

# Experiencing Art

## Austrian Aesthetics between Psychology and Psychologism

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It is notoriously difficult to define art and there is hardly any agreement concerning the question of what properties should be considered to be aesthetic ones – even the idea to use “beautiful” as shorthand for aesthetic properties<sup>1</sup> seems to have become obsolete in the twentieth century. It seems obvious, however, that we can call only those objects *works of art* that we can *experience* as instantiating aesthetic properties or as realizing aesthetic ideals (however these properties or ideals may be characterized and independent of the question of whether or not these experiences are reliable). In order to be a work of art, in other words, an object has to be *perceptible*.<sup>2</sup> Some theories even suggest that like secondary qualities aesthetic properties depend essentially on the interaction between the object that has the relevant properties and the perceiver, as the old saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” seems to confirm. This suggests that our capacity to experience aesthetic properties should be accounted for by every aesthetic theory that aims at being comprehensive.

Psychological and phenomenological approaches even go one step further and argue that the notion of aesthetic experience should be considered

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<sup>1</sup> As, for example, Stephan Witasek suggests, cf. his (1904, p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> There might be some works of art that are so small, distant, or in some way essentially hidden so that they can never be directly perceived by the naked eye, as it is the case, for example, in some works of conceptual art like Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit*. Even these works of art, however, contain perceptible parts – in minimal cases it might only be their description by which we get to know about their very existence – and it can be argued that it is actually these perceptible parts that constitute the actual work of art.

a basic notion in aesthetics. They typically start their studies with a careful description and analysis of the mental phenomena we have when perceiving a work of art; the ontological status of aesthetic values and properties are considered relevant only insofar as they become intentional objects of our aesthetic experiences. With this strategy to found aesthetics on experience, there is a *prima facie* risk of adopting a form of psychologism, i.e. a position that reduces the principles and truths of aesthetics to psychological truths or theories and/or explains the nature of aesthetic values and properties by referring to psychological mechanisms of human beings.

In what follows I will discuss the question of whether the aesthetic theory of Franz Brentano is guilty of psychologism. In the second part I will focus on the views of one of the prominent aestheticians of the Graz school of object theory, Stephan Witasek, who was (indirectly) strongly influenced by Brentano, but is at the same time aware of the thin line between psychology and psychologism in aesthetics. In the concluding section of this paper I will argue that with their psychological approaches to aesthetics both Franz Brentano and Stephan Witasek offer a theory of beauty rather than a theory of art.

### *1. Aesthetics as a Practical Discipline Based on Psychology: The Aesthetics of Franz Brentano*

With his work in psychology Brentano not only aimed at contributing to the development of a new and independent scientific discipline; he also wanted to lay the foundations for a scientific approach to philosophy. In *Meine letzten Wünsche für Österreich*<sup>3</sup> he explicitly notes that, like all other philosophical disciplines, aesthetics too is rooted in psychology:

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<sup>3</sup> Brentano published this text on the occasion of his leaving Vienna in 1894 as a series of articles in the newspaper *Die neue freie Presse* and shortly later as a self-standing book. In this text he takes stock of his time in Vienna; he outlines the philosophical position of himself and his school, argues for the importance of founding a psychological laboratory in Austria, and harshly criticizes the fact that as a former catholic priest he was legally denied the right to marry in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

And similarly one could show most easily for aesthetics and every other philosophical discipline that separated from psychology it would have to wither like a branch that is detached from the trunk. (Brentano 1895, p. 39)<sup>4</sup>

Psychology, according to Brentano, is a “theoretical science”, i.e. a science that consists of “a set of truths that are internally related” (Brentano 1988, p. 3)<sup>5</sup> and has a clearly defined and homogeneous subject matter. Aesthetics, on the other hand, is not a theoretical science, but rather a practical discipline, for “the complex of truths it delineates is not held together by theoretical kinship, but rather by a goal external to its field of knowledge” (Brentano 1988, p. 4).<sup>6</sup> Thus for Brentano aesthetics is not a science<sup>7</sup>, it is rather an instrument that serves practical purposes. In his lectures on aesthetics, he proposes a definition of aesthetics as

... the practical discipline that teaches us to experience with correct taste the beautiful and the not-beautiful, to prefer what is more beautiful over what is less beautiful, and that gives us instructions to create it [*the beautiful*] and make it suggestive and significant for everyone. (Brentano 1988, p. 5)<sup>8</sup>

According to Brentano, not only aesthetics, but also logic and ethics are practical disciplines that depend on the theoretical science of psychology: while the goal of aesthetics is to teach us to recognize beauty and to develop a “correct” taste, that of logic is to teach us to judge and infer correctly and that of ethics to choose and act correctly. These three practical disci-

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<sup>4</sup> My translation: “Und ähnlich ließe sich für die Aesthetik und jede andere Disciplin der Philosophie aufs leichteste nachweisen, daß sie, losgetrennt von der Psychologie, wie ein vom Stamm losgetrennter Zweig verdorren müßte.“

<sup>5</sup> My translation: “eine Gruppe von Wahrheiten, die innerlich verwandt sind.”

