

Providing for Aesthetic Experience

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1. Introduction

Aesthetic theories of art are those that tie art essentially to the aesthetic, typically by way of a necessary condition that makes reference to an aesthetically qualified kind (aesthetic experience, properties, objects, purposes, interest, value, and so on).¹ Such theories hold that a thing must meet the aesthetic condition in order to count as art. In this article, I will understand the aesthetic condition in terms of aesthetic experience, as other formulations can be paraphrased in such terms and objections to aesthetic theories stand out in starkest relief from them. By the phrase “aesthetic experience” I mean nominally the distinctively pleasurable, meaningful, and valuable type of experience associated closely, though not exclusively, with the appreciation of artworks. (For now this designation should suffice, although I will provide a more detailed account below.)

We often think of artworks as having the function, at least typically, of providing for aesthetic experience; they yield or are meant to yield experiences of this characteristic type. We speak of art causing, or eliciting, such experiences in an appropriately situated viewer, who has the wherewithal (attentiveness, understanding, responsiveness) to be so moved. As such, aesthetic theories reflect a common and intuitive view of what artworks are and how they function.

¹ Examples include George Schlesinger, “Aesthetic Experience and the Definition of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979), pp. 167-76; Monroe C. Beardsley, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art,” in *What Is Art?* ed. Hugh Curtler (New York: Haven, 1983), pp. 15-29; William Tolhurst, “Toward an Aesthetic Account of the Nature of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1984), pp. 261-69; P. N. Humble, “The Philosophical Challenge of Avant-garde Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24 (1984), pp. 119-28; Richard Lind, “The Aesthetic Essence of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992), pp. 117-29; James Anderson, “Aesthetic Concepts of Art,” in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 65-92; and Nick Zangwill, “Aesthetic Functionalism,” in *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley*, ed. Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 123-48.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

Against this view that art can be defined, even in part, aesthetically, critics have levied several key objections (the anti-art objection, the circularity objection, the bad-art objection, the many-roles objection, and the denied-aesthetic objection). It is because of these objections that, despite recent attempts to revive it,² the aesthetic approach remains largely in disrepute. An aesthetic theory of art, to prove successful, must answer these objections. My purpose is to do just that, by first proposing an aesthetic criterion for art and then defending it from these objections.

2. Two Types of Aesthetic Theory

In considering aesthetic theories of art, there is a crucial distinction which not only critics but also advocates often fail to appreciate sufficiently. An aesthetic theory might require, on the one hand, that artworks *actually* provide for aesthetic experience, and on the other, that they merely be *intended* so to provide. Consider the following definitions of art (*sans definiendum*), proposed by George Schlesinger and Monroe Beardsley, respectively: “an artifact which under standard conditions *provides* its percipient with aesthetic experience”³ (my emphasis); “something produced with the *intention* of giving it the capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest”⁴ (my emphasis). We might refer to these different commitments as aesthetic *actualism* and aesthetic *intentionalism*, respectively.⁵

Both definitions are held by critics as examples of the *same* species of aesthetic (sometimes “functionalist”) theory, and criticized on that basis,⁶ even though accounts like Schlesinger’s are radically different from those like

² See, e.g., Richard Shusterman, “The End of Aesthetic Experience,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), pp. 29-41; Anderson, “Aesthetic Concepts of Art”; Nick Zangwill, “Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), pp. 111-18; and Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

³ Schlesinger, “Aesthetic Experience and the Definition of Art,” p. 175.

⁴ Beardsley, “An Aesthetic Definition of Art,” p. 19.

⁵ For discussion along somewhat different lines, see Anderson, “Aesthetic Concepts of Art.” Zangwill, in “Aesthetic Functionalism,” offers a more or less hybrid actualist-intentionalist view.

⁶ See Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 52; and Robert Stecker, “Definition of Art,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 142. See also Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 35-43.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

Beardsley's. The difference is clear and crucial. An unintentionally effective work counts as art on Schlesinger's view but not on Beardsley's. Likewise, a really poor artwork may fail to provide for aesthetic experience despite intentions to the contrary, which would qualify it as art on Beardsley's view, but not on Schlesinger's. Critics of aesthetic theories often aim their objections—each counting far more persuasively against one than against the other type of theory—indiscriminately at both, thus equivocating on what aesthetic theories imply.

Before offering a specific aesthetic criterion to defend against the key objections to aesthetic theories generally, one added refinement is in order. Critics often overextend the intended scope of aesthetic conditions, whether actualist or intentionalist, beyond the pale of plausibility. Note that no artwork causes aesthetic experience for everybody or at all times; the greatest artwork leaves some critics cold (A. C. Bradley's infamously harsh critique of Shakespeare, for instance⁷). Note also that many works are intended to be appreciated, not by everybody, but only by the initiated few—often those with specialized knowledge (of works alluded to, art history, and so on). Consider the possible scope of the following articulations of the actualist (A) and intentionalist (I) conditions:

- (A): x is art $\rightarrow x$ provides for aesthetic experience.
- (I): x is art $\rightarrow x$ is intended to provide for aesthetic experience.

