

Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View"

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The Aesthetic Point of View

I

There has been a persistent effort to discover the uniquely aesthetic component, aspect, or ingredient in whatever is or is experienced. Unlike some other philosophical quarries, the object of this chase has not proved as elusive as the snark, the Holy Grail, or Judge Crater – the hunters have returned not empty-handed, but overburdened. For they have found a rich array of candidates for the basically and essentially aesthetic:

- aesthetic experience
- aesthetic value
- aesthetic enjoyment
- aesthetic satisfaction
- ⊙ aesthetic objects
- ⊙ aesthetic concepts
- ⊙ aesthetic situations

Confronted with such trophies, we cannot easily doubt that there *is* something peculiarly aesthetic to be found in the world of our experience; yet its exact location and its categorial status remain in question. This is my justification for conducting yet another raid on the ineffable with the help of a different concept, one in the contemporary philosophical style.

II

When the conservationist and the attorney for Con Edison argue their conflicting cases before a state commission that is deciding whether a nuclear power plant shall be built beside the Hudson River, we can say they do not merely disagree; they regard that power plant from different points of view. When the head of the Histadrut Publishing House refused to publish the novel *Exodus* in Israel, he said: "If it is to be read as history, it is inaccurate. If it is to be read as literature, it is vulgar."(1)

And Maxim Gorky reports a remark that Lenin once made to him:

"I know nothing that is greater than [Beethoven's] Appassionata. I would like to listen to it every day. A marvellous, super-human music. I always say with pride – a naive pride perhaps: What miracles human beings can perform!" Then screwing his eyes [Lenin] added, smiling sadly, "But I can't listen to music too often; it affects your nerves. One wants to say stupid nice things and stroke on the head the people who can create such beauty while living in this vile hell. And now you must not stroke anyone on the head: you'll have your hands

beaten off. You have to hit them on the head without mercy, though our ideal is not to use violence against anyone. Hmm, hmm, – an infernally cruel job we have.”(2)

In each of these examples, it seems plausible to say that one of the conflicting points of view is a peculiarly aesthetic one: that of the conservationist troubled by threats to the Hudson’s scenic beauty; that of the publisher who refers to reading *Exodus* “as literature”; that of Lenin, who appears to hold that we ought to adopt the political (rather than the aesthetic) point of view towards Beethoven’s sonata, because of the unfortunate political consequences of adopting the aesthetic point of view.

If the notion of the aesthetic point of view can be made clear, it should be useful from the philosophical point of view. The first philosophical use is in mediating certain kinds of dispute. To understand a particular point of view, we must envision its alternatives. Unless there can be more than one point of view toward something, the concept breaks down. Consider, for example, the case of architecture. The classic criteria of Vitruvius were stated tersely by Sir Henry Wotton in these words: “Well-building hath three conditions: Commodity, Firmness, and Delight.” Commodity is function: that it makes a good church or house or school. Firmness is construction: that the building holds itself up. Suppose we were comparing a number of buildings to see how well built they are, according to these “conditions”. We would find some that are functionally effective, structurally sound, and visually attractive. We would find others – old worn-out buildings or new suburban shacks – that are pretty poor in each of these departments. But also we would find that the characteristics vary independently over a wide range; that some extremely solid old bank buildings have Firmness (they are knocked down at great cost) without much Commodity or Delight, that some highly delightful buildings are functionally hopeless, that some convenient bridges collapse.

Now suppose we are faced with one of these mixed structures, and invited to say whether it is a good building, or how good it is. Someone might say the bank is very well built, because it is strong; another might reply that nevertheless its ugliness and inconvenience make it a very poor building. Someone might say that the bridge couldn’t have been much good if it collapsed; but another might reply that it was a most excellent bridge, while it lasted – that encomium cannot be taken from it merely because it did not last long.

Such disputes may well make us wonder – as Geoffrey Scott wonders in his book *The Architecture of Humanism*(3) – whether these “conditions” belong in the same discussion. Scott says that to lump them together is confusing: it is to “force on architecture an unreal unity of aim”, since they are “incommensurable virtues.” For clarity in architectural discussion, then, we might separate the three criteria, and say that they arise in connection with three different points of view – the practical, the engineering, and the aesthetic. In this way, the notion of a point of view is introduced to break up a dispute into segments that seem likely to be more manageable. Instead of asking one question – whether this is a good building – we divide it into three.

Considering the building from the aesthetic point of view, we ask whether it is a good work of architecture; from the engineering point of view, whether it is a good structure; and from the practical point of view, whether it is a good machine for living.