<sup>6</sup> My translation: “der Komplex von Wahrheiten, den sie abgrenzt, ist nicht durch theoretische Verwandtschaft, sondern durch einen außerhalb des Wissensgebietes liegenden Zweck zusammengehalten.”

<sup>7</sup> It is not even a “*Wissenschaft*” – the meaning of the German term is wider than the English “science”, it refers not only to the natural sciences, but also to the disciplines that constitute the humanities.

<sup>8</sup> My translation: “sie ist jene praktische Disziplin, welche uns lehrt, mit richtigem Geschmack Schönes und Unschönes zu empfinden, das Schöneres vor dem minder Schönen zu bevorzugen, und uns Anweisungen gibt, um es hervorzubringen und für die Gesamtheit eindrucksvoll und wirksam zu machen.”

plines depend on psychology as their theoretical foundation, which is shown also by the fact that the

triad of the *Beautiful*, the *True*, and the *Good* ... [is] related to three aspects of our mental life; not, however, to knowledge, feeling, and will [as Kant suggested], but to the triad that *we* have distinguished in the three basic classes of mental phenomena. (Brentano 1995, p. 261)

Brentano, as is well known, distinguishes three classes of mental phenomena: presentations, judgments, and phenomena of love and hate, i.e., phenomena in which we take an emotional stance towards an object. The first of these classes is the most basic. When in his *Psychology* Brentano defines the subject matter of psychology by distinguishing mental from physical phenomena, one of the criteria he proposes for telling them apart is that all and only mental phenomena are presentations or based on presentations. “Nothing can be judged, desired, hoped, or feared, unless one has a presentation of that thing” (Brentano 1995, p. 80).

Logic, according to Brentano, is the practical discipline that is concerned with judgments; i.e. with that class of mental phenomena in which we take a positive or a negative stance towards the (existence of the) object by affirming or denying it. In addition, judgments are correct or incorrect; they have a truth-value. According to Brentano, a judgment is true when it is evident, i.e., when one perceives (in inner perception that is directed towards the judgment) that one judges with evidence. More generally, according to Brentano “a person judges truly, if and only if, his judgment agrees with the judgment he would make if we were to judge with evidence” (Chisholm 1986, p. 38). Notwithstanding this dependence on the notion of judgment, however, truth, for Brentano, is not a subjective notion: if one person affirms an object and another person denies the same object, only one of them judges correctly.

Ethics, on the other hand, is concerned with phenomena of love and hate. When experiencing a phenomenon of this class, we take an emotional stance towards an object, i.e., a stance that can be positive or negative; one can have, as Chisholm puts it, a “pro-emotion” or an “anti-emotion” towards the object.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, phenomena of this class can be correct or in-

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chisholm (1982, p. 68).

correct. In these two aspects we have a formal analogy between judgments and emotions. An emotion is correct, according to Brentano, “when one’s feelings are adequate to their object – adequate in the sense of being appropriate, suitable, or fitting” (Brentano 1902, p. 70). If it is correct to love an object, we can say that it is good; if it is correct to hate it, it is bad. The question of whether or not it is correct to have a positive emotion towards an object is not a subjective one; according to Brentano it is impossible that one person correctly loves an object and another person correctly hates it.

Aesthetics, finally, is based on the most basic class of mental phenomena: on presentations. According to Brentano, every presentation is in itself of value; this holds even for those that become the basis of a correct, negative judgment or a correct anti-emotion:

Every presentation, taken by itself, is a good and recognizable as such, since an emotion that is manifested as being correct can be directed towards it. It is out of question that everyone, if they had to choose between a state of unconsciousness and the having of any presentation whatsoever, would welcome even the poorest presentation and would not envy lifeless objects. Every presentation appears of value in that it constitutes an enrichment of life. (Brentano 1988, p. 144)<sup>10</sup>

While judgments and emotions consist in taking either a positive or a negative stance, the value of a presentation is always positive, but comes in degrees: some presentations are of higher value than others.

But, one might ask, if all presentations are valuable, how can we distinguish between presentations in which we experience objects that are of high aesthetic value from those in which we experience objects of a lower aesthetic value or even such that have a negative aesthetic value, i.e., objects that are disgusting, repellent, or simply ugly? Moreover, how can we distinguish presentations that are relevant for aesthetics from those that are not?

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<sup>10</sup> My translation: “Jedes Vorstellen ist aber, an und für sich betrachtet, ein Gut und als solches erkennbar, weil sich eine als richtig charakterisierte Gemüts-tätigkeit darauf richten kann. Ohne Frage würde jedermann, wenn er zwischen dem Zustande der Bewußtlosigkeit und dem Besitz irgendwelcher Vorstellungen zu wählen hätte, auch die ärmlichste begrüßen und die leblosen Dinge nicht beneiden. Jede Vorstellung erscheint als eine Bereicherung des Lebens von Wert.”

