The Myth of the Aesthetic

1. Introduction

The concept of the aesthetic was introduced into philosophy almost 300 years ago and philosophers still cannot agree about how to understand it. Derek Matravers has said that “our concept of the aesthetic is a mess” (1996: 268). According to Elisabeth Schellekens, “philosophers are still a long way from sharing a cohesive account of the aesthetic” (2011, 224). A prominent psychologist has noted that “several hundred years of philosophical work [on the aesthetic] has failed to yield a consensus that can guide empirical research in a straightforward way” (Juslin 2019, 425). If philosophers cannot find a satisfactory answer to a question, they are probably asking the wrong question. Maybe the right question asks whether the concept of the aesthetic can be salvaged. The time has come to consider the possibility that the concept of the aesthetic is not a useful in understanding what makes certain objects, or experience of them, valuable. Some philosophers have begun to question the concept of the aesthetic (Sackris and Larsen 2023) and this paper aims to finish it off. We need new and finer-grained concepts to understand why experiences of certain objects or, perhaps, the objects themselves, are valuable.

Philosophers have come at the concept of the aesthetic from two directions. The external approach is an effort to discover something common to all aesthetic objects or properties. The internal approach to the aesthetic is an attempt to identify a feature shared by all experiences that count as aesthetic experiences. Both the internal and the external projects have been wild goose chases. One problem is that the only way to determine which items are aesthetic objects is to determine which experiences are aesthetic experiences. Unfortunately, the only way to determine which experiences are aesthetic experiences is to determine which items are objects of aesthetic experience. Another problem stems from the fact that there is no agreement about the aesthetic and, consequently, no prospect of a descriptive or explicative definition of the term. The only way forward is to stipulate which items are aesthetic objects or which experiences are aesthetic experiences. Different philosophers stipulate different answers. Attempts to define both aesthetic experience and the objects of aesthetic experience turn out to be a particular kind of definition: persuasive definition, in the sense identified by Stevenson (1938).

This essay will not address aesthetic value. A satisfactory analysis of the concept of aesthetic value depends on a prior account of either aesthetic experience or aesthetic objects. This is the case since either aesthetic experiences or aesthetic objects will be the items that possess aesthetic value. Since an upshot of this paper is that there is no reason to believe that the concepts of aesthetic objects and aesthetic experiences are useful, the concept of aesthetic value is equally useless. The belief that a wide range of objects share the same sort of value, namely aesthetic value, is an obstacle to understanding how any of these objects, or experiences of them, are valuable. According to Schusterman, “aesthetic value… is a vague, ambiguous, complex, historically fashioned, and essentially contested concept. That does not mean that it is useless or meaningless” (2023, 101). I disagree. That is exactly what it means.

2. The external question

Let us begin by getting a sense of the objects regarded as objects of aesthetic experience. These days, philosophers hold that items of almost any sort can be aesthetic objects. At one time, philosophers tended to think that only works of fine art are aesthetic objects but Lopes lists “Bollywood movies, first-person shooter games, Parisian gypsy jazz, gentian drifts, step dance, concrete poetry, architectural photography, dog breeding, and…fashion” (2018, 31) as aesthetic objects. Perfume is also on his list and elsewhere Lopes adds works of philosophy (2022). In addition, sporting events (Kuntz 1974, Best 1988), sexual experiences (Shusterman 2007), the natural world (Carlson 2000), ideas (Schellekens 2007), mathematical proofs (Breitenbach 2013), genuine historical artifacts (Korsmeyer 2019), drug-induced psychedelic experiences (Forster 2021), wine (Burnham and Skilleås 2012), food (Perullo 2016), everyday items such as kitchen utensils, pieces of furniture, personal grooming, toys, computer graphics, and domestic spaces (Saito 2007) have all been said to be aesthetic objects. Not a great deal is missing. In fact, Riggle adds “[s]neakers, sunsets, lamps, landscapes, espresso shots, sculptures, and graffiti” to the list and observes “that nearly everything we encounter has some aesthetic value” (2023, 16). Lopes similarly states that “items of (just about) any kind can have aesthetic merits or demerits” (2018, 36.)