Critics of aesthetic theories often seem to believe that if *anyone* fails to find art pleasing, that fact alone falsifies (A), and that if anyone is not included in the class of the intended audience, that falsifies (I). Attributing such implications to aesthetic theories effectively turns them into straw men. We should interpret (A) as requiring only that x provide for *someone's* aesthetic experience, and likewise (I) as requiring only that x be intended to so provide for at least one person.

I shall defend a form of actualism, as articulated in (A), as a necessary condition for art. (A) seems innocuous on its face; however, critics of the aesthetic approach—and there are many—vehemently reject *any* aesthetic condition, whether (A)-like, (I)-like, or otherwise. Since the objections target (I) as well as (A) brands of aesthetic theory, I will also, in showing the viability of the aesthetic approach generally, discuss plausible ways an intentionalist might respond to these objections.

⁷ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Delhi: Atlantic, 2007), pp. 73 and 75.

3. The Proposed Criterion

The main thrust of the objections to most aesthetic theories is that they do not capture a necessary condition for art. But aesthetic theories have been criticized on other grounds as well. There is the concern that no aesthetic condition, even in conjunction with others (such as the artifactuality condition), can prove *sufficient* for art. Suppose we had a drug that produces aesthetic experience—call it *aesthetrix*.⁸ One might suppose that the very possibility of such a pharmaceutical must undermine any aesthetic theory of art. As an artifact that produces aesthetic experience and was designed for that purpose, *aesthetrix* stands as a clear counterexample to both Schlesinger-style (A) accounts and Beardsley-style (I) accounts of art, for the drug is not art, and yet it seems to count as art on either form of aesthetic theory.

A plausible aesthetic criterion must avoid this quandary. Now no one thinks that merely providing for aesthetic experience is sufficient for art. Some non-artworks (such as nautilus shells and sunsets) provide for aesthetic experience, and where intentionalists typically cite the absence of intent so to provide to handle such cases, actualists usually invoke the artifactuality constraint: to count as artwork a thing must be human-made, or better, an artifact, in a suitably broad sense to include both objects and events. We might include such items as driftwood art (and readymades) in the artwork class by identifying the relevant artifact as the *presentation* of the object to the artworld. What the *aesthetrix* case shows is only that the aesthetic criterion needs to be constrained appropriately.

Aesthetrix seems to count against the Schlesinger version of (A) because, in the standard case, the subject of aesthetic experience will also perceive the drug (seeing the pill before swallowing, the liquid before injecting, and so on). Perceiving *aesthetrix* in this sense obviously has nothing to do with the aesthetically pleasurable effects of the dose. But in art it is precisely perceptual engagement with a work that grounds aesthetic experience of it. To rule out the *aesthetrix* case, we might add a Dewey-style constraint on how aesthetic experience is provided for: specifically, that it must be provided for by perceptually available properties of the work.⁹ “Perceptually available” covers both works (like music) available *in* a sensory modality and works (like literature) available *through* a sensory modality (through vision, say, though the content is not visual). We can avoid the

⁸ See, e.g., Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 56. The *aesthetrix* case is related to, but distinct from, the case of a drug-like work of art, as in Jerrold Levinson, “Defining Art Historically,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979), p. 235; and Monroe C. Beardsley, “Redefining Art,” in *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. M. J. Wreen and D. M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 301-2.

⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 1-3.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

aesthetrix case, then, by specifying the connection between aesthetic experience and the way it is elicited: *An artwork is an artifact that provides for aesthetic experience via perceptually available properties.* This aesthetic criterion, incorporating (A) and similar to Schlesinger's style of actualism, is the one I propose to defend here.

No aesthetic theory would be complete without at least outlining a view of that kind of experience on which it lays so much stress. My account of aesthetic experience stands firmly in a significant tradition in aesthetics, a tradition including—though their views differ widely in crucial respects—the following concepts of aesthetic experience along with their associated proponents: the instructive delight in engaging emotionally cathartic representations (Aristotle); “equipoise” between formal and natural responses (Friedrich Schiller); the “fraternal union” of Apollo and Dionysus (Friedrich Nietzsche); a mingling of the perceptive and sensory pleasures (George Santayana); the special integration of various normal responses into “*an experience*” (John Dewey); the “synaesthesia” of intellectual and emotional responses (I. A. Richards); attentive, unified, and complete pleasurable experience (Beardsley). This tradition may be viewed as arising from Aristotle's rejection of Plato's view of the fundamental, principled, irreconcilable (but superable) antagonism between reason and emotion.