Thus one way of clarifying the notion of a point of view would be in terms of the notion, of being *good of a kind*.⁽⁴⁾ We might say that to adopt the aesthetic point of view toward a building is to classify it as belonging to a species of aesthetic objects – namely, works of architecture – and then to take an interest in whether or not it is a *good* work of architecture. Of course, when an object belongs to one obvious and notable kind, and we judge it in relation to that kind, the “point of view” terminology is unnecessary. We wouldn’t ordinarily speak of considering music from a musical point of view, because it wouldn’t occur to us that someone might regard it from a political point of view. In the same way, it would be natural to speak of considering whiskey from a medical point of view but not of considering penicillin from a medical point of view. This shows that the “point of view” terminology is implicitly rejective: it is a device for setting aside considerations advanced by others (such as that the bridge will fall) in order to focus attention on the set of considerations that *we* wish to emphasize (such as that the sweep and soar of the bridge are a joy to behold).

The “point of view” terminology, however, is more elastic than the “good of its kind” terminology. To consider a bridge or music or sculpture as an aesthetic object is to consider it from the aesthetic point of view. But what about a mountain, a sea shell, or a tiger? These are neither musical compositions, paintings, poems, nor sculptures. A sea shell cannot be *good* sculpture if it is not sculpture at all. But evidently we can adopt the aesthetic point of view toward these things. In fact, some aesthetic athletes (or athletic aesthetes) have claimed the ability to adopt the aesthetic point of view toward anything at all – toward *The Story of O* (this is what Elliot Fremont-Smith has called “beyond pornography”), toward a garbage dump, toward the murders of three civil-rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi. (This claim has been put to a severe test by some of our more far-out sculptors.) Perhaps even more remarkable is the feat recently performed by those who viewed the solemn installation of an “invisible sculpture” behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The installation consisted in digging a grave-size hole and filling it in again. “It is really an underground sculpture,” said its conceiver, Claes Oldenburg. “I think of it as the dirt being loosened from the sides in a certain section of Central Park.”⁽⁵⁾ The city’s architectural consultant, Sam Green, commented on the proceedings: “This is a conceptual work of art and is as much valid as something you can actually see. Everything is art if it is chosen by the artist to be art. You can say it is good art or bad art, but you can’t say it isn’t art. Just because you can’t see a statue doesn’t mean that it isn’t there.” This, of course, is but one of countless examples of the current tendency to stretch the boundaries of the concept of “art”.

The second philosophical use of the notion of the aesthetic point of view is to provide a broad concept of art that might be helpful for certain purposes. We might say: "A work of art (in the broad sense) is any perceptual or intentional object that is deliberately regarded from the aesthetic point of view."⁽⁶⁾ Here, "regarding" would have to include looking, listening, reading, and similar acts of attention, and also what I call "exhibiting" – picking up an object and placing it where it readily permits such attention, or presenting the object to persons acting as spectators.

III

What, then, is the aesthetic point of view? I propose the following: To adopt the aesthetic point of view with regard to X is to take an interest in whatever aesthetic value X may possess.

I ask myself what I am doing in adopting a particular point of view, and acting toward an object in a way that is appropriate to that point of view; and, so far as I can see, it consists in searching out a corresponding value in the object, to discover whether any of it is present. Sometimes it is to go farther: to cash in on that value, to realize it, to avail myself of it. All this searching, seeking, and, if possible, realizing I subsume under the general phrase "taking an interest in". To listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata* with pleasure and a sense that it is „marvelous, superhuman music“ is to seek -- and find -- aesthetic value in it. To read the novel *Exodus* „as literature,“ and be repelled because it is „vulgar,“ is (I take it) to seek aesthetic value in it but not find very much of it. And when Geoffrey Scott makes his distinction between different ways of regarding a building, and between that „constructive integrity in fact“ which belongs under Firmness and that „constructive vividness in appearance“ which is a source of architectural Delight, he adds that „their value in the building is of a wholly disparate kind“;⁽⁷⁾ in short, the two points of view, the engineering and the aesthetic, involve two kinds of value.

This proposed definition of „aesthetic point of view“ will not, as it stands, fit all of the ordinary uses of this phrase. There is a further complication. I am thinking of a remark by John Hightower, Executive Director of the New York State Council on the Arts, about the Council's aim to „encourage some sort of aesthetic standards.“ He said, „There are lots of laws that unconsciously inhibit the arts. Architecture is the most dramatic example. Nobody has looked at the laws from an aesthetic point of view.“⁽⁸⁾ And I am thinking of a statement in the *Yale Alumni Magazine*⁽⁹⁾ that the Yale City Planning Department was undertaking „a pioneering two-year research project to study highway environment from an aesthetic point of view.“ I suppose the attention in these cases was not on the supposed aesthetic value of the laws or of the present „highway environment,“ but rather on the aesthetic value that might be achieved by changes in these things. Perhaps that is why these examples speak of „an aesthetic point of view“ rather than „the aesthetic point of view.“ And we could, if we wished, make use of this verbal distinction in a broadened definition: To adopt *an*

aesthetic point of view with regard to X is to take an interest in whatever aesthetic value that X may possess or *that is obtainable by means of X*.