Suppose that everything, or virtually everything, can be an aesthetic object. It follows that we make no progress in analyzing the concept of the aesthetic by identifying aesthetic objects. An aesthetic object is just an object. Anyone who thinks that the concept of the aesthetic can be analyzed by identifying aesthetic objects has two options at this point. The first option is to admit that there is no difference between aesthetic objects and other objects. This is not a viable option since externalists aim to understand the concept of the aesthetic by distinguishing aesthetic objects from non-aesthetic objects. The other option is to say that everything can be an object of aesthetic experience but that we do not have aesthetic experience of everything all of the time. That is, anything can be an object of aesthetic experience, but it has to be experienced in the right sort of way. To adopt this option is, however, to say that the concept of the aesthetic can be analyzed only by finding a way in which aesthetic experience differs from non-aesthetic experience. But this is to punt the question about the aesthetic to internalists. That is, the external approach to defining the aesthetic is abandoned in favour of the internal approach.

Perhaps, however, this conclusion is too quick. One could hold that everything can be an object of aesthetic experience, but not all properties of things are aesthetic properties. That is, one could maintain that the effort to identify aesthetic objects was actually an attempt to identify aesthetic properties, which happen to belong to everything or almost everything, but which do not exhaust the set of properties. Several suggestions have been made about which properties are aesthetic properties.

A familiar proposal is that aesthetic properties are the sorts of properties corresponding to the sorts of concepts identified by Sibley as aesthetic concepts (1959) or found on De Clercq’s list of aesthetic properties (2008). These include unity, balance, integration, lifelessness, serenity, somberness, dynamism, vividness, delicacy, triteness, sentimentality, tragicness, gracefulness, daintiness, elegance, garishness, and many others. Before we accept that these are aesthetic properties, we need to ask what makes a property an aesthetic property.

Gaut (2007) provides a clue to understanding why only certain properties made their way on to Sibley’s list. Gaut notes that these days any list of aesthetic properties ought to include the properties such as challenging preconceptions, starkness, resisting closure, being transgressive, and so on, yet they were not on Sibley’s list. These are properties that are valued in a modern critical practice. Elegance, delicacy, gracefulness, and the like made it on to Sibley’s list because they are the sort of property that was valued in the austere formalist critical practice of the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, starkness only became a (positive) aesthetic property when people began to value it in the late twentieth century. This is the key to understanding how a property comes to be regarded as an aesthetic property. When certain properties are experienced in a certain sort of way, they become regarded as aesthetic properties. In particular, experience of them involves valuing them in a certain sort of way.

If this is right, and properties are aesthetic properties when people value them, then externalist approaches to analyzing the concept of the aesthetic face a problem. Apparently, a property gets on to the list of aesthetic properties when people value experience of it. This is, however, to say that the externalist approach to the aesthetic punts the aesthetic question to the internalist. That is, the concept of the aesthetic is to be understood in terms of a certain way of experiencing (experiencing that involves valuing in a certain way) not in terms of a certain sort of property.

Another possible object of aesthetic experience needs to be considered. The suggestion is often made that the form of an item is one of the objects of aesthetic experience (Levinson 1996, Stecker 2006). Usually, the form of an object is held to be a pattern of colors, shapes, sounds or other perceptual properties. Carroll uses the word ‘form’ in this sense when he speaks of the “formal structures of artworks” or a work’s “design” (2000, 206). In addition, the form of an object of appreciation is distinguished from its content. Some works of art are held to be pure, contentless form. This is the view of formalists concerning music (Kivy 1990, 2002). A formal feature of a musical work might be close harmony or the use of retrograde inversion. Representational works of art can also, however, be appreciated for their form. In such cases, a work’s form is abstracted from any representational content it may have.

The concept of form seems to encompass quite a few properties. Presumably, household utensils and similar items are appreciated, qua aesthetic objects, for their formal properties such as shape. Paintings can have formal qualities such as balance or dynamism. Works of literature are also said to have form but the form of a novel seems different from the form of an electric can opener. The form of a sonata seems something quite different again. Artworks are not the only objects with form. Kivy, for example, refers to the form of a sunset (2002, 55). The concept of form is so broad that apparently everything has a form.

If forms are the objects of aesthetic experience, and an object cannot be experienced without at least some of its formal properties being experienced, then it follows that every experience can be an aesthetic experience. One could say that every experience of form is an aesthetic experience, but that is an unattractive option. In this case, all experiences are aesthetic experiences, and the concept of the aesthetic is useless. The only other option is to hold that only certain ways of experiencing forms are aesthetic experiences. Once again, this is to punt the analysis of the aesthetic to the internalist.

