

Book Review

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Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability

Jennifer A. McMahon (ed.)

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In recent decades the philosophy of mind and related sciences have put growing stock in the thought that explaining cognition will require careful attention to how cognitive agents are situated in a body, a natural environment, a context of action, and increasingly also a social environment. The ‘situated cognition’ paradigm has now also started trickling its way into work on *aesthetic* cognition and, in the process, challenging the status quo. In aesthetics it has long been standard practice to conceive the rationality of aesthetic response in terms of cognitive features we all purportedly share. But this appeal to universally shared features of cognitive agents, so the challenge goes, unduly abstracts away from their individual differences, their natural and practical environments, and—most importantly for current purposes—from the social and historical circumstances that shape their aesthetic encounters with the world.

Against this backdrop Routledge has recently published *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability*, a collection of new work by established philosophers that thematizes the role of social embeddedness in aesthetic cognition. Its publication adds welcome fuel to the freshly kindled conversations about the deeply social bases of our aesthetic lives.

Social Aesthetics comprises an introduction by the editor, Jennifer McMahon, and twelve essays selected from papers presented at two recent workshops on art and imagination (in San Francisco in 2016 and Adelaide in 2017). The essays are evenly divided into three sections, each loosely organised around one of the three terms in the book’s subtitle. A well-chosen cover image and, at the centre of the volume, a series of high quality colour plates of materials referenced in the text, enhances the reading experience as well as the satisfaction of owning the book in print. In a milieu where collections of this kind often take several years from conception to publication, McMahon deserves every commendation for delivering a well-rounded product with its contents still at the height of their relevance.

The individual contributions cover an exceedingly wide range of topics, so much so that this may at times seem to pose a risk to the volume's overall cohesion. Presumably in part to forestall this risk, McMahon uses her introduction to explain away apparent disagreements between some of the authors and to propose that the chapters jointly 'form three stages in an argument for social aesthetics' (5). Here, however, she overstates the point. For one thing, we are nowhere offered an explicit articulation of what the notion of 'social aesthetics' denotes, and hence there is some vagueness about what accepting an 'argument for social aesthetics' would commit us to. More tellingly, the expression 'social aesthetics' appears in the volume only once after the introduction (in Elizabeth Burns Coleman's suggestive but somewhat puzzling assertion that 'etiquette is also a form of social aesthetics' (182)). This is indicative of the fact that the contributors do not all understand their work in McMahon's terms, and reading them through the lens of her introduction and organization of the volume might be more apt in some cases than in others.

But these are minor quibbles. Even if each chapter is best approached on its own terms, broad thematic concurrence around the import of the social for the aesthetic is sufficient rationale for their inclusion in the same collection. Among the highlights, for instance, are two chapters with an expressly historical bent. Both deftly navigate the historical data, and both draw significant but quite dissimilar lessons about how the social and aesthetic domains interact. **Nancy Sherman** traces and criticizes the twentieth century rise of the idea that expression in dance is primarily a matter of the externalization of inner states of the dancer. Sherman's portrayal of this development is interspersed with an astute discussion of the influence of military decorum on the early development of ballet, and of how its vestiges were supplanted in modern dance by the reactive push for freer expression. Drawing on current work on the communicative and coordinative functions of the emotions, she argues that the modern emphasis on dancers' inner states leaves out more essential features of expression that are achieved by ongoing responsiveness to *external* social inputs, such as cues from other dancers' movements, and conventions that facilitate emotional signalling.

A quite different set of historical particulars provides the material for a chapter by **Ivan Gaskell**. Its centrepiece is a careful account of an eighteenth-century British expedition to the south Pacific, which Gaskell reconstructs with an eye to philosophical questions about the exchange of material artefacts across cultural boundaries. He uses this account as a springboard to develop a general schema of attitude types that can be held towards items that have been transplanted from their original cultural contexts, and he discusses how these attitude types, that he dubs '*supersession*', '*translation*', and '*assumption*', inevitably interact with aesthetic responses to the items (173–175). Gaskell's schema has clear explanatory power and shows promise for application in other contexts (the current debates about cultural appropriation come readily to

mind, for example), but he shows laudable restraint in the effort to avoid overly general or indiscriminating applications of it to his own historical subject matter.

In a rare but welcome instance of sustained conversation between chapters, **Elizabeth Burns Coleman** takes up and discusses Gaskell's schema. Whereas his interest in cultural exchange is primarily descriptive and explanatory, hers has a strong normative component. Animating Burns' contribution is the question how non-Indigenous persons and institutions might ethically treat culturally charged items from Indigenous cultures as targets for aesthetic appreciation. She raises problems for the practice of displaying such items in galleries and classifying them as art, but ultimately argues that these problems can be largely allayed if their display and appreciation includes learning and imaginatively participating in the norms of etiquette that surround the items' use in their contexts of origin. These remedial recommendations seem sensible, but some questions remain about whether they are sufficient to overcome the problems they are meant to address.

A chapter exemplifying a restraint similar to Gaskell's, albeit with respect to very different subject matter, is supplied by **Cynthia Freeland**, who writes about non-representational uses of colour in the work of a selection of contemporary artists: James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, and Anish Kapoor. Freeland's take on their art favours detailed description and interpretation of individual works and comments by the artists over theoretical generalizations. Her selection is nonetheless curated to facilitate some interesting general reflection on how perceptual and emotional effects elicited by abstract uses of colour can come to feature centrally in the post-perceptual interpretation of artworks, and in structuring the social interactions surrounding our engagement with them. The only other chapter to prominently feature interpretation of particular art is due to **Robert Sinnerbrink**. Sinnerbrink's topic is the relationship between cinematic and moral experience, and his guiding question is how film can succeed in deepening moral understanding. He argues, cogently, that extant approaches to this question are wrong to limit their focus to emotional responses that establish univocal moral allegiance with or against characters, and he proposes a framework for cases where emotional ambivalence and estrangement, and cognitive dissonance, are used to prompt reflection and reconsideration of the viewer's moral stance. A sensitive discussion of the final scenes of Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012) serves as a fitting case study.