I have allowed the phrase „adopting the aesthetic point of view“ to cover a variety of activities. One of them is judging: To judge X from the aesthetic point of view is to estimate the aesthetic value of X. Those who are familiar with Paul Taylor’s treatment of points of view in his book *Normative Discourse* will note how the order I find in these concepts differs from the one he finds. His account applies only to judging, and is therefore too narrow to suit me. It also has, I think, another flaw. He holds that „taking a certain point of view is nothing but adopting certain canons of reasoning as the framework within which judgments are to be justified; the canons of reasoning define the point of view. . . . We have already said that a value judgment is a moral judgment if it is made from the moral point of view.“(10)

Thus we could ask of Taylor: What is an aesthetic value judgment? He would reply: It is one made from the aesthetic point of view. And which are those? They are the ones justified by appeal to certain „canons of reasoning,“ and more particularly the „rules of relevance.“ But which are the aesthetic rules of relevance? These are the rules „implicitly or explicitly followed by people“ in using the aesthetic value-language -- that is, in making judgments of aesthetic value. Perhaps I have misunderstood Taylor’s line of thought here, but the path it seems to trace is circular. I hope to escape this trap by breaking into the chain at a different point.

I define „aesthetic point of view“ in terms of „aesthetic value.“ And while I think this step is by no means a trivial one, it is not very enlightening unless it is accompanied by some account of aesthetic value. I don’t propose to present a detailed theory on this occasion, but I shall extend my chain of definitions to a few more links, and provide some defense against suspected weaknesses. What, then, is aesthetic value? The aesthetic value of an object is the value it possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification.

There are three points about this definition that require some attention. First, it will be noted that this is not a definition of „value.“ It purports to distinguish *aesthetic* value from other kinds of value in terms of a particular capacity. It says that in judging the total value of an object we must include that part of its value which is due to its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification.

The second point concerns „aesthetic gratification.“ My earliest version of this capacity-definition of „aesthetic value“ employed the concept of aesthetic experience.(11) I am still not persuaded that this concept must be abandoned as hopeless, but it needs further elaboration in the face of criticism by George Dickie, whose relentless attack on unnecessarily multiplied entities in aesthetics has led him to skepticism about whether there is such a thing as aesthetic experience.(12) I have tried working with the concept of aesthetic enjoyment instead,(13) and that may be on the right track. For the present, I have chosen a term that I think is somewhat broader in scope, and perhaps therefore slightly less misleading.

Again, however, the term „aesthetic gratification“ is not self-explanatory. It seems clear that one kind of gratification can be distinguished from another only in terms of its intentional object: that is, of the properties that the pleasure is taken *in*, or the enjoyment is enjoyment *of*. To discriminate aesthetic gratification -- and consequently aesthetic value and the aesthetic point of view -- we must specify what it is obtained from. I offer the following: Gratification is aesthetic when it is obtained primarily from attention to the formal unity and/or the regional qualities of a complex whole, and when its magnitude is a function of the degree of formal unity and/or the intensity of regional quality.

The defense of such a proposal would have to answer two questions. First, is there such a type of gratification? I think there is, and I think that it can be distinguished from other types of gratification, though it is often commingled with them. Second, what is the justification for calling this type of gratification „aesthetic“? The answer to this question is more complicated. Essentially, I would argue that there are certain clear-cut exemplary cases of works of art -- that is, poems, plays, musical compositions, and so forth -- that must be counted as works of art if anything is. There is a type of gratification characteristically and pre-eminently provided by such works, and this type of gratification is the type I have distinguished above. Finally, this type of gratification (once distinguished) has a paramount claim to be denominated „aesthetic“ -- even though there are many other things that works of art can do to you, such as inspire you, startle you, or give you a headache.

If this line of argument can be made convincing, we find ourselves with what might be called primary *marks* of the aesthetic: it is the presence in the object of some notable degree of unity and/or the presence of some notable intensity of regional quality that indicate that the enjoyments or satisfactions it affords are aesthetic -- insofar as those enjoyments or satisfactions are afforded by these properties. I shall return to these marks a little later, and show the sort of use I think can be made of them.

IV

But before we come to that, we must consider the third point about the capacity-definition of „aesthetic value“ -- and this is the most troublesome of them all.

The term „capacity“ has been chosen with care. My view is that the aesthetic value of an object is not a function of the actual degree of gratification obtained from it. It is not an average, or the mean degree of gratification obtained from it by various perceivers. It is not a sum, or the total gratifications obtained from it in the course of its existence. All these things depend in part on external considerations, including the qualifications of those who happen to resort to libraries, museums, and concerts, and the circumstances of their visits. I am thinking in terms of particular exposures to the work -- a particular experience of the music, of the poem, of the painting -- and of the degree of aesthetic gratification obtained on each occasion. Aesthetic value depends on the highest degree obtainable under optimal circumstances. Thus my last

definition should be supplemented by another one: The amount of aesthetic value possessed by an object is a function of the degree of aesthetic gratification it is capable of providing in a particular experience of it.

