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OBJECTIVITY AND AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

GLENN POSKOCIL

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Where do we draw the line between what is and is not a work of art? And, how are we to distinguish between so called "good" and "bad" works of art? There is a tendency to blur the distinction between these questions because they seem, in certain senses, to be inextricably bound to one another. It is not uncommon, for instance, to hear someone praise something by referring to it as a "work of art," yet most of us agree that not all works of art are "good," even in the aesthetic sense. Too often this distinction is muddled by the language of the layman. My intent here is to explore the second matter, as to whether or not there is any objectivity in the evaluation of artistic merit. However, this task will eventually call into play some consideration of the prior matter, as to the definition of art.

In dealing with the matter of objectivity in the aesthetic judgement, I shall first talk about the relation between qualities of the artwork, e.g. balance, form, "spirit of joy," soothingness, and the standards for the aesthetic judgement. I shall also discuss some parallels between the ways in which we evaluate things such as tools and the ways in which we might go about the evaluation of art. Later in the paper, I shall discuss in detail the aesthetic experience and its relation to the making of aesthetic judgements.

A judgement which is wholly susceptible to objectivity is one which either does or does not correspond to some accepted definition or criterion of truth or value. For example, one might say that a judgement concerning the quality of one drill over another is purely objective in that both drills can be measured against an accepted criterion -- namely, the of usefulness for the drilling of holes. Whichever drill corresponds most closely to a desired degree of usefulness is the best. Aesthetic theory need not be so optimistic as to hope for such a level of objectivity. What level of objectivity must be reached if we are to distinguish between good and bad works of art? Are we attempting to formulate a theory which will accomodate such claims as, "this piece of art is definitely good, but this one is even better?" Or, are we going to be content to merely distinguish the good works from the bad ones? At this point, we cannot determine exactly what it is that aesthetic theory will or might eventually allow us to do; however, I do not expect it to enable us to evaluate the aesthetic merits of all works of art. We may be asking too much of aesthetic theory if we expect it to accomodate such claims as, "this work is good, but this one is even better." Most of us would be quite content to have access to an aesthetic theory which could accomodate the following claim: "These works are clearly good, those are clearly bad, and these over here are simply indeterminable."

What counts is that it can differentiate the good and the bad. Whether or not aesthetic theory is capable of this, much less anything more, remains to be seen.

In an attempt to locate criteria for evaluation of art we shall find that there is an important distinction to be made between qualities of the work of art and the aesthetic response of the observer. I have in mind such qualities as balance, subject matter, and so on. Inasmuch as both seem to be related to evaluative criteria, it is difficult to decide which is of the most significance. If the qualities or properties of a particular work of art are deemed "good," is there a guarantee that the related aesthetic response is a "good" one? Or, are we to deny the possibility that a praiseworthy aesthetic response can be elicited by an artwork which has unpraiseworthy qualities? In view of the problems fostered by this distinction, one is tempted to seek out support for the argument that the qualities present in a work of art are always directly related to the quality of the aesthetic response. In many senses this may well be the case, but such an argument necessarily denies the possibility that the same artwork may elicit a variety of responses (even within the same individual at different occasions). As one who is at present seeking objectivity, I am attracted by the idea of avoiding a serious consideration of the aesthetic response, for qualities of the artwork are much more tangible. However, we cannot ignore the fact

that the aesthetic judgement cannot be made before the event of the aesthetic response. That is, the judgement is made during or after the initial response. In addition, it seems that any criteria which are chosen for the evaluation of qualities present in the work of art are given their meaning, at least partly, in terms of what we consider, in some sense, to be valuable in the aesthetic response.

This preceding notion raises another distinction, that of the pre-critical and critical response. There are many senses in which we can speak of the aesthetic response, thus we must be careful to explicate any sense in which it is referred to. The pre-critical response might be thought of as a "gut reaction," whereas the critical response is something which involves a process of reasoning in some degree. Thus, if we are to make any sense of what it is that is valuable in the aesthetic response, we must speak in terms of a specified context of the aesthetic response. I shall expand upon this notion further on.

If the aesthetic response can be separated from the qualities of the artwork itself, and discussed as a significant influence on evaluative judgements, there is a problem which immediately arises. It seems that the perception of an artwork from the individual point of view is influenced by the individual's knowledge, education, social status, and a host of other factors. For the observer brings something with him to the event of perceiving the work of art. At

a general level, one might want to say that an individual's perception of a work of art is influenced or even framed by the structures of the culture through which he sees. In the same vein and at a more specific level, a particular individual's experience of a work of art is affected by how much and what aspects of his culture he has absorbed and brought with him to the experience. Even the aging process and all the possible considerations associated with it may affect the individual's experience of the artwork, and therefore with the aesthetic response. More specifically, it may be the case that we can make sense of a position which holds that there is an individual development or change of taste, even one which is a function of age, and which is somehow independent of social acculturation. However, I do not wish to argue for such a position here.

