

AESTHETIC RELATIVISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

As Hume remarks, the view that aesthetic evaluations are ‘subjective’ is part of common sense—one certainly meets it often enough in conversation. As philosophers, we can distinguish the one sense of the claim (‘aesthetic evaluations are mind-dependent’) from another (‘aesthetic evaluations are relative’). A plausible reading of the former claim (‘some of the grounds of some aesthetic evaluations are response-dependent’) is true. This paper concerns the latter claim. It is not unknown, or even unexpected, to find people who believe that aesthetic evaluations are culturally relative, or even agent-relative. A cultural relativist would hold that there is no way to adjudicate an apparent disagreement between, say, a Japanese critic who finds Wright of Derby clunky and unsubtle, and a British critic who finds Utamaro’s flower pictures overly pretty and sentimental. An agent-relativist would hold there was no way to adjudicate between someone who thought Renoir sickly sweet, and someone who found his work ravishingly beautiful. The view is little discussed in contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics in exactly this form, although the attempts to prove the intersubjective validity of aesthetic evaluation (ISV),¹ would, if they worked, show relativism to be false. Furthermore, thoughts on aesthetic relativism can

¹ I have taken this abbreviation from a critical notice of Malcolm Budd’s *Aesthetic Essays* by Rob Hopkins (forthcoming). Hopkins’ paper also inspired some thoughts that lurk in the far background of this paper. This is also an opportunity to thank Jesse Prinz for his characteristic generosity in allowing me to discuss his unpublished work.

be found amongst those writing in aesthetics. The immediate spur for this essay is an unpublished paper by Jesse Prinz.²

First, let me say what I mean by aesthetic relativism.

The judgement ‘ x is aesthetically valuable’ means no more than ‘ A finds x to be aesthetically valuable’.

For cultural relativism, A is some cultural group and for agent-relativism A is some individual. Few, if anyone, would think that *everything* that counted as an aesthetic judgement is relative. For the sake of simplicity, I shall ignore this caveat as the kinds of judgement I will be talking about are generally the kinds of judgement that those inclined to relativism think are relativist: namely, aesthetic evaluations.

There are two things we can note immediately. First, there is one big advantage to this view: namely, it relieves us of the need to provide an account of ISV. Hume begins with his Lockean account of beauty (roughly, ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’) and then struggles to show that this is compatible with ISV. Relativism at least provides an explanation of why philosophers (including the greatest philosophers) have struggled to come up with a justification for ISV; there isn’t one. Second, relativism does not have to be unsophisticated about what counts as ‘finding’. It need not mean ‘ A finds x to be aesthetically valuable in all circumstances on all occasions’. It can add a plethora of caveats: that A needs to be qualified in various ways and that the circumstances need to be right in various ways. However, what makes it relativism is the denial that such caveats give grounds for the judgement being binding on anyone who is not A .

Apart from ‘finding’, the other obviously problematic phrase in the formulation is ‘aesthetically valuable’. What exactly the term ‘aesthetics’ refers to varies from writer to writer. In this paper I shall follow Prinz and consider aesthetic evaluations with two kinds of content: judgements on physical attractiveness of persons, and then judgements on works of art. First, I will examine a general consideration that seems incompatible with relativism, and second, I will consider a more serious response to relativism. For simplicity, I will, in general, restrict my discussion to visual attractiveness and the visual arts.

One reason for thinking aesthetic evaluations are relative is that the grounds for aesthetic evaluations are some elicited non-cognitive affect. In more old fashioned

² Prinz (unpublished).

