

There is no aesthetic experience of the genuine

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Abstract: Many hold that aesthetic appreciation is sensitive to the authenticity or genuineness of an object. In a recent body of work, Carolyn Korsmeyer has defended the claim that genuineness itself is an aesthetic property. Korsmeyer's aim is to explain our aesthetic appreciation of objects that afford a sense of being 'in touch with the past'. In this paper, I argue that genuineness cannot explain our appreciation of these objects. There is no aesthetic experience of the genuine.

1. Introduction

Many hold that aesthetic appreciation is sensitive to the authenticity or genuineness of an object. In a recent body of work, Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2016, 2019) has defended the claim that genuineness itself is an aesthetic property.¹ Korsmeyer's aim is to explain our aesthetic appreciation of objects that afford a sense of being 'in touch with the past'. In this paper, I argue that genuineness cannot explain our appreciation of these objects. There is no aesthetic experience of the genuine.

In §2, I consider the cases that motivate Korsmeyer's account and show how she departs from existing views regarding the relationship between genuineness and aesthetic appreciation. In §3, I assess Korsmeyer's distinctive claim that genuineness 'can itself be the direct intentional focus of an aesthetic encounter' (2008a: 118). We can make sense of genuineness as a second-order property predicating of objects that they possess historical features that bear a valuable connection to the past. However, this does not show up as an intentional focus of one's appreciation of these objects. Moreover, genuineness does not provide an adequate description of the objects' historical features that one does appreciate, so it cannot explain why we value objects in virtue of possessing those features. I conclude in §4 by suggesting a way forward for explaining the cases that motivate Korsmeyer's account.

2. 'In touch with the past'

The explanandum that motivates Korsmeyer's account is that genuine objects exert an attraction that replicas, even perceptually indistinguishable ones, do not. When, in 2009, to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the Library of Congress displayed the original draft of the Gettysburg Address, people queued up to see it. When they displayed a facsimile of the Address indistinguishable to the naked eye from the original, no queue formed (2019: 21–22). Korsmeyer aims to explain this phenomenon by arguing that genuine objects possess an experiential, aesthetic value that cannot be reproduced: 'a shiver, a thrill, a poignant acknowledgement, a small dose of awe in the presence of the real thing' (2019: 28).

Korsmeyer anticipates resistance to the claim that genuineness is a property that commands aesthetic attention given that it is not perceptible. According to a traditional view in aesthetics, the only properties of art works that are relevant to aesthetic appreciation are those that manifest in one's experience of a work, independently of any knowledge about a work's art-historical context or history of production (Bell 1913; Lessing 1965; Meiland 1983). Many theorists, however, hold that aesthetic appreciation is properly sensitive to a work's authenticity or genuineness, since they hold that some or all aesthetic qualities of art

¹ Following Korsmeyer, I use here 'authentic' and 'genuine' and their cognates interchangeably.

works depend on facts about the art-historically situated performances of their makers, which are irreducible to works' manifest properties or properties that supervene on those properties (Dutton 1979; Currie 1989: ch. 2; Davies 2004: ch. 2). For instance, to appreciate the stylistic originality of a painting by Vermeer, it matters that it was in fact painted by Vermeer, not by a twentieth-century imitator. If I discover that what I thought was a Vermeer is a Van Meegeren, my aesthetic experience and evaluation of the work changes. As Korsmeyer puts it, genuineness is widely recognized as having a 'supporting role' in aesthetics (2019: 35). Crucially, however, unlike the cases where genuineness is often accepted as having a supporting role, the cases that Korsmeyer is interested in do not involve any appreciable artistic achievement, or, if they do, this is not the target of the appreciative experience that she has in mind. The people who queued to see the Gettysburg Address did not do so to experience its beauty or other standardly recognized aesthetic qualities. The people who queued to see the Address merely wanted to experience, to be in the presence of, the Address (Korsmeyer 2019: 22).

It will be helpful at this stage to clarify the extension of the phenomenon that Korsmeyer is aiming to explain. She speaks of objects that 'bring the past alive', that afford a sense of being 'in touch with the past' and that 'bring the past into presence' (12, 162). Korsmeyer does not limit the phenomenon to artefacts that are notably old, however. Genuineness, she writes,

pertains to new things as well . . . The same phenomenon occurs with singular or rare artifacts or with those that were used (and touched) by certain people and under special circumstances (163).