Another commonly-heard proposal is that aesthetic properties are perceptual properties. Levinson, for example, says that “aesthetic properties are perceptual properties relevant to the aesthetic value of the object that possesses them” (2003, 6). (Notice that aesthetic properties are defined with reference to aesthetic value. Circularity lurks, but let us pass this by.) As used by Levinson and others, ‘perceptual property’ appears to refer to colours, shapes, sounds, tastes, and scents. Presumably tactile sensations could also appear on the list. Reference to perceptual properties is meant to exclude, among others, so-called artistic properties, such as originality and creativity. In contrast with a shape or colour, the originality of a work cannot be seen simply by inspecting a work of art. The originality of a work can only be identified when it is understood in its context. Levinson’s proposal is also meant to exclude expressive properties, cognitive properties and any content or meaning a work may possess.

The suggestion that aesthetic properties are limited to perceptual properties is controversial. Although Levinson says that aesthetic properties are perceptual properties, he immediately adds “but beyond that the demarcation of the class of aesthetic properties is subject to dispute” (2003, 6). Unfortunately, even this judgement is too optimistic. Levinson himself sometimes lists “meanings” (1996, 6) as aesthetic properties and meanings lack perceptual properties. Ideas and mathematical proofs also appear on some lists of aesthetic objects and they also lack perceptual properties. Goldman (2013) includes expressive properties among aesthetic properties though they are not perceptual properties, at least not in the sense that circularity is a perceptual property. Sometimes, at least, Carroll regards expressive properties as aesthetic properties (2000, 2004). Korsmeyer (2019) holds that genuineness is an aesthetic property, but it is not a perceptual property. There is little agreement about which properties are aesthetic properties.

In the face of this disagreement, we need to ask how we are to define the concept of an aesthetic property. One possibility is to resolve disputes about what counts as aesthetic properties by reference to current usage. Another way to define aesthetic properties would be to refer to the original use of the word ‘aesthetic.’ Carroll is an example of someone who thinks that this is the way to proceed. He writes that “Since the eighteenth century, a recurrent theme in the tradition has been that cognitive properties are not aesthetic properties and that the cognitive advantages offered by engaging with artworks are not part of the aesthetic experience properly of the works in question” (2012, 173). He believes that this provides us with grounds for limiting aesthetic properties to perceptual and formal properties.

Defining the aesthetic on the basis of how the word ‘aesthetic’ was used in the eighteenth century is an odd way to arrive at a definition. For a start, it is not clear that the expression ‘aesthetic experience’ was originally used in the same way by everyone. Hegel already meant something different by ‘aesthetic’ than did earlier philosophers (1993, 1). However, there is a much larger issue. No one would think that the word ‘art’ is to be defined by reference to how it was used in the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, it was possible to give a descriptive or, at any rate, explicative definition of art: it was regarded as an imitation of nature designed to provide pleasure and also knowledge (Batteaux [1746] 2015, Kant [1790] 2000). However, we cannot resolve debates about the definition of art in the present day by reference to what art was in the eighteenth century. No one today is going to say that, since in the eighteenth-century art was the imitation of nature, art is essentially the imitation of nature. Similarly, debates about the definition of the aesthetic cannot be resolved by reference to eighteenth-century usage.

The way to define the concept of aesthetic properties is to refer to current usage. The trouble is that the concept has not merely evolved since the eighteenth century. It has also fragmented. As we have seen, a wide variety of properties are referred to as aesthetic properties. There is not even any agreement on whether they are perceptual properties. Consequently, there is no prospect of using current usage as a guide to the definition of the concept of the aesthetic. Later, we will return to the question of how the aesthetic is to be defined and we shall see that the only option is to provide a stipulative definition. Moreover, we shall see that philosophers have been providing all along a particular kind of stipulative definition: persuasive definition.

A final external approach to the aesthetic remains to be considered. One could say that aesthetic objects are beautiful objects. This is not a promising proposal for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that the concept of beauty is probably identical to the concept of aesthetic value. Certainly Lopes introduces the concept of beauty in the context of his discussion of aesthetic value (2018, 47) and Shelley also appears to use ‘beauty’ and ‘aesthetic value’ interchangeably (2020, 217) when he approvingly quotes Hutcheson’s views on beauty in the context of his discussion of aesthetic value. Moreover, as already noted, there is no prospect of giving a satisfactory analysis of the concept of aesthetic value without first having given a satisfactory analysis of either aesthetic objects or aesthetic properties. There is no way to know what beauty is without having a look at the things that are supposed to be beautiful. Consequently, there is no prospect of giving a satisfactory analysis of beauty without first having answered the internal or external question about the aesthetic.