Brentano distinguishes between the value a presentation has *per se* and the particular aesthetic value it might have. A presentation is aesthetically valuable only if it becomes the object of a second mental phenomenon, in particular an emotion, in which one correctly takes a positive stance towards it:

The point is not merely that a presentation is valuable, but that its value is grasped in an actually experienced pleasure that is manifested as being correct. (Brentano 1988, p. 32)<sup>11</sup>

For Brentano, thus, not every presentation can be considered an aesthetic experience; he does distinguish between the value of a presentation and aesthetic value:

But it was not my intention to identify the concepts beauty and value of the presentation. Not only beautiful presentations please correctly. Beauty is the narrower concept. We tend to call beautiful only those presentations that are of such immense value that they justify a particularly high degree of pleasure. It does not suffice, however, that they merit a high degree of pleasure, in order to be beautiful, they must be presented to us in such a way that this pleasure is actually aroused. (Brentano 1988, p. 152)<sup>12</sup>

Thus, according to Brentano, an object is beautiful if a presentation that is directed at it arouses a correct, positive emotion: “its [beauty’s] goal is pleasure” (Brentano 1988, p. 135).<sup>13</sup> An object is ugly, on the other hand, if a presentation that is directed at it arouses a correct, negative emotion, a form of displeasure.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> My translation: “Es kommt nicht bloß darauf an, daß eine Vorstellung wertvoll ist, sondern daß ihr Wert in einer als richtig charakterisierten, wirklich erlebten Freude erfaßt wird.”

<sup>12</sup> My translation: “Aber es war durchaus nicht meine Absicht, die Begriffe Schönheit und Wert der Vorstellung zu identifizieren. Nicht nur schöne Vorstellungen gefallen mit Recht. Schönheit ist der engere Begriff. Schön pflegen wir nur Vorstellungen von so erheblichem Werte zu nennen, daß sie ein besonders hohes Maß von Wohlgefallen rechtfertigen. Es genügt aber nicht, daß sie ein hohes Wohlgefallen verdienen, sie müssen, um schön zu sein, uns in solcher Weise dargeboten werden, daß dieses Wohlgefallen auch tatsächlich erweckt wird.”

<sup>13</sup> My translation: “Es hat Freude zum Ziele.”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Brentano 1988, pp. 147f.

This does not imply, however, that Brentano advocates a subjectivist aesthetics. Since the pleasure that is aroused by a presentation of a work of art must be a correct emotion, it is impossible that one person correctly experiences an object as beautiful that another person correctly experiences as ugly. This still allows for the possibility, however, that the second person incorrectly experiences the object as ugly – after all, his taste might not be well trained – or that an object arouses an aesthetic experience in one person and does not in another; in that case, the latter person will remain indifferent towards the object, while the former appreciates it.

This clearly shows that “Brentano’s theory of value places mental states as primary in analyzing aesthetic and ethical value” (Baumgartner et al. 2004, p. 229). Based on his theory of evidence and correct emotion, Brentano can argue, however, that aesthetic judgments are objective without having to acknowledge the existence of values at an ontological level.

Hence we can call in a higher (narrower) sense that as beautiful the presentation of which has excellent value (and of course by itself, not in the sense of higher utility). In this sense the beautiful is obviously free of subjectivity. It is something that is universally valid, and it pays to investigate its laws. (Brentano 1988, p. 127)<sup>15</sup>

The discussion so far has shown that psychology plays a central role in Brentano’s aesthetics. In the next section I will turn to the question of whether this justifies calling Brentano’s aesthetics a form of psychologism in a sense analogous to that of logical psychologism that became the target of Husserl’s critique.

## 2. *Brentano’s Aesthetics and Husserl’s Critique of Psychologism*

Husserl’s attack on psychologism has been a delicate issue in his relation to his former academic teacher Franz Brentano.<sup>16</sup> The latter was well aware

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<sup>15</sup> My translation: “Dementsprechend können wird dann in einem höheren (engeren) Sinne das schön nennen, dessen Vorstellung vorzüglichen Wert hat (und natürlich in sich selbst, nicht im Sinne größerer Nützlichkeit). In diesem Sinne ist das Schöne offenbar von Subjektivität frei. Es ist etwas, was allgemeingültig ist, und es verlohnt sich wohl, seine Gesetze aufzusuchen.”

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this aspect, cf. Huemer (2004).

that the *Prolegomena* to the *Logical Investigations* had gained Husserl a good deal of attention and respect in the German philosophical community.<sup>17</sup> In 1904, when, after a few years of silence, they took up their correspondence again, Brentano asked Husserl “to name one single important point in which you think you have deviated from and gone beyond me” (Brentano in Husserl 1994, p. 24)<sup>18</sup>, Husserl answered with an outline of his critique of logical psychologism and a sketch of his distinction between pure and normative logic. Brentano did not hide that he was not impressed by this critique which he interpreted to consist in a charge of subjectivism or anthropocentrism – a charge that he rejected as absurd.

