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KIVY, PETER. *De Gustibus: Arguing About Taste and Why We Do It*
by Nils-Hennes Stear

De Gustibus asks why we dispute over taste. The question differs from its nearby relative, whether there are grounds ultimately justifying such disputes and, if so, what they are. Kivy's question is simply about *why* we dispute, regardless of whether doing so is metaphysically vindicated. It is in that respect more sociological than metaphysical or semantic, though Kivy also attends to the metaphysics.

The book draws from thinkers as distinct as Immanuel Kant, Elizabeth Barnes, and Roland Barthes. It's very occasionally witty, as when Kivy remarks that David Hume's test of time 'has survived the test of time' (p. 146). And it's executed in mostly accessible, airy prose that, coupled with its brevity, makes it pleasant reading.

Ignoring complications, Kivy's thesis is that we dispute about taste because we are realists about aesthetic value. The complications? First, 'We' refers to the 'art-interested', those 'interested enough in and acquainted enough with one or more of the arts to have opinions about artworks they wish to defend and convince others of' (p. 102). Second, the realism is restricted to artworks and their art-relevant properties. Third, taste disputes range over works' meanings (domain of 'interpretation'), aesthetic properties ('analysis'), and aesthetic value ('evaluation'); a different realism corresponds to each domain.

In what follows, I summarize each chapter, adding occasional observations, before advancing a general worry about the realism Kivy attributes to his book's argumentative, art-interested subjects.

The opening chapter considers David Hume's 'dilemma'—the competing pulls of common sense towards subjectivism and objectivism regarding taste—using it to fix the book's aims. Following an accessible introduction to Hume's writings on value, Kivy concludes that, while Hume shows how 'sometimes, one of the parties to [taste] disputes is right, the other wrong', he neglects to show 'why such disputes should occur' (p. 9).

Chapter Two continues the historical exposition, turning to Kant's Third *Critique*. In addition to familiar Kantian views about the shared mental faculties—'common ground'—that give our disinterested aesthetic judgements universal purport, Kivy examines lesser-known (implicit) Kantian proposals concerning why we dispute at all. Kivy identifies two, both rooted in humanity's desire for sociability: communicating judgements of beauty to give others the benefit of its pleasure, and doing so to enjoy sharing the pleasure. Kivy finds neither explanation convincing. As to Kant's claim that meaningful aesthetic dispute presupposes a common ground, Kivy effectively agrees. Yet, while he thinks this gives us a necessary condition for dispute, it's far from sufficient. So, the search continues.

Chapter Three begins a seven-chapter quest for an answer to the book's motivating question in the meta-ethical canon. While ultimately unsuccessful, this search is not entirely unproductive; Kivy takes various lessons from it, exploiting them later to fashion his positive proposal. The

chapter surveys two of the earliest higher-order discussions of aesthetic and ethical value: Francis Hutcheson's sentimentalism and John Balguy's rationalist criticisms of it.

Chapters Four and Five draw from more recent vintage, sampling the earliest forms of ethical expressivism, namely AJ Ayer's emotivism and Charles Stevenson's prescriptivism, respectively.

Kivy considers Ayer's contention that aesthetic judgements are expressions of emotion made (and here Ayer's view is reminiscent of Kant's) to get others to share one's attitude. However, the problem, Kivy notes, is that while a potentially credible account of ethical dispute, it won't work for aesthetics. Getting others to adopt one's *ethical* attitudes offers obvious benefits in terms of influencing their actions, promoting social coordination, averting practical conflict, etc. In the aesthetic case, however, such benefits disappear, disregarding exotic cases, leaving us without an answer to the central question. It's here that Kivy previews his positive proposal: aesthetic disagreements are disagreements about what is true. It's a view he considers unavailable to emotivists like Ayer and Stephenson who eschew cognitivism about ethical and aesthetic discourse.

Stevenson's expressivism proves no more helpful to Kivy than Ayer's, floundering on the same point: it can explain discourse meant to change attitudes motivating action. But, remove action and the desire to change practical attitudes becomes mysterious. Moreover, Kivy persuasively notes that those actions that aesthetic attitudes *do* help motivate (ignoring uninterestingly instrumental cases) don't solve the problem either. Such aesthetic 'actions'—reading, looking, comparing—aren't of the kind that 'conflict with the interests of others' or have 'victims and beneficiaries' (p. 40). Therefore, an appeal to such actions to justify aesthetic expressivism leads to a problem as difficult the one it means to solve: why would people wish to alter others' aesthetic actions?