My reason for holding this view is that I want to say that a critical evaluation is a judgment of aesthetic value, and it seems clear to me that estimating capacities is both the least and the most we can ask of the critical evaluator. I take it that when a literary critic, for example, judges the goodness of a poem (from the aesthetic point of view) and is prepared to back up his judgment with reasons, he must be saying something about the relationship of the poem to the experiences of actual or potential readers. The question is: What is this relationship? When a critic says that a poem is good, he is hardly ever in a position to predict the gratification that particular readers or groups of readers will receive from it. Moreover, he is usually not in a position to generalize about tendencies -- to say, for instance, that readers of such-and-such propensities, preferences, or preparations will probably be delighted by the poem. If the critic has at his disposal the information required to support such statements, he is of course at liberty to say such things as: „This would have appealed to President Kennedy,“ or „This is an ideal Christmas gift for your friends who love mountain climbing.“ But when he simply says, „This is a good poem,“ we must interpret him as saying something weaker (though still significant) about the capacity of the work to provide a notable degree of aesthetic gratification. For *that* is a judgment he should be able to support, if he understands the poem.

The question, however, is whether the capacity-definition of „aesthetic value“ is too weak, as a report of what actually happens in art criticism. I can think of three difficulties that have been or could be raised. They might be called (1) the unrecognized masterpiece problem, (2) the LSD problem, and (3) the Edgar Rice Burroughs problem. Or, to give them more abstract names, they are (1) the problem of falsification, (2) the problem of illusion, and (3) the problem of devaluation.

1. Some people are troubled by one consequence of the capacity-definition -- that objects can possess aesthetic value that never has been and never will be realized: „Full many a gem of purest ray serene / The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.“ This ought not to trouble us, I think. It is no real paradox that many objects worth looking at can never be looked at. But there is another kind of aesthetic inaccessibility in the highly complicated and obscure work that no critic can find substantial value in, though it may still be there. In Balzac's short story „Le chef-d' uvre inconnu,“ the master painter works in solitude for years, striving for the perfection of his greatest work; but in his dedication and delusion he overlays the canvas with so many brush strokes that the work is ruined. When his fellow artists finally see the painting, they are appalled by it. But how can they be sure that the painting doesn't have aesthetic value, merely because they have not found any? The capacity to provide aesthetic gratification of a high order may still be there, though they are not sharp or sensitive enough to take advantage of it.

If my proposed definition entailed that negative judgments of aesthetic value cannot even in principle be justified, then we would naturally mistrust it. But of course this consequence is not necessary. What does follow is that there is a certain asymmetry between negative and affirmative judgments, with respect to their degree of confirmation; but this is so between negative and affirmative existential statements in general. The experienced critic may have good reason in many cases not only for confessing that he finds little value in a painting, but for adding that very probably no one ever will find great value in it.

2. If aesthetic value involves a capacity, then its presence can no doubt be sufficiently attested by a single realization. What a work *does* provide, it clearly *can* provide. And if my definition simply refers to the capacity, without qualification, then it makes no difference under what conditions that realization occurs. Now take any object you like, no matter how plain or ugly - - say a heap of street sweepings awaiting the return of the street cleaner. Certainly we want to say that it is lacking in aesthetic value. But suppose someone whose consciousness is rapidly expanding under the influence of LSD or some other hallucinogenic drug happens to look at this heap and it gives him exquisite aesthetic gratification. Then it has the capacity to do so, and so it has high aesthetic value. But then perhaps every visual object has high aesthetic value, and all to about the same degree -- if the reports may be trusted.

I cannot speak authoritatively of the LSD experience, but I gather that when a trip is successful, the object, however humble, may glow with unwonted intensity of color and its shapes assume an unexpected order and harmony. In short, the experience is illusory. This is certainly suggested by the most recent report I have run across.⁽¹⁴⁾ Dr. Lloyd A. Grumbles, a Philadelphia psychiatrist, said that while listening to Beethoven's *Eroica*, particularly the third movement, he felt simultaneously „insatiable longing and total gratification.“ Dr. Grumbles said he also looked at prints of Picasso and Renoir paintings and realized for the first time that „they were striving for the same goal.“ Now you *know* he was under the influence of something.

This example suggests a modification of the definition given earlier: The aesthetic value of X is the value that X possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification *when correctly experienced*.

3. The problem of devaluation can perhaps be regarded as a generalization of the LSD problem.⁽¹⁵⁾ When I was young I was for a time an avid reader of the Martian novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Recently when I bought the Dover paperback edition and looked at them again, I found that I could hardly read them. Their style alone is enough to repel you, if you really pay attention to it.