Consider a lovely example that Korsmeyer borrows from Jane Austen's *Emma*: a disused pencil stub secretly kept by Harriet Smith as a token of her affection for Mr Elton, the stub having belonged to and been used by Mr Elton and carelessly discarded in Harriet's presence. As well as artefacts, Korsmeyer also allows that natural objects can afford aesthetic encounters with the past. She cites examples of giant redwoods and recalls a news report about how, after a meteor explosion over Chelyabinsk, 'many people scavenged to find fragments of meteorites, desiring to hold in their hands something that came from outer space' (28).

What is it that one appreciates when one appreciates these objects? Korsmeyer's answer is that one appreciates their *genuineness*. Where genuineness has been recognized as having a supporting role in aesthetics, Korsmeyer's central claim and point of departure is that 'genuineness -- being the real thing -- is also a property that commands attention in itself, and that this attention yields an experience that qualifies as aesthetic' (35). Elsewhere, she writes that genuineness 'can itself be the direct intentional focus of an aesthetic encounter' (2008a: 118).

In what follows, I will assume that Korsmeyer is right that the encounters she describes have an aesthetic character. The question I want to pursue is: can these experiences rightly be understood as ones of *genuineness*? What, according to Korsmeyer, does it mean to attend to an object's genuineness?

3. *What is genuineness?*

According to Korsmeyer, genuineness 'is both a descriptive and an evaluative property.' (2019: 7) As an evaluative property, it possesses multiple 'zones of value': cognitive, ethical and aesthetic (7–8, 35). Genuine objects can teach us about the past; they are worth preserving, even at great expense and inconvenience; and they afford valuable aesthetic experiences. The passages that best elucidate what Korsmeyer understands the descriptive

property of genuineness to be are the following: that ‘genuineness is an objective property -- a property of an object -- that refers to the conditions under which it came into being’ and that “‘Genuine’ is a term that names a property of objects pertaining to the history of their making and use’ (60, 162).

Now, this descriptive sense of ‘genuine’ is familiar in aesthetics from literature on fakes and forgeries. Denis Dutton describes it in terms of ‘*nominal authenticity*’, which he defines ‘simply as the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object’ (2005: 259). It is easy enough to see how an object’s being genuine in this sense can feature as a *requirement* for aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, one of the main argumentative strategies that Korsmeyer deploys to support her case for genuineness is to highlight the phenomenal change in experience that occurs when an object is discovered to be a fake or replica (Korsmeyer 2008a, 2019: ch. 3). Objects such as the Gettysburg Address only evoke a thrill of wonder or awe if one believes they are genuine. If deception is revealed, the magic is lost. Evidently, however, this cannot be what Korsmeyer means when she describes genuineness as an aesthetic property. The requirement that one must correctly identify an object to appreciate it properly does not name a property of the object that one appreciates, be it genuineness or any other.

If Korsmeyer is to explain the encounters she describes in terms of an aesthetic property, it must be a property shared by objects that afford those experiences. There is, however, a major obstacle to thinking about genuineness as a property shared by objects: namely, that any object can be genuine in one sense and not genuine in another. A facsimile of the Gettysburg Address is not the genuine Address, but it is a genuine facsimile. ‘Genuine’ is what J. L. Austin calls a ‘*substantive-hungry*’ word: a word whose meaning depends on *what* it is being used to refer to. As Austin observes, whereas the statement ‘this is pink’ is intelligible without knowing what ‘this’ refers to, the statement ‘this is genuine’ is only intelligible when one knows what ‘this’ is (Austin 1964: 68–70). Moreover, the sense of calling something ‘genuine’ depends not merely on knowing what object is being referred to through an act of ostension, but on knowing a description under which it will count as genuine. To call an object *o* a genuine *x* is to say that *o* has been correctly identified as an *x*, where *x* provides a salient description of *o*, and to call an object *o* a not genuine *x* is to say that *o* has been correctly identified as a not-*x*, where *x* provides a salient description of what *o* is not (for instance, what *o* might otherwise be mistaken for).

