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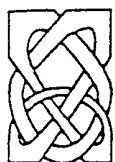
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ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE:
Beyond Aesthetic Subjectivism
and Objectivism

by

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ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE:
BEYOND AESTHETIC SUBJECTIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM

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It is quite generally acknowledged now that the cognitive and aesthetic dimensions of experience cannot be sharply distinguished from each other since understanding may have aesthetic influence and aesthetic experience functions cognitively. Nelson Goodman, for instance, strongly emphasizes the latter direction, and he even says that aesthetic experience is a form of understanding since it is cognitive experience. It follows, in particular, that the aesthetic qualities of one's environment, or rather, how one feels about them, have consequences concerning how one comprehends its meaning. Conversely, interpreting the environment, that is, bringing out its symbolic and cognitive meaning and significance, may in turn have an effect on how one continues to aesthetically experience it. According to Goodman, then, aesthetic experience results in an interaction between the subject and environment, and arguments for its interactive character have been presented by some other philosophers, too, such as John Dewey and Arnold Berleant. In what follows, I shall briefly study this interaction and its consequences for the problem of aesthetic subjectivism and objectivism and state some additional arguments against the meaningfulness of this dichotomy.

1. *Experience and the Environment*

According to Gardner (1996), the experiences that we call aesthetic have a distinctive immediate, emotional and contemplative character. For him, the appreciation of art is the most complex and intense form of aesthetic experience, in which we are set apart from the real world. It is in dramatic contrast to everyday life. A less distinctive kind of aesthetic awareness results from our perception of the world. Gardner seems to distinguish architecture from art in terms of experience, since he says that "[s]ome degree of aesthetic receptivity is shown by the quiet

influence that architecture exerts on our feelings..."¹ Thus art, other than architecture, is for him more powerful than environmental elements in general as far as aesthetic experience is concerned.

This way of understanding the nature of aesthetic experience seems to be more or less of a traditional kind. According to traditional accounts, one aesthetically perceives and experiences an object by taking a psychic distance and this way assumes an aesthetic attitude toward it, and this involves being detached from practical, scientific, or other interests and factors. Instead of discussing here the well-known variants of this theory, I shall return back to its notion of attitude and criticize the theory in the light of the notion of intentionality. I shall also use this notion to evaluate some competing theories. Such theories have been presented by pragmatists like Dewey (1934), who argues that aesthetic experience does not involve detachment but is holistic in nature involving an integration of factors which may look dispersed in a more customary experience, and by phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (1964), according to whom it is more accurate to say that we see according to a painting than to say that we see it. A more recent critic of the traditional view is Berleant (1991, 1992), who sees it as deriving from the more general philosophical tradition, dualism, that makes a sharp distinction between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. In Berleant's account, aesthetic experience is engagement, one's active and constructive activity and participation in which an object or environment invites him. For Berleant (1992), my environment is "...a complex network of relationships, connections, and continuities of those physical, social, and cultural conditions that describe my actions, my responses, my awareness, and that give shape and content to the very life that is mine."² There is a phenomenological overtone in Berleant's notion of aesthetic experience and in his criticism of dualism. Unlike Gardner in the above quotation, he wants to bridge the distinction commonly made in aesthetics between art and other elements of our environment, and what is perhaps even more important is that for Berleant aesthetic questions and ethical ones are not strictly separable, which might mean that the two kinds of experience mix with each other.

These holistic accounts apply to how we experience the environment in the usual senses of natural and built environment, but they should be amended by emphasizing more explicitly the cognitive aspects of aesthetic experience. Since experience involves perception (or observation), and since the latter in turn is a cognitive process, as already argued by Kant and again emphasized in current philosophy, cognition plays a crucial role in it. Goodman (1968), for instance, sees aesthetic experience as a dynamic process, fundamentally cognitive in character, in which emotions also function cognitively. It involves identifying symbols and "interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world."³ In aesthetic experience, says Goodman, perception, concepts, and feelings interact and

¹ Gardner (1996), p. 229.

² Berleant (1992), p. 4.

³ Goodman (1968), p. 241.

they are "related in complex ways to the properties of objects."⁴

2. *Aesthetic Objectivity and Subjectivity*

The problem of the nature of aesthetic experience is of course closely related to the question of whether aesthetic qualities are objective or subjective, or, possibly, relative. They are objective, it is said, if they belong to objects themselves, as do other, e.g. physical qualities. Then they are independent of the valuating subject or consciousness, but since aesthetic experience depends on aesthetic properties, it gives us knowledge of them. Our aesthetic judgement about an object is correct and thus yields knowledge if it complies with the aesthetic qualities the object possesses.

This is how the objectivity of aesthetic qualities is often defined. Objectivism in aesthetics, the view that the aesthetic qualities are objective, is of course analogous to its namesake in ethics and value theory, and to certain views in the philosophy of perception, philosophy of science, literary criticism, etc. For example, if (aesthetic) perception is what is needed to have the aesthetic experience, it is evident that if we can objectively perceive (and actually do in favourable circumstances) objectively existing aesthetic properties -- allegedly in the same way as objectively existing physical properties -- then some objective knowledge of the qualities results. According to this view, in appropriate circumstances aesthetic experience fits the world as the world is independently of us, but one can also make mistakes in judgements in the same way as one can make mistakes in other areas of knowledge acquisition. However, objections can be presented to objectivism in aesthetics which are similar to the well-known objections to objectivism in those other areas.