The remaining chapters deal with broader theoretical questions. The volume opens with arguably the most ambitious of these, by **Mohan Matthen**, who builds on his 2017 paper on aesthetic pleasure to develop the beginnings of a hedonist theory of aesthetic value. At the chapter's core is an account of how capacities for '*f-pleasures*' — the genus to which Matthen assigns aesthetic pleasure — are learnt and reinforced through repeated engagement in the same activities. The

upshot of this is that cultural learning comes to play a large part in determining our propensities for aesthetic pleasure, a psychological observation from which Matthen moves, rather quickly, to a version of normative hedonism he labels ‘anti-objectivist’, in which an artwork’s aesthetic value is indexed to the culture of its intended audience.

Matthen’s chapter covers swathes of ground and his penchant for making substantive value theoretic commitments on the back of rather schematic arguments can sometimes leave one craving more detail. His tacit equation of aesthetic value with the value of artworks *as artworks* will garner resistance from some readers in aesthetics. Along the way he also picks an interesting battle in cognitive science, by explicitly counterposing his account of f-pleasure with consensus views in the research programme on processing fluency. But whatever reservations one might have, it is hard to deny that Matthen’s recent foray into aesthetics is brimming with compelling new ways to frame stagnant debates, and this chapter continues that trend. The stand against cultural universalism he articulates in it, moreover, is all the more alluring for its boldness.

More circumspect approaches to value theoretic questions are furnished by **Jane Kneller** and **Garrett Cullity**, who both take the traditional tack of focussing on value judgment. Cullity gives a comparative analysis of moral judgments and judgments of artistic value, proposing that they share a similar kind of claim to objectivity, but that the source of that claim differs between them. Despite the difference, he proceeds to discuss a series of connections between the two evaluative domains, with a section on the morally educative capacity of art and on Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism (114–115) proving a highlight of his chapter. Kneller uses the volume’s closing chapter to consider what resources there are in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment to accommodate the sorts of social embeddedness and cultural variability thematized throughout the other chapters.

In the volume’s lone essay on methodology, **Bence Nanay** questions the excessive priority tradition accords to aesthetic judgment. Tracing the source of this emphasis on judgment to contingent historical factors, Nanay suggests that it has led to the neglect of finer grained and more pertinent data available through the examination of extended episodes of aesthetic engagement. In keeping with the volume’s theme, he adds the argument that current trends in work on social cognition conflict with the idea that judgment could play the foundational role in a complete explanation of the social aspects of our aesthetic lives.

Nanay’s attack on the primacy of aesthetic judgment is in tension with the methodological choices of some of the other contributors, such as Kneller and Cullity. This tension is one of the ‘apparent incompatibilities’ McMahon downplays in the introduction to the volume, and indeed, she is right that, strictly speaking, there is no incompatibility. Nanay’s plea is programmatic and should not be read as a blanket condemnation of all or any work that concentrates on aesthetic

judgment. But there is nonetheless a real disagreement here: not about what anyone has had to say about aesthetic judgment, but about whether aesthetic judgment (however it is conceived) is the right place to start with aesthetic theorizing. The latter is a methodological question that deserves a fair hearing in aesthetics; it cannot be simply shrugged off, as McMahon's comments seem to imply, by shifting to a conception of aesthetic judgment that encompasses the forms of dynamic engagement Nanay argues we should prioritize over judgment.

Keith Lehrer contributes a chapter on the normative role of consensus in aesthetic experience. Like Matthen, he builds directly on prior work, especially his work on the notion of 'exemplarization'; but while Matthen's chapter can easily stand on its own, Lehrer's will perhaps be of most interest to readers already familiar with his work. **Paul Guyer** contributes a chapter that sketches what he calls (after Wollheim's notion of twofoldness) a 'threefold' model of artistic meaning. The third 'fold' of his model roughly comprises ideas and emotional contents over and above the two standard aspects of Wollheimian seeing-in, although this is complicated by how Guyer sometimes slides between talk of three aspects of the work's meaning and three aspects of the appreciator's experience of the work. Guyer hits his stride, however, in the passages where he harnesses textual evidence to show that his model has precedents in Wollheim, Kant, and Santayana.

Finally, **McMahon**'s own essay, perhaps the clearest rival to Matthen's with respect to theoretic scope and ambition, raises a puzzle for theories of art that rely on a standard conception of propositional imagination. If we take imagining to be a propositional attitude with a functional profile that precludes it from any role in motivating action, it might seem that our imaginative engagement with an artwork cannot be a source of insight pertinent to our practical engagement with the world beyond the work. McMahon rightly argues that we should preserve the cognitivist intuition that art can deliver real and practically applicable insight, and proposes as remedy that we move to a broader conception of imagination, for which she draws on work by Tamar Gendler, Susanna Schellenberg, and Peter Langland-Hassan. Her proposal resonates with other recent voices in aesthetics, especially in debates about fiction, that have sought to move past a Waltonian paradigm for thinking about the imagination.

If the preceding tour of the volume's chapters has served to make apparent the considerable diversity of its subject matter—a feature cited at the beginning of this review as a potential problem—it is to be hoped that it has done so in a manner that exposes this diversity for what it really is, namely, one of the volume's assets. There is variety here to catch the interest of just about anyone working in aesthetics, not to mention other branches of value theory or arts studies, and other disciplines studying social cognition or cross-cultural exchange. With *Social Aesthetics*, McMahon and her collaborators have made a consequential contribution.