Since any object can be both genuine in one sense and not genuine in another, there cannot be a property of genuineness *simpliciter*. In every instance, some further specification is required to make it intelligible. This puts a different complexion on Korsmeyer’s claim that genuineness ‘is an objective property’. Although genuineness *refers* to objective properties, it cannot be defined simply as an objective property, for, assuming that an object can accurately be described in two or more ways that do not logically entail one another, a point of view is required to pick out a description that will determine what objective properties are relevant. Korsmeyer alludes to this when she writes that an object is genuine if ‘it is what one takes it to be’ (2019: 18). In taking an object to be one thing and not another, one is implicitly recognizing criteria that can be used to determine whether it is genuine. The genuine Address is the one penned by Lincoln; a genuine piece of meteorite is one that came from outer space; Harriet’s genuine pencil stub is one that belonged to and was used by Mr Elton.

It appears, then, that to speak of genuineness as a property of an object is to speak of the object’s having been identified, with some sufficient degree of assurance, as one thing and not another, according to whatever specification is salient. But this is surely not what one attends to when one appreciates the kinds of objects Korsmeyer describes. When I appreciate the Gettysburg Address, I do not appreciate its *having been identified as the one penned by*

Lincoln. Museum curators and others in the trade may find satisfaction in such authentications, but that is a different story.

It is not plausible that when one appreciates an object as a genuine object, one appreciates its having been identified as genuine. However, it is plausible that one appreciates it *just for those features that are relevant to its being identified as genuine*. And something like this, it turns out, is what Korsmeyer thinks it means to appreciate an object's genuineness. We have seen that Korsmeyer describes the evaluative property of genuineness as having different 'zones' of value: cognitive, ethical and aesthetic. What it means to be genuine in an evaluative sense, however, plays a much more fundamental role in Korsmeyer's account than one might expect it to. According to Korsmeyer, for an object to be valuable as a genuine object, it must not only be genuine in a descriptive sense; it must also be valuable in the first place. As Korsmeyer writes, the 'experience of real things is valuable because the objects themselves are valuable under correct description.' (60) 'Only things with some kind of presumptive importance merit being called "genuine"' (161).

We can now see that the 'correct description' of the object is both the description under which the object is valuable *and* the description under which it counts as genuine. What makes the Gettysburg Address special is its having been penned by Lincoln for the occasion of his address at Gettysburg; what makes the meteorite special is its having come from outer space; what makes Harriet's pencil stub special is its having once belonged to and been used by Mr Elton. These are the features that one appreciates when one appreciates these objects, and they are just the same features that need to be identified to ascertain the objects' genuineness.

So, according to Korsmeyer, the property of genuineness refers to an object's historical features that bear a special connection to the past. Can we make sense of genuineness in this way? The difficulty is that what it means to be genuine in a descriptive sense now appears to have gone out of the window. There is nothing that the properties of *having been penned by Lincoln for the occasion of his address at Gettysburg, having come from outer space* and *having once belonged to and been used by Mr Elton* have in common that warrants calling them 'genuine' according to any recognizable sense of the term. If one says that one appreciates the Gettysburg Address for *genuinely* having been penned by Lincoln, it is evident that the addition of 'genuinely' is redundant. Either it was penned by Lincoln or it was not. Ironically, saying that the Address was *genuinely* penned by Lincoln can even seem to cast doubt on whether it was. Attending to the genuineness of an object can disrupt the experience that Korsmeyer claims is one of genuineness! Korsmeyer shows an awareness of this when she writes:

As a rule, genuineness is part of the understanding that audiences bring to encounters with artifacts, but it is presumptive rather than noticed in the moment. (22)

What, then, becomes of the claim that genuineness is 'the direct intentional focus' of the encounter?

Now, this argument against genuineness parallels claims that Frank Ramsey (1927) defends regarding truth. According to Ramsey's 'redundancy theory' of truth, to say of a proposition *p* that '*p* is true' is to say nothing more than '*p*'. Hence, the addition of 'is true' is semantically redundant. Many, however, defend truth as a non-redundant second-order property: one that meaningfully predicates of '*p*' something like 'that *is* how things are' (White 1970: 93). Analogously, one may defend genuineness as predicating of an object something like 'that *really does* have the historical properties that it appears to have that bear a special connection to the past'. For instance, 'this *really is* the Address penned by Lincoln, not a facsimile of the Address'. Pertinently, for our purposes, one can in this way defend the

claim that one values objects' genuineness. It may be true that in the individual case, genuineness does not show up as an intentional focus of appreciation. I am not aware of appreciating the *genuineness* of the Address; rather, I simply appreciate *the Address*. Nevertheless, the property of genuineness helps to explain our collective evaluative practices. It explains why, for instance, we value artefacts in the museum more than replicas in the giftshop.