Plato's account strikingly evokes certain work in evolutionary neuropsychology according to which, when the intellect and emotions are engaged—and not severally or jointly quieted—mental life is typified by near constant conflict between the intellectual cortex and the appetitive/emotional diencephalon.¹⁰ Such conflicts include, for example, wanting to do one thing but believing one ought to do something else. Part of what is so phenomenologically special and psychologically valuable about aesthetic experience, in my view, is that it exhibits not only the absence but also the contrary of ordinary mental life so typified: the coherent, mutually reinforcing engagement of both the intellect and the emotions, of both the cortex and the limbic system—*resolutive* experience, I call it.¹¹ Although Plato does not countenance this type of experience, the tradition in theorizing about aesthetic experience cited above, and extending from Aristotle to the present day, certainly does. For this tradition it is particularly edifying that some recent work in the relatively new field of neuroaesthetics dovetails with it rather remarkably. Of particular interest is the hypothesis that underlying all aesthetic experience is what is known as the peak shift effect, that is, roughly,

¹⁰ A. T. W. Simeons, *Man's Presumptuous Brain* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), pp. 40-59.

¹¹ Jason Holt, “A Comprehensivist Theory of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996), p. 427.

the tendency to respond more intensely (cortically and subcortically) to “exaggerated” versions of stimuli we normally discriminate.¹²

That said, I should mention some of the assumptions on which I will proceed, as well as certain trends endemic to critics of aesthetic theories. I assume, for instance, that the essentialist program (the attempt to formulate a set of severally necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for art) is a worthwhile project. If not, then at least my efforts will be serviceable, ultimately, as further confirmation of this common-enough suspicion. I also assume that actualism (like intentionalism, for that matter) lays claim to at least a *prima facie* plausibility, especially in light of the problems besetting its competitors. By and large, critics of actualism tend to be unduly skeptical of the aesthetic in any sense, overly impressed by the *avant-garde* (or what *was* the *avant-garde*), and more so by its apparent implications for aesthetic theory.

4. The Anti-Art Objection

The objections to actualism that are my principal focus here purport to show that it is not necessary for art that a work provide for aesthetic experience. Following Stephen Davies, the suspicion underwriting the first objection is that at some stage in the history of art it became possible for art to slough off its original aesthetic function, presuming it had one, and still count as art.¹³ In particular, it is alleged that we already have examples of such art among *avant-garde*, Dadaist work, so-called anti-art, the usual paradigm of which is Marcel Duchamp’s readymade *Fountain*, a urinal appropriated for exhibition in a gallery and pseudonymously signed “R. Mutt.” Allegedly, the entire point of such anti-art is that it flouts, and was intended to flout, aesthetic expectations and values. Most viewers find such work baffling to say the least, devoid of aesthetic merit, and this is usually taken to mean that the aesthetic condition, ironically for art’s sake, has been circumvented.

There are a number of moves the actualist can make in addressing such alleged counterexamples. First, we might simply dismiss the claim that

¹² V. S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, “The Science of Art: A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (1999), p. 18. The notion that all art is caricature seems untenable. How could photorealistic painting count as caricature? The Ramachandran-Hirstein proposal can be interpreted much more charitably, however: A photorealistic painting, by definition, does not caricature the thing depicted, but it does provide what may be called a (fixed) caricature of ordinary (dynamic) experience. In the same way, abstract works that emphasize particular properties—color, texture, shape—caricature ordinary experience in that these properties are not normally emphasized, highlighted, isolated, or framed.

¹³ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, p. 38. Davies refers to the target aesthetic theories as “functionalist.”

Reason Papers Vol. 32

such cases are genuine artworks. While this is a consistent move, the more such cases accrue—and they have accrued significantly—and the more they are so regarded as art by artworld cognoscenti, the less plausible the maneuver seems and the more ad hoc; hence aesthetic theorists, contra Davies, need not deny that such cases are genuine artworks (although a number certainly do deny it). A more contentious line is to say that such cases point at most to minor imperfections in an otherwise useful theory of art, successful in the vast majority of cases.¹⁴

Admitting such cases as artworks and accepting that they strictly fail to meet the aesthetic condition, the actualist might explain their inclusion in the class of “art” by citing resemblance relations to particular works that meet the condition or kinds of works (i.e., art forms) that usually do. Aside from the general problems associated with resemblance accounts (everything resembles everything else in some respect, and salient resemblances seem to require further explanation that such accounts eschew), the actualist would have to admit that the artwork class is heterogeneous through and through, for whether a work really meets the condition or merely resembles (in the right way) something that does, the piece may count as art. The essentialist project here has defeated itself.