If there is an important link between the aesthetic judgement and the aesthetic response, and if the aesthetic response is affected by social and individual factors which influence the individual's experience of an artwork, what then, are we to say about arguments which suggest that an individual's social status, age, and education are important factors in the determination of the validity of aesthetic judgements? In particular, it is often taken for granted that the judgement made by the well educated patron of the arts is somehow more significant or more worthy of serious consideration than the judgement made by someone unfamiliar

with much art. Is there any truth in such claims? Is the seventh grader's evaluation any less credible than the one made by the professor of art history? Whether or not there is an arguable position here is not of concern at the moment, for to approach our problem in this manner is misleading. It may be the case that the art-educated are more often in a position to make valid judgements about the merits of artworks than those who are not. What counts, however, is whether or not those who make evaluations have access to the kind of reasoning or justification which we hope to find valid in the end. We have to focus on the process of reasoning without regard for its origin.

Is it possible to evaluate something in terms of merit without having any reasons whatsoever to support the evaluation? If someone is asked, "why do you like the taste of broccoli?", and their reply is, "I can't explain it, I just like the taste of broccoli," are we to suppose that there are no supporting reasons simply because they cannot be articulated? I think not. There is a distinction which must be drawn between an unarticulated reason and an articulated reason. A judgement supported by reasons which cannot or will not be articulated is doomed to remain a matter of individual taste or opinion, but an articulable reason is extensible to the realm of collective consensus or evaluation. If we are to find objectivity in the aesthetic judgement, we must have access to articulable reasons. At this point,

we might consider what is involved in the distinction between the kinds of reasons which aim at explaining "why I think something to be good," and the kinds which aim at explaining "why you should think it to be good too." That is, there is a difference between explicating the causes of an aesthetic judgement and arguing for the validity of an aesthetic judgement.

The distinction here bears a likeness to the distinction which Monroe Beardsley makes between what is and what is not a genuine dispute. According to Beardsley, two people who are in disagreement about the merits of a particular thing but do not have any reasons with which to explain their positions are not engaged in a dispute, but merely a "contradiction." A dispute comes about when two parties who are in disagreement give reasons for their positions.<sup>1</sup> There is a problem with this suggestion which results from the fact that Beardsley does not attempt to define the specific character of the reasons which justify each position. If the reasons offered by both parties aim at some kind of emotive meaning, that is if the reasons merely explain why a particular individual has made a positive judgement and not why other individuals should or ought to pass the same judgement, then there is only disagreement and not a dispute. Disagreement may be a necessary condition for the existence of a dispute, but it is not a sufficient one. My point is simply that we must keep in mind the knowledge

that there are different kinds of disagreements; Some are based upon attitudes and others upon beliefs, some are genuine disputes and some are not. If we are to find objectivity in the aesthetic judgement, we need not only to have access to articulable reasons, but also to reasons which do more than simply explain a judgement, i.e. why it is made -- in short, give the causes of a judgement. We must have access to reasons which aim at persuading and arguing "for" a particular position.

When two parties are engaged in a dispute over the merits of a work of art, how are we to decide which reasons are more relevant or valid as grounds for an aesthetic judgement? How are we to distinguish valid reasons from the ones which might be too weak, subjective, or irrelevant? It seems that we might begin by attempting to locate some standard(s) by which the validity of the reasons can be measured. To the contrary, I shall approach this matter with an attempt at a process of elimination. That is, I shall first consider what kinds of standards are not able to serve as valid grounds for aesthetic judgements. The understanding of what something is not may in some way facilitate or contribute to an understanding of what something is.

# I. QUALITIES OF THE WORK OF ART IN RELATION TO AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

Suppose that we are offered the following argument: Van Gogh's "A Starry Night" is a good painting (in an aesthetic sense) because its colors are well balanced and vigorous, and because the overall impression which it offers is soothing, mystical, and dream-like. Now, the first point we might consider is that we are offered five reasons in support of the judgement, however similar they might appear. Which, if any, of these reasons might be linked to a valid standard for an aesthetic judgement? I do not claim to have the answer at hand, but this example of an argument serves well to illustrate an important point which must be considered. If a valid aesthetic judgement is to rely, in some degree, upon the qualities of the work of art, then it must be shown that the qualities focused upon by the reasons correspond to the work descriptively. For example, if I state that Van Gough's "A Starry Night" is a good work of art because it is soothing (assuming that "soothing" has been determined as a criterion of aesthetic excellence), then I remain to face the problem of proving that the painting does or can indeed elicit a soothing response. However, I do not believe that the problem in general of proving that a work of art possesses certain qualities is as formidable a task as the problem of locating the criterion of excellence. The underlying point here is this: If we

