "new" philosophy of the Vienna Circle, he still found time to develop and expound his theories of art, beauty, and ethics. Though the works concerning these topics are few, we can see in both an early (1909, "Basic Problems of Aesthetics in the Light of Evolutionary History") and a later work (1927, "On the Meaning of Life")<sup>1</sup> an innovative and even revisionary aesthetic theory. This paper is intended to explicate that part of Schlick's theory which appears in the latter work, rather than his more general account of ethics and truth.

To get to the heart of Schlick's aesthetic theory, we should underline his characterization of art-making: "It is the joy in sheer creation, the dedication to the activity, the absorption in the movement" [117]. An artistic act is one which is done for its own sake, not for any presupposed consequence (for artists see every possible consequence of their actions ¶118), but without being driven by its outcome [117]. Thus, whatever is done or produced for the pure sake of the enjoyment of its being done or being produced is, for Schlick, art. An artist 'works' only from the desire to create, and not from any need to have a finished product [116]. Taken in Schlick's wide philosophical sense, art then becomes nothing more than play [116].

'Play', however, needs some expansion, especially if it is contrasted to 'work', and some explanation is offered by Schlick. Play is "purposeless action" [114] which means that play is that activity which is pursued for itself and not for achieving some external goal. Work, on the other hand, is also easily defined: "... work means goal-seeking activity" [113] which is the pursuit of any activity primarily as a means to an end. Play, Schlick claims, is what sets

people apart as people, for it is only when one is able to play, that is, to engage in an activity "without the stern frown of purpose"[115], that one is really human.

There is, however, a major problem with this understanding of man being man because of play. Humans are not the only animals to engage in play, nor are humans the only ones to engage in purposeful activity. Unless Schlick is willing to allow that some non-human animals also are art-makers, he will have to find a way to defend his claim that play is what makes humans human and not porpoises, for example, also human. One possible solution is that the 'play' of non-human animals is not really play; that is, it may be part of the individual animal's or species' survival skills, and so it is always linked up with purpose, even if the purpose were not somehow known to the animal. Schlick does not offer to clarify this point, and the above is a tentative explanation which might be one solution to the problem.

Setting aside this problem with the concept of play, the separation of work from play does not for Schlick entail that all useful and productive activity should cease, but rather that profitable and valuable goods and services would come about more freely and abundantly if work were allowed to become play [115- 116, 117]. After all, if humankind is to continue existing, it somehow must meet its physical needs (e.g., food, shelter, etc.), but this does not require that all human action must be directed solely to the attainment of these needs, but rather that these needs are fulfilled by some human action [116]. Here it is important to note that Schlick does not appear to believe that if each and every person on the planet were to engage in purposeless activity, all needs would be magically met. Instead, he believes that what is now considered work will be transformed into what he would consider play and that neither the activities nor their productions would cease or change, but that the attitudes in which they were undertaken would be changed [117].

All that is required for an activity to be play is that it is done for its own sake, and this, too, is how Schlick has characterized art. Consequently, any activity or any product which is the result of play can merit the name 'art'. All human activities become art when they are pursued for their own sakes, and thus farming, weaving, and cobbling are examples of activities which "may take on the character of artistic acts" [117]. Scientific research and knowledge

likewise may be converted into art when they become ends-in-themselves rather than the quest for some external goal [116].

There is a connection, then, between this theory of art and Schlick's theory of beauty proposed in his earlier "Basic Problems of Aesthetics in the Light of Evolutionary History." Art is possible when human energy is no longer entirely used merely for survival but instead allowed to flow into other channels. Beauty is a form of development which occurs only as humankind not only has excess energy to devote to the creation of the beautiful, but also as humankind evolves to a 'higher' level of evolution which permits this condition of producing more pleasant lives rather than merely subsistence-level ones [cf. p. 22 of "Basic Problems..."].

Play, or art-making, is a result of this function, but this is not necessarily to say that art and beauty are necessarily identical; it could be that the two may contingently occur together but without any necessary connection. Our question then becomes whether art is beautiful, and, if so, why. Its answer, not directly addressed by Schlick, requires that some attention be devoted to explicating what the 'beautiful' denotes in Schlick's later work, and this, in turn, requires at least a brief examination of its major point. In brief, "the meaning of life is youth" [123; cf 120, 128]. This claim does not refer to age in terms of years, but to an attitude which is most often exemplified by younger people. It is, Schlick claims, "basically what the Greeks called *Eros*, [and] is devotion to the deed, not the goal" [120] which distinguishes youth from non-youth no matter what the age [120].<sup>2</sup> Youth is a concentration on the 'here and now' rather than the past or future [121], and it is youth which is not subject to life's network of cares and alone is capable of "the purest joy" [120]. It is not my purpose here to develop Schlick's idea of youth except to mention it insofar as it affects his development of aesthetics, and the brief exposition given will suffice.

Claiming that the meaning of life is youth, Schlick goes on to argue that the traditional values which normally cluster around the beautiful, good, and true, along with their three respective faculties - feeling, willing and thinking and their three respective cultural areas - art, society, and enquiry - can all be incorporated into his notion of youth [123]. What this entails from an aesthetic is that any object or action which is characterized by youthfulness (i.e., the accidental product of play) will be beautiful. It could happen that an object may

have natural beauty because it naturally has no connection whatsoever to any practical purposefulness in regard to life's maintenance [124; cf. 14-15], but art has the power to confer beauty to any object by separating from the object any type of usefulness which would otherwise validate the object's existence [124-5]. Again, this does not mean that the object could not be useful, but that its existence not be considered as a means to some external end rather than as an end-in-itself. The making or enjoying of art is done for the making or enjoying of art, and the more 'youthfully' so, the more beautiful and better the art or the experience of the art is [124].