A more plausible tack for the actualist is to accept such cases as artworks and hold that, despite appearances, they meet the actualist condition.¹⁵ Although the urinal used by Duchamp for *Fountain* presumably was not intentionally created to provide for aesthetic experience, and even if Duchamp himself intended, in presenting the urinal to the artworld, to *frustrate* rather than foster aesthetic experience, this does not mean that *Fountain* in fact fails to provide for aesthetic experience. While standard opinion would have it that *Fountain* does not so provide, some people find it to be a delightfully ironic piece, not terribly profound, perhaps, but appreciable nonetheless. It seems that such works *can* indeed provide for aesthetic satisfaction, although admittedly they do so in non-standard ways (whether they ought to is another matter), and that it is in virtue of being ironic in the way it is and commenting on sculpture in the way that it does, that a work like *Fountain* can so provide.¹⁶ Avant-garde and conceptual art can provide for aesthetic experience, even if its way of doing so is less tied to the sensible world than is the case with more traditional artworks. Such properties count as aesthetic in a derivative sense, since they underlie the

¹⁴ For further discussion, see Zangwill, “Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?”

¹⁵ As is suggested by Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35 and 62-63.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

aesthetic experience that such works provide, and are identified via such provision. If these properties are not aesthetic properties, it is not properties per se, but experience alone that puts the *aesthetic* in aesthetic theories of art.

To deny that one could appreciate such works aesthetically in any sense is either psychologically implausible or artistically prejudicial. The untransfigured urinal does not lend itself to such appreciation, and many people simply fail to appreciate *Fountain* post-transfiguration. But this is not terribly significant, as many artworks are not immediately accessible, certainly not to everyone, and this indicates only, as we already knew, that an audience often needs certain degrees and kinds of background knowledge, and perhaps also to be in a certain frame of mind, in order to derive aesthetic experience from seeing some work. What makes a work avant-garde is not that it fails to provide for aesthetic experience at all, but that it provides for aesthetic experience in an unusual way—an unorthodoxy to which many members of an audience will naturally be unaccustomed, and so by default relatively unreceptive.

One concern with this maneuver is that, if such a work as *Fountain* provides for aesthetic experience, it is not clear how anything could then fail to provide for aesthetic experience. Suppose we set aside for the moment the notion of “correct regard,” which is particularly difficult to elucidate in any case. Limiting ourselves to perceptible things, it seems that anything could potentially provide for aesthetic experience when viewed in certain conditions, whether standard, somewhat peculiar, or downright bizarre. But while anything *could* provide for aesthetic experience, most things, as a matter of fact, do not. (This is part of the motivation for suggesting that while the aesthetic condition should be retained, it should be retained in a weaker form, disburdened of some of the work to which many would put it.) Bringing back the notion of correct regard, suppose that *Fountain* does, or at least can, provide for aesthetic experience when viewed correctly. (Given variations in human psychology, I take it that regarding a work correctly will be insufficient for having an aesthetic experience of it.) Most things will not provide for aesthetic experience when viewed correctly. Presumably, *Fountain* does, or at least can, provide for aesthetic experience owing in part to the context (being in a gallery) or theoretical background that informs the viewing, differentiating *Fountain* from its indiscernible counterparts. This claim does not imply that it is the institutional or historical context that makes the work a work of art in the first place, although these may be necessary for such works. Either might make a work a salient candidate for aesthetic appreciation without making it art per se. (Usually, by that point the artist has appreciated the work aesthetically already.) If *Fountain* fails so to provide when viewed “correctly,” this does not rule out that it so provides *simpliciter*, which is all that the aesthetic view strictly requires. An aesthetic theorist need

Reason Papers Vol. 32

not be committed to the view that a work of art that provides for aesthetic experience *ought* so to provide. (This matter will be picked up again below.)

It is for the intentionalist that such cases seem particularly difficult, since on the one hand, the urinal Duchamp presented was probably *not* created with the intention to provide for aesthetic experience, and on the other, Duchamp's intentions in presenting it were avowedly, at least to all appearances, anti-aesthetic. It is for exactly this reason that intentionalists such as Beardsley deny that such candidates are genuine artworks, but the intentionalist has some maneuvering room here. For one thing, the urinal itself is not the work, the transfigured urinal is, the urinal-as-transfigured, -as-presented-to-the-artworld. Indeed, *Fountain* is really (arguably) the presentation, by Duchamp, of the urinal to the artworld, in which case the non-aesthetic intentions behind the urinal's manufacture are irrelevant. And what of Duchamp's "anti-aesthetic" intentions? The intentionalist might observe that Duchamp no doubt derived, and intended to derive, an ironic satisfaction from the *succès de scandale* of *Fountain*. It may be argued, then, that Duchamp tried to provide for *his own* aesthetic satisfaction, not only in his choice of materials, but also by using them for shock value, to outrage others by frustrating their hopes to find aesthetic experience in more standard ways.