The problem is this: if on Monday I enjoy a novel very much, and thus know that it has the capacity to provide gratification, then how can I ever reverse

that judgment and say the novel lacks that capacity? If the judgment that the novel is a good one is a capacity-judgment, it would seem that downward reevaluations (that is, devaluations) are always false -- assuming that the original higher judgment was based on direct experience. There is no problem about upward reevaluations: when I say on Tuesday that the novel is better than I thought on Monday, this means that I have discovered the novel to have a greater capacity than I had realized. But how can we explain the lowering of an aesthetic evaluation and still maintain that these evaluations are capacity-judgments?

Some cases of devaluation can no doubt be taken care of without modifying the definition of „aesthetic value.“ The devaluation may be due to a shift in our value grades caused by enlargement of our range of experience. I might think *Gone with the Wind* is a great novel, because it is the best I have read, but later I might take away that encomium and give it to *War and Peace*. Or the devaluation may be due to the belated recognition that my previous satisfaction in the work was a response to extra-aesthetic features. I now realize that my earlier enjoyment of detective stories was probably caused only in small part by their literary qualities, and was much more of a game-type pleasure.

But setting these cases aside, there remain cases where on perfectly sound and legitimate grounds I decide that the work, though it has provided a certain level of aesthetic gratification, is in fact not really that good. I have overestimated it. Evidently the definition of „aesthetic value“ must be modified again. One thing we might do is insert a stipulation that the work be a reliable or dependable source of gratification: flukes don't count. We need not change the judgment into a straight tendency-statement. But we might insist that the enjoyment of the novel must at least be a repeatable experience. Something like this notion seems to underlie the frequent claim that our first reactions to a new work of art are not wholly to be trusted, that we should wait awhile and try it again; that we should see whether we can find at least one other person to corroborate our judgment; or that only posterity will be in a position to know whether the work is great.

I grant that all these precautions are helpful -- indeed, they enable us to avoid the two sources of error mentioned a moment ago: having an inadequately formulated set of grading terms, and confusing aesthetic with nonaesthetic gratification. But I think it ought to be possible for a person, after a single experience of a work, to have excellent grounds for thinking it good and for commending it to others. And I think he would be justified in pointing out that he has found a potential source of aesthetic gratification that lies ready to be taken advantage of -- even though he does not yet know how readily, how easily, how conveniently, or how frequently recourse may be had to it. Thus my escape from the difficulty is to revise the definition of „aesthetic value“ again so as to stipulate that it is the value of the whole work that is in question: The aesthetic value of X is the value that X possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification *when correctly and completely experienced*.

The youth who was carried away by the adventures of Thuvia and the green men of Mars and the other denizens of that strange planet may well have gotten greater aesthetic gratification than the elderly person who returned to them after so many years. For the youth was fairly oblivious of the faults of style, and he filled in the flat characterizations with his own imagination, giving himself up unself-consciously to the dramatic events and exotic scenery. But, though he was lucky in a way, his judgment of the *whole* work was not to be trusted.

V

We saw earlier that the notion of a point of view plays a particular role in focusing or forwarding certain disputes by limiting the range of relevant considerations. We invoke the aesthetic point of view when we want to set aside certain considerations that others have advanced -- as that a poem is pornographic, or that a painting is a forgery -- or that (as Jacques Maritain remarks) „a splendid house without a door is not a good work of architecture.“(16) But the person whose considerations are thus rejected may feel that the decision is arbitrary, and enter an appeal, in the hope that a higher philosophical tribunal will rule that the lower court erred in its exclusions. How do we know whether being pornographic or being a forgery or lacking a door is irrelevant from the aesthetic point of view? I propose this answer: A consideration about an object is relevant to the aesthetic point of view if and only if it is a fact about the object that affects the degree to which the marks of aesthetic gratification (formal unity and intensity of regional quality) are present in the object.

Thus: Is the fact that a painting is a forgery relevant to a judgment of it from the aesthetic point of view? No, because it has no bearing on its form or quality. Is the fact that a painting is a seascape relevant? Sometimes. It is when the subject contributes to or detracts from its degree of unity or its qualitative intensity. Is the biography of the composer relevant? According to a writer in *The Music Review*, „it is a well-known fact that knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the composition of a work enhances the audience’s appreciation. . . . It is because of this that programme notes, radio comments, and music appreciation courses are in such demand. To secure such knowledge is one of the important tasks of music research.“(17) Now, I’m not sure that this „well-known fact“ is really a fact, but let us assume that it is. Does it follow that information about the circumstances of composition is relevant to consideration of the work from an aesthetic point of view? We can imagine this sort of thing:

It was a cold rainy day in Vienna, and Schubert was down to his last crust of bread. As he looked about his dingy garret, listening to the rain that beat down, he reflected that he could not even afford to feed his mice. He recalled a sad poem by Goethe, and suddenly a melody sprang into his head. He seized an old piece of paper and began to write feverishly. Thus was „Death and the Maiden“ born.