are to refer to qualities of the work of art in making an aesthetic judgement, we must be able to describe or define these qualities or properties in such a way that our meaning is clear and specific. If a term such as "mystical" is to be discussed as a quality of an artwork which has something to do with its aesthetic evaluation, we must be careful to explicate what it is that we mean by "mystical." We may find that certain descriptions or terms are far too vague or general in meaning to serve as adequate considerations in aesthetic judgements.

What sorts of descriptions of works of art might be said to have nothing to do with aesthetic merit? Obviously, descriptions such as "large," "rectangular," or "in the key of A," have nothing to do with aesthetic merit. We must pay attention to those descriptions which seem as if they might have something to do with aesthetic merit, but which may not. Careful consideration must be given to descriptions such as "well-balanced" or "harmonious" for, although they are often used by critics as counting towards a positive appraisal, their merit-making value as they apply to a work of art is not universally agreed upon. Balance and harmony may be appealing qualities in a work of art to many people, yet many others may be indifferent or even "turned off" by such qualities since they are prevalent in so many of the objects around us, at least in the case of balance. If a quality such as "balance" is to count towards the aesthetic

merit of a work of art, it may not matter that there will be some people who will prefer that it count against the merit of a work; what matters is that the reasons which support the claim are well justified in some manner.

Monroe Beardsley suggests that if a reason is to properly support an aesthetic evaluation, that is if a reason is to be relevant, it must be centered around a description of the artwork itself. In addition, the reason must both support the value judgement and explain why the judgement is true. Beardsley also suggests that reasons which center around the antecedent conditions of the work, "about the intentions of the artist, or his sincerity, or his originality, or the social conditions of the work," are not relevant critical reasons because they do not explain "directly" why the work is good. Beardsley excludes from the class of relevant critical reasons those which aim at the effect of the artwork upon individuals or groups, descriptions such as "morally uplifting, or shocking, or popular at the box office."<sup>2</sup>

One problem here is that Beardsley does not explain exactly how it is that descriptions or interpretations of the artwork (itself) directly explain why the work is good. It is not so much that I wish to criticize Beardsley on this point, but his suggestion leaves us begging for an explanation. According to Beardsley, relevant critical reasons, those which properly support an aesthetic judgement, appeal to

three general criteria which he claims to adequately cover the range of general descriptions. These are "unity, complexity, and intensity of regional quality." I do not wish to embark upon a full-scale explanation of these terms, but would like to briefly consider his term "regional quality." This category of descriptions includes terms such as "spirit of joy." How is it that such a quality can be used as a criterion of excellence, as a quality which counts towards the merit of a work of art? It is true that "joy" usually carries with it connotations of positiveness or goodness, but this fact alone surely cannot justify the validity of the use of the term as a criterion of excellence. Such a justification is no more valid than is a justification by an appeal to authority. The term "spirit of joy" becomes even more problematic (as a criterion of excellence) when it is realized that its meaning may lack a certain specificity, a certain preciseness. Moreover, to speak about an artwork in terms of a quality such as "spirit of joy" may say as much about what it is not as what it actually is. For example, to say that a painting has a "spirit of joy" may imply that the painting does not have a spirit of all those things which we consider to be the opposite of joy such as "misery," "unhappiness," perhaps even "hopelessness." This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not such terms might serve adequately as negative criticism of a given artwork.

I am not as comfortable as Beardsley in ruling out all of the antecedent conditions of the work of art as relevant critical reasons. In particular, the fact that he rejects the intentions of the artist as relevant is somewhat bothersome, though I do not intend to consider this problem here. I use the word "somewhat" because there is an appeal for the idea, as another philosopher once phrased it, "It is always what is done that we have to judge, not what the artist intended, but perhaps failed to do."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, on the other hand, it is rather disturbing that Beardsley dismisses as irrelevant the "social conditions of the work of art." Now, he does not explicate what it is that this may refer to, but there are many considerations having to do with what we might generally term "social conditions of the work of art" which may be relevant to the aesthetic judgement. For example, the meanings associated with terms such as "spirit of joy" may change according to the social conditions within which the work is present. A Greek bacchanal is not a Christian good deed. Even the meaning of the term, "beauty," and not merely the standards for employing it, is dependent, in certain senses, upon the social and cultural framework in which it is applied. To cite a rather crude example, it is well known that in past eras the stereotypical female beauty was by today's standards rather overweight and unpleasing. Today, of course, the media has helped to depict her as slim. If, for example, a modern painting of a slim, nude

woman were presented within this distant culture of plumpness appreciators (and let us say that the degree of representation and so forth is consistent with their acceptance), in all likelihood the painting would be less beautiful, or have no beauty at all, and so of less aesthetic value to the extent that the capturing of the beauty of the female body were a significant measure of excellence. It appears to be the case that our culture, the media, the educational system, and so on, influences and even determines many of our preferences and values. The question is whether they also help justify our aesthetic judgements, and not merely our preferences and values.

