

## IN DEFENCE OF EXTREME FORMALISM ABOUT INORGANIC NATURE: REPLY TO PARSONS

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I defend extreme formalism about inorganic nature against arguments put forward by Glenn Parsons. I begin by laying out the general issue over aesthetic formalism, and I describe the position of extreme formalism about inorganic nature. I then reconsider Ronald Hepburn's beach/seabed example. Next I discuss the notions of function in play in our thinking about inorganic nature. And lastly I consider Parsons's flooding river example. I conclude that extreme formalism about inorganic nature is safe from Parsons's arguments.

### I. EXTREME AND MODERATE FORMALISM

MODERATE formalism lies between two extremes. On one extreme is extreme formalism, according to which the aesthetic value of something is entirely 'internal' to it, in the sense that it does not at all depend on its *history* or *context*.<sup>1</sup> On the other extreme is anti-formalism, according to which, the aesthetic value of a thing always (or mostly) depends on its history or context. The extreme formalist position was advanced (for visual art) by Clive Bell and Roger Fry at the beginning of the twentieth century, and (for music) it was advanced by Eduard Hanslick in the middle of the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> but it has not been very popular since then. Anti-formalism dominates contemporary aesthetics, particularly in the United States. (Examples would be Arthur Danto and Kendall Walton.<sup>3</sup>) The right view, I think, falls between these extremes. According to moderate formalism, many aesthetic judgements make essential reference to history or context, and many do not.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By a thing's history, I shall mean its origins, or how it came into existence, rather than its history, while it has existed. For simplicity, I shall ignore the fact that the microphysical nature of a thing is also aesthetically irrelevant for a formalist.

<sup>2</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913); Roger Fry, *Transformations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918); Edward Hanslick, *on the Musically Beautiful* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981); Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review*, (1970).

<sup>4</sup> I develop moderate formalism in chapters 4–8 of my *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 2001).

Moderate formalism joins forces with extreme formalism in complaining vociferously that anti-formalism misses out on an important part of our aesthetic lives, in which our aesthetic thought and experience is independent of our knowledge of a thing's history or context. The rather intellectual activity of slotting things under categories and experiencing them in the light of those categories has its place, but it can be overdone. There is also a place for a more naïve or raw appreciation. The sort of hyper-theoretical picture of understanding the arts that emerges particularly in the writings of Arthur Danto, for example, and those who follow him, is, I think, unhealthy and needs opposing. We need to recover our aesthetic innocence. Or at least some of it.

If it is said that contemporary cutting-edge avant-garde art has a sophisticated theoretical dimension and lacks a purely formal aesthetic one, I reply that even if this were true (which it isn't, being a vast exaggeration), aestheticians should not, in Monroe Beardsley's apt phrase, be so *utterly spineless* as to make that phenomenon a pivot around which the whole of aesthetic theory turns.<sup>5</sup> Given the irritatingly complacent way that some anti-formalists appeal to the avant garde, it would be natural and perhaps virtuous to be tempted to espouse extreme formalism. Nevertheless, the truth seems to be moderate formalism, even if that truth seems a little dull and sensible by comparison with extreme formalism.

We have a battle, then, between intellectualist anti-formalists and philistine formalists. Although moderate formalism occupies what I think of as the sensible middle ground, I think that there is a lot *more* truth in the extreme formalism of those like Bell, Fry, and Hanslick than in their over-intellectual anti-formalist opponents. For I think that the formal aspect of our aesthetic lives is more basic than the non-formal aspect. One aesthetic form of life is parasitic on the other. The raw, naïve, uncultivated sensibility, which responds to what delights the eye or ear, without knowledge of the history or context of what it is that provokes delight, is the basis on which sophisticated category-dependent aesthetic understanding is built. The sophisticated aesthetic sensibility has humble roots and should not forget them. Sophistication is something we can attain only from naïvety.

Still, for all that, my view is moderate formalism: both forms of aesthetic appreciation are fine in their own way. My defence of moderate formalism is a plea for open-mindedness and tolerance. Hence my campaign in the face of the anti-formalism hegemony.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Monroe Beardsley, 'An Aesthetic Theory of Art', reprinted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). See also Nick Zangwill, 'Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, Kant was also a moderate formalist, who opposes extreme formalism when he distinguished free and dependent beauty in §16 of the *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1928). It is bizarre that Kant gets classified as a formalist.