When, during a friendly encounter, I sought an explanation from Husserl, and then, as the opportunity arose, from others, who use the newly introduced term, I was told that it means a theory which contests the general validity of knowledge, a theory according to which beings other than men could have insights which are precisely the opposite of our own. Understood in this sense, I am not only not an opponent of psychologism, but I have always very firmly rejected and opposed such absurd subjectivism. (Brentano 1995, p. 306)

Brentano’s hostility towards Husserl’s antipsychologism is also nourished by the fact that it entails an ontological commitment to ideal logical objects, which he does not share: “But the realm of thought objects, which even a respectable thinker as Bolzano has had the presumption to accept, cannot be accepted. It rather could also be shown to be absurd” (Brentano in Husserl 1994, p. 34).<sup>19</sup>

When in a text on Brentano’s theory of judgment, Roderick Chisholm argues that Brentano does not adopt a form of psychologism, he also interprets, like Brentano, Husserl’s critique as a charge of subjectivism:

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<sup>17</sup> In fact, Husserl reacts quite strongly when he gets the impression that Brentano suggests that with his investigations Husserl was driven by his ambition to make an academic career rather than to make a substantial contribution to the philosophical debate (Husserl 1994, pp. 25f).

<sup>18</sup> My translation: “Recht dankbar wäre ich Ihnen, wenn Sie mir einen einzelnen wichtigen Punkt namhaft machten, in welchem Sie von mir ab- und über mich hinaus gegangen zu sein glauben.”

<sup>19</sup> My translation: “Aber das Reich der Gedankendinge, in welches leider auch ein so respectabler Denker wie Bolzano sich verstiegen hat, ist darum noch nicht zuzulassen. Es dürfte vielmehr ebenfalls als absurd erwiesen werden können.“



Brentano has sometimes been accused of what Frege and Husserl called “psychologism”; but the fact that he recognizes the universality and objectivity of such principles as the above [*i.e.*, the principle that “for any persons *S* and *S'*, it is impossible for there to be anything which is such that it may be correctly affirmed by *S* and correctly denied by *S'*.”] indicates that the charge is unjustified. (Chisholm 1982, p. 76)

This interpretation of psychologism, however, does not really do justice to Husserl’s point. While anthropocentrism and subjectivism can be forms of psychologism, Husserl uses the later term in a much larger sense. As is well known, at the beginning of his philosophical career Husserl worked on the psychological foundations of mathematics. His *Philosophy of Arithmetics* was harshly criticized by Frege for being psychologistic.<sup>20</sup> When Husserl presents his critique of logical psychologism in the *Prolegomena* to the *Logical Investigations*, he presents it as if it constituted a fundamental shift in his philosophical position.<sup>21</sup> In this text, he defines logical psychologism as a position according to which

the essential theoretical foundations of logic lie in psychology, in whose field those propositions belong – as far as their theoretical content is concerned – which give logic its characteristic pattern. Logic is related to psychology just as any branch of chemical technology is related to chemistry, as land-surveying is to geometry etc. ... Often people talk as if psychology provided the sole, sufficient, theoretical foundation for logical technology. (Husserl 2001, p. 40)

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Frege 1894.

<sup>21</sup> I am not suggesting that Husserl actually did subscribe to psychologism (at least not to the problematic form of psychologism he criticized in *Logical Investigations*) in his early work, but rather remain neutral on this exegetical question. The widespread view that Husserl was a psychologist has been challenged by a number of scholars; for a discussion cf. Mohanty (1982, pp. 18–42) and (1997). I do find it relevant, however, that in some passages of his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl clearly indicates that he did change his views on the significance of psychology for logic in the 1890s. In the foreword to the *Prolegomena*, Husserl mentions that the part that deals with psychologism goes back to a series of lectures given at Halle in 1896, *i.e.*, two years after Frege’s review. Alluding to his alleged psychologism in *Philosophy of Arithmetic* he remarks, quoting Goethe: “There is nothing to which one is more severe than the errors that one has just abandoned” (Husserl 2001, p. 3).

Husserl's critique, thus, aims at the attempt to reduce the laws of logic to that of psychology and to take psychology to be the basic discipline, the theoretical foundation, and, in consequence, to explain logical facts with psychological means. While Husserl does not explicitly mention Brentano in his definition of psychologism<sup>22</sup>, the very wording does recall Brentano's formulation of his views on the relation between logic, ethics and aesthetics, on the one hand, and psychology, on the other, in his lectures on aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Brentano, he insists that the essential laws [*Wesensgesetze*] of logic hold *a priori* and cannot possibly be explained on the basis of an empirical science. He not only insists that the realm of the *a priori* has to be sharply distinguished from the empirical realm, he also suggests that logic deals with entities that belong "not to the realm of nature, but to that of ideas" (Husserl 1994, p. 37).<sup>24</sup> Husserl's position, thus can be seen as the result, among other factors, of his taking seriously Twardowski's distinction between content and object of presentations<sup>25</sup>; he regards logic as a study of entities that can – but do not essentially have to – become objects of mental acts.

In his reply Brentano admits that the laws of logic cannot be inductively derived from the psychological behaviour of human beings, but adds the cynical remark that he believes "today as little as always in the *a priori*-fictions which Kant has given as a present to philosophy" (Brentano in Husserl 1994, p. 40).<sup>26</sup> Thus, if overcoming psychologism entails the acceptance of abstract entities (such as ideal logical objects or values), or that of *a priori* truths, Brentano is clearly not an anti-psychologist.