It may be the case that the social conditions surrounding a given work of art cannot be appealed to in such a way as to directly justify a value claim, but they might serve to justify whatever it is that justifies the value claim. That is, the cultural setting for the work of art serves as the grounds for the standards (themselves) which we appeal to in the evaluation of art. The critical reasons Beardsley takes to be relevant appeal to standards which are relative to and given meaning by the culture and era in which they exist. Perhaps Beardsley would reply to this by suggesting that to consider social conditions of the work of art as I have is to confuse causes with reasons, that social conditions may in some way account for the existence of certain judgements but not in any way support the reasons for the aesthetic

judgement. However, I am not confusing causes with reasons. My position is that social conditions do serve as reasons for judgements, but as standards, or reasons for standards, which specify what facts or conditions are relevant reasons for aesthetic judgements.

The last point I wish to consider concerning Beardsley is that he has deemed it fallacious to evaluate a work of art in terms of its effect upon the observer; such approaches are said to suffer from the "affective fallacy." We must first shed some light on this consideration by drawing a distinction between a "pro-response" and an "aesthetic-response." The "pro-response" includes such things as "popular at the box office." Recall my earlier distinction between the "pre-critical" and "critical response." The "pro-response" is akin to the "pre-critical" response in that it may be thought of as a sort of "gut reaction;" it determines the general attitude towards something, a work of art is either liked or it is not. The "aesthetic-response," on the other hand, may be influenced by the "gut reaction" but is somehow attuned to many other levels of appreciation and experience. Beardsley may be safe in suggesting that the "pro-response" is not a relevant consideration in the aesthetic judgement, but he may not be safe if he means to include those responses which might fall under the category of "aesthetic." Now, he claims that descriptions such as "morally uplifting, or shocking, or

popular at the box office" are not relevant reasons because they do not "say what in the work makes it good," but themselves have to be explained by "what is in the work (which is shocking because of the nudity or the sadism or whatever)..."<sup>4</sup> There is little point in arguing that "morally uplifting" or "shocking" are "aesthetic-responses" as I have defined them, but if what counts against such responses as relevant reasons for aesthetic judgements is that they do not explain what "in the work" makes it good, then it stands to reason that the "aesthetic-response" must also be ruled out since it does not explain what "in the work" makes it good. Indeed, all responses must be ruled out since responses are by nature distinct from descriptions of or qualities in a work of art. Thus, we may read Beardsley as suggesting that an appeal to aesthetic experience is an irrelevant consideration in the making of aesthetic judgements since aesthetic experience is a response of some sort. This is even more clearly the case when he states that "the only way to support such a judgement [here he means a judgement concerning aesthetic value] relevantly and cogently would be to point out features of the work that enable it to provide an experience having an esthetic character."<sup>5</sup>

This last statement might appear to some as being somehow intuitively plausible, but there is something very disturbing about it. For, I agree with Beardsley's position that "the aesthetic value of an object is that value which it possesses

in virtue of its capacity to provide esthetic experience. However, if this is the case, why is it that we may appeal only to features or descriptions of the artwork in the making of aesthetic judgements? If the aesthetic experience is what counts in deciding upon the aesthetic value of an object, may we not appeal to aesthetic experience or response as well? The reason for my suggestion that Beardsley's claim (above) might appear to be intuitively plausible is that the qualities or features of the work of art are responsible for the justification of the merit of the related aesthetic experience. In other words, the aesthetic experience of which we speak exists as a reaction or response to the artwork, and more specifically, qualities of the artwork. Though we would not want to say that the aesthetic experience is a reaction to any particular quality of the artwork, we would want to say that it is a reaction or to a complex relationship of qualities. What is disturbing about Beardsley's claim I shall attempt to make clear in the following.