In order to make this maneuver work, the intentionalist would have to show such ironic satisfaction to constitute, or to be compatible with, genuine aesthetic experience. While Duchamp's satisfaction probably could not count as disinterested, it might nonetheless count, in some sense, as serving his aesthetic interest. Suppose we interpret *Fountain* as the *situation* of Duchamp-presenting-a-urinal-to-the-artworld-as-an-artwork, in which he intended to satisfy his aesthetic interest (perversely, no doubt) *via* the ironic satisfaction of the anti-aesthetic act. On this reading, while the presentation itself was motivated by anti-aesthetic intentions, this is perfectly consistent with Duchamp himself finding the outcome aesthetically piquant (at a meta-level). This is at least somewhat plausible, and although we might never know enough about Duchamp's psychology to confirm such a hypothesis, it does suggest that the infamous readymade may not be the counterexample to intentionalism that it is often taken to be. But even if intentionalism ultimately falls to the anti-art objection (which now seems to require the elusive knowledge that Duchamp did not have such a meta-intention), its actualist cousin remains relatively unscathed.

5. The Circularity Objection

It seems that anti-art can quite plausibly be construed as meeting the actualist condition. The second objection, though, also owing to Stephen Davies, applies even if works like *Fountain* can be so understood. Such works are still important, in Davies's view, since they illustrate how art is

Reason Papers Vol. 32

conceptually prior to providing for aesthetic experience.¹⁷ If a work like *Fountain* so provides, it does so in part, unlike its untransfigured counterpart, because it has been transfigured. The aesthetic here depends on art, not vice versa, so even if actualism is extensionally adequate (i.e., gets the cases right), it still gets things backwards, and so is ultimately circular.

Here is a reconstruction of Davies's argument:¹⁸

- (1) Actualism implies that something will count as art in part because it provides for aesthetic experience.
- (2) Something provides for aesthetic experience in virtue of its aesthetic properties.
- (3) A thing's aesthetic properties are those relevant to interpreting it as art.
- (4) That a work like *Fountain* is art is relevant to interpreting it, in contrast to its untransfigured counterpart, as art.
- (5) Thus, providing for aesthetic experience depends on arthood, not vice versa.
- (6) Therefore, aesthetic actualism is circular.

Davies seems to take this objection to apply both to actualism and intentionalism as distinguished here, but it is not particularly problematic for the latter. An intentionalist like Beardsley, whom Davies explicitly targets, could simply say (although this was not Beardsley's actual take on *Fountain*) that one ingredient of the urinal's transfiguration is the intention that it provide, in some sense, for aesthetic experience, and this intention is necessary for art even if being art in the first place is necessary for a work like *Fountain* *actually* to provide for aesthetic experience.

The standard actualist reply is to deny (2), at least as Davies construes it.¹⁹ On such a reading, Davies thinks the actualist is committed to the view that *all* of a thing's aesthetic properties figure into its providing for aesthetic experience, and by extension its arthood. If we are forced to accept that being art at all is an aesthetic property, then the actualist can simply deny that all of a work's aesthetic properties figure into its arthood. That *Fountain* is about the artworld, is seemingly ironic, and provokes questions, say, about the history of sculpture—these are the properties that help *Fountain* provide for aesthetic experience and elevate the urinal to arthood. Being art is not. In

¹⁷ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁸ This is adapted from Anderson, "Aesthetic Concepts of Art," p. 75.

¹⁹ Such a reply is suggested in Stecker, *Artworks*, pp. 62-63; and Anderson, "Aesthetic Concepts of Art," pp. 76-77.

fact, we may well doubt whether being art is an aesthetic property at all, except perhaps in the trivial way that knowing that something is art relieves one of the possible burden of having to determine as much.

Thus, while the standard rejection of (2) is presumably sufficient, we might also plausibly object to (3) and (4), which seem to presuppose (and thus commit the actualist, if not Davies himself, to) the controversial view that aesthetic properties, those relevant to interpreting something as art, attach strictly to artifacts (more strictly still, to art) and not, for instance, to beautiful things in nature: sunsets, nautilus shells, erosion patterns, and so on, except perhaps in a derivative sense. A more plausible view would be that aesthetic properties are those relevant to providing for aesthetic experience, or perhaps those that are relevant to interpreting something as if it *were* art. Naturally, we need not deny sunsets and nautilus shells original (i.e., non-derivative) aesthetic properties to exclude them from the class of artworks.