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, Husserl does not mention Brentano at all in the context of psychologism in his *Prolegomena*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the quotes I have discussed above. Husserl had heard Brentano's lecture on aesthetics in 1885/86 in Vienna; moreover, in a letter from March 1905 (i.e., in the time when Brentano and Husserl exchanged letters on psychologism) he notes that recently he had used his notes from this very lecture to read passages to his students (cf. Husserl 1994, p. 36).

<sup>24</sup> My translation: "nicht im Reich der Natur, sondern in dem der Ideen".

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Twardowski (1977).

<sup>26</sup> My translation: "Auch glaube ich heute so wenig als jemals an die apriorischen Fiktionen, mit welchen Kant die Philosophie beschenkt hat."

This shows that, while Chisholm (and Brentano) are right to insist that Brentano does not advocate a subjectivist position – neither in logic, nor in aesthetics or ethics – we can state that Brentano was, according to the definition Husserl presents in his *Logical Investigations*, not only a logical psychologist, he also adopts a form of psychologism in ethics and aesthetics: Brentano explicitly states, as we have seen above, that psychology is the theoretical science on which practical disciplines such as logic, ethics, and aesthetics are based.

The concept [of beauty], even if it is conceived, in analogy to that of truth, as universally valid for all rational beings, originates in any case, like all its various subspecies, from the realm of psychology. The same holds for the concept of truth and the kinds of true and evident judgment; for I conceive logics to stand in a very similar relation to psychology as aesthetics does. (Brentano 1988, p. 17)<sup>27</sup>

As a consequence, a Brentanian aesthetics will focus not in the first place on the characteristics of works of art, but rather on the characteristics of our aesthetic experiences in which they become the intentional object. It will, as Brentano's definition of aesthetics has it, "teach us to experience with correct taste the beautiful" (Brentano 1988, p. 5) – just like normative logic (in Husserl's sense) can teach us to judge correctly, but not aim at describing aesthetic truths and values.

### 3. *Psychology and Psychologism in Aesthetics: A Thin Line*

The tension between arguing that psychology ought to play a central role in aesthetics and avoiding the charge of psychologism is strongly felt by some other members of the so-called Austrian tradition of philosophy, mainly by proponents of the Graz school of object theory, founded by Alexius Meinong, a direct student of Brentano. Meinong's philosophical position is strongly characterized by its roots in Brentano's philosophy,

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<sup>27</sup> My translation: "Der Begriff, selbst wenn er analog dem der Wahrheit als allgemeingültig für alle vernünftigen Wesen genommen wird, stammt so wie seine verschiedenen Unterarten jedenfalls aus psychischem Gebiet. Das gilt ja auch vom Begriff der Wahrheit und den Arten des wahren und evidenten Urteils; ich denke mir denn auch die Logik in ganz ähnlichem Verhältnis zur Psychologie wie die Ästhetik."

which, however, he further develops in significant ways.<sup>28</sup> For Meinong too the notion of intentionality plays a central role; he takes up and further develops Brentano's distinction of three classes of mental phenomena, adding a fourth class of assumptions that he characterises as 'judgments without belief'; and he follows Brentano also in his theory of values where he argues that we can experience moral values in feelings, i.e. phenomena of love and hate that presuppose a judgment, whereas aesthetic objects are experienced in presentations or assumptions that do not.<sup>29</sup>

Like Husserl, Meinong received Twardowski's distinction between object and content of presentations, which strongly influenced him in his elaborating the theory of objects; a development that also brings him to gradually modify his theory of values: while in his early writings he argued that our experiences of values, i.e., our value-feelings, are constitutive for values, he later held that values exist independently of our experiences as properties of higher order, but are represented in those.<sup>30</sup> Meinong, thus, makes an antipsychologistic move in his theory of values, but continues to insist on the importance of psychology for this field of studies.

The tension between the importance of psychology and the dangers of psychologism in aesthetics can be seen most explicitly in the work of Stephan Witasek<sup>31</sup>, a student of Meinong whose work focused on aesthetics and psychology. Witasek published a series of texts on aesthetics in the first years of the last century, culminating in his *Grundzüge der allgemeinen Ästhetik*. After a break of more than a decade, he turns back to publish on aesthetics shortly before his early death, in 1915, i.e. three years after Meinong's text against psychologism in value theory.

The notion of aesthetic experience plays a central role also in Witasek's aesthetics. Like Brentano and Meinong, he argues that these experiences are presentations that become objects of an emotion or feeling. The rationale he offers is that to appreciate the beauty of an object one does not need to judge that it exists; one might vividly imagine a non-existing mountain –

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the relation between Brentano and Meinong, cf. Rollinger (2008).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Meinong 1917, pp. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Meinong 1912, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> For a more detailed overview of Witasek's aesthetics and his position in the so-called Austrian tradition of philosophy, cf. Smith (1994) and Reicher (2006).

or a fictional character – and be delighted by the beauty of the imagined object, even though one is well aware of its non-existence.<sup>32</sup>

When, in his *Aesthetics*, he defines the subject matter of this discipline he speaks about real objects and experiences thereof and argues that it is to be shown by empirical studies, in an inductive manner, what these objects have in common.<sup>33</sup> According to Witasek, aesthetic objects are characterized by what he calls aesthetic properties.<sup>34</sup> These properties are ideal properties, for they are not perceptible. Moreover, they are not objectual, but extra-objectual (*außergegenständlich*) since they are relational characteristics of the object. When it comes to defining aesthetic properties, Witasek characterizes them as those properties that can bring about aesthetic feelings in a subject: “The aesthetic property of an object is the fact that it can stand in a causal and teleological relation to the aesthetic behaviour of a subject” (Witasek 1904, p. 22)<sup>35</sup>, where *aesthetic behaviour* refers to a form of psychological behaviour. The aesthetic property, thus, is the fact that the aesthetic object can bring about a series of specific mental phenomena in the subject.