We may draw a distinction between the idea of a "response" and the idea of a "reaction" in terms of the aesthetic experience. For the sake of argument, let us say that an aesthetic "response" to a particular work of art is a response which is consistent and in a manner predictable in the sense that the quality or character of the response is the same regardless of who (special circumstances aside) is

having the response. In this sense, we might say that an artwork (which is composed of a complex relationship of qualities) always affords for all observers a common aesthetic response. Now, let us say that an aesthetic "reaction" to a particular work of art is a response which is not consistent or predictable. In this case, we might say that the artwork has functioned as the catalyst for the response, as the initial cause of the reaction, but that the observer has in some sense contributed something of his own to the experience. The artwork is not solely responsible for the quality of the aesthetic experience in this case, for the observer has allowed his own imagination, memories, or something from within himself to influence the experience.

If Beardsley would claim that all aesthetic experiences are of the aesthetic "response" variety as I have defined them, then he is quite right in suggesting that the only way to support an aesthetic judgement is to refer to features and qualities of the artwork. However, few of us, if any, would want to claim that all or even most aesthetic experiences are of the "response" variety. It is often the case that different individuals are influenced differently by the same thing, especially when that thing is a work of art. My point is not that it is in any way useless, much less wrong, to refer to the artwork in the making of aesthetic judgements, but that in many cases it may be just as useful or even necessary that we refer to qualities and characters

of the aesthetic experience. Beardsley might reply to my suggestion with the idea that whatever it is that the observer somehow adds to the experience does not in any way effect the aesthetic value of the artwork since it has nothing to do with it. This is plausible. However, we may reply that the aesthetic value of an artwork may have something to do with the potential for inducing or influencing a variety of aesthetic experiences, or that what the individual "adds" to the aesthetic experience does effect the aesthetic value of the artwork since whatever it is that he "adds," however personal or unique, is influenced by the artwork. In any case, it would seem to be unwise on our part to ignore the possibility that the aesthetic experience may be used as justification for aesthetic judgements in all cases.

In the appreciation and evaluation of art there is an intuitive factor; this, obviously, is what we are fighting to either understand or overcome. It is difficult for us to explain why we appreciate or approve of certain works of art, even to ourselves. But it is a mistake, I think, for us to assume that the intuitive factor cannot be subject to objective analysis. Thus far, we have been attempting to analyze the descriptions of the aesthetic object and the responses or reactions to the object in terms of evaluative criteria. In doing this, we may be trying too hard to find some direct relationship between the work of art and the standards by which it should be judged. We might do better

to place more emphasis on the consideration that the interpretation of the work of art and the standards by which we judge the work of art are given meaning partly by the socio-cultural setting of which they are a part. As I have already suggested, there may be some sense in the idea that the social conditions of the artwork may serve as grounds for the standards which we appeal to in the evaluation of art. Consider the statement by Marx, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life." Art is part of these spiritual processes. Inasmuch as the mode or production of material life may be said to condition the economic and social structures of society, we may say that art and how we perceive it is conditioned by social and economic structures. In keeping with this line of thought, there are many philosophers who hold that an artwork can be fully understood and/or appreciated only when it is seen as being integrated with a particular set of cultural situations, either past or present as the case may be. It may turn out to be the case that the analysis of our intuitive insight into the evaluation of art will be facilitated by the understanding of how our intuition is subject to the same social and economic conditioning.

In considering the intuitive evaluation, we face the problem of whether or not one person's intuition in the evaluation of art is any more valid than another's. However,

the task of evaluating the validity of intuition may be somewhat less formidable if we attempt to understand it as the product of social forces. The majority of Americans place a high value on the attainment of wealth and property. Are we to believe that it is simply a coincidence that so many people share the same values? I think not. Social structure defines values, and values strengthen social structure. The question here is whether or not aesthetic values are related to social structure in the same way as are such other kinds of values. We are often led by society into a sort of unconscious assimilation of certain standards. We often accept ideas and values of the society without questioning. As children, we accept the values of our role models, or "significant others" as sociologists would say, before we understand why it is important to accept certain values. Later in life, we may seriously question many of our values, but many of them may go unquestioned. The point is that we are quite accustomed to the process of accepting something before we understand the value of whatever it is that we have accepted. Thus, many of us subscribe to certain values without knowing why we have done so. Now, if it is the case that aesthetic values are somehow embedded in the network of social values, is an appeal to the values of the society any more valid than an appeal to authority?