Now even if everyone, or nearly everyone, who reads this program note finds that it increases his appreciation of the song, a condition of appreciation is not necessarily a

condition of value. From this information -- say, that it was raining -- nothing can be inferred about the specifically aesthetic character of the song. (It is relevant, of course, that the words and music match each other in certain ways; however, we know that not by biographical investigation but by listening to the song itself.)

Here is one more example. In a very interesting article, „On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,“ Meyer Schapiro has argued:

Contrary to the general belief that in the Middle Ages the work of art was considered mainly as a vehicle of religious teaching or as a piece of craftsmanship serving a useful end, and that beauty of form and color was no object of contemplation in itself, these texts abound in aesthetic judgments and in statements about the qualities and structure of the work. They speak of the fascination of the image, its marvelous likeness to physical reality, and the artist's wonderful skill, often in complete abstraction from the content of the object of art.(18)

Schapiro is inquiring whether medieval people were capable of taking the aesthetic point of view in some independence of the religious and technological points of view. He studies various texts in which aesthetic objects are described and praised, to elicit the grounds on which this admiration is based, and to discover whether these grounds are relevant to the aesthetic point of view. Form and color, for example, are clearly relevant, and so to praise a work for its form or color is to adopt the aesthetic point of view. And I should think the same can be said for „the fascination of the image“ -- by which Schapiro refers to the extraordinary interest in the grotesque figures freely carved by the stonecutters in Romanesque buildings. These centaurs, chimeras, two-headed animals, creatures with feet and the tail of a serpent, and so forth, are the images deplored by St. Bernard with an ambivalence like that in Lenin's remark about Beethoven: „In the cloister, under the eyes of the brethren who read there, what profit is there in those ridiculous monsters, in that marvelous and deformed beauty, in that beautiful deformity?“(19)

But what of Schapiro's other points -- the image's „marvelous likeness to physical reality, and the artist's wonderful skill“? If a person admires skill in depiction, he is certainly not taking a religious point of view -- but is he taking the aesthetic point of view? I should think not. No doubt when he notices the accuracy of depiction, reflects on the skill required to achieve it, and thus admires the artist, he may be placed in a more favorable psychological posture toward the work itself. But this contributes to the conditions of the experience; it does not enter into the experience directly, as does the perception of form and color, or the recognition of the represented objects as saints or serpents. So I would say that the fact that the medieval writer admired the skill in depiction is *not* evidence that he took the aesthetic point of view, though it is evidence that he took *an* aesthetic point of view, since skill was involved in the production of the work.

There is one final problem that may be worth raising and commenting on briefly, although it is not at all clear to me how the problem should even be formulated. It concerns the justification of adopting the aesthetic point of view and its potential conflicts with other points of view. On the one hand, it is interesting to note that much effort has been spent (especially during recent decades) in getting people to adopt the aesthetic point of view much more firmly and continuously than has been common in our country. The conservationists are trying to arouse us to concern for the preservation of natural beauties, instead of automatically assuming that they have a lower priority than any other interest that happens to come up -- such as installing power lines or slaughtering deer or advertising beer. And those who are concerned with „education of the eye,“ or „visual education,“ are always developing new methods of teaching the theory and practice of good design, with the aim of producing people who are aware of the growing hideousness of our cities and towns, and who are troubled enough to work for changes.

But the effort to broaden the adoption of the aesthetic point of view sometimes takes another form. According to its leading theoretician, the „Camp sensibility“ is characterized by the great range of material to which it can respond: „Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world,“ writes Susan Sontag. „It incarnates a victory of style over content, of aesthetics over morality, or irony over tragedy.“(20)

Here is an extreme consequence of trying to increase the amount of aesthetic value of which we can take advantage. But it also gives rise to an interesting problem, which might be called „the dilemma of aesthetic education.“ The problem is pointed up by a cartoon I saw not long ago (by David Gerard), showing the proprietor of a junkyard named „Sam’s Salvage“ standing by a huge pile of junked cars and saying to two other men: „Whattya mean it’s an ugly eyesore? If I’d paid Picasso to pile it up, you’d call it a work of art.“

The central task of aesthetic education, as traditionally conceived, is the improvement of taste, involving the development of two dispositions: (1) the capacity to obtain aesthetic gratification from increasingly subtle and complex aesthetic objects that are characterized by various forms of unity -- in short, the response to beauty in one main sense -- and (2) an increasing dependence on objects beautiful in this way (having harmony, order, balance, proportion) as sources of aesthetic satisfaction. It is this impulse that is behind the usual concept of „beautification“ -- shielding the highways from junkyards and billboards, and providing more trees and flowers and grass. As long as the individual’s aesthetic development in this sense is accompanied by increasing access to beautiful sights and sounds, it is all to the good. His taste improves; his aesthetic pleasures are keener; and when he encounters avoidable ugliness, he may be moved to eliminate it by labor or by law. On the other hand, suppose he finds that his environment grows uglier as the economy progresses, and that the ugliness becomes harder to escape. Second, suppose he comes to enjoy another kind of aesthetic value, one that derives from intensity of regional quality more than formal fitness. And third, suppose he