The second reason is that the concept of beauty no more refers to a single property than does the concept of the aesthetic. The word ‘beauty’ is applied to a wide range of items without much in common. Levinson limits himself to consideration of visual objects that are described as beautiful and comes to the conclusion that the word ‘beauty’ is applied to seven irreducibly different visible properties (2016, 99-119). However, many things besides visual objects are described as beautiful: concepts, proofs, moral ideals, musical works, works of literature, humans, landscapes, and a host of other things. The concept of beauty is probably no more useful than the concept of the aesthetic and there is no point trying to analyze one poorly understood concept in terms of another poorly understood concept.

External attempts to analyze the concept of the aesthetic have arrived at a dead end. Let us turn to an examination of internal attempts in the hope that they will be more successful.

3. The internal question

Since we are unclear about which objects are objects of aesthetic experience, the internal approach to the aesthetic immediately faces a difficulty. Many philosophers, in an effort to analyze the concept of aesthetic experience, make reference to the objects of aesthetic experience. If the objects of aesthetic experience are contested and uncertain, this will be a problem for attempts to analyze aesthetic experience. Another problem also quickly presents itself. Just as there is disagreement about the objects of aesthetic experience, so there is no consensus about what counts as aesthetic experience. Moreover, no principled way to resolve this disagreement is available.

Some definitions of aesthetic experience explicitly presuppose an answer to the external question about which objects are aesthetic objects. These are so-called minimalist definitions of aesthetic experience. Stecker is an example of a minimalist and he states that aesthetic experience is “the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience” (2004, 4). This is a minimalist account of aesthetic experience in that it does not distinguish the character of aesthetic experiences from the character of other experiences. Aesthetic experiences are simply experiences of aesthetic objects. The minimalist internal approach to aesthetic experience immediately punts analysis of the aesthetic to the externalist. As we have seen, however, there is no agreement about the answer to the external question. If an internal approach to the aesthetic is to make any progress, it needs to identify a way in which aesthetic experiences differ from other experiences. A non-minimalist account of aesthetic experience looks like the best bet for an internalist account of the aesthetic.

For many years, non-minimalist accounts of aesthetic experience fell out of favour due to the influence of Dickie (1964). Dickie argued that aesthetic experience does not differ in kind from other sorts of experience. Recently, however, Iseminger (2003) and Levinson (2016) have defended a sort of aesthetic attitude theory and explicitly rejected Dickie’s arguments. Levinson holds that aesthetic experience is “absorbed and arrested” while non-aesthetic experience is “watchful and wary” (2016, 29). Levinson speaks of aesthetic attention as “attention focused on an object’s perceivable forms and properties, for their own sake” (2016, 39). Sometimes the difference between minimalists and non-minimalists is difficult to discern. Both the minimalists and the non-minimalists speak of aesthetic experience as experience valued for its own sake. Stecker speaks of “attending in a discriminating manner” and “attending to [forms, qualities or meaningful features of things] for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience” (2006, 4). That sounds a lot like Levinson’s non-minimalism to the untutored ear. In any case, perhaps aesthetic experience is absorbed, arrested experience of forms and properties for their own sake.

The first point to make is that the non-minimalist, just as much as the minimalist, has to presuppose an answer to the external question. Non-minimalists do not want to say that absorbed, arrested experience of just anything counts as an aesthetic experience. (Contrary to what Levinson says, a lot of intent non-aesthetic experiences are neither watchful nor wary.) A person’s attention can be absorbed and arrested while repairing a watch or sewing a dress, but non-minimalists do not want to say that the watchmaker or the tailor has an aesthetic experience. Consequently, non-minimalist internalists must refer to things like perceptual properties and forms when trying to characterize aesthetic experience. But this is to punt the aesthetic question to the externalist.

Perhaps, aesthetic experiences are experiences in which the object of experience is valued for its own sake. Alternatively, aesthetic experiences could be experiences had when attending to something for the sake of the experience of it provides. The trouble is that in many cases, we have experiences in which things are valued for their own sake that are not aesthetic experiences. When one experiences a loved one or, indeed, any fellow human, one often values one’s fellow humans for their own sake. Nature can be valued for its own sake. However, to experience one’s fellow humans, or nature, and to value them for their own sake is not necessarily to have an aesthetic experience.