Humean terms, the content of the judgement ‘ x is aesthetically valuable’ is something like ‘I find x pleasurable’ or, if we wanted to be cultural relativists ‘I, and others of my culture, find x pleasurable’. From this position, one might investigate whether as a matter of fact different people or different cultures find different things pleasurable. It might turn out that there is variation, either among individuals or among cultures, and it might turn out that there is no variation among individuals, or no variation among cultures. One could label the first of these positions ‘relativism’ and the second of these positions ‘universalism’ (this is how Prinz uses the terms). However, that is not the contrast in which I am interested given the way I have defined ‘relativism’. The universalist position here is still relativist: it is still that case that ‘ x is aesthetically valuable’ means no more than ‘A finds x to be aesthetically valuable’. It just so happens that we all find the same things aesthetically valuable. Showing that, as a matter of fact, everybody likes jam would not show that a liking for jam is not a mere preference. As it is a mere preference it is, on my terms, relative.

What, then, would be non-relativism on my terms? (As the term ‘universal’ does not contrast with ‘relative’, as explained in the last paragraph, I shall contrast ‘relative’ with ‘absolute’ despite the misleading connotations of the term.) One could say that aesthetic value is real, objective, part of the fabric of the world; it is a fact about an object as to whether or not it possesses it, or it is such that real disagreement is possible as to whether or not an object possesses it. However, these claims are open to varying metaphysical interpretations, which place them at varying distances from relativism. So in what follows I shall not rely on an exact definition of absolutism, but simply explore whether or how far we can get from relativism.

II. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF ATTRACTIVENESS

Prinz makes a case, based on surveys and other sociological evidence, for judgements of physical attractiveness varying across time and space. He concludes: “Views of physical attractiveness are not universal, and there is no way to adjudicate when conflicting trends are found”.³ However, views similar to that which I am attributing to the relativist have been criticized for starting with the actual preferences of people, as those preferences can be in some ways systematically malformed. There is a view, common in some parts of feminist philosophy, that ideals of attractiveness have

³ Prinz (unpublished), p.10.

evolved so as to systematically undermine the status of women in contemporary Western society.⁴ Let us call the ideal of female attractiveness in contemporary Western culture 'F'. Consider the following claim:

- 1.) 'F' is a pernicious social construct.

Someone who believed this might hold the following:

- 2.) I find someone manifesting 'F' aesthetically valuable, but they are not really aesthetically valuable (rather, I have just been manipulated into thinking so).

This is a negative thesis: it only says that some people a person finds aesthetically valuable they ought not to find aesthetically valuable. It does not say that there are some people a person ought to find aesthetically valuable.

One could run a similar argument with respect to the aesthetic value of works of art. One might hold, for example, that the ideals of aesthetic value in works of art are a social construct that foregrounds some notions of attractiveness (those that appeal to people of a certain race, sex or class) at the expense of others.⁵ Once again, someone who believed this could end up claiming that although one finds a work of art aesthetically valuable, it is not really aesthetically valuable (one has been manipulated into thinking so).

These arguments depend on whether we can move from:

- 3.) A has been manipulated into finding x to be aesthetically valuable.

to:

- 4.) x is not really aesthetically valuable (even to A).

This inference seems suspect. It would not follow, for example, from my discovering that I had been manipulated into finding the taste of broccoli pleasant, that I did not

⁴ The classic statement is in Wolf (1990); a more recent, and more sophisticated account, can be found in Chambers (2008).

⁵ Here the classic text is Bourdieu (1984).

really find the taste of broccoli pleasant. A difference between the broccoli case and the cases we are considering is that individuals might wish to resist pernicious socially constructed norms of attractiveness; that is, not conform to them. Hence, we could move from

3a.) A has been manipulated into finding x to be aesthetically valuable.

to:

4a.) A ought not to find x aesthetically valuable, or A does not think x merits being found aesthetically valuable.

It does not seem such a stretch of language to express these views with the claim ' x is not really aesthetically valuable'.

Even if we grant that all these arguments go through, what damage is done to the relativist position? If ideals of aesthetic value are a pernicious social construct, then there are non-relative, moral grounds, against the inference from 'I find x to be aesthetically valuable' to ' x is aesthetically valuable'. This shows only that in such circumstances, A should not trust his or her finding x to be aesthetically valuable; that is, A's ability to find things aesthetically valuable has been systematically undermined. It does not show that aesthetic evaluations are intersubjectively valid. The relativist claim could still be true in a society where there are no pernicious social constructs. In other words, being in thrall to a pernicious social construct can join being drunk, having jaundice, being inexpert, or whatever as one more thing that the relativist can allow makes a judgement untrustworthy. Only the ideologically pure could make aesthetic evaluations that were above reproach, but they might still be relativist for all that.

