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The Aesthetic Creation Theory of Art

The Aesthetic Creation Theory of Art, developed by Nick Zangwill in a series of articles recently collected in *Aesthetic Creation*, is a theory of the nature of art. Its primary aim is not to define 'art' or to analyze our concept of art, but to explain our interest in what falls under this concept: why do people make, contemplate, exhibit, conserve, buy and study works of art, in short, what is art *for*? Zangwill's short answer is that, works of art have an aesthetic function. Moreover, this function is not something that works of art have acquired through the ages. Rather, they are work of art *in virtue of* having that function. Stated in more precise terms, The Aesthetic Creation Theory amounts to the following thesis:

Something is a work of art because and only because someone had an insight that certain aesthetic properties would depend on certain nonaesthetic properties; and because of this, the thing was intentionally endowed with some of those aesthetic properties in virtue of the nonaesthetic properties, as envisaged in the insight.¹

In other words, a work of art is an artifact whose function it is to have certain aesthetic properties in virtue of certain other properties (non-aesthetic properties). Because aesthetic properties are values, and moreover, values the apprehension of which yields pleasure, the Aesthetic Creation Theory seems to provide a simple and intuitively plausible explanation of why art itself is valued.

Zangwill defends the Aesthetic Creation Theory in a clear, subtle and marvelously concise way, without losing sight of how issues in the philosophy of art connect to issues in other domains of inquiry. Moreover, the idea at the core of the theory, that art has an aesthetic function, has a strong intuitive appeal. For example, many people are likely to explain their interest in particular artworks by reference to aesthetic properties such as beauty. Of course, the question is how best to develop the idea. Monroe Beardsley (1981), Gary Iseminger (2004) and Nick Zangwill have all answered the question differently.² In what follows, the merits of Zangwill's answer will be investigated.

¹ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36.

² Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981). Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

I. A theory of what?

As said, the Aesthetic Creation Theory's primary purpose is to explain, not to define or to analyze. This fact is stressed throughout the book, and little effort is required to see why. The Aesthetic Creation Theory operates with a very liberal notion of art, to say the least:

a notion that includes painting, music, architecture and some literature, and which also includes everyday creative activities such as industrial design, advertising, weaving, whistling, cake-decorating, arranging and decorating rooms, religious rituals and firework displays.³

On my understanding, the list could be extended to include not just everyday "creative" activities, but also everyday hygienic activities such as washing and combing one's hair, brushing one's teeth (with whitening tooth paste), shaving, and filling the laundry machine. Of course, from hygienic measures it is a small step to all kinds of work-out programs intended, at least in part, to improve one's looks, and to medical self-treatment methods, for example, applying a cream against warts or herpes blisters. Carefully sealing an envelope is also not to be underestimated. In all these cases, a desired aesthetic effect is known to follow upon certain non-aesthetic changes that one is oneself capable of bringing about. It seems that, on the Aesthetic Creation Theory, this is all it takes to produce art.

Naturally, there are several things that Zangwill could say in reply. First, he could say that shaving and the like are habitual practices, not requiring an insight on each occasion. However, whether they are habitual really depends on the person, and surely some sort of insight may precede the decision to get rid of one's beard or to comb one's hair.⁴ Second, he could say that hygiene and medical treatments such as the aforementioned never result in the creation of an artifact. But is a nicely shaven beard really any less artificial than a nice flower-arrangement? Similarly, is a medically treated skin really any less artificial than a tattooed one? Note, in this connection, that Zangwill seems happy to regard flower-arrangements (Zangwill 2007, 101n1) and tattoos (Zangwill 2007, 60, 161, 163) as works of art, and that he regards "most roses" as artifacts (Zangwill 2007, 101n1).

It is doubtful whether stressing the explanatory purpose of the Aesthetic Creation Theory can neutralize these worries about extensional adequacy, that is, about the range of items to which the theory applies. After all, the explanatory purpose is to explain *art*, not just any human activity. And if the explanation provided is the same for art and a host of non-artistic activities, then it seems that little insight will be gained into the nature of the first. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Zangwill himself is not willing to give up on the requirement of extensional adequacy:

³ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 78.

⁴ It may also be noteworthy that Zangwill does not require the insight to be original. *Ibid.*, 44.

What about a theory that explains the point of art but which is extensionally inadequate? There is no easy answer here. It depends how extensionally inadequate it is. It cannot be *majorly* extensionally inadequate. It must explain the point of many or most of those things that we normally categorize as works of art. But if the theory has minor extensional quirks in an otherwise good explanatory theory, these could be overlooked.⁵

But surely, including a morning shave into the category of artworks cannot be considered a 'minor extensional quirk'?