Aesthetic qualities are subjective if they do not exist in objects independently of subjects and their valuations, and therefore some subjectivists draw the conclusion that aesthetic experience does not yield any knowledge of aesthetic qualities themselves. Now experience only means that the perceiver is, for some reason or other, aesthetically affected by the object, by its properties of other kinds. Subjectivism here is often confused with relativism, which, at least in some moderate forms, means cultural relativism which says that many qualities and how they are experienced depend on the culture, where 'culture' is to be understood in some broad sense. They are not just dependent on single individuals but relative to culture. A person is influenced by the culture he or she belongs to, which means that the person's subjective reactions are not independent of it. Relativism can either be considered as a special case of subjectivism or as being a different kind of notion, viz. intersubjectivism rather than subjectivism.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

3. *Direction of Fit*

Gardner's view about the cognitive distinctions between objectivism and subjectivism is somewhat embarrassing. He says that what usually motivates objectivism in philosophy is not relevant for aesthetic experience. The motivation comes from the idea that the world is given and independent of how we represent it, whence our experiences put us in touch with the world as it really is. However, this motivation is not relevant for aesthetic experience since in aesthetic experience one does not gain knowledge in the first place. It is rather a kind of personal relationship to the world than a way to gain knowledge. He also expresses this argument by saying that "[t]he cognitive demand that mind should fit the world does not apply to aesthetic interest, which is in this respect closer to desire than belief -- what we want is for the world to fit *us*."⁵

Here Gardner is clearly using a notion analogous to Searle's (1979, 1983) notion *direction of fit*, which Searle employs in connection with his theories of intentionality and speech acts. For example, intentional states may have the mind-to-world direction of fit or the world-to-mind direction of fit. Thus, for instance, beliefs, which can be true or false, have the former, whereas desires, which cannot be true or false but rather fulfilled or not fulfilled, have the latter direction of fit. In other words, in a sense it is the responsibility of a belief to match the world in order to be true or satisfied (since the world is what it is). If it does not match the world, it can be changed so as to match it. Instead, if desires are not fulfilled, the world is responsible, since the desire is what it is and cannot be changed to match the world; rather the latter is to change.

Now, however, in the light of current psychological and epistemic theories and views in the philosophy of science and of perception it does not seem to be correct to say that in each case of intentional states the traffic between the mind and the world is one-way since this oversimplifies matters. Thus, for instance, it is well known that there exist convincing recent arguments whose aim is to show that how we perceive the world and what we (scientifically) know about it depend not only on how the world is but depend on our theories, our earlier knowledge and background beliefs, and the like. Now the same can be said about aesthetic experience in view of such current theories as Goodman's and Berleant's, which seem to oppose what Gardner says about its direction of fit. It is evident that if aesthetic experience is a dynamic, cognitive, and constructive intercourse between the mind and the environment or if it is an active engagement and participation, it must be an active two-way traffic between the mind and the world.

⁵ Gardner (1996), p. 232.

This means that the notion of aesthetic experience cannot be based on strictly objectivist or subjectivist positions. It also seems to follow that the idea that the knowledge of aesthetic qualities can only be acquired if they are objective is not justified. Analogously to what is argued (e.g., by Thomas Kuhn and Hilary Putnam) in current (more or less relativist) philosophy of science about the nature of scientific knowledge, it can as well be maintained that aesthetic knowledge is acquired by means of such cognitive and constructive *exchange* with the world that is typical to aesthetic experience, in the sense of Goodman, Berleant, and others.

4. *Engagement and Identity*

Let us now place the above discussion in a slightly different context and assume we are working intensively on our environment in such a way that both our mental and physical capacities are needed -- to a considerable extent, that is -- to complete the task. Let us assume, furthermore, that it takes a long time to do the job and we even become physically tired. It is easy to find examples of this kind of working. It can be gardening, harvesting, building, lumbering. All these activities require not only physical efforts but thinking, planning, and problem solving, and when we finally finish the job, we can see that we have brought about something useful. Then we feel satisfaction and may even start feeling attached to this place and thinking that our relation to it is something unique. This is a *two-way fit* between the world and the mind, or rather, the whole personality, in a very concrete sense of the word. In short, the environment becomes more meaningful and its symbolic and aesthetic values increase (whatever that might exactly mean), if we have been working on it in an appropriate and understanding way. In such cases we are apt to identify and appraise the place in question in terms of this attachment created by the work.

If aesthetic experience is our dynamic and two-way interaction with the environment, involving cognition, historical knowledge, emotions, and all or many of our senses, as argued by Goodman and Berleant, one can readily see that it may have similar effects on us, even though, perhaps, somewhat less concrete and powerful than what the work of the kind I just described does. But the analogy is obvious. It is likely that in cases where experiences consist of taking distance and being disinterested, in the traditional sense of aesthetic experience, such effects do not exist, at least not to the same degree, since such experiences are not equally active and do not involve a two-way fit. More importantly, however, if the above arguments for the two-way fit are correct, they are at the same time arguments against the objectivist and subjectivist opinions on the nature of aesthetic values. They are not just out there nor are they just in our minds as the two views respectively propose, but rather result from our interaction with the environment.

Such effects as described do not necessarily follow even if the perceiver takes an active role in his or her enterprise to understand the environment, but I think they are likely to occur. In

any case, the question arises what could be done -- in addition to encouraging an active engagement with, and work on, the environment -- for instance, to people responsible for environmental management in order to increase their sensitivity concerning aesthetic values and the proper understanding of their nature. Berleant proposes extensive and effective environmental criticism, thus attempts to educate people in environmental questions, and this is, of course, one way. Criticism, however, may not be able to lead the responsible people beyond the old distinction between the subjectivist and objectivist positions. Active interactions might be more efficient.

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