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Reflections On Art And Ontology

I

One of the general topics of this conference is art and ontology and I want to try to say something about two issues in ontology as they show up in philosophical thinking about art and aesthetics. The first of these concerns the nature of works of art themselves and the second the nature of aesthetic properties and aesthetic judgments. I am not at all sure exactly when ontological concerns made their way in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, but certainly by early in the twentieth century philosophers are concerned with the ontology of art. Philosophers will ask the question, "What kind of an object is a work of art?". That is an odd question; at least it ought to appear odd to anyone who is not a philosopher for philosophers tend not to see the oddness in their questions. Suppose someone were to ask what kind of an object a rhinoceros is. That seems a strange way of inquiring about the beast. Would it do to reply that it's big and grey and armored all over, generally ill tempered and has no manners, never did have any and, if Kipling is right, never will? Philosophers would not put up for a moment with such an answer, whether it is about rhinoceroses or art. Descriptions of particular works of art, their genre or style, or the materials of which they are made is not what is wanted. The philosopher will accept an answer only in terms of one or another of the metaphysical categories of philosophical theory, e.g. physical substance, mental attribute, sense datum, culturally emergent entity or what have you. Aesthetic objects are supposed to belong to one or another of these metaphysical categories. And it is

here that we enter philosophy land where things get curiouser and curiouser.

Let us consider first paintings and statues. To what ontological category do these belong? A first, and naive, philosophical answer is that they are physical objects. They have weight and dimensions, hang on walls or stand on pedestals in specific locations and in that respect are not essentially different from tables and chairs. Aesthetic theory, however, has never accepted that as a satisfactory ontology of art. The reasons are interesting. Works of art have properties that apparently are inconsistent with their being physical objects, or *merely* physical objects. There are three respects in which this is supposed to be so. First, a painting can have spatial characteristics such as depth which seems inconsistent with the fact that the physical canvas is only a flat surface. Secondly, paintings and sculptures can have expressive and emotional character that is denied to mere physical stuff. Like sentient beings, and unlike mere matter, they can be gay or somber, triumphant or tragic. And finally, to put it in the most general terms, works of art can have meaning while mere bits of matter cannot be said to *mean* anything.

Ontological theories of art are to a large extent attempts to account for these very general facts about works of art. If works of art cannot be mere physical objects, what, then, are they? They must be a kind of thing that can be the locus of meaning and of value. Idealists said that they are essentially mental, ideas in the mind of the artist to which any physical canvas or block of stone is only incidental. It is in the mind of the artist that the intentions and feelings that provide the meanings and expressive character that inform the work of art are to be found. Or, alternatively, the real work of art is an experience in the mind of the observer. The physical painting or statue is sometimes represented as a vehicle for communicating the full panoply of meanings in the artist's mind to the mind of the spectator.

And so is born the idea of the "aesthetic object", an object distinct from any physical object and which is supposed to be the real work of art and the object of appreciation and criticism. Aesthetic object theories are designed to answer at least three questions. (1) How can

works of art be *perceived* to have expressive properties? How can we *hear* the sadness in the music when sadness is something that we feel? (2) How can the expressive properties of art that are presumably "objective" properties of the work be distinguished from various feelings and connotations only *associated* with the work? How, for example, may we distinguish between Santayana's old portmanteau which is merely a *reminder* of Florence and the joy and sweetness that can be found *in* the very words we hear? (3) How can the apparently aberrant use of language essential to aesthetic judgments be explained, e.g. how can the word "sad" which gets its meaning by referring to a human feeling also refer to *sounds*?