The aesthetic condition of the subject is essentially a feeling (of pleasure or displeasure), together with a vivid presentation, where the presentation is the psychological prerequisite for the feeling. Aesthetic feelings are presentation-feelings.<sup>36</sup>

An object is beautiful, if it arouses pleasure, it is ugly, if it arouses displeasure in the subject; the degree of beauty depends on the intensity of the presentation. Thus, while Witasek starts out with defining the subject matter of aesthetics by citing the entities that can be called beautiful – as one

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Witasek 1902, pp. 175ff.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Witasek 1904, pp. 7f.

<sup>34</sup> Witasek uses the shorthand “beautiful” for all aesthetic properties, because “what is common to them comes to light most clearly in beauty” (Witasek 1904, p. 11).

<sup>35</sup> My translation: “Die ästhetische Eigenschaft eines Gegenstandes ist die Tatsache, daß er in Kausal- und Zielrelation zu ästhetischem Verhalten eines Subjektes stehen kann.”

<sup>36</sup> My translation: “Der ästhetische Zustand des Subjektes ist wesentlich ein (Lust- oder Unlust-)Fühlen zusammen mit einem anschaulichen Vorstellen, und zwar so, daß das Vorstellen die psychische Voraussetzung des Fühlens bildet. Die ästhetischen Gefühle sind Vorstellungsgefühle.”

might expect from one of the main proponents of the theory of objects – he defines as their common characteristic their power to bring about a certain kind of mental phenomenon. The main part of Witasek’s book focuses on a psychological analysis of these experiences, which clearly shows that his aesthetics does attribute a central role to psychology. Like Brentano, Witasek succeeds in avoiding a form of subjectivism. Whether the presentation of an object arouses a positive or a negative emotion, he states, depends essentially on characteristics of the object. “In general it is due to the object itself, the way it looks, its constitution, whether it pleases or displeases” (Witasek, 1904, p. 342).<sup>37</sup> Unlike Brentano, however, Witasek discusses in detail the psychological factors (not related to aesthetics) that are responsible for the fact that, in a specific moment, the aesthetic experience of an individual spectator might be different, weaker, or even completely missing.

The psychologism in Witasek’s theory becomes quite explicit in his discussion of the nature of aesthetic norms, though:

The existence of the norm, i.e., the existence of the fact that one and the same object arouses in general the same aesthetic behaviour, has, in accordance with the principle “same causes, same effects” its grounds in the similarity of the psychological organization of different subjects. (Witasek, 1904, p. 306)<sup>38</sup>

Even though we should not put too much weight on this quote – after all, Witasek explicitly states that aesthetics is a discipline about aesthetic objects and experiences, and not about norms or values<sup>39</sup> – it shows clearly that in his *Aesthetics* he does adopt a form of psychologism with regards to the ontological question concerning the existence of aesthetic norms. More generally we can state that even though in his *Aesthetics* Witasek respects the distinction between content and object of a mental phenomenon, his aesthetics does attribute a central role to the notion of experience and a

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<sup>37</sup> My translation: “Es liegt im allgemeinen am Dinge selbst, an seinem Aussehen, seiner Beschaffenheit, ob es gefällt oder mißfällt.”

<sup>38</sup> My translation: “Das Bestehen der Norm, d.h. also, das Bestehen der Tatsache, daß ein und derselbe Gegenstand im allgemeinen gleiches ästhetisches Verhalten hervorruft, hat nach dem Satze ‘gleiche Ursachen, gleiche Wirkungen’ seinen Grund ersichtlich in der Gleichartigkeit der psychischen Organisation verschiedener Subjekte.”

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Witasek (1904, pp. 5f) and (1902).

study of the psychological mechanisms of the spectators, i.e., of human beings.

In the years that follow, Witasek does modify his position, though. In his article “Über ästhetische Objektivität” he explicitly discusses the role of psychologism in aesthetics. He begins with stating that recent mainstream in philosophy has emphasized the role of psychology, which has brought about a setback for what he calls *autonomous aesthetics*, i.e., theories that argue for the “transcendence of the (realm of the) aesthetic” and the objectivity of aesthetic values<sup>40</sup>, and favoured psychological and empirical approaches to aesthetics, “the mere subjectivity of the (realm of the) aesthetic seemed beyond question” (Witasek 1915, p. 87).<sup>41</sup> In this article he aims to show, however, that the view that beauty is an objective notion and that the realm of the aesthetic does have (some) autonomy with respect to the mental life of an individual human subject are *Kronprinzenwahrheiten*, i.e. truths that a crown prince, before assuming power, might challenge, but which, after having mounted the throne, he comes to give in – even though they might play a different role in his new regime. Witasek, thus, comes to reflect – and put into a new perspective – the importance of psychology for aesthetics.