The decision to consider Ayer's and Stevenson's theories but not those of more modern expressivists, like Simon Blackburn or Allan Gibbard, is a little perplexing. For either Kivy only wants to consider expressivism in general and so contemporary expressivisms are surplus to requirement, in which case the added discussion of Stevenson is odd, or else the details do matter, in which case discussing Stevenson makes sense, but then the omission of contemporary expressivisms is mysterious. The mystery only grows when one asks why other kinds of meta-ethical non-cognitivism, such as R.M. Hare's prescriptivism aren't also considered. Even if it's clear how prescriptivism would run into the problems Kivy identifies, it enjoys kindred spirits in aesthetics. I have in mind Frank Sibley (whom Kivy discusses) and Arnold Isenberg, who thought of criticism as consisting as much in getting others to see a work in thus and such a way—what we might loosely call 'prescribing' a way of seeing, listening, etc.—as in explaining aesthetic properties and values. Coupled with this is a worry about the relevance of these meta-ethical views to Kivy's thesis. For, one could accept, say, Stevenson's semantics while remaining neutral on how ethical speakers conceptualize their ethical claims. In short, the meta-ethical theories needn't entail much by way of psychology, which is the real subject of Kivy's discussion.

Finding no love among the meta-ethicists, old or new, Chapter Six considers taking the 'heroic line' by denying that people dispute over taste. Predictably enough, Kivy rejects this line. But the chapter has the ulterior purpose of taking ethicists to task for sometimes glib denials of genuine aesthetic dispute (and complementary affirmation of ethical dispute). Among the causes, Kivy notes that ethicists often conflate the (typically) greater comparative importance of ethical over

aesthetic disputes with the idea that ethics enjoys a more robust appearance-reality distinction than aesthetics. The former is common sense; the latter isn't.

Chapters Seven and Eight function as a coda to the preceding ones, reprising the *motif* of aesthetic disputes reducing to moral ones, but on a new pattern. Kivy considers whether enjoying morally flawed artworks can constitute vice, on which he takes an ambivalent position. The connection to Kivy's question is that if an artwork's moral flaws are also aesthetic, and enjoying immoral works is a vice, then aesthetic disputes reduce to moral ones. The obvious problem with this reductive strategy is that it would only apply to a small subset of aesthetic disputes. In the end, Kivy rejects the suggestion. But it returns him to the idea traced in Chapter Four: we dispute about taste because we care about truth.

Chapter Nine begins by sketching Bentham's hedonism, the paradox it generates—that trivial games like pushpin are as valuable as poetry, provided both please equally—and Mill's notorious attempt to resolve the paradox by distinguishing qualities of pleasure. The chapter gives the final, fatal blow to the attempt to reduce aesthetic to ethical disputes by considering a moral argument suggested by Mill's qualitatively different pleasure: those opting for inferior pleasures fail morally. A wish to improve others could then motivate aesthetic discourse. However, Kivy argues, accusing such a person of indulging 'low' aesthetic pleasure presupposes a belief in some work's relative inferiority. Put differently, the moral motivation is 'parasitic' on accepting aesthetic realism, (p. 80) making any appeal to the former otiose (not to mention, implausible).

Chapter 10 returns to the 18th century theorists who began the book. Kivy considers Hume's and Kant's aesthetic 'phenomenologies', meaning their characterizations of experiencing something as beautiful. As he reads them, Hume takes the experience of a beautiful object to feel as if beauty inheres in the object (whether it actually does), while Kant takes it to consist of an awareness of pleasure the object elicits from the subject, on which basis she judges it beautiful. Kivy sides with Hume and against Kant. He closes by considering Thomas Reid's aesthetic phenomenology, which he argues can, but needn't, be read as like Hume's.

Chapter 11 begins with George Santayana's error-theoretic account of beauty as 'pleasure objectified', through which Kivy arrives at the general claim on which he later rests his positive arguments. The claim is that, broadly, two motivations for earnest, rational dispute exist: moving others to action and convincing them of the truth. Whether the dichotomy holds—whether, that is, other kinds of correctness conditions can't sustain dispute—is debatable, a point I return to shortly. And invoking Santayana also reveals a respect in which Kivy's book is less trailblazing than it arguably purports to be, since the view he ends up with is, with some important qualifications, Santayana's.

Kivy spends the rest of Chapter 11 clarifying 'aesthetic' in order to begin the argument proper. He distinguishes the domains of interpretation—concerning artworks' meanings, including both their morals or messages and what they represent; analysis—concerning their aesthetic, art-relevant qualities (understood broadly), such as gracefulness or foreshadowing; and evaluation—concerning their aesthetic value. We dispute taste, he says, because we are realists regarding at least one of these three domains.

The action really starts in Chapter 12. After identifying the ‘art-interested’, Kivy defends the claim that interpretation disputes are motivated by disputants’ realism.

Kivy begins by articulating the authorial intentionalism he committed to in Chapter Seven by giving a Gricean account of artistic meaning. On this view, a work has a meaning only if the author intends appreciators to grasp that meaning by virtue of recognizing the intention, and the author makes the artwork one that appreciators have some chance of recognizing as conveying that meaning. The Gricean view, Kivy maintains, captures our ‘pre-systematic intuition’ (p. 104).