6. The Bad-Art Objection

A longstanding objection to actualism concerns its apparent collapse of the fact/value distinction. If part of what it takes to be art at all is that a work manages to provide for aesthetic experience, then in virtue of such success, any bona fide artwork will have at least some aesthetic value, however minimal. While this maps well onto the evaluative sense of art in certain approbative predications (as in “*That’s a work of art!*”), it appears to leave anything like a purely classificatory, descriptive sense of “art” nowhere. For this reason, actualism may seem to fail to provide the foundational sort of theory that we are really after—a theory of *art*. In its more recent guises, the objection runs something like this: Intuitively, there are some artworks devoid of aesthetic merit, which do not satisfy aesthetic interest. They are thoroughly bad pieces. On the actualist view, though, any work that counts as art is *not* devoid of aesthetic merit. Thus, actualism is false.²⁰

It should be noted that despite certain allegations to the contrary (e.g., Davies’s critique of Beardsley²¹), intentionalist theories of art are immune to this objection. A work may have been created with the intention that it provide for aesthetic experience without that intention in any way being fulfilled. (Beardsley was quite explicit about this commitment, and it is a mystery why Davies criticizes him on this basis.) In such a case, the intention to produce the work is fulfilled but the intention to have it produce aesthetic experience is not. Bad art poses no problem here.

²⁰ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, p. 76; and Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 39.

²¹ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, pp. 62-77.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

The actualist can adopt several different strategies in responding to the bad-art objection. One is simply to bite the bullet and insist that “art” properly has only a value-laden sense. The motivation for such a move might be to preserve the straightforward account of aesthetic value so often prized by actualists. To account for the intuition that there are thoroughly bad works, the actualist might say a number of things, for instance, that such works count as art by dint of resemblance-relations borne by effective works, although here again we abandon essentialism. Alternatively, it might be urged that the merit of bad works, while real, is negligible, and so for practical purposes only, if not in truth, nil. Discounting the statistically negligible in this sense is not an arbitrary matter but, in fact, a principled one. Another point is that bad works—really, really *bad* works (the poetry of William McGonagall comes to mind)—might be seen as succeeding, on some level, in spite of themselves, because of their very badness, almost as if they’re so bad, they’re good—that is, aesthetically appreciable at a meta-level for their thoroughgoing first-order badness. Especially in such cases as McGonagall’s, it is somewhat intuitive that perfectly awful works satisfy the aesthetic interest in some sense, often in stark contrast with the artist’s intentions. McGonagall’s verse is very amusing, albeit unintentionally, and it certainly sells well. Still, it would be difficult to justify this view. Since I am not claiming that it is true, much less staking much on the claim, perhaps it is best left alone. We might observe, even so, that thoroughly bad works also serve to contrast with, and thus heighten our appreciation of, good art, and so do provide for a kind of appreciation, not only in themselves but also, indirectly, of other work.

One may doubt whether such lines of reply will succeed, although they might nonetheless merit further inquiry. Some artworks, it would seem, merely leave us cold, are not ironically appreciable, and need not necessarily figure into our appreciation of quality work. Even if they did, this is at best a Procrustean form of what most actualists intend. Still, the notion of being practically devoid of aesthetic merit if not in truth has a certain degree of plausibility, echoing to a certain extent the idea that bad works *merely* serve a function while good works serve it *well*. It seems that thoroughly bad works are akin to, say, thoroughly bad can openers, the successful use of which causes too much strain and bother, or the doorstop that must precariously be balanced to do its job and is easy to dislodge. While such things work, they do not work well. The sensible thing may be to revise one’s preferences (not bothering with the art, going without tuna, letting the door close) or procure items that work well to use instead (better art, a better can opener, a better doorstop). A threshold problem may be looming here, but this may indicate little more than that the working/working well distinction is a somewhat vague one, as is the bald/hirsute distinction or the red/orange distinction.

Another, perhaps more radical move is to abandon the unnecessary link between something’s providing for aesthetic experience and its being of

aesthetic value. No doubt aesthetic experience is of psychological value, and can be had in the absence of anything that merits such response. Consider, then, different positions on the metaphysical status of aesthetic value. If we are realists, and suppose such values to be mind-independent, a work may provide for aesthetic experience even if it ought not to as a matter of fact. If instead we suppose aesthetic norms to be embodied by something like David Hume's standard of taste,²² in this case too a work may so provide in ways not sanctioned by the standard. From a relativist perspective, a bad work is one that, say, leaves *me* cold, though it may still count as art (objectively) because, as matter of fact, it works for someone else. The only real problem here would be if we had a democratic "standard" of value somewhere in between Hume's and the relativist's, in which case a work's effectiveness for anyone at any time would count as some measure of aesthetic value. But not only is such a view implausible on its face, it would seem readily handled by one of the responses suggested above (biting the bullet, the working/working well distinction, discounting the negligible, or some combination of these).

The intentionalist is still immune to the bad-art objection, and anyone inclined to press for a truly democratic standard of aesthetic value has to overcome a rather heavy burden of proof.