Generally speaking, "good" and "bad" are evaluative terms which have little meaning unless certain conditions are met. First of all, the concept of "good" has no meaning in the absence of the concept of "bad," each has its meaning only in relation to the other. Secondly, in many cases "good" and "bad" have little use-value outside of a relationship with some specific standard. Often, something is either "good" or "bad" in relation to some purpose which it serves or facilitates. We typically assess the value of a tool in terms of usefulness, durability, and even how comfortably the tool fits our hands. How well the tool facilitates the realization of the purpose for which it was designed is its measure of value. The design, durability, and grip of the tool are all the things which contribute to its usefulness. Perhaps there is a useful analogy to be made between the evaluation of such things as tools and the evaluation of art. Can we say that one saw has a greater value than another (perhaps a greater value to one who wants to purchase a saw) because it has been proven to be more durable? Well, it is one reason for supposing that it may be better; but what good is a durable saw which does not perform well? Even though "durability" functions as a criterion of excellence for the evaluation of tools, it is not a necessary nor sufficient one to justify that value judgement. All of those things which facilitate the desired performance of a tool are, as they stand alone, conditions of or contributors

to excellence. None of these qualities, i.e., durability, grip, design, are sufficient justification for excellence as they stand alone. The standard(s) by which the tool is ultimately measured, namely those factors which facilitate the realization of the purpose for which the tool was designed (hereafter referred to as "usefulness"), is really a composition of many standards.

Another question which is brought about by the consideration of the tool is whether or not it makes any sense to say something like, "a good hammer is a better tool than a good saw." Since both of these tools serve very different purposes, such a statement seems to be absurd. However, because both the hammer and the saw are tools, they are both evaluated in terms of "usefulness." What it is that we mean by "usefulness" changes depending upon which tool we are evaluating, but the general concept of "usefulness" does not. Value judgements about art, like tools, cannot be justified by an appeal to a single standard, unless what we mean by a "single standard" is a composition of standards. The question we should be asking at this point is whether or not there is something which applies to the evaluation of art in the way that "usefulness" applies to the evaluation of tools. There may be a way in which "usefulness" in regard to tools may be analgous to aesthetic experience in regard to art.

## II. THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

I have already briefly discussed several different contexts in which we may speak of the aesthetic experience, namely the "aesthetic response," the "aesthetic reaction," the "pre-critical response," and the "critical response." What I would like to consider now is the distinction to be made between a response and an aesthetic response to an object. Firstly, it is generally accepted that aesthetic responses (or experiences) can be elicited from things which are not works of art. The Grand Canyon, for example, has often been the source of many an aesthetic response. Secondly, not all responses to the work of art are of the aesthetic variety, even among works which are assumed to be capable of invoking such responses. I do not believe that we want to approach this matter with the assumption that the aesthetic response to the work of art is somehow very different in nature from the aesthetic response to the things which are not considered to be works of art. Perhaps works of art provide a greater variety of such responses, and so on, but I think we can safely proceed with the notion in mind that an aesthetic response is an aesthetic response, regardless of its object. At what level(s) does the response to or experience of art differ from other kinds of experience. The answer to the question, though not very helpful, is, quite simply, at the aesthetic level. What differentiates the aesthetic level of experience from

the general flow of experience may have something to do with the way in which "self-consciousness" is related to both the aesthetic and general flow of experience.

In an effort to differentiate the aesthetic experience from the general flow of experience, Dorothy Walsh suggests that there is a "duality of self-reflexive awareness" and suggests, wrongly I think, that this duality is inherent in the aesthetic experience. This duality, according to Walsh, is characteristic of "an experience," a category of experience which art (though not only art) offers us. The experience of which she speaks is "self-consciously recognized by the experiencer as his. An experience is not just awareness; it is awareness of awareness." She goes on to say that "An awareness of awareness is both an awareness of something given in experience, and also an awareness of a mode or manner of experiencing it; in short, it is a 'me-experiencing this'."<sup>6</sup> Now, in consideration of the fact that the purpose of Walsh's essay concerns the single question, "What kind of knowledge, if any, does literary art afford?," I do not wish to criticize her suggestion here. However, her suggestion may serve to help illuminate my theory of how the aesthetic experience differs from other experiences.

What I hold as being an aesthetic experience is directly opposed to Walsh's idea of "an experience." An aesthetic

experience is better characterized by a lack of awareness of awareness, if you will. It is a state of mind characterized by the fact that as soon as one becomes aware that he is in this state, he no longer is. To be aware of the fact that one is aware of something presupposes a distance between the experiencer and his experience of whatever it is that is being observed. For example, when a man is aware that he is aware of a tree, he sees both himself and the tree as being distinct from one another. This distinctness is what is meant by "distance." Through awareness of this distance comes a state of mind in which the experiencer is both aware of the experience of the tree and aware of the experience of himself as distinct from the tree, as that which is observing the tree. Thus, it is in this sense that we may speak of a distance between the experiencer and his experience. There is no disputing the fact that there is a physical distance between the brain and other objects in the world such as trees, but need there be a distance between the mind of a person and the mind's experience of something like a tree? That is, the experiencer and his experience. The aesthetic experience is a level of experience which transcends the boundaries of self-awareness in such a way that at the moment or moments of its existence, the experiencer is not able to step back from one awareness or call into play a second awareness which is somehow conscious of the experience taking place. To put it poetically, the

observer, the object which invokes the experience, and the experience itself become one. At the inception of awareness of awareness, the aesthetic experience ceases to exist. The preceding is an account of the structure of an aesthetic experience, but it must be kept in mind that this structure is not peculiar to the aesthetic experience.