comes to realize that his aesthetic gratification is affected by the demands he makes on an object -- especially because the intensity of its regional qualities partly depends on its symbolic import. For example, the plain ordinary object may be seen as a kind of symbol, and become expressive (that is, assume a noteworthy quality) if the individual attends to it in a way that invites these features to emerge. Suddenly, a whole new field of aesthetic gratification opens up. Trivial objects, the accidental, the neglected, the meretricious and vulgar, all take on new excitement. The automobile graveyard and the weed-filled garden are seen to have their own wild and grotesque expressiveness as well as symbolic import. The kewpie doll, the Christmas card, the Tiffany lampshade can be enjoyed aesthetically, not for their beauty but for their bizarre qualities and their implicit reflection of social attitudes. This is a way of transfiguring reality, and though not everything can be transfigured, perhaps, it turns out that much can.

What I mean by the dilemma of aesthetic education is this: that we are torn between conflicting ways of redirecting taste. One is the way of love of beauty, which is limited in its range of enjoyment but is reformist by implication, since it seeks a world that conforms to its ideal. The other is the way of aestheticizing everything -- of taking the aesthetic point of view whenever possible -- which widens enjoyment but is defeatist, since instead of eliminating the junkyard and the slum, it tries to see them as expressive and symbolic. The conflict here is analogous to that between the social gospel and personal salvation in some of our churches -- though no doubt its consequences are not equally momentous. I don't suppose this dilemma is ultimately unresolvable, though I cannot consider it further at the moment. I point it out as one of the implications of the tendency (which I have been briefly exploring) to extend the aesthetic point of view as widely as possible.

But there is another weighty tradition opposed to this expansion. Lenin and St. Bernard stand witness to the possibility that there may be situations in which it is morally objectionable to adopt the aesthetic point of view. A man who had escaped from Auschwitz commented on Rolf Hochmuth's play: „*The Deputy* should not be considered as a historical work or even as a work of art, but as a moral lesson.“(21) Perhaps he only meant that looking for historical truth or artistic merit in *The Deputy* is a waste of time. But he may also have meant that there is something blameworthy in contemplating those terrible events from a purely historical or purely aesthetic point of view. Renata Adler, reporting in *The New Yorker*(22) on the New Politics Convention that took place in Chicago on Labor Day weekend, 1967, listed various types of self-styled revolutionaries who attended, including „the aesthetic-analogy revolutionaries, who discussed riots as though they were folk songs or pieces of local theatre, subject to appraisal in literary terms ('authentic', 'beautiful').“ That is carrying the aesthetic point of view pretty far.

This possibility has not gone unnoticed by imaginative writers, notably Henry James and Henrik Ibsen.(23) The tragedy of Mrs. Gereth, in *The Spoils of Poynton*, is that of a woman who could not escape the aesthetic point of view. She had a „passion for the

exquisite“ that made her prone „to be rendered unhappy by the presence of the dreadful [and] she was condemned to wince whenever she turned.“ In fact, the things that troubled her most -- and she encountered them everywhere, but nowhere in more abundance than in the country house known as Waterbath -- were just the campy things featured by Miss Sontag: „trumpety ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunched draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants [and even] a souvenir from some centennial or other Exhibition.“ The tragedy of the sculptor Professor Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken* is that he so ably aestheticized the woman who loved him and who was his model that she was not a person to him. As she says, „The work of art first -- then the human being.“ It may even be -- and I say this with the utmost hesitation, since I have no wish to sink in these muddy waters -- that this is the theme of Antonioni’s film *Blow-up*: the emptiness that comes from utter absorption in an aesthetic point of view of a photographer to whom every person and every event seems to represent only the possibility of a new photographic image. In that respect, Antonioni’s photographer is certainly worse than Professor Rubek.

The mere confrontation of these two vague and general social philosophies of art will not, of course, take us very far toward understanding the possibilities and the limitation of the aesthetic point of view. I leave matters unresolved, with questions hanging in the air. Whatever resolution we ultimately find, however, will surely incorporate two observations that may serve as a pair of conclusions.

First, there are occasions on which it would be wrong to adopt the aesthetic point of view, because there is a conflict of values and the values that are in peril are, in that particular case, clearly higher. Once in a while you see a striking photograph or film sequence in which someone is (for example) lying in the street after an accident, in need of immediate attention. And it is a shock to think suddenly that the photographer must have been on hand. I don’t want to argue the ethics of news photography, but if some, out of the highest aesthetic motives, withheld first aid to a bleeding accident victim in order to record the scene, with careful attention to lighting and camera speed, then it is doubtful that that picture could be so splendid a work of art as to justify neglecting so stringent a moral obligation.