7. The Many-Roles Objection

The next objection turns on the idea that art has a great variety of functions and these functions evolve over time. We might cite the fact that art had a much more religious function in the Middle Ages than it does in the more secularized artworld of today, that art tends to be more politically and socially conscious than it used to be, that certain art forms, like painting, which once had the function of representing the world, have come, in more or less recent times, to admit of other purposes, as is seen in such traditions as abstract expressionism. If art has such ever-evolving functions, it would seem that no single function, such as providing for aesthetic experience, is essential.²³ Any function one might point to as plausibly essential in point of fact or principle might come off as exceptionable. Indeed, if providing for aesthetic experience seems essential to art, this is because other comparably plausible functions, such as expressing emotion or presenting formally interesting stimuli, are being ignored.

It should be obvious that this objection targets both actualist and intentionalist species of aesthetic theory. In terms of the dynamic pluralist

²² David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, and Ronald Roblin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 242-53.

²³ Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 50.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

picture offered here, artists' intentions and purposes would seem no less varying, no less evolving, than the panoply of psychological and cultural roles played by artwork post-production. It should also be clear that this view is substantially correct in character if not in implication. It cannot be denied that artists' creative intentions and the further purposes for which they create, the techniques they employ and the styles they exhibit, the media they use and the manners of use, the character of their work and its repercussions, both psychological and cultural, are all subject to great variation and change over time.

The burden on the actualist is to account for these seemingly obvious facts in a way that staves off the apparent implication that art has no essential function. As it turns out, this is not a particularly onerous task. Providing for aesthetic experience is multiply realizable if anything is. In implementing the aesthetic, there are obviously going to be various ways of getting the job done, different inputs (conditions of creation) yielding different outputs (consequences of creation), even if at some abstract level the conditions and consequences are uniform. This is so even if we limit ourselves to a single aesthetic property (one purely formal property, say). While artworks may function in many ways which have nothing to do with their being art (e.g., being used as doorstops), the variety of functions they have *qua* art will be variations in the *proaesthetic* means to providing for aesthetic experience, or the *paraesthetic* effects of such provision, if there is indeed such variety. Suppose a poet expresses emotion in writing a poem that garners critical praise, while a painter exhibits a formally interesting canvas that fetches a staggering price from an appreciative collector. Variation in these scenarios is a matter not of not providing for aesthetic experience, but rather in the *proaesthetic* means (expressivist or formalist) and in the *paraesthetic* effects (cachet versus wealth) of such provision.

Of course, I am giving the objection the benefit of the doubt here. The point is not that there *is* such variety in, say, what I am calling the *proaesthetic* means, but rather that if there were such variety, as the objection suggests there is, this would not entail that the aesthetic condition fails. The only implication would be that there are various ways to get done the same basic job of providing for aesthetic experience.

8. The Denied-Aesthetic Objection

The last objection I will deal with in any detail is that while actualism posits aesthetic experience as what is provided for by art, there is no such thing as aesthetic experience, nothing distinctively aesthetic about experiences so labeled. At the core of the objection is the notion that aesthetic experience is at best a heterogeneous kind, ultimately unreal. There are two prongs to this objection. First, it has been claimed that while a lot of art provides audiences with some experiences that involve some measure of

Reason Papers Vol. 32

emotional and cognitive—one might say intellectual—response, some nominally aesthetic experiences appear to be of a purely sensuous nature (as when one appreciates the mere texture of a sculpture, say).²⁴ Similarly, it has been claimed that alongside genuinely appreciative experiences, aesthetic experience may include mere detection of or attention to certain properties of a work (formal, expressive, aesthetic) without concomitant appreciation.²⁵

Second, it has been claimed that with most aesthetic experiences, the intellectual and emotional responses involved vary too widely for there to be anything common and peculiar to the class.²⁶ I will defend the concept of aesthetic experience as a uniform, genuine kind from the somewhat plausible, but ultimately answerable, suggestion that aesthetic experience is too varied for this to be the case.

Skepticism about the aesthetic generally is elaborated, it seems, from persuasive critiques of such posits as an aesthetic mode of perception, the aesthetic attitude, and a distinct aesthetic faculty. Aesthetic experience need not, however, be cashed out in such tendentious ways. The irony here is that many of those who object to the aesthetic in any sense, on the grounds that it is a disjunctive kind (and so arguably, in a sense, not a *real* kind), are happy to give disjunctive but avowedly realist theories of art (where a kind—*artwork* in this case—is held to be real even though there are alleged to be no necessary and sufficient conditions for it). The problem, if it is a problem, applies equally to both or to neither.

It should be clear that this objection poses less of an immediate problem for intentionalism. After all, one can intend to create a work that provides for aesthetic experience even if, as a matter of fact, there is no such thing, just as one can intend to hunt unicorns, worship Odin, or discover the last digit in π . But there is a difficulty lurking in the wings. As intentionalism is consistent with anti-realism about aesthetic experience, it might turn out that in order to make art, or in order to do so rationally, artists must never be disabused of the “beautiful lie” (rather than noble lie) that such experiences exist.