III. RELATIVISM AND UNDERSTANDING

A better challenge to relativism begins by firmly distinguishing between preferences and judgements of value. Preferences are, in my sense of the term, agent-relative. A psychologist might show the inhabitants of Cambridge images of 20 rectangles, and it turns out that 60% of respondents prefer rectangle 14. The same survey, conducted in Beijing, has the result that 60% of respondents prefer rectangle 12. There is neither

ground nor reason for us to attempt to adjudicate between the different visual preferences of individuals and the different visual preferences of cultures. Indeed, as discussed above, relativism (as I understand it) would not be undermined even if the result was that everyone preferred rectangle 14 (as, or so the rumour has it, among ratios, everyone prefers a ratio of 1.618—the ‘golden ratio’).

Are judgements of aesthetic value in the arts expressions of a positive reaction (or, as Prinz holds, expressions of a positive reaction with the additional claim that the object being regarded elicited that positive reaction)? Here are two reasons for thinking not. First, we distinguish the judgement ‘I like it’ from the judgement ‘It is good’. It is not so much that the judgements can come apart (although surely they can come apart) but that we take them to be different judgements. The relativist could agree: the judgement ‘I like *x*’ is a *mere* preference; a *mere* expression of liking, while the grounds for the judgement ‘*x* is good’ is some different, more complicated affective reaction. Nonetheless, it is an affective reaction; people either have it or they do not have it, and thus relativism is still in the picture. If there are entirely ‘cold’ judgements (the judgement that ‘*x* is good’ made in the absence of an affective reaction) it is an ‘inverted-commas’ judgement. That is, a judgement that really means something like ‘This is good according to the critics’, or ‘This makes an interesting move in the current debate within the artworld’, or ‘I know I ought to like this even if I do not’. I find the relativist’s way of construing the distinction between expressions of preference and judgements of value unconvincing. That is, I see no reason (apart from the desire to explain them away) to think that ‘cold’ judgements are, in fact, ‘inverted-comma’ judgements.

There is a second, and I think more persuasive, intuition-pump to push us to think that judgements of aesthetic value are not grounded in affective reactions: that such a view does not make sense of our engagement with art. Here is an example which might be familiar, or, if not familiar, at least plausible. Rothko is in many ways a difficult painter. Is there enough there for his paintings to be great paintings? Is what is there more to do with overwhelming affect than anything particularly valuable? One can imagine puzzling over this question for years; visiting the Rothko collections in London, Houston and Washington; buying the biography and the various books on or by Rothko. One can imagine that, sometime or other, one is standing in the Rothko room at the Tate looking (yet again) at the paintings and asking oneself whether they are great paintings. What is it that one is asking oneself? It is surely not the question

of whether, in the scheme of things, Rothko's paintings elicit a positive affective reaction. That should take no longer to answer than it would take to fill in a psychologist's questionnaire. One is surely not checking the defeaters for judgement that the relativist does allow do not apply; that is, one is not checking one is not drunk, that the lighting is adequate and so on. So what is one doing? One is, surely, trying to work out whether the paintings possess aesthetic value.

Let us, for the moment, grant the distinction for which I am arguing. That is, that there is a distinction between expressions of a positive affective reaction (together with the claim that the object expressed that affective reaction) and judgements of aesthetic value. What would the latter have to be like in order not to be relativist?