However, one area where I am extreme and immoderate is the aesthetics of inorganic nature. I defended extreme formalism about inorganic nature in my paper 'Formal Natural Beauty'.<sup>7</sup> There I go the whole way to a view like the one that Bell, Fry, and Hanslick held about visual art and music. I am pleased that Glenn Parsons has advanced some interesting criticisms of this view in this journal.<sup>8</sup> Here I shall reply to his criticisms. The comments I will make will probably not resolve our differences, but will, I hope, focus them more sharply.

Parsons makes three moves against my defence of extreme formalism about inorganic nature. First, he contests my treatment of Ronald Hepburn's famous beach/seabed example. Second, he contests my notion of function. And third, he claims that the functions of inorganic natural things, as he understands these 'functions', is sometimes of aesthetic significance. I address each of these points in turn.

## II. HEPBURN'S BEACH/SEABED

I am somewhat sceptical about the use of examples in philosophy as an important argumentative strategy. They are usually not very effective because those who have signed up to different theories tend to give different interpretations of the examples. This is the case with many of Hepburn's examples. Some might think that it is a bad thing if it turns out that we lack an example-led way of prosecuting the issue, for perhaps an intractable issue is not a genuine issue. But I am more optimistic. I think that the fact that theoretical differences lead to first-order differences shows how healthily continuous with first-order aesthetic issues are our apparently abstruse theoretical differences. It gives one confidence that what we are considering is not some philosopher's word-game but a substantive matter.

In Hepburn's most influential example, we imagine walking along a stretch of sand by the shore which we assume is a beach and which we think of as having a 'wild glad emptiness'; but on learning that the stretch of sand is in fact not a beach but a seabed we revise our judgement and think that it has a 'disturbing weirdness'.<sup>9</sup> This example is supposed to elicit anti-formalist intuitions and thus support anti-formalism about the aesthetics of inorganic nature.

By way of reply, I suggested that the stretch of sand is indeed wildly and gladly empty considered in itself, but that it is *also* disturbingly weird when considered as part of a temporal whole in which the stretch of sand is submerged at other times. In

<sup>7</sup> Nick Zangwill, 'Formal Natural Beauty', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (2001); reprinted in Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Parsons, 'Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 44 (2004), pp. 44–56. I leave to one side the remarks he makes about 'positive aesthetics' in the last section of his paper.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetic and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', reprinted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds), *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Apparently Hepburn had in mind an area near Berwick.

passing I suggested that this part-whole analysis was supported by the fact that we *imagine* the stretch of sand on which we are walking as submerged under water, and this act of imagination generates the feeling of weirdness. Parsons disputes my appeal to imagination in my interpretation of the example. He says that no such imaginative act is needed for the example to have force. Well, perhaps Parsons is right that we do not have to imagine the beach under water. I appealed to an imaginative act because I was attempting to diagnose what it is that changes when we acquire the information that what we are walking on, and what we thought was a beach is actually a seabed and not a beach. For Hepburn is right that something changes. The question is what it is. Whether or not imagination is involved, the anti-formalist analysis of what changes is disputable. Assuming that the change is an aesthetic change, what is disputable is whether the change consists in the fact that the original aesthetic judgement is *abandoned* as opposed to the change consisting in the *adding* of another aesthetic judgement that is perfectly consistent with the original one. The plausibility of the latter analysis may not *depend* on the existence of acts of imagination. But imagination helps.

It is also disputable whether the change in a change in our *aesthetic* appreciation. In this respect, the appeal to imagination, particularly visual imagination, also helps. Parsons thinks that imagination is not involved when we judge the seabed to be weird. But if imagination is not involved, then it is not at all obvious that the ascription of weirdness to the seabed is an aesthetic ascription. I may judge that it is weird without seeing it as weird. Perhaps I would also judge that it is weird if I gained the information that it is owned by the Queen. But that would not be an aesthetic matter. Perhaps I would think that it is weird because it is surprising. By contrast, some things *look weird* because of how they are in themselves. Puffer fish, for example, are weird in both ways: they look weird, and they also are weird biologically in some respects. There are different kinds of weirdness. We need a reason to think that the weirdness is aesthetic weirdness. And the appeal to our visual imagination of the scene submerged under water suggests that it is so. In fact, anti-formalists are helped by the appeal to visual imagination, for they need to get as far as claiming that there is a new aesthetic judgement.