The second conclusion is that there is nothing -- no object or event -- that is per se wrong to consider from the aesthetic point of view. This, I think, is part of the truth in the art-for-art’s-sake doctrine. To adopt the aesthetic point of view is simply to seek out a source of value. And it can never be a moral error to realize value -- barring conflict with other values. Some people seem to fear that a serious and persistent aesthetic interest will become an enervating hyperaestheticism, a paralysis of will like that reported in advanced cases of psychedelic dependence. But the objects of aesthetic interest -- such as harmonious design, good proportions, intense expressiveness -- are not drugs, but part of the breath of life. Their cumulative effect is increased sensitization, fuller awareness, a closer touch with the environment and concern for what it is and might be. It seems to me very doubtful that we could have

too much of these good things, or that they have inherent defects that prevent them from being an integral part of a good life.

Notes

(1) *New Republic*, January 16, 1961, p. 23. Compare Brendan Gill, in *The New Yorker*, March 5, 1966: 'It is a lot easier to recommend attendance at „The Gospel According to St. Matthew“ as an act of penitential piety during the Lenten season than it is to praise the movie as a movie. Whether or not the life and death of Our Lord is the greatest story ever told, it is so far from being merely a story that we cannot deal with it in literary terms (if we could, I think we would have to begin by saying that in respect to construction and motivation it leaves much to be desired); our difficulty is enormously increased when we try to pass judgment on the story itself once it has been turned into a screenplay.'

(2) From Gorky's essay on Lenin, in his *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1950), 17:39-40. My colleague Olga Lang called my attention to this passage and translated it for me. Compare Gorky, *Days with Lenin* (New York, 1932), p. 52. *Time* (April 30, 1965, p. 50) reported that the Chinese Communists had forbidden the performance of Beethoven's works because they „paralyze one's revolutionary fighting will.“ A Chinese bacteriologist, in a letter to a Peking newspaper, wrote that after listening to Beethoven, he „began to have strange illusions about a world filled with friendly love.“

(3) (New York, 1954), p. 15, where he quotes Wotton.

(4) In this discussion, I have been stimulated by an unpublished paper by J. O. Urmson, „Good of a Kind and Good from a Point of View,“ which I saw in manuscript in 1961 and which was later published as Chapter 9 of *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (New York, 1968). I should also like to thank him for comments on an earlier version of his paper. Compare his note added to „What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?“ in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York, 1962), p. 26. I also note that John Hospers has some interesting remarks on the aesthetic point of view in „The Ideal Aesthetic Observer,“ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2 (1962): 99-111.

(5) *New York Times*, October 2, 1967, p. 55.

(6) Compare my „Comments“ on Stanley Cavell's paper in *Art, Mind, and Religion*, ed. W. H. Capitan and D. D. Merrill (Pittsburgh, 1967), esp. pp. 107-9.

(7) Scott, *Architecture of Humanism*, p. 89; compare pp. 90-91, 95. In case it may be thought that architects who have the highest respect for their materials might repudiate my distinction, I quote Pier Luigi Nervi (in his Charles Eliot Norton lectures): „There does not exist, either in the past or in the present, a work of architecture which is accepted and recognized as excellent from the aesthetic point of view which is not also excellent from a technical point of view“ (from *Aesthetics and Technology in Building* [Cambridge, Mass., 1965], p. 2). Though arguing that one kind

of value is a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition of the other, Nervi clearly assumes that there is a distinguishable aesthetic point of view.

(8) *New York Times*, April 2, 1967, p. 94.

(9) December 1966, p. 20.

(10) Paul Taylor, *Normative Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1961), p. 109.

(11) See my *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, 1958), chap. 11.

(12) See „Beardsley’s Phantom Aesthetic Experience,” *Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1965):129-36, and my „Aesthetic Experience Regained,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (1969):3-11 (pp. 77-92 in this volume).

(13) „The Discrimination of Aesthetic Enjoyment,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 3 (1963):291-300 (pp. 35-45 in this volume).

(14) In the *Delaware County Daily Times* (Chester, Pa.), February 10, 1967.

(15) It was discussed briefly in my *Aesthetics*, pp. 534-35, but has since been called to my attention more sharply and forcefully by Thomas Regan.

(16) *L’intuition creatrice dans l’art et dans la poesie* (Paris, 1966), p. 53.

(17) Hans Tischler, „The Aesthetic Experience,” *Music Review* 17 (1956):200.

(18) In *Art and Thought*, ed. K. Bharatha Iyer (London, 1947), p. 138. I thank my colleague John Williams for calling my attention to this essay.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

(20) Susan Sontag, „Notes on Camp,” *Partisan Review* 31 (1964):526.

(21) *New York Times*, May 4, 1966.

(22) September 23, 1967.

(23) I set aside the verse by W. H. Auden called „The Aesthetic Point of View.”