What is the person who is struggling to assess Rothko struggling to achieve? The answer, surely, is that they are struggling to put themselves into a position where they can understand Rothko's work. More accurately, they are trying to put themselves into a position where they will have an experience of Rothko's work which is informed by their understanding the work correctly. This claim has been defended by Malcolm Budd, who summarizes it as follows:⁶

The intersubjective validity of a judgement that attributes a high, medium, or low artistic value to a work is determined by how valuable it is to experience the work with understanding.⁷

The approach Budd takes in his most extended discussion of this is to give a conceptual analysis of the artistic value. That is, he is not providing a defence of his view that aesthetic value is 'intersubjective', but rather is claiming that our concept of aesthetic value is that the value is intersubjective. If Budd's analysis is right, then relativists are either revisionists or are arguing that we cannot apply our concept of aesthetic value correctly.

According to Budd:

You attribute artistic value to a work in so far and to the degree that you regard the experience it offers as being intrinsically valuable. For you to regard an experience as being intrinsically valuable, is for you to consider it right or appropriate, merited or

⁶ The rest of this paper draws heavily on Budd, although whatever errors have crept in are my own.

⁷ Budd (2007), p.97.

justified, to find it intrinsically rewarding. An experience merits such a response if there is good reason to find it intrinsically rewarding.⁸

What does this view suggest about relativism? Let us grant (as Budd does) that, for some works, there is more than one evaluation of the work that is not incorrect;⁹ that works of art do not possess artistic value to a precise degree, and are thus incommensurable; and that artistic value is doubly anthropomorphic: the experience is only available to the human sensibility, and only someone with a human sensibility will value the experience.¹⁰

For the view to be compatible with cultural relativism, it would have to be the case that when someone of culture A claims ‘*x* is aesthetically valuable’ he or she means ‘*x* merits being found intrinsically rewarding for people of culture A’. The relativist might seek support in the thought that people of a non-A culture would not (or could not) understand the work. Only somebody who grew up in the A culture, fully appreciated its nuances and so on would (or could) ever be in a position to get to grips with it. However, that thought, which is independently implausible in both its weaker and stronger versions, would not be enough to deliver relativism. What is claimed is that ‘*x* is aesthetically valuable’ is equivalent to ‘If one were to understand this work, it would merit being found intrinsically valuable’—an absolute truth. That someone would not (or could not) understand *x* is irrelevant. That is, to claim that a particular work of Japanese art is aesthetically valuable is to claim that were someone to understand the work, it would merit being found intrinsically valuable. That is true whether or not someone from the West would (or could) understand it.

The same considerations apply in the case of agent-relativism. The agent-relativist would need to claim that ‘*x* is aesthetically valuable’ would mean ‘*x* merits being found intrinsically rewarding for A’. However, the idea that *x* is such that it merits being found intrinsically rewarding, but that is true only for A, is barely coherent. It would be as if the person in the intuition-pump above, having studied the pictures and read the books, came to the conclusion that Rothko’s pictures did merit being found intrinsically valuable, but that this merit claim applied only to him or her.

⁸ Budd (2004), p.270.

⁹ Budd (2004), p.273 holds the absolutist *could* make this claim. He does not endorse it himself.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.269-71.

How should the relativist respond to this? They might begin by pointing out an implausible consequence of the absolutist position: namely, that, as a matter of fact, people do disagree as to whether or not a particular work of art possesses aesthetic value. What is the absolutist's diagnosis of disagreement? It seems too trite merely to say that at least one of the parties to the disagreement is suffering from some epistemological failure that further thought would remedy.

There are a number of replies the absolutist can make here. First, the extent of aesthetic disagreement should not be over-stated. There is a great deal more agreement than disagreement about, and, even where there is disagreement, it is often grounded in substantial agreement. However, that does not meet the relativist's point: granted that there is at least some disagreement, what is the absolutist's diagnosis of it?

The second reply is that not everything that appears to be a disagreement is a disagreement; it could simply be conflicting preferences. That is, different people might like different works of art, or might prefer to spend time (or money) on different works of art. Absolutism says nothing about expressions of preferences which may or may not match. The absolutist claim is that there are judgements of aesthetic value which are not merely expressions of preference, and that these are ISV.