Since my aim was to argue against Hepburn's argument against formalism, what I must achieve is quite weak: all I must do is to give a formalist interpretation of the example that yields a reasonably plausible account of what changes given the added information. I need not establish that the formalist interpretation is superior to the anti-formalist interpretation. I need only give a reasonably plausible formalist account of the change. Either the change in our judgement is not an aesthetic change, or else a new aesthetic judgement is indeed made, but not about the same thing; in either case, the original aesthetic judgement stands.

### III. NOTIONS OF FUNCTIONS

Parsons is right that I simply helped myself to a certain view of the nature of function according to which having a function is in part having a certain history. A thing's

function depends on its history. Artefactual and biological functions have this in common. This historical conception of function can be filled out in various ways. Biological functions usually are usually thought to depend on evolutionary history whereas artefactual functions are usually thought to depend (in part) on intentions. So having a function depends on having a particular kind of historical property.<sup>10</sup> (Someone who believes that living things are God's artefacts believes that biological functions are in fact artefactual functions.) There is room for theoretical divergence over exactly which evolutionary mechanisms are important and over exactly how intentions play their role, and what else is necessary. But the important thing is that this is a historical conception. Something that comes into existence after lightning strikes in a swamp has no function—not unless the lightning was a thunderbolt from a god who intended to generate that thing.

Given this view of function, my view of the aesthetics of inorganic nature is very simple. It is that inorganic things do not have functions, and so they do not have aesthetic properties that depend on functions. Furthermore, we should not aesthetically appreciate inorganic things in the light of functions that they do not have.

This view of biological function strikes me as being relatively obvious. But it is not uncontroversial since there are some who controvert it. The view of function I embraced is probably the majority one (not that I am appealing to that as a consideration, given what I said about anti-formalism above!). But there is also a rival conception of function according to which to have a function is to have and perhaps also to exercise certain causal powers.<sup>11</sup> Parsons calls such functions 'systematic capacity functions'; I shall call this view of functions the *causal role view*. This view can also be developed in various ways. But very broadly, the historical conception is backward looking in time, whereas the causal role conception is not. This seems like quite a big divergence over what makes for a function. Things could have causal role functions even if the world only came into existence five minutes ago. And things can have historical functions even though they lack the relevant causal roles. But we can avoid needless controversy simply by distinguishing historical functions from causal role functions. Then we can see how much the views really differ and exactly where. We have two notions of function: historical and causal role notions. Rivers and rocks have causal role functions but not historical functions. The substantive aesthetic issue, then, is not about notions of function but about whether we should appreciate rocks and rivers in the light of their causal role functions even though they have no historical functions.

#### IV. PARSONS'S CHAOTIC FLOODING

Following a recent paper by Allen Carlson, Parsons thinks that inorganic things like rivers and rocks can have functions by being part of an ecosystem that provides a

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Millikan, *White Queen Psychology and Other Essays for Alice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Cummins, 'Functional Analysis', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXII (1975), p. 20.

habitat for organisms.<sup>12</sup> I don't want to police the word 'function' over-zealously. I have to say, though, that this usage does seem weird to me. Does the sun really have the 'function' of making things grow? Does it really have the 'function' of sustaining planets and the life they sustain in their orbits? Well, we can talk that way! Do many rocks and rivers really have the function of providing a habitat for living creatures? Rocks or rivers do not come into existence because predecessors of this rock or river played a certain ecological role. And playing some ecological role rarely sustains rocks or rivers in existence. So they do not have historical functions. However, we can tolerate a plurality of notions of function so long as we keep track of which we are deploying. *Ecological functions* are a matter of what the item *does* in an ecological system that involves living things. Ecological functions are a subclass of casual role functions. Parsons says that inorganic things can have ecological causal role functions and he argues that those things can have aesthetic properties in virtue of these functions; and in particular that rocks and rivers can have aesthetically relevant ecological functions. I dispute this.