Maybe experiences, not the objects of experience, are valued for their own sake. The trouble then is that many experiences are valued for their own sake but not aesthetic experiences. Any experience of pleasure is valued for its own sake, but not all experiences of pleasure are aesthetic experiences unless one is prepared to collapse the distinction between pleasure and aesthetic experience. Few philosophers are prepared to collapse this distinction. Indeed, some philosophers (e.g., Lopes 2018, Shelley 2021) hold that aesthetic hedonism is mistaken and that the concept of the aesthetic cannot be analyzed in terms of pleasure. Consequently, non-minimalists need to specify the experienced things which are valued for their own sake and the things experience of which is valued for its own sake. This is to punt the aesthetic question to the externalist.

Perhaps, aesthetic experiences can be distinguished from other experiences in some other way. Levinson identifies one more feature supposedly possessed by aesthetic experiences but not others. In aesthetic experiences, “*there is a positive, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception*” (2016, 39). Many evaluative responses are not aesthetic responses and the only way Levinson proposes for distinguishing aesthetic responses from other evaluative responses is that aesthetic evaluations are valued for their own sake. We have just seen that this does not distinguish aesthetic experiences from others.

Another possibility is that aesthetic experience is distinguished from other experience by its disinterestedness. The prospects of such an account of aesthetic experience have looked bleak ever since Dickie (1964). Prior to Dickie philosophers had often thought that aesthetic experience is characterized by disinterestedness. Disinterested experience is experience of an object without any motive beyond experience of the object itself. Dickie argues, however, that if someone should listen to a piece of music with the motive of preparing for an examination, this does not seem to entail that the experience is not aesthetic. This is particularly true since a person may be in a phenomenological state indistinguishable from that of another listener who lacks this motive. More recently, Carroll (2000) has adopted a similar position by imagining two people who view a painting and focus on its formal structure. He argues that a person who focuses on the formal structure of a painting, believing that it will be a source of pleasure, and another who focuses on the same structure, believing that it will enhance their discriminatory powers, both have an equal claim to have an aesthetic experience of the painting. As Dickie argues, there is paying attention or not paying attention, not two ways of paying attention. If experience is only attentive or inattentive, the only way to distinguish aesthetic experience from non-aesthetic experience is by reference to the objects of experience: aesthetic experiences are experiences of aesthetic objects. But this is to punt the aesthetic question back to externalist attempts to understand the aesthetic.

Internalist attempts to understand the aesthetic face another difficulty. Some philosophers think of aesthetic experience as a sort of cool, disinterested experience of formal or perceptual properties but this view is far from universal. Others describe as aesthetic experiences states of mind that differ dramatically from disinterested contemplation of forms or perceptual properties. Some philosophers (aesthetic hedonists) define aesthetic experience in terms of pleasure, while others say that aesthetic hedonism is mistaken. The challenge is to find a way to resolve differences of opinion about which experiences are aesthetic experiences.

Before turning to questions about how to resolve these differences, let us get a sense of some contemporary forms of internalism. Matthen has recently defended a form of aesthetic hedonism and while he does not speak of aesthetic experience he speaks of mental engagement with aesthetic objects. This “mental engagement can be purely perceptual (looking at a sunset), completely intellectual (reading a book), or partly each (listening to music or looking at art)” (2018, 26). His account of mental engagement differs dramatically from familiar accounts of aesthetic experience. Engaging with a work of art, on his view, is largely a cognitively complex activity that involves mastering cultural norms governing artworks. (How experience of sunsets fits into this picture is unclear.) Matthen makes engagement with art sound a lot like solving sudoku puzzles. With practice one gets better at grasping them and this adds to the pleasure. Again, this is very different from other accounts of aesthetic experience.

Lopes is a recent internalist who is opposed to hedonism. He proposes to understand the aesthetic in terms of aesthetic practices. (He cannot be an externalist since, by his own account, pretty much anything can be an object of aesthetic practice and, consequently, there is no way to distinguish aesthetic objects from non-aesthetic objects.) Aesthetic practices include certain kinds of experience, but, aesthetic practice is not limited to having experiences of a certain kind. Aesthetic practice also involves being able to display a work in a suitable context, to dance in a suitable manner to a song, to assemble a complementary collection of works, to criticize informatively, and so on. Sometimes he believes that aesthetic practice has an experiential element. It has an experiential element, for example, when someone apprehends that a façade is graceful or that a muscat raisin has a medium flavour tempo (whatever that is) (2018, 47). Crucially, however, the apprehension of aesthetic properties has a cognitive element. Lopes believes that aesthetic experts establish rules or standards. In Lopes’ account of the aesthetic, talk of aesthetic experience is replaced by talk about recognition that certain rules or standards have been successfully followed or about the ability to engage in practices that reveal that one has mastered these rules.