Beauty, then, is a necessary condition for art without being a sufficient. A work of art is always and only an artifact (Schlick, I believe, would maintain that since art is the result of human play, art is *necessarily* an artifact), and as such, it cannot compare well with the experience of beauty in life. "And indeed, when rightly regarded, our art is but nostalgia for nature, for a better nature, and could be extinguished by a life filled with beauty" [124]. A life of play, a life fully taken up with activities which serve no purpose other than the joy gained in the doing of those activities, would indeed be a life full of beauty, and although Schlick does not agree, a life full of art [cf. 124].

To claim that Schlick has interesting insights into aesthetic theory is not to deny that his exposition is fraught with problems, some of which have already been pointed out. The discrepancy mentioned in the last paragraph is only one of these. Schlick believes a totally beautiful life would have no room for art since art somehow for him is a "remainder of purposive work, without which, in our actual existence, no work of art comes into being" [124]. This seems to contradict what he claimed earlier insofar as a life full of beauty would be a life youthfully led, that is, a life in which all activities are play, which means a life of art-making. Does Schlick perhaps mean that such an existence would be devoid of art since everything would be art in any case, and there would be nothing to distinguish art from non-art? His position on this point is unclear.

A stronger criticism arises when the meaning of "purposeless action" is addressed. It is difficult to understand how patronized art may come about. It may not be doubted that Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony is a result of that composer's making music for its own sake, and so, on Schlick's account, it would be both beautiful and art. The music for the "Nutcracker Suite", on the

other hand, was contracted, and as such, it was written for monetary profit and, perhaps, recognition, but it was not written for its own sake. On Schlick's rendering of art and beauty, it is difficult to see how this 'work' for now, that is what it is could be classified as beautiful or as art. Many other examples of great art works which were commissioned and not spontaneously created also come to mind, and all these under Schlick's theory could be in danger of losing their status as works of art.

I believe, however, that Schlick may have an answer to this objection and that such a putative solution has already been alluded to within this paper. Just as the products of the farmer, weaver, cobbler, etc. may be transformed into works of art by the farmer's, weaver's, cobbler's, etc. becoming engaged in the activity for its own sake rather than the outcome of the work, so too could the products of the composer, painter, dancer, etc. engage in their crafts for their own sakes and not any external outcome. It matters not what was the stimulus for the beginning of the activity, but that somewhere in the process the agent 'forgets' the purpose and pursues the activity as an end-in-itself. It could be that many artifacts which are now believed to be great art works could still lose their status as art under Schlick's view, but this objection may be somewhat weakened by the above consideration. Such a tentative resolution, however, is not without its own problems. It would imply that, in order to determine whether some artifact were *in fact* a work of art, we should have to inquire into the mental states of its maker at the very time of its production. This raises the large problem of verification of long-past mental states, about which Schlick has nothing to say.

The number of objects taken to be art, however, seems to increase rather than lessen under Schlick's theory since it seems to allow that many artifacts which are not considered art gain that title. The products of the farmer who artistically tills the fields and the shoes of the cobbler who artistically sews the leather are candidates for art. This, though, does not seem to be so much an objection for Schlick as it does to be a desideratum. How mankind would live more profound and beautiful lives were there to be more art [cf. 117].

Despite the problems with the aesthetic theory proposed by Schlick in these two essays, it still has much to offer in comparison with other more contemporary theories of art and/or beauty. Beauty and art are coupled in Schlick's

theory, while many other rival theories of aesthetics, unable to give any reasonable account of beauty, ignore the subject of the beautiful altogether. Rival theories leave art as the to-be-interpreted expression of the artist or base it on the judgmental whims of an institutional 'artworld'. Art, once a possession of the upper classes, had become accessible to the ordinary person after the 18th century's great revolutions, and slowly has been reclaimed from all of humankind by a new elitist group which is referred to as the artworld. Schlick rescues art and beauty from this group and returns it once more to all of humanity to enjoy, if it will, its fruits. Indeed, art and beauty are available to all, both to create and to enjoy, and it is Schlick's revisionary account of aesthetic theory which might allow that ". . . the sun of a brighter cluture disperses the dark clouds of purpose, and the playful and youthful element, to which man is everywhere strongly disposed, emerges into the light of day" [128].

#### NOTES

1. This first work appeared in *Archiv fur die gesamte psychologie* 14 (1909) 102-132. The translation used here is found in *Moritz Schlick : Philosophical Papers* Vol.I. Tr. Peter Heath. Eds. Henrk L. Mulder and Barbara F. B. Van de Velde-Schlick. Dordrecht, Holland : D. Reidel Publishing, 1979, pp.1- 24. This latter work appeared in *Symposion* 1 (1927) 331-354. The translation used here is found in *Moritz Schlick : Philosophical Papers* Vol.II. Tr. Peter Health. Cit., pp. 112-129. Numerals which appear in brackets refer to page numbers in this translation.
2. The concept of *Eros* is generally understood to have a sexual (hence, 'erotic') connotation, but Schlick gives not even the slightest recognition of this fact. It may be that he does wish to compare the same intense self-absorption of doing an action for its own sake with the intensity of the sexual act, whether this is so he does not say.