A preliminary point is that if this were supposed to be a quite general rescue operation, saving inorganic nature from extreme formalism, then there would be a huge gap in the argument. For many beautiful inorganic things lack ecological functions. Perhaps the sun has the kindly ecological function of nourishing life on earth. But what about the rings of Saturn? They are beautiful but do nothing to aid life on earth or anywhere else (so far as we know!). They sit there complacently and lazily, not lifting a finger to further life. But beautiful they are. One possibility is that Parsons would concede my point here and embrace extreme formalism about inorganic nature that plays no role with respect to organic nature. That would be a vast concession. Another possibility is that Parsons would give a non-formal analysis of the beauty of the rings of Saturn even though they lack any kind of function. I suspect that Parsons and I would then find ourselves in a similar situation to the one we found ourselves in when we disagreed over the right interpretation of Hepburn's beach/seabed example.

The more important point is this. Even where inorganic things *do* have an ecological role, it is questionable whether seeing things in the light of their contribution to some ecological system *is* of aesthetic significance, as Parsons thinks. In order to argue that rivers and rocks have aesthetic properties that depend on their ecological functions, he gives the interesting example of a flooding river. Parsons says that the flooding river might initially seem chaotic; but it no longer seems chaotic when we realize that it is an essential part of the cycle of life in the local ecosystem. I find little plausibility in this example, although perhaps it is to be expected that Parsons and I diverge in our interpretation of examples. Is the word 'chaotic' being used to name an aesthetic characteristic? Let us assume that Parsons is using it as such, so that he is thinking of chaoticness as a visually appreciable property of the rampaging water. If so, I do not

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<sup>12</sup> Allen Carlson, 'On Aesthetically Appreciating Human Environments', *Philosophy and Geography*, vol. 4 (2001).

care, aesthetically, if it is aiding life or destroying it. Beauty can be benign and beauty can destroy. And the same goes for other aesthetic characteristics. On the other hand, if chaoticness is not a visually appreciable property, then it is doubtful that it is an aesthetic property.

As in Hepburn's beach/seabed example, it is also open to the extreme formalist to give a part-whole analysis. I might see the flooding as part of a wider whole. Individual floodings might be chaotic; but the pattern of regular floodings might not be chaotic as a whole. Perhaps there is aesthetic rhythm in the pattern of individually chaotic events. Whether or not this rhythm in the pattern is an aesthetic matter, when we learn about the life-propagating role of the flooding, it seems to *me* (though perhaps not to Parsons) that the individual flooding continues to *look* chaotic. Whatever judgement we reach after the change of information does not undermine the original aesthetic judgement. Additional judgements are either aesthetic judgements about a wider whole or else they are non-aesthetic judgements; and in each case, they are consistent with the original judgement. I suspect that the judgement that the pattern of flooding is not 'chaotic' is probably not an aesthetic judgement since it is not a visually appreciable property. But this is not so important. What is important is that the individual flooding *is* judged 'chaotic' in an aesthetic sense, and that judgement is *robust* in that it would not be rejected given additional information about the ecological role of the flooding.

Parsons and I have different views of the flooding river example, which might be expected giving our different initial theoretical commitments. But I am happy so long as the example supplies no dialectical pressure in favour of anti-formalism.

#### CODA

Despite Parsons's interesting discussion, those who are committed to extreme formalism about inorganic nature can remain unmoved. I would like to add one last remark by way of diagnosis. Beauty, ugliness, and other aesthetic qualities pertain to *appearances*. They are a matter of how things *look* or *sound*. They are not a matter of how things *are*, apart from appearances. It is true that beauty, ugliness, and other aesthetic qualities often pertain to appearances as those appearances are informed by our beliefs about the reality they are appearances of. But it is also true that they often pertain to *mere appearances*, which are not so informed. By contrast, both science and morality are mostly about how things are and not about appearances. Aesthetics is indeed relatively superficial by comparison. Anti-formalists, I suspect, cannot come to terms with this, and they want Beauty to be something else. But Beauty matters in her own way. Let us relish her for what she is.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Glenn Parsons for very helpful comments.