It’s unclear whether Kivy’s Gricean take gives him the realism he wants, however. The second condition on meaning depends upon what appreciators will find intelligible. But artworks, unlike typical conversational utterances, are typically addressed to humanity generally, rarely to specific people. Since many will differ in what they find intelligible, specifying with any precision what intelligibility amounts to requires setting down norms for audiences. One can’t just take what humanity generally would find intelligible, because if ‘generally’ means ‘universally’, nothing can convey any meaning. Helpfully restricting the audience will require norms. In short, without such norms, there will be no way to determine which artworks can plausibly convey which meanings. That being so, positing a widespread Gricean view of artistic meaning looks a less promising route to Kivy’s thesis. For, it’s no clearer that people are realists about intelligibility norms than about artistic meaning. Anti-realism about intelligibility norms would percolate through to meanings.

Kivy goes on to discuss Roland Barthes and Stanley Fish, showing why their brands of skepticism or relativism about artistic meaning, even if accepted by ordinary folk, wouldn’t explain disputes over meaning.

The chapter concludes with a simple argument for interpretation realism itself, rather than people’s belief in it. The worry that ethical realism spuriously adds values to our ontology, Kivy argues, doesn’t afflict interpretation realism, which requires no values, only *meanings*, which our ontology already embraces.

Attention turns to the domain of analysis in Chapter 13. Kivy spends some time delineating the properties he takes to populate this domain—art-relevant properties—showing where he follows and departs from Sibley’s categories of aesthetic properties.

As with the previous chapter, Kivy considers factors favouring analysis realism itself. He notes that since realism about aesthetic value as such might be less plausible than realism about ‘thick’ aesthetic *properties*, one must distinguish them. And, again, he argues that an objection to ethical realism—that ethical properties don’t cause observable phenomena—doesn’t clearly afflict aesthetic properties. Much as with Kivy’s discussion of Stevenson and Ayer, one might query the relevance of Kivy’s tentative defences of realism, rather than disputants’ beliefs in it, to his central question. However, by defending aesthetic realism, Kivy shows the view’s merits. And since people are, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to accept a plausible over an implausible view, this gives the sociological position he ultimately defends indirect support.

Kivy also considers what kind of entity evaluative aesthetic properties might be in Chapter 13. Adopting Elizabeth Barnes’ account, Kivy tentatively suggests they are emergent properties—fundamental yet ontologically dependent upon the entities giving rise to them. Kivy reassures those

skeptical about emergent values that, unlike moral ones, aesthetic values don't come with an ontically dubious *ought* for action, counting this as a 'prima facie plus' (p. 136) for aesthetic emergentism over its ethical cousin (surely one of the book's poorer arguments).

If *De Gustibus* were an 80's video game, Chapter 14 would be the final boss. And fittingly, Kivy summons a kind of master argument. To dispute about aesthetic value while believing there is no fact of the matter concerning that value (ignoring instrumental motives), Kivy says, would be irrational. And since people *do* so dispute, they must be realists about the various aesthetic domains, since general accusations of irrationality about art in the art-interested are 'preposterous' (p. 142). Evidently, Kivy never waded through an internet comments section.

In the closing chapter, Kivy considers error theory's paradoxical implications. According to recent work by Bart Streumer, believing the error theory about normativity generally undermines believing in reasons, including reasons for belief, making it thereby irrational to believe error theory itself. The discussion's upshot is, roughly, that even an art-disputing error theorist accepts aesthetic realism to some degree, since her belief in error theory can be only partial.

A recurring worry the book provokes throughout concerns the unclarity about what realism, and so what believing in aesthetic realism, amounts to for Kivy. This issue becomes particularly acute in his discussions of Hume's and Santayana's meta-aesthetic theories, made acuter still by his calling them 'subjective realism'. One wonders whether Kivy takes their views to contrast with realism, or to represent it. Kivy never explicitly addresses what he takes realism to be, although clearly the story consists partly in cognitivism—the claim that there is a 'fact of the matter' about matters aesthetic (pp. 25, 72, 80, 100) and partly in an ontological commitment to aesthetic meanings, properties, and values (pp. 56, 91, 117). Obviously, these two commitments are related, and one might, in a Dummettian spirit, want to collapse the latter into the former. Still, they are distinct.

This matters for two reasons: for settling what Kivy's thesis amounts to and how plausible it is. If realism involves ontological commitment, for instance, then his central dichotomy comes under pressure. At the heart of Kivy's argument is the idea that, barring practical motives, only concern for the truth can sustain rational, good-faith dispute. Hence, those disputing taste believe their aesthetic claims are, or could be, true. But does this require a belief in the reality of aesthetic properties and values? People also frequently and rationally dispute mathematical, temporal, and modal claims in good faith. But this surely doesn't require them to be Platonists, or temporal or modal realists, even 'deep down'. Or if it did, this would only undermine the necessity of truth-aptness to genuine dispute. Therefore, if they aren't concerned with the truth (and an error-theory is ruled out), some other correctness condition besides truth must suffice to make sense of them. In short, Kivy has not told us why what might work for long division couldn't also work for art criticism. And we haven't even considered worries raised when anti-realists adopt minimalist semantics that apparently allow them, on the terms of their own theory, to say near enough anything realists can with a straight face.

These worries aside, *De Gustibus* is a thought-provoking and erudite work—a fitting last effort from a scholar sadly no longer with us.

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