

Naturalism and Aesthetic Experience

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## Naturalism and Aesthetic Experience

In my recent book, *Art and Engagement* (1991), I develop the idea of aesthetic engagement as central to the appreciation of art. The human contribution to the constitution of the “work” of art, I claim, is a critical part of appreciative experience. This contribution, however, is easily misread into the history of the idea of experience that has dominated Western philosophy since the seventeenth century, a history that sees experience as an inner, personal, subjective affair. From this vantage point, the metaphysical implications of an aesthetics of experience seem to lead resolutely to idealism.<sup>1</sup>

‘Experience’, however, is a troublesome term precisely because its meaning is equivocal. Despite its association with philosophical idealism, experience allows a range of interpretations in various contexts. Even though aesthetic experience is often understood subjectively, it is mistaken to think that it allows of no other alternative. These comments raise a complex of issues, two of which I want to consider here: first, the metaphysical significance of experience and, second, the bearing of art on metaphysics.

There is a strong and well-grounded fear in modern philosophy on the part of naturalists and materialists that introducing the human factor into the epistemological equation is tantamount to embracing idealism. There may be good reason for this. From Berkeley, in the British tradition, to Kant, in the continental, experience became the philosopher’s stone that transmuted the lead of the material world into the divine gold of mind. A crucial difference lies, however, between epistemology and metaphysics, as others have pointed out in condemning this unwarranted transference: The human presence in the one does not decide the character of the other.<sup>2</sup>

While alternative accounts of experience have been developed, tradition perseveres in imposing itself on them. Dewey was a frequent victim of this misapprehension. No less a contemporary of his than Santayana (1951) wrongly confounded Dewey’s focus on human experience with the subject-

tivism inherent in British empiricism. Moreover, the grounds for such a misconstrual persist, for experience continues to be appropriated for subjective purposes, as we discover, for example, in psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Yet the assumption of subjectivism is neither necessary nor invariable, and the practice of making it is particularly distressing when it comes to questions of aesthetics, where experience has so central a position.

Part of the problem is semantic. 'Fact' can be variously defined. Philosophical naturalism, for example, does not understand facts as objective realities that we, as knowers, attempt to grasp and formulate. Neither does it hold that "facts are themselves produced by perception."<sup>3</sup> A naturalistic interpretation of facts can see them as cognitive achievements distilled from the manifold of our active experience as part of a natural-social-cultural world. This is sometimes done formally and rigorously, as in the sciences, and sometimes more casually in the form of inferences from individual and social activities and practices. Indeed, facts represent the same reciprocity of human and world in cognitive activity that we see at work in the aesthetic interrelations that unify artist, appreciator, performer, and art object into a complex field (see my *Art and Engagement* [1991]).<sup>4</sup> Naturalism is compatible in this respect with phenomenology, with hermeneutics, and even with Marxism. As in these domains of science and philosophy, a naturalistic metaphysics is entirely consonant with a theory of aesthetic participation that emphasizes the appreciator's contribution. It is a mistake, then, to consider any of these movements as unavoidably idealist. While they may propose more than a methodology, they may also provide less than a metaphysics.

Aesthetic reciprocity, which the arts embody so forcefully and which I tried to articulate in my book, has, nonetheless, powerful relevance for metaphysics. The arts exhibit the world in various modes and dimensions, even though accounts that have claimed to reveal that bond of world and art have not been particularly successful. Theories of mimesis, representation, and symbol have tried to elucidate specific ways in which the aesthetic relates to the wider world, yet they have not succeeded. In part this is because they do not fully realize the essential reciprocity of aesthetic experience and so they try to elucidate the way in which the arts relate to the world beyond by drawing connections rather than by disclosing their interpenetration. In recognizing the bond that the arts establish with different domains of experience, aesthetic engagement at the same time makes explicit our contribution to the formation of the larger human sphere. For the mutual influence of perceiver and object that is a central element in aesthetic experience eloquently expresses the general pattern of all experience. The arts do not only interpret our world; they serve as an exemplar of ways in which we participate in constructing it.

Aesthetic reciprocity, then, helps us to understand how we contribute to

the formation and content of the world, but it does not assert that we constitute that world. One of the strengths of aesthetic engagement as a naturalistic concept is that, by incorporating the human factor into the very structure of art, it both avoids the dualistic separation of appreciator and art object that is so burdensome for other theories and exemplifies the continuity that also unites art with the wider world.

Related to this humanizing of the world through aesthetic engagement is the implication that, since one cannot speak of a world independent of the human perceiver, the multiplicity of experience qualifies the very meaning of 'reality'. This leads to the idea of multiple realities, a notion that has its roots in James, Dewey, and Buchler, and which *Art and Engagement* (1991) develops still further. The notion of multiple realities does not land us in idealism, however; it is rather the direct consequence of a rigorous naturalism. Rich possibilities for further investigation lie in exploring its forms and the relationships this idea has to the world beyond art.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of aesthetic engagement points to another shortcoming inherent in equating experience with subjectivism, a difficulty that consists in considering all experience as an entirely personal matter. At first glance, this seems incontrovertible, since only individuals appear capable of having experience, yet it follows only from the presumption of individuals who possess Leibnizian self-sufficiency. If, on the contrary, one regards human being as thoroughly embedded in a social-cultural-historical matrix, then it is possible to expose the notion of a self-contained individual as a cultural myth. From this standpoint, "individual" experience is irrefragibly social and never exclusively personal, private, or subjective. Aesthetic reciprocity demonstrates how experience is not a matter of personal history alone; it is as much a matter of social history as the person who is its host. What is true of aesthetic experience is equally true of other modes of experience.

The arts, then, offer us "some lessons in metaphysics," to borrow Ortega's modest phrase, and, toward the end of my book, I was concerned with suggesting this. Where these intimations of art will take us is not yet clear. They certainly move beyond the narrow path of traditional aesthetics, but they hardly lead straight to idealism.

*Goshen, Connecticut*

## NOTES

1. Crispin Sartwell's otherwise sensitive and highly perceptive review of *Art and Engagement* in this journal (1993) illustrates the ease with which one can slip into a subjective reading of experience.

2. See, for example, Ralph Barton Perry's critique of Berkeleyan idealism in his *Present Philosophical Tendencies* ([1912] 1968).
3. Sartwell (1993) wrongly ascribes this claim to me.
4. In *The Aesthetic Field* (1970), I develop this idea systematically.
5. I explore the idea of multiple realities in *Art and Engagement* (1991, chaps. 8 and 9).

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