This (partial) defence of genuineness, however, fails to do what Korsmeyer needs it to do. Asserting the genuineness of an object can only be done by way of asserting a description of an object. If we can make sense of genuineness as a second-order property of a *description* of an object, it is not clear that this amounts to there being a corresponding property *of the object* that can fulfil the required explanatory role. Yet even if we grant that there is such a property, still it cannot tell us what we need to know. Genuineness, as Korsmeyer understands it, cannot be predicated of any object that has a connection to the past, nor can it be predicated of any object that has the historical features that it appears to have. 'Only things with some kind of presumptive importance merit being called "genuine"'. The problem here is not just that it is the 'correct description' under which the object is valuable that is doing the explanatory heavy lifting in the individual case. Rather, it is that there is not any adequate way of cashing out this correct description in terms of genuineness. If, as Korsmeyer suggests, the property of genuineness is grounded on the historical features of objects that are valuable under some description or other, saying that we value objects that possess those features *because* they are genuine gets us nowhere.

The basic problem with Korsmeyer's account is that she attempts to make an essentially epistemic concept an essentially evaluative one. Notice that in regular usage, genuineness is not an honorific term. One can have genuine trash as well as genuine treasure. In a recent response to Korsmeyer, Joshua Lewis Thomas (2021) has observed that genuineness is 'not a source of value in its own right'. Instead, Thomas suggests, genuineness is a 'value-qualifier', analogous to an object's condition. Thomas is right that genuineness is not a source of value in its own right. But neither is it a value-qualifier. Suppose I decide to sell two of my gold Rolexes, one of which is in better condition than the other. *Ceteris paribus*, one expects that the Rolex in good condition will be worth more than the one in bad condition. Being genuine or not genuine does not likewise qualify the value of my Rolexes. A genuine Rolex is not worth more qua Rolex than a 'Rolex' that is not genuine, for the simple reason that a 'Rolex' that is not genuine is not a Rolex. To say that an object is genuine is to say nothing more than that it has been correctly identified under a certain description. And while identifying an object correctly will in many cases be a requirement for being able to accurately value it, the value that it has is independent of its being identified. A painting by an old master misattributed to a minor artist does not become more valuable qua painting once its identity is discovered; it is simply that its value had not been realized.

4. Conclusion

Genuineness has a legitimate role in aesthetic appreciation in so far as appreciation requires that an object be correctly identified. Adequately appreciating a painting by Vermeer requires that I believe it was painted by Vermeer. Adequately appreciating the Gettysburg Address requires that I believe it was penned by Lincoln. In both cases, genuineness matters. But in neither case is it correct to say that genuineness is *what* I appreciate. I appreciate the Vermeer partly because it was painted by Vermeer. I appreciate the Address largely, if not entirely, because it was penned by Lincoln. These features I appreciate, not the genuineness of the objects that possess these features.

Korsmeyer's work on this topic is valuable not least because she has identified an interesting phenomenon that we all recognize -- objects that afford a sense of contact with

something remote that they embody in virtue of a past causal connection -- that stands in need of explanation. In this paper, I have argued that genuineness does not show up as an intentional focus of one's appreciation of these objects and that genuineness does not provide an adequate description of the objects' historical features that one does appreciate. Korsmeyer might yet be able to carve out a space for genuineness in a stipulative sense as a response-dependent aesthetic property based on a distinctive kind of experience that the objects cause. However, it is doubtful that the phenomenology of encounters with objects that embody their past is distinctive enough to support such attribution. There does not appear to be any distinctive 'feel' of being put in touch with a special person, place or event through an object connected with its past. Rather, the phenomenology of these encounters varies according to what it is that one is being in touch *with*.

What sense can we make of objects affording a sense of being 'in touch' with something remote? Of course, one cannot touch the past through an object, nor can one contact a love interest through a pencil stub. What sense can we make of objects that 'bring the past into presence'? Objects are from the past, but so much is trivial. The best way of making sense of these expressions, I suggest, will be in terms of imagination, along lines laid down by Kendall Walton (1990). But that must be for another paper. What I have aimed to show here is that, however these experiences might be explained, they are not ones of genuineness.²

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