Turning to actualism, in responding to the claim that some aesthetic experiences are purely sensuous, we might maintain either that such experiences are not in any strict sense aesthetic, or that they are not purely sensuous. We might echo Immanuel Kant and insist that these pleasures are

²⁴ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, p. 59; and Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 37.

²⁵ Noël Carroll, “Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000), p. 207.

²⁶ Davies, *Definitions of Art*, pp. 59-60; and Stecker, *Artworks*, p. 36.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

too base to take the stamp of genuine aesthetic experience.²⁷ Aesthetic experience is something we often value over and above the purely sensuous. For the sake of the aesthetic we often forgo the instant gratification of the sensuous. Another tack is to claim that it is not aesthetic but purely sensuous experience that is the fiction. As pleasurable, sensuous experience involves the emotions, and so seemingly must also involve subconscious cognition, as when figures and faces and shapes generally exhibit the golden ratio, which we are more or less hardwired to find attractive, irrespective of whether such knowledge is ever made explicit.

Even so, the term “aesthetic” is sometimes used—elastically—to underscore the delight we sometimes take in certain sensations for their own sake. Misuse of the term sometimes involves confusing the character of the object of experience with that of the experience itself. One can experience artwork, even pleurably, without the experience having to have an aesthetic character at all (think of nude studies). An experience *of* an aesthetic object, or even of its aesthetically relevant properties, need not be an aesthetic experience. Sensuous experience of artwork, or detecting and attending to features that would be relevant to its active appreciation, might in fact lead to, accompany, or be part of aesthetic experience, but it might just as well not, and so its potential involvement in aesthetic experience does not imply that there is anything aesthetic about such sensuous, attentive, or detective experience on its own.

As for the problem of variety, I will take an example that is oversimplified but nonetheless illustrative. Suppose a tragedy makes me sad and makes me think seriously about dire fate, while a comedy makes me happy and makes me think lightheartedly about lucky coincidence. What could these experiences possibly have in common? Again, we might follow Kant, according to whom, very roughly, aesthetic experience consists in free play between the faculties of the imagination and the understanding, regardless of the *content* of either of these faculties.²⁸ In terms of this discussion, while my tragedy-response and my comedy-response may have nothing in common intellectually or emotionally, this does not mean that the two have nothing peculiarly aesthetic in common. Not only do they both involve the intellect and the emotions but, more strikingly, their variety in content does not rule out the possibility that in both cases there is the same type of *relation* between intellect and emotion, one that overarches admittedly variable content. Above I characterized the relation, and the experience, in terms of the *resolution* of conflict between intellect and emotion, not the

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), sec. 7, pp. 31-32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 9, p. 62.

Reason Papers Vol. 32

quelling of either, but the coherent engagement of both. If mental life is characterized by such conflict typically, this would help explain the psychological value of art.²⁹

What I am suggesting here is that at the appropriate level of abstraction, there is something common and peculiar to the class of aesthetic experiences. At the very least I have shown that this particular objection does not suffice to show that such a theory of aesthetic experience cannot be defended. Sensuous experience can be dismissed as non-aesthetic or as implicitly impure, whereas detecting or attending to aesthetic properties, though clearly *of* the aesthetic, are insufficient for aesthetic experience. Plus, judicious abstraction to common and peculiar relations between mental faculties takes care of the problem of variable content. Thus a univocal, robust notion of aesthetic experience can be preserved.

9. Conclusion

Critics and advocates alike might see what I have attempted here as taking the teeth out of aesthetic theories by delegating less work to the aesthetic condition than is standard, suggesting that we might have to abandon the erstwhile strong link between actualism and aesthetic (though not psychological) value. But abandoning this link would only be anathema to the aesthetic approach in general if the value of aesthetic experience were not significantly bound up with human psychology, and if human psychology were not sufficiently varied to allow for different permissible (if not all strictly correct) responses to art, or relatedly if one could infer something about the objective value of art from the simple fact that someone finds it valuable in a certain way (this simple fact nonetheless being necessary, according to the actualist, for art). Such a condition is in concert with the aesthetic approach in general, not only for preserving the link between art and the aesthetic, but also for suggesting (if not implying) the form a reasonable (if reductive) account of aesthetic value might take. In its most defensible form, actualism does less work than otherwise, but in avoiding the most virulent attacks on aesthetic theories, it does enough.

I have proposed an aesthetic criterion for art motivated by a defense of the (A) condition (actualism) from the key—and often thought devastating—objections levied against aesthetic theories. These objections, I argue, can successfully be parried without compromising the objectives of the aesthetic approach to defining art. At least none of the objections seems now to have scored a very palpable hit.

²⁹ Holt, “A Comprehensivist Theory of Art,” p. 427.

Reason Papers Vol. 32