Each of these internalist approaches to the aesthetic faces the same difficulties as other internalist approaches to the aesthetic. In particular, they end up punting the aesthetic question to the externalist. For example, someone like Lopes has to be able to distinguish aesthetic practices from non-aesthetic practices and the only way to do this is to say that aesthetic practices are the ones that are concerned with aesthetic values. (‘Aesthetic value’ is Lopes’ idiosyncratic term for an aesthetic property.) Belle canto and making sushi may be aesthetic practices, but other practices, such as auto repair and internal medicine, are not. Otherwise, all practices governed by standards are aesthetic practices, in which case the concept of the aesthetic has been stretched to the point where it is useless. We need an answer to what Lopes calls the demarcation question, the question of how to distinguish aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic properities. Lopes makes little effort to specify what an aesthetic property is beyond saying that the lists of Sibley and Le Clercq provide us with paradigms. Suppose that this is right and there are some paradigms of aesthetic properties. We still do not have an analysis of the aesthetic without a general account of the aesthetic and Lopes still punts the aesthetic question to the externalist.

The next problem facing internalist attempts to understand the aesthetic is the same as one of the problems facing externalists. A consensus on how to understand the aesthetic has probably never existed. However, even if, in the eighteenth century, people consistently used the concept of aesthetic experience in the same way, that consistent usage would not be the basis for resolving contemporary disputes. The only way to resolve the dispute is to appeal to current usage but there is no established usage to which philosophers can refer in giving a descriptive definition of aesthetic experience. As the examples just considered (Lopes and Matthen) illustrate, the accounts of aesthetic experience are various and becoming more various. If we had any prospect of identifying the objects of aesthetic experience, then we would have some prospect of understanding the concept of the aesthetic. However, as we have seen, we have no such prospect.

An experience comes to be regarded as an aesthetic experience in much the same way that something comes to be regarded as an aesthetic object or an aesthetic property. In the middle of the last century, a lot of people believed that audiences ought to aim for disinterested contemplation of art. As a result, this sort of experience was described as aesthetic experience. Goodman explicitly rejects the “persistent tradition” which “pictures the aesthetic attitude as a passive contemplation of the immediately given, direct apprehension of what is presented, uncontaminated by any conceptualization, isolated from all the echoes of the past and all the threats and promises of the future, exempt from all enterprise” (1976, 241). He does not think such experience is possible and he values experience of symbol systems so he holds that aesthetic experience is the interpretation of symbol systems. The kinds of interactions with works of art (and just about everything else) described by Lopes have very little in common with what people like Carroll and Levinson take to be aesthetic experiences. Lopes’ “aesthetic” acts are not limited to appreciation, they need not be disinterested (I may groom my dog with the aim of winning a trophy), and they differ in many other ways from experiences that are often thought to be aesthetic.

In the previous section, we saw that properties are called aesthetic properties when someone values experience of them. Now it appears that the only way to distinguish aesthetic experiences from non-aesthetic experiences is by reference to objects of experience. Moreover, the word ‘aesthetic’ is used in a wide variety of ways that have little in common. However, the various uses of ‘aesthetic’ do have one thing in common. They all pick out items that someone thinks are worthy of attention. When this recognition dawns upon us, we can see that attempts to define aesthetic experience are persuasive definitions.

4. Persuasive definition of the aesthetic

The concept of a persuasive definition was introduced into philosophy by C.L. Stevenson in the 1930s. Philosophers do not talk much about persuasive definition these days, but it is a useful addition to the philosopher’s toolkit. In particular, the concept of a persuasive definition is useful in understanding what is going on in attempts to define the aesthetic.

Stevenson described a persuasive definition as “one which gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantively changing its emotive meaning, and which is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing, by this means, the direction of people’s interests” (1938: 331). A persuasive definition changes what Stevenson calls the “conceptual meaning” of a word. The conceptual meaning of a word is just the meaning of a word in the ordinary philosophical sense of meaning. When a persuasive definition changes the conceptual meaning of a word, the denotation of the word changes. While a persuasive definition changes conceptual meaning, the original emotional meaning remains constant. The emotional meaning of a word is the connotations, positive or negative, associated with the word. Crucially, a persuasive definition has a purpose. It is designed to draw attention to certain objects and to confer a status on them.