Someone may wish to suggest at this point that there are two kinds of aesthetic experiences, one being characterized by the lack of awareness (let us say an "immersed" aesthetic experience), and another being characterized by an awareness of awareness (a "self-conscious" aesthetic experience). Is it possible for an aesthetic experience to happen during the state of mind characterized by an awareness of awareness? I shall argue that because an awareness of awareness presupposes a stepping back from experience in certain senses, the intensity of the awareness which is under the eye of the other awareness, so to speak, is diminished. Let us begin with a consideration of the awareness which is aware of another awareness (hereafter referred to as the first awareness). Similarly, we shall refer to the awareness which the first awareness is aware of as the second awareness. Now, what is characteristic of the first awareness is a state of mind which is analytical, oriented toward comparison, and even sometimes judgemental, at least we will say that the first awareness is capable of being such states of mind. The first awareness is doing the

"looking" whereas the second awareness is being "looked" at, though the second awareness is also "looking" at something. However, the second awareness is not "looking" at the first awareness. If what the second awareness is "looking" at is an object, e.g. a tree, the second awareness is experiencing the object where the first awareness is experiencing the experience of analyzing or "looking at" the "experience" of the second awareness, to put it awkwardly. Thus, as it is, there are two experiences taking place simultaneously.

Is this first awareness, then, a rational state of mind? It is not the case that the first awareness is always judging, comparing and so forth, but I shall hold that it is a rational state of mind of sorts. Let us suppose that the object of our experience is a car. The "immersed" state of mind and the "self-conscious" state of mind will experience the car in very different ways. The "immersed" experience of the car is one in which the shape, color, and lines of the car are the only kinds of features which one is aware of. In this state of mind, the experiencer is not aware that the car is a Honda, or that it is two years old, or that it may be a desirable thing to purchase. The "self-conscious" state of mind is aware of the color, shape, and lines of the car, but it is also aware of the car in ways that the "immersed" state of mind cannot be. The "self-conscious" mind sees the car as a good buy, as

an object which may enhance his prestige, as a 1985 Honda, and so on. In short, we might say that the "self-conscious" state of mind which is aware of the car sees the car in terms of some kind of meaning, whereas the "immersed" state of mind which is aware of the car does not. Someone may question whether or not a person who has never seen a car or even heard of its existence, such as a native, would experience the car in an "immersed" sense. Such a native would have a "self-conscious" experience of the car since he would in all likelihood attempt to make sense of it, to see it in terms of some kind of meaning.

The second awareness is akin to the "immersed" awareness in that it too is aware only of the appearance of the car, e.g. color, shape, and not of any meaning which the car may hold. But the first awareness attempts to find meaning in the object of the experience of the second awareness, thereby diffusing the would be "immersed awareness" into two separate awarenesses. Thus, the "aesthetic" intensity of the first awareness, i.e. of the experience of the second awareness, is less by comparison than the intensity of the "immersed" experience. The "immersed" awareness is not able to experience anything in terms of meaning because it is not aware of its object of experience as being either distinct or related to anything else in any way other than a physical sense, i.e., a tree is seen against some sort of background and a musical note may be heard against the

background of silence and as it relates in pitch or tonal quality to other musical notes. In the "immersed" awareness of an object, there is no "distance" between the experience and the object of the experience, or between the experiencer and the experience. In the "self-conscious" awareness of an object, there is a "distance" between the experience and the object of the experience, and between the experiencer and the experience. In the absence of "distance," the experiencer is not able to see the object of the experience in terms of any meaning. The visual appearance, sound, or even texture of an object (which are the aspects of any object that the "immersed" awareness is aware of) have no meaning in the sense in which I use "meaning." An object has meaning only as it relates to something other than the object such as a purpose, value, desire, another object, or whatever.