His point of departure is the distinction between the act of judgment as a piece of psychological reality and the object that is judged. When it comes to the question of which of the two is of interest for aesthetics, he clearly opts for the latter – for it is the object that distinguishes the aesthetic judgment from other judgments. Moreover, Witasek suggests that the term “is beautiful” in the judgment “A is beautiful” does not mean that A arouses pleasure<sup>42</sup>, but rather refers to a property of an object A, which is completely in A and not relative to (the experiences of) a subject, and which can be grasped (it is *anschaulich erfassbar*).<sup>43</sup> Witasek, thus, gives up his view that beauty is a relative property; he rather compares the judgment “A is beautiful” to judgments concerning secondary qualities, like “this meadow is green”.

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Witasek 1915, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> My translation: “und die bloße Subjektivität des Ästhetischen schien außer Frage.”

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Witasek 1915, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Witasek 1915, p. 93.

According to Witasek, the bearers of aesthetic properties are – like those of secondary qualities – immanent objects, i.e., mental representations of real objects; they do not exist, but quasi-exist. He discusses various ways of how this thesis should be interpreted and which ontological consequences it implies and concludes that aesthetic properties are not – as one might suggest with secondary qualities – a sign for a different kind of property that might be inherent to the object and the cause for its appearing in this way. Witasek rather concludes:

The aesthetic quality is in the first place only immanent object and does not in and by itself imply any kind of transcendence. ... The aesthetic object is, therefore, merely immanent object, the thesis concerning aesthetic appearance gains in a completely unrestricted sense scientific justification. (Witasek, 1915, p. 198)<sup>44</sup>

In sum, we see that Witasek struggles with finding a reinterpretation of his psychological aesthetics that avoids the pitfalls of psychologism – insofar as it does not conceive of aesthetic properties as relational to aesthetic experiences – but, at the same time, continues to attribute to psychology a fundamental role in aesthetics.

... we can say that the (realm of the) aesthetic is of exclusively subjective nature, it roots merely in the subject. It has often been shown by psychological aesthetics that this does not imply that the (realm of the) aesthetic is prone to fall into arbitrariness and individual disorder [*Regellosigkeit*]. If the (realm of the) aesthetic is based on psychological laws, there is an aesthetic norm in the same way as there are psychological laws. And the possibility of differences of aesthetic values is guaranteed by the fact of the development of the psychological subject. (Witasek, 1915, pp. 199)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> My translation: “Das ästhetische Merkmal ist eben zunächst bloß immanenter Gegenstand und bedingt an und für sich in keinem Sinne irgendeine Transzendenz. ... Der ästhetische Gegenstand ist also ausschließlich immanenter Gegenstand, die Lehre vom ästhetischen Schein erhält damit in völlig uneingeschränktem Sinne wissenschaftliche Fundierung.”

<sup>45</sup> My translation: “In diesem Sinne kann man sagen, das Ästhetische ist ausschließlich subjektiver Natur, es wurzelt lediglich im Subjekt. Daß das Ästhetische damit nicht subjektiver Willkür und individueller Regellosigkeit verfällt, ist von der psychologischen Ästhetik oft schon gezeigt worden. Beruht das Ästhetische auf psychologischen Gesetzen, so gibt es ästhetische Norm in eben demselben Maße, in dem es allgemeingiltige psychologische Gesetze gibt. Und die Möglichkeit ästhetischer Wertunter-



#### 4. *Aesthetics, the Science of Beauty?*

In the preceding sections I have argued that psychology plays a central role in the aesthetic theories of both Brentano and Witasek and that both adopt a position that is very close to psychologism. In the concluding section of this paper I will discuss a tacit assumption that both philosophers seem to share, namely that the central notion of aesthetics is that of beauty. While the centrality of this notion might raise the plausibility of a psychological approach to aesthetics – after all, beauty can be grasped in perception – it also contains the danger that one focuses too strongly on this notion and ends up with developing a theory of beauty, rather than a theory of art.

Both philosophers seem to – or, in the case of Witasek, explicitly do – take “beauty” to be shorthand for all aesthetically relevant properties. Rather than defining works of art or providing criteria that allow us to distinguish them from ordinary objects, they focus on describing psychological mechanisms that allow us to experience beauty and at best show what objects are beautiful – independent of whether these objects are artefacts or not. This seems unsatisfactory, because there are many works of art – especially of contemporary art – that can hardly be considered “beautiful” and do not even aim at arousing pleasure in the spectator. Quite often we value works of art because they seek “to challenge, to disorient, to disrupt, to explore” (Elgin 2002, p. 12) to comment on the human condition, to offer new perspectives, or to invite us to reflect on our prejudices, etc.