Stevenson gives an example to illustrate what he means by persuasive definition. Suppose that ‘cultured’ means “widely read and acquainted with the arts” (1938, 331). That is the conceptual meaning of the word. But it also has an emotional meaning. That is, the word also has positive connotations. A cultured person is regarded as being sophisticated, broad-minded and erudite. Now suppose that someone comes along and says that ‘cultured’ does not mean widely read and acquainted with the arts. Instead, the “real meaning of ‘culture,’ is *imaginative sensitivity*” (1938, 331). The word had never previously been used in this sense and this cannot be said to be a descriptive or clarificatory definition. It is a stipulative definition, but a special kind of stipulative definition: a persuasive definition. The goal of the definition is to get “people to stop using the laudatory term [‘culture’] to refer to reading and the arts, and to use it, instead, to mean imaginative sensitivity” (1938, 332).

A persuasive definition maybe stipulative but, Stevenson observes, it is “not a matter of “merely arbitrary” definition…nor is any persuasive definition “merely arbitrary”, if this phrase is taken to imply “suitably decided by the flip of a coin”” (1938, 334). A persuasive definition is chosen, not at random, but with the goal of directing attention to something selected by the person offering the persuasive definition. In a memorable phrase, Stevenson wrote that “To choose a definition is to plead a cause” (1944, 210). And that is what many philosophers have been doing when they speak of the aesthetic. The term ‘aesthetic’ has strong positive connotations and philosophers want to associate the term with properties and experiences that they think are particularly deserving of respect and attention.

The problem with the concept of the aesthetic is in certain respects like the problem with the concept of art. Weitz (1956) argued that the concept of art is an open concept. No property is shared by all artworks. He also distinguished between the descriptive and the evaluative senses of the concept of art. This is just another way of drawing Stevenson’s distinction between conceptual meaning and emotive meaning. Weitz enjoins philosophers to ignore the evaluative sense of art and focus on the descriptive sense. He writes that the “elucidation of the descriptive use of “Art” creates little difficulty. But the elucidation of the evaluative use does. For many…“This is a work of art” does more than describe; it also praises” (1956, 34). Nothing is wrong with praising works, but Weitz believes that the two senses of ‘art’ need to be kept distinct.

The problem is that keeping the senses distinct is not easy. When a concept is open, Weitz notes, “a situation can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of *decision* on our part to extend the use of the concept to cover this” (1956, 31). For example, a decision can be made to apply the concept of art to Duchamp’s *Fountain*, an erstwhile urinal. The decision to extend the use of the concept of art has two consequences. The first is that the class of artworks becomes even more diverse. The second is that the evaluative or emotional sense of art is extended to the new object, because the novel object is thought to be deserving of praise. Weitz’ contemporaries soon recognized that this is what happens when something is called a work of art and the denotation of the word ‘art’ changed. Beardsley wrote that “When ‘emotive meaning’ came into view, with all its devious consequences, the term ‘work of art’ seemed to provide a fine example of ‘persuasive definition’” (1961, 175). Similarly, T.J. Diffey recognized that the project of defining art is a process of persuasive definition. The term ‘work of art’ he says “has a revisable denotation” (1969, 149). He then observes that “to say that something is a work of art is to imply that it is a thing of interest and worth” and he refers to this as the “emotive meaning” of ‘work of art’ (1969, 148). The emotive meaning remains the same when the denotation of ‘art’ is revised. In other words, we are dealing with persuasive definition.

In the mid-twentieth century, formalism ruled the artistic roost and the properties valued by formalists, roughly those properties corresponding to Sibley’s list of aesthetic concepts, were regarded as aesthetic properties. Ever since, some philosophers have assumed that aesthetic experience is experience of these properties. More imaginative philosophers have added to the list of things of which we can have aesthetic experience. Korsmeyer very much enjoys interacting with genuine historical artifacts, so she characterizes experience of them as aesthetic experience. Lopes wants to take the Western fine arts off their pedestal and highlight other arts. He identifies a certain way of interacting with objects as an aesthetic interaction and, as a result, interactions with perfume, dog shows, hip hop music, and other products have as much claim on being aesthetic objects as the music of Mozart or the novels of Jane Austen. Saito is impressed by the achievements of design students and regards their products as objects of aesthetic experience. In each case, the positive connotations associated with the term ‘aesthetic’ are transferred to objects in a domain to which it had not previously applied.

It is essential to recognize that philosophers who define the aesthetic are often engaged in persuasive definition. They are not revealing the essence of aesthetic experience. They are pleading a case.

5. Different objects of experience and different kinds of experience

Susanne Langer realized that a challenge facing philosophers is to understand the different ways in which objects of experience (or experiences of objects) are valuable. She writes that

Even chefs, perfumers, and upholsterers, who produce the means of sensory pleasure for others, are not rated as the torchbearers of culture and inspired creators….If music, patterned sound, had no other office than to stimulate and soothe our nerves, pleasing our ears as well-combined foods please our palates, it might be highly popular, but never culturally important (1953, 28).