The aesthetic experience somehow transcends, or perhaps bypasses, the state of mind which experiences objects in terms of meaning. To this degree, at least, I must contend that the "immersed" awareness, or the immersed structure of mind, is a necessary precondition for the inception of the aesthetic experience. However, I have also suggested that objects other than works of art may be experienced in the "immersed" sense. Thus, we are left with the question of how the aesthetic experience differs from the general lot of "immersed" experiences. I do not intend to take up this

question here, for it is not necessary that I do so in order to proceed with my point. If the quality of the aesthetic experience is what effects the aesthetic value of a work of art, and if the aesthetic experience must necessarily be appealed to in the making of aesthetic judgements (even though qualities or properties of the artwork may in some manner also be appealed to), then it may be misleading for us to assign aesthetic value (in relation to some sense of "good" or "bad") to works of art because of the "meaninglessness" associated with the aesthetic experience. For, if the aesthetic experience, as an "immersed" experience, is an experience devoid of "meaning," then the aesthetic experience should not be evaluated in terms of the realm of positive and negative values. This is not to suggest that the aesthetic experience should not be evaluated at all, only that aesthetic experiences should not be evaluated in such a way that our evaluations result in such conclusions as, "this aesthetic experience has more aesthetic value than that one." Further, if the aesthetic value of the work of art is ultimately in part a function of the aesthetic experience, or if the aesthetic value of the work of art is to be assessed through the aesthetic value of the aesthetic experience, then it stands to reason (or so the argument contends) that the work of art should not be evaluated in such a way that will yield conclusions such as, "this work of art has more aesthetic value than that one."

The crucial premiss of this argument is that aesthetic experiences are devoid of "meaning." Now, it may be suggested that the aesthetic experience is devoid of "meaning" during the moments of its existence, but that it has a "meaning" when it is reflected upon. For "meaning," in terms of the aesthetic experience, is, as I have defined here, something which comes about when the object of the experience is seen in relation to something other than the object. Thus, the reflected-upon aesthetic experience has "meaning" in that it may be seen as related to many other things. However, this "meaning," whatever it is, which is assessed through the reflecting upon an aesthetic experience is superimposed upon the aesthetic experience by the reflecting experiencer. The "meaning" is not inherent in the aesthetic experience, it is "brought to" the aesthetic experience as opposed to "extracted from" the experience, if you will. Thus, it may be said that the realm of meanings are applicable to the reflected upon aesthetic experience, but not to the aesthetic experience itself. And, it is the aesthetic experience, not the reflected-upon aesthetic experience, which lies closest to the work of art. The underlying point here is that of the following two ratios, the first is greater than the second: the ratio of (the degree to which the observer determines the nature of the reflected-upon aesthetic experience) to (the degree to which the artwork determines the reflected upon aesthetic experience) is greater than

the ratio of (the degree to which the observer determines the aesthetic experience) to (the degree to which the artwork determines the aesthetic experience).

Given the argument of the last two pages, it may well turn out to be the case that to ask whether or not a particular work of art is "good" or "bad" is as pointless as it is to ask whether or not the color red is "good." It may even turn out that we are somehow undermining the very purpose or significance of the work of art by our attempts at evaluations in terms of aesthetic excellence. In any case, the conception of "good" and "bad" may be incompatible, perhaps incommensurable, with the experience of art. This is not to suggest that the task of evaluating art is without purpose, for it expands our ability to appreciate works of art and raises other questions and problems which may have otherwise gone unnoticed. What I suggest is that the significance which may come from the consideration of the work of art -- the "evaluation" of it, if you will -- may have more to do with the communication of different perspectives and interpretations than with the attainment of an aesthetic judgement, i.e. some true claim about the artwork meeting criteria of excellence. The possibility that such an attainment is impossible should in no way deter us in philosophy from serious consideration of the aesthetic judgement, however, for its consideration contributes to an understanding and appreciation of the variety of experiences which art may bring to us.

In summary, consideration of the distinction between the aesthetic experience and the reflected-upon aesthetic experience points to the understanding that there is a "meaninglessness" characteristic of the aesthetic experience. This "meaninglessness" is precisely that which obstructs the possibility of assigning to the work of art an aesthetic value in terms of merit. This is by no means to suggest that works of art may not be assigned a value of any sort, for there are moral, political, nationalistic, and a host of other standards by which the work of art may be measured. However, the judgements which might result from such evaluations would not fall under the peculiar category of the "aesthetic."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Monroe Beardsley, "Tastes Can Be Disputed," Classical Philosophical Questions, fourth ed., ed., James A. Gould (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co., 1982), p. 602.

<sup>2</sup> Monroe Beardsley, "The Classification of Critical Reason," A Modern Book of Esthetics, ed., Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), p. 394.

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Rader, ed., A Modern Book of Esthetics, fifth ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), p. 384.

<sup>4</sup> Beardsley, op. cit. p. 394.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Walsh, "Enhancement of Experience," A Modern Book of Esthetics, ed., Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), p. 153.

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