The third reply is that disagreement could be rooted in epistemological failure. The relativist is surely right to claim that it would be embarrassing to absolutism to have to claim that all disagreements are rooted in epistemological failure, however it is plausible to think that some are. That is, it is part of Budd's position that an evaluation that is not grounded in understanding can be discounted.¹¹ Such a position might be thought elitist, but, if so, it is surely elitism of a benign kind. That the worth of a person's evaluation of an object or activity is valuable to the extent that it is grounded in an understanding of that object or activity is true of many things besides art. There is no sense in asking for an evaluation of a game of cricket from someone who does not understand cricket. They can tell you what they liked about it (the players look nice in white) and what they didn't like about it (it was very boring when wickets were not falling). However, these claims—however biographically interesting—are worthless as evaluations *of the game of cricket*. It is unclear why we would not be

¹¹ Ibid, p.270.

right to discount evaluations of works of art that are not grounded in understanding in the same way.

These three replies are, in themselves, enough to take much of the strength out of the relativist's demand for an explanation of disagreement. The absolutist, however, has three further replies that take us into difficult areas in the philosophy of art. First, there could be more than one understanding of a work that was both correct and complete. An uncontroversial example is difficult to find, as the claim that there is a uniquely correct and complete understanding is compatible with the claim that the meaning of a work might be ambiguous, or it might be indeterminate.¹² Nonetheless, if there were more than one understanding of a work that was both complete and correct, this would explain some aesthetic disagreement.

Second, even if there were, for each work, a uniquely correct and complete understanding, that might support incompatible evaluations.¹³ That is, one person might take another person to have understood the work correctly, but disagree that the understanding provides reasons for the evaluation. The relativist might sense a concession here: if two people agree on the understanding of a work but disagree on its evaluation and nothing more can be said then we have a relativistic situation of 'blameless disagreement'. However, it is not the case that nothing more can be said. The two antagonists can discuss their reasons for taking their understanding to support their evaluation. Even if it is unlikely that the argument could be settled easily, there is no pressure to retreat to relativism. Consider an example (this time from Literature). Two people might agree on their understanding of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. However, one could take the position Wyndham Lewis argued for in *Paleface*, that Lawrence's valorisation of feeling over intellect, primitivism over sophistication, is immature; the other might take the Leavisite position that such matters are indicative of Lawrence's integrity and moral seriousness. This is a substantial disagreement: nothing like a difference in preferences or gustatory taste where relativism would be appropriate.

Third, apparent aesthetic disagreement could stem from at least one of the parties having a correct understanding, but an incorrect evaluation. Sentimentality, or an immaturity of taste, might lead to an overvaluation of things such as the pace of the narrative and an under-evaluation of psychological characterization. Alternatively, to

¹² Ibid, p.270-73.

¹³ Ibid, p.270.

take a case from the visual arts, someone might understand a picture correctly, in its full art-historical context, but overrate the importance of the project in which the artist was engaged. That a particular work marked the next development of Greenbergian modernism is no reason to place a high aesthetic value on it if there is little value in developing Greenbergian modernism.

Thus the absolutist has resources on which to draw to explain the fact of disagreement. There is also a *tu quoque* argument: how can the relativist explain why disagreements are not simply apparent disagreements? That is, how can the relativist explain criticism (which I take to be the practice of debating reasons for evaluations) if there is nothing to be explained? There is no practice of debating whether or not the taste of broccoli is or is not actually good. So if relativism were true, why is there a practice of debating whether or not particular works of art are or are not actually good?

Apart from the two intuition pumps, I have not provided an argument for the ISV of aesthetic evaluations. All I have done is to show that there is a construal of aesthetic evaluations of works of art in which they, in contrast to aesthetic evaluations of physical attractiveness, say, are not relativist. If this alternative construal is correct, this has consequences for work done in psychology on beauty and work done in philosophy on beauty. If the former construes beauty as something like ‘visual preference’ and the latter construes beauty as something like ‘aesthetic merit’, then it is not clear that results in the former will do much to inform the latter.

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