If we start from the belief that perfumes and poetry are both valuable qua aesthetic objects, we are going to miss the distinction that Langer identifies.

Consider, for example, the pleasure of seeing a colourful sunset, the quiet satisfaction that one experiences on seeing a neat room with just a touch of disorder, the feeling of communion with past persons that one feels when in contact with a genuine historical artifact, the multifaceted gustatory sensation as one samples a fine Bordeaux wine, grooming a corgi according to the standards of the American Kennel Club, the feeling of elation that can come from exciting popular music, the thrill engendered by sparkling athleticism, and the complex emotional response one feels after seeing a good production of Shakespeare’s *Othello* or hearing a concerto by Bach. This is an incredibly diverse range of experiences. Applying the concept of the aesthetic to them all shrouds crucial differences between beer and Bashō, perfume and Prokofiev, corgis and Corelli. There is a difference in kind between (experience of) Vetiver and (experience of) Vermeer, between *Die Hard* and *Die Zauberflöte*. These experiences have differences at least as great as anything they may have in common and calling them all aesthetic experiences papers over the differences. If they have something in common, it is little more than that someone values them and wants to grant them a special status by calling them aesthetic.

This is not to deny that Korsmeyer, Lopes, Matthen, and other philosophers have identified actual forms of experience and interaction with objects. Korsmeyer is certainly right when she says that many people feel “the thrill of an encounter with the genuine.” She goes wrong when she adds that the “term “aesthetic” does as well as any to describe” (2019, 29) this thrill. Calling this thrill aesthetic explains nothing. In contrast saying that people value the feeling of commune with others that genuine objects provide is informative. Moreover, the recognition that genuine objects promote a feeling of communion makes clear that experience of these objects has little in common with experience of symphonies or sonnets. Lopes is also right when he holds that there are activities in which experts establish rules and people can learn to follow those rules. The issue here is not whether such a phenomenon exists. The issue is whether it is helpful to use the word ‘aesthetic’ to describe a given practice. Being able to groom a dog to the point where it can win a dog show has little to do with experience of an Austen novel and using the term ‘aesthetic’ for both is unhelpful. Matthen is right when he says that mastering a complex set of rules, including the cultural norms that govern the production of artworks, can be rewarding for some people and the rewards increase with increasing mastery. However, let us call this what it is. It is a kind of intellectual satisfaction and nothing is gained by calling this experience aesthetic.

The previous paragraph might be seen as justifying a pluralist account of the aesthetic, but that would be a mistake. It would be possible to give an account of aesthetic experiences that lumps together a wide range of experiences or objects and call them aesthetic. All that motivates such pluralism is nostalgia for the concept of the aesthetic. Philosophers are engaged in the project of understanding why certain experiences and certain objects are valuable. The trouble is that these experiences and objects are valuable in a wide variety of ways. Once again, to apply the concept of the aesthetic to a diverse range of object or experiences fails to help us understand why they are valuable.

Probably the best option at this point in philosophical history would be to abandon the concept of the aesthetic and replace it with more precise and useful concepts that will help us understand why experience of art (and other objects) is valuable. Likely, however, the use of the term is so deeply engrained that we are not going to be able to get rid of it. The next best option, after abandoning the concept, is to attempt to rehabilitate it. If the use of the concept could, by pure stipulation, somehow be restricted to certain objects or experiences, then it might be useful. I am not optimistic that philosophers will be able to agree on a standard usage.

5. Conclusion

Philosophers have failed to give a satisfactory analysis of the concept of the aesthetic. The attempt to analyze the concept faces two difficulties. The first is that aesthetic objects cannot be identified without knowing which experiences are aesthetic experiences and aesthetic experiences cannot be identified without knowing which objects are aesthetic objects. The second problem is that an incredibly broad range of experiences and objects are described as aesthetic. There is no principled way to choose between the various accounts of the aesthetic and philosophers end up offering persuasive definitions of the aesthetic. These definitions classify as aesthetic objects and experiences ones which philosophers believe are deserving of attention. These objects and experiences are, however, valuable in a wide variety of ways and calling them all aesthetic obscures differences between them. Finer-grained concepts than the concept of the aesthetic are needed to explain how various kinds of objects and experiences are valuable. The belief that the concept of the aesthetic is a useful concept turns out to have been a myth.

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