



Journal des Economistes et des Etudes Humaines

Bilingual Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Publié avec le concours de l'Institut Européen des Etudes Humaines
Paris & Aix-en-Provence

COMMENTS ON EKKEHART SCHLICHT'S "AESTHETICISM IN THE THEORY OF CUSTOM"

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The thrust of the argument of Schlicht's paper in a recent volume of this journal is that a correct account of rule learning must take into consideration an aesthetic rule-preference or in other words that "rules can be graded not only with respect to their instrumental usefulness, but also with respect to their clarity, straightforwardness, analogy, and ease of perception and reproduction. Some rules are better than others in this sense."¹ The position is constructed as a middle-ground position between "inductivism" and "structuralism" that are found by the author to be untenable. I want to present three general comments regarding the notion of aestheticism. The first deals with a version of sophisticated structuralism that the author misses to deal with in his paper and the other two are criticisms of the idea of the aesthetic judgment.

1. In Schlicht's discussion of "sophisticated structuralism" the author acknowledges that rule-learning can be rule-bound itself. But then he draws an analogy to linguistic structuralism contending that "this kind of structuralism would maintain that humans are equipped with a "generative social structure" which produces, in interaction with prevailing circumstances and historical conditions, any social structure that we may observe".² This is, however, not the same as the contention that the process of concept formation and learning are rule-bound. In the work of Holland et al.³ for example, the main idea is that concept formation and learning is rule-bound only in the sense that the very fundamental epistemic unit is a cognitive rule. Rule clusters that are often activated together in the individual's attempt to model its environment will eventually become associated and will form categories. Many rules and rule clusters together give rise to mental

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¹ Schlicht-2000, p. 40.

² Schlicht-2000, p. 42.

³ Holland et al-1986.

models which are transient cognitive structures and enable the individual to generate predictions even though knowledge of the environment is incomplete. The modification of these mental models which is based on the underlying rule-modification according to the environmental feedback is what we call learning. In this sense, what is part of our genetic architecture is that we are thinking and learning according to rules. But here the role of the genetic architecture in the learning process stops and all the rest of our knowledge is cultural. With this theory⁴ (that Schlicht is not discussing in the paper) the problems with inductivism and structuralism that he correctly points out are overcome in a consistent way without invoking any ad hoc aesthetic preference, as the author seems to do. Having said that, I proceed to my further comments on aestheticism.

2. Schlicht proposes the aesthetic preference as a solution to the problem. This is, of course, an ad hoc solution, which is not necessarily always a great sin as long as there are good reasons for introducing it. My first problem with Schlicht's highly original proposal is that he still seems to move in the area of a conscious choice of rules (like the "structuralists", as he calls them, *e.g.* North and Buchanan); the only difference seems to be that in his case people choose rules according to another standard, simplicity or beauty instead of utility maximization or utility increase. The author is giving throughout the whole paper the example of a convention contending that it is just one good example of a social rule. But the example of a convention is not that innocent as he suggests. In the case of conventions, as we know from game theory, the constellation of interests is very peculiar and the players receive the same payoffs as long as they are all doing the same thing. There is the need to appeal in this case to something else, in order to solve the underlying game and in this case the author is definitely right in pointing out that an aesthetic standard can do the job perfectly well, so that either the left or the right side of the road is chosen. *But this is only true as long as there is no genuine conflict of interest involved. After the conflict of interests in the situation is essentially solved by deciding that both will choose the same side of the road, the further decision can be made according to whatever standard, for example aestheticism.* But the necessary condition is that the conflict of interests is solved in the first place.

In other words, what I am arguing here is that Schlicht's aesthetic standard is only of importance in this particular case of the conventions. In all other cases of social rules that a genuine conflict is involved, aestheticism is not enough. People rather adopt rules because they expect that they will better their condition by doing it rather than because these rules are simple. Simplicity and other aesthetic standards are only employed if they contribute to the utility increase of the individual and in most, if not all the cases, they are not dominating utility considerations. I am taking a longer and more complicated route to my office everyday that involves 20 minutes rather than 15 minutes walk, because I want to

⁴ Mantzavinos: North, Shariq: 2001.

d to be seen by the Greek owner of the fast-food restaurant who will start
ing with me. I do that even though the simpler rule would be to follow the 15
ites path.

3. Besides, a reader of the paper cannot avoid gaining the impression that
e whole discussion aestheticism is presented as just another standard of
osing between rules. Implicit and sometimes explicit in Schlicht's discussion is
learning is equivalent with choosing between rules. I disagree with this view,
e learning is fundamentally a process of rule modification which does not
ssarily involve a conscious choice of rules. Therefore I think that the judgment
is own theory according to which "[t]his rule preference induces people to try
ear rules first. This makes induction and rule learning possible"⁵ is misplaced.
icht's theory gives us only a criterion of what kind of rule to choose or adopt,
a theory of learning. A theory of learning must according to my view also deal
the process of routinization that at some point might include choice (and even
oice of rules), but is not always to be equated with the conscious choice of
rules to be acquired.⁶

icht-2000, p. 43.

e fleshed out this argument in Mantzavinos-2001.

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