

Nick Zangwill

The Metaphysics of Beauty.

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The Metaphysics of Beauty is a collection of Nick Zangwill's published essays on aesthetics. Some are revised, and there are three new appendices and one previously unpublished essay. The book touches on an impressive range of topics in analytic aesthetics: aesthetic properties, the intentional fallacy, architecture, gender issues, the aesthetics of nature, the sociology of taste, and more. Throughout, Zangwill confronts the best of philosophical aesthetics in an engaging and honest style. When he is uneasy with his own views he says so, and he is not above occasionally admitting that his opponents are right. That said, Zangwill spends most of the book arguing iconoclastically and inventively against philosophical orthodoxy.

In Part One, Zangwill argues that beauty has a 'preeminent place' in aesthetics (2). Specifically, he rejects the tendency, apparent in Austin, Goodman and others, to dismiss verdictive aesthetic judgments ('this vase is beautiful') in favour of 'substantive' ones ('this vase is dainty'). This is tricky. For on one hand, Zangwill sensibly maintains that beauty must be 'tied' to substantive properties somehow, because 'something which is beautiful cannot be *barely* beautiful. It must be beautiful *because* it has various substantive properties' (19). Further, if verdictive properties are *aesthetic* properties, they must have some 'close link' to substantive aesthetic properties that 'justifies grouping them together in one category' (4). On the other hand, however, beauty cannot be tied *too* tightly to these properties, lest the distinction between them be lost and verdictive judgements become merely abbreviated substantive judgements.

Zangwill deftly steers a middle course. He sees verdictive properties as tied to substantive ones in supervening on them, and by being 'essentially linked' to them. Not only does the elegance of a vase, in conjunction with its grace and delicacy, determine, or necessitate, that it is beautiful; it is also 'part of what it is to be elegant to be beautiful' (35). This close metaphysical connection, however, is offset by the 'epistemic autonomy' of verdictive properties (21). Although substantive properties determine verdictive ones, one can never argue or reason from the former to the latter. Beauty must be grasped directly by a faculty of taste. Substantive judgments are 'more like *rationalizations*, in the pejorative sense, than reasons' (40), merely describing 'the way that a thing achieves aesthetic merit' (34).

In Part Two, Zangwill sets out to rehabilitate that 'much despised doctrine', Formalism. He dissociates himself from the aesthetician's favourite punching bag, Clive Bell's theory of Formalism, advocating instead 'moderate formalism': (1) many or all works of art have some formal properties, (2) some works of art (nonrepresentational and noncontextual works) have only formal properties, and (3) all aesthetic properties depend, at least partly, on

sensory qualities. To turn aside counterexamples, Zangwill employs several strategies: conceding that some aesthetic properties are not formal, showing that knowledge supposedly required for appreciating an artwork is actually irrelevant to its aesthetic qualities, and demonstrating that supposedly non-formal aesthetic qualities are not really aesthetic. He criticizes, at length, Walton's 'guernica' argument, an influential source of anti-formalist sentiment. His case is rounded out by discussion of the appreciation of artworks, natural objects and abstract entities, such as theories and proofs. In many cases, Zangwill shows that moderate formalism does justice to our aesthetic experience; where it appears not to, he explains away its apparent implausibility.

Throughout, Zangwill construes the formal/non-formal distinction roughly on the lines of Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty. Something that has non-formal aesthetic properties is dependently beautiful, or beautiful 'as a thing with a certain function' (61). Formal aesthetic properties are free beauties that 'do not depend on the fact that the thing has some non-aesthetic function' (61). This way of construing non-formal beauty is one of the weaker points of the book, and it sometimes cripples Zangwill's analyses. This is perhaps most apparent in his discussion of nature, where it leads him to claim that inorganic natural objects, having no 'evolutionary function', must possess only formal qualities. Even apart from its initial implausibility, this is problematic.

What Zangwill has in mind, presumably, is the notion of a 'selected function': that effect of an item or trait that explains the selective success (and hence survival) of ancestral organisms with that item or trait. Since inorganic natural objects do not undergo natural selection, these functions are found only in organic nature. However, many paradigm cases of dependent natural beauty in organic nature are not beauties involving *selected* functions. For instance, in *On The Origin of Species* Darwin noted that while 'the sutures in the skulls of young mammals have been advanced as a beautiful adaptation for aiding parturition', in fact these sutures did not arise because of their capacity to aid in birthing. Instead, 'this structure has arisen from the laws of growth, and has been taken advantage of in the parturition of the higher animals'. The example is somewhat esoteric, but the general point is that biological organs and traits carry out many important tasks besides the ones for which they have been selected, and may have dependent beauty in light of performing these.

Therefore dependent/non-formal beauty cannot be accounted for in terms of selected functions. This puts pressure on Zangwill to adopt a wider sense of 'function', according to which a history involving selective success is not essential for having a function. However, on such accounts (e.g., Cummins's) functions are not restricted to organic items that undergo natural selection. So if dependent/non-formal beauty is to be construed in terms of functions then inorganic nature should possess such beauties too. In fact, however, the whole notion that all non-formal beauty can be crammed into a function-based framework is dubious. This is why sophisticated non-formal ap-

proaches to aesthetic appreciation (e.g., Walton's) tend to embrace a pluralism about the ways in which cognitive factors can enter into aesthetic experience.

Part Three of the book advances into metaphysical matters surrounding the ontology of aesthetic properties. Zangwill offers an interesting interpretation of Hume's non-cognitivist anti-realism about aesthetic qualities, but ultimately rejects Hume's account. He also criticizes arguments for anti-realism that play on the metaphorical nature of aesthetic language. Despite opposing these strands of anti-realist thought, however, he also eschews aesthetic realism in its stronger forms, in which aesthetic properties are mind-independent. Zangwill himself opts for the more traditional view that aesthetic properties, though real, are mind-dependent in an important sense. This stance is directly related to his formalist commitment to a dependence of aesthetic properties on sensory ones. Since sensory qualities are mind-dependent, and 'aesthetic properties inherit the metaphysical status of sensory properties, whatever it may be' (200), aesthetic properties are mind-dependent.

The above gloss fails to do justice to the thoroughness, erudition and insight that Zangwill brings to each of the issues he tackles. The book ends with a useful chapter in which Zangwill compares his views with other writers and mounts a rousing charge against sociological approaches to the aesthetic, which he sees as attacking the entire aesthetic tradition. His specific critiques of these approaches aside, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* itself, as a stimulating and spirited tour through many of the central issues of contemporary aesthetics, is clear testament to the vibrancy of that tradition.

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