So the Aesthetic Creation Theory is very liberal, but maybe it applies to all works of art? If that were true, it would at least provide a necessary condition for being art. However, there is reason to doubt that it does. Recall, from the passage quoted in the beginning of this paper, that the Aesthetic Creation Theory requires that "someone had an *insight* that certain aesthetic properties would depend on certain nonaesthetic properties" (italics not in original). For Zangwill, insight is a "moment of acquiring knowledge".⁶ In the case at hand, the acquired knowledge is supposed to be knowledge of a conditional: if such-and-such non-aesthetic properties were to be realized, then such-and-such aesthetic properties would be realized as well. But the requirement seems to be too strong. What if a team of art historians and epistemologists were to discover that the artists responsible for some of the masterpieces hanging in the National Gallery merely had *true* (justified) *beliefs* regarding the relevant dependency relation? Would that automatically deprive these pieces of their art-status? (Would they have to be removed from the museum and perhaps replaced by fakes created by a more knowledgeable artist?) Furthermore, it is even doubtful whether having a *true* belief regarding the dependency relation is necessary. After all, it seems possible for an artist to be completely mistaken about the aesthetic properties he is about to realize in one of his works. Instead of being great, neat, and unified, as intended, the work turns out to be bad, clumsy and chaotic (even though it has all or most of the envisaged non-aesthetic properties). Surely this must have happened on more than one occasion. Zangwill may respond that if the resulting work is so utterly bad as to be devoid of aesthetic value, then it simply is not a work of art.⁷ But it is easy to consider a different kind of case that does not allow for a similar response. Suppose an artist intends to create a bad, clumsy and chaotic work – perhaps something not deserving to be called 'art' at all – and, guided by his mistaken view of the dependency relation, ends up producing a great, neat, and unified work of art. At least on the face of it, this seems to be a possibility. And if it is one, then the artist's creative activity need be guided by a true belief regarding what aesthetic properties depend on what non-aesthetic properties, contrary to what Zangwill assumes. (It may be asked why someone would care to create a bad work.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

Being self-destructive, provocative, indifferent, or simply in need of money are certainly possible reasons. But the important thing is that the intention seems to be possible.)

Some of the above points have also been made by Daniel Nathan in a recent review of *Aesthetic Creation*.⁸ However, according to him, Zangwill's book also raises "deeper puzzles" by requiring

that all artists must believe (a) that aesthetic properties supervene on nonaesthetic ones and (b) that certain aesthetic properties (the ones that are to be found or at least intended to be present in the work) arise out of precisely those nonaesthetic features that the artist places in the work. However, artists, I would assume, often just create, absent cognitive or other understanding of how the aesthetic qualities of their works do ultimately emerge.⁹

Here, it seems to me, a word in defense of Zangwill's theory is appropriate. There is of course a sense in which artists "often just create": they often experiment without a detailed plan in mind. But this trivial fact does not contradict Zangwill's idea that artists must have some understanding of the supervenience relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. Moreover, it has been argued that such an understanding comes automatically with an understanding of what evaluative properties like beauty and ugliness are, that is, with grasp of the corresponding concepts.¹⁰ Therefore, the burden seems to be on Nathan to prove that an artist can be involved in an aesthetic project without understanding how aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties are related.

II. Persistence

Aesthetic Creation also explores a number of interesting metaphysical issues such as the essential properties of works of art and their identity through time. Let me end with a brief note on how Zangwill thinks about the latter:

The cross-time identity of a work of art depends on the persistence of most of the nonaesthetic properties that realize the aesthetic properties that were envisaged in the artist's intentions. However, those aesthetic properties can be realized by different stuff at different times, so long as the different stuff realizes most of the same aesthetic properties as a causal consequence (of the right kind) of earlier phases.¹¹

(For the sake of simplicity, Zangwill disregards failed art.) According to this passage, the persistence of a work of art requires that "most" of

⁸ Daniel O. Nathan, review of *Aesthetic Creation* by Nick Zangwill, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66(2008): 416–418.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁰ Consider, for example, how the supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive is explained in Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 125.

¹¹ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 112.

the intended non-aesthetic properties are preserved. But how is one going to count these properties? And does every property count for one? For example, is depicting a Dutch rural landscape as important as containing a small blue patch in the right upper corner when persistence is concerned? Perhaps, though, this is just analytic niggling on my part, and Zangwill has something more commonsensical in mind.