Brentano does not seem to be aware that his conception of art might be too narrow. While he does not go so far as to reduce art to beauty, he explicitly states that it would be a mistake if an artist would not aim at producing beautiful objects. In a lecture in Vienna in 1892 he states:

In France there is a school of painters that reportedly takes it to be the purpose of art to show how ugly the world is. With some examples of modern poetry one comes to think that it rests on a similar conception. This would be a regrettable confusion. (Brentano 1988, p. 193)<sup>46</sup>

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schiede ist durch die Tatsache der Höherentwicklung des psychischen Subjektes verbürgt.”

<sup>46</sup> My translation: “In Frankreich gibt es eine Malerschule, von der man sagt, sie halte es für die Aufgabe der Kunst, zu zeigen, wie häßlich die Welt sei. Bei manchem Stück

While the experience of paintings that show how ugly the world is might not (directly) arouse pleasure in the spectator, however, these paintings might still be of high artistic value. With this I do not want to suggest that beauty is not an important aesthetic property; I merely aim to challenge the view that being beautiful is the only or the most important aesthetic property and that it is not the only, and not even a necessary goal of art to arouse pleasure in the spectator.

In his article “The Artworld” Arthur Danto argues that not every predicate can be meaningfully attributed or denied to an artwork; there is only a limited list of predicates that can. Even if we were to follow Brentano and Witasek in using “beautiful” as a shorthand for all properties that can be meaningfully attributed or denied to works of art, we could not account for the fact that this list is continuously undergoing modifications and enrichments: as Danto suggests, the important moments in the history of art, the moments of breakthrough, consist in adding a property to the list of those that are considered artistically relevant.<sup>47</sup> Doing so, however, the artist enriches the whole artworld, for the new property can be meaningfully attributed or denied to all works of art there are:

... suppose an artist determines that *H* shall henceforth be artistically relevant for his paintings. Then, in fact, both *H* and non-*H* become artistically relevant for *all* painting, and if his is the first and only painting that is *H*, every other painting in existence becomes non-*H*, and the community of paintings is enriched, together with the doubling of the available style opportunities. It is this retroactive enrichment of the entities in the artworld that makes it possible to discuss Raphael and De Kooning together, or Liechtenstein and Michelangelo. The greater the variety of artistically relevant predicates, the more complex the individual members of the artworld become, and the more one knows of the entire population of the artworld, the richer one’s experience with any of its members. (Danto 1964, pp. 583f)

This shows that Brentano’s strategy of focusing exclusively on beauty makes it difficult for him to account for artistic progress; moreover, he cannot account for the fact that the very notion of art has evolved over the century. Brentano’s notion of art, thus, is a static notion that does not allow

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moderner Poesie möchte man glauben, es läge ihm eine ähnliche Auffassung zugrunde. Das wäre eine beklagenswerte Verirrung.”

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Danto (1964, p. 584).

him to account for the dynamics that have characterized the artistic progress in all the history of art.

I doubt that Brentano would be moved by this critique. He could reply that every person who has developed a *correct* taste – even a person from the 15<sup>th</sup> century who, by some mysterious ways, gets to see the masterpieces of the twentieth century, but is completely ignorant about the developments that have taken place in the centuries in between – would experience all works of art as aesthetically valuable. One might even accuse the position that I am sketching of adopting a form of relativism or as giving in into the dictates of fashion and insist that aesthetic standards must be eternal; but this would, in my point of view, overlook the fact that like other forms of human endeavour, also art is evolving, and that today’s artists do not start from zero, but are building on the achievements of their predecessors.

Moreover, the problem that not all works of art aim at arousing pleasure in the spectators is not only related to artistic development or in our dealing with (for Brentano’s time) progressive artists that have the “purpose to show how ugly the world is”. We find it also in the context of a form of art that since ancient time was considered one of the most important and most sublime: tragedy. When watching *Antigone* or *Hamlet*, we witness (the representation of) events that do not (directly) arouse pleasure in us. Brentano is aware of this problem, which he discusses in his lecture “Das Schlechte als Gegenstand dichterischer Darstellung”.<sup>48</sup> He argues that we might find the topic to be of particular value, appreciate the artistic form, or like to be moved by the misfortunes of others. Alas, Brentano does not carefully analyze the psychological processes that are involved, but rather declares the phenomenon to be too complex for aesthetics.<sup>49</sup> This is regrettable not only

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<sup>48</sup> Reprinted in his 1988, pp.170–195.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Brentano 1988, p. 192: “In the same way as the single, ingenious work of art cannot possibly be explained in all its power by scientific analysis, also, and in particular, the specific life of a whole artistic genre cannot be elucidated in all its wealth by aesthetic analysis” (My translation: “Wie das einzelne geniale Kunstwerk durch keine wissenschaftliche Zergliederung jemals in seiner vollen lebendigen Kraft verständlich gemacht werden kann, so wird eben und noch weit weniger, das eigentümliche Leben einer ganzen Kunstgattung durch die ästhetische Analyse in dem Reichtum seiner Beziehungen klargelegt werden können.”)

because the psychological processes that allow us to appreciate tragedy are quite complex and at the same time quite enlightening<sup>50</sup>, but also because further analysis might have brought Brentano to reflect on some of the cornerstones of his aesthetic theory.

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<sup>50</sup> For an interesting analysis cf., for example, Feagin (1983).

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