The theoretical answer to the first question is that the object perceived is not the physical object, but the aesthetic object which is the result of some kind of interaction between the physical object and our states of consciousness. The aesthetic object is supposed to be the locus of the union between the perceived properties of the art object and the feelings that give it its aesthetic and artistic value. The second question is answered by encouraging art criticism to confine itself to a description of the aesthetic object; in that way it can be assured of attending to what is "really" there and can avoid irrelevant "subjective" intrusions. The third question is answered by the theory's assumption that the words of the expressive vocabulary do not describe anything physical, but keep their original function of referring to human feelings and reactions for these are said to make up part of the aesthetic object itself.[1]

The problems with aesthetic object theories are legion. For the most part they trade on mistaken views about the nature of the physical and the mental which are descendants of some version of Cartesian dualism and which entail that the philosopher's "real work of art" is a private object. The confusion in all of that needs no rehearsal here. To these difficulties we can add that in these theories perception

[1] This type of theory is worked out in detail by S. C. Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Bloomington:Indiana University Press, 1955). Wittgenstein spoke of turning disguised nonsense into patent nonsense. Pepper makes this task easy for us since his confusions are right out in the open and can be made patent without much digging.

is conceived of in a very narrow way. The many different kinds of things that can count as objects of perception are simply ignored. Perception, we need to remind ourselves, is not simply a matter of seeing, only seeing shapes and colors, but includes seeing likenesses, seeing one thing as another, seeing several objects as forming a pattern and so on. With this restricted view of perception goes an equally narrow view of language that fails to take account of the many different uses that words may have. We can see this with the aid of that overworked example of the sad music. Philosophical blinders allow one to think that the word "sad" can refer only to a feeling and that feelings can only be felt and not heard. It takes a better view of both language and perception to realize that the use of the word is more flexible than is dreamt of in most philosophies and can be extended to characterize an object of perception.

Ontological theories of art also trade upon certain assumptions about meaning. Let us note right off that the word "meaning" can play us false if we are not careful. It has a remarkable number of uses. The word "obese" means "fat". The English word "breakfast" means "Frühstück" in German. There were depths of meaning in the words he spoke. "What is the meaning of this?", he exclaimed when he returned unexpectedly to find his wife in bed with the milkman. "It is impossible for me to say how much music has meant to me in my life", said someone or other. The first three are examples of meanings that words can have. How can a word have a meaning? To make that into a problem you must start from the assumption that printed words are only marks on paper and spoken words are only sounds in the air. And that is I believe is one place where ontological theories of art start. We suppose that by themselves marks and sounds have no meaning. By the same token pigments found on the surfaces of canvases all by themselves have no meaning. These marks and sounds and pigments must have some operation performed upon them in order to become meaningful. This operation is frequently described as some form of interpretation. It is supposed that not only do works of literature, painting and the other

arts require interpretation to become meaningful, but so does the ordinary speech of everyday life.

Indeed, taken *all by themselves* marks and sounds and blobs of pigments have no meaning, but the words we read, the speech we hear and the paintings we look at are not taken *all by themselves.* They are produced in a context of human activity which includes the speaking of language, the making of images, various natural and primitive reactions and a host of human practices. When we read or listen we do not encounter marks on paper or sounds in the air – as if everything comes in alien hieroglyphics and inarticulate gurgling – we read words and we hear what people say. Ontological theories misdescribe their starting point. We do not – always – have to interpret what we encounter. In the standard case we understand right off what we read and what we hear. There is, of course, a place for interpretation, but that place has to stand in contrast with the everyday situations in which it is all quite clear.[2]

By rejecting all these theories about special aesthetic objects and works of art not being *merely* physical objects I do not want to be understood as arguing for the ontological thesis that works of art really are merely physical objects. The notion of "physical object", I suggest, occupies its own cage in the same philosophical zoo as sense data, soul substance, monads and all the rest. I don't want to offer any ontological thesis of any kind. It is enough to say that paintings hang on walls and statues stand in gardens.

Other ontological puzzles can be manufactured about works of literature and music that cannot be identified with any particular object. We may be inclined to think that this printed page is only a copy *of* the poem, this concert is only a performance *of* the music and then we

[2] The necessity for this kind of interpretation is assumption behind the theories of Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981) and Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980). Cartesian assumptions about the inability of the physical to present anything expressive or meaningful are obviously in play in both works.

are left perplexed about what the poem or music itself is. We need not pause, however, to untangle all of that.[3]

Despite the confusions surrounding the very question of "the ontological status of the work of art" there are serious issues motivating the philosophy. These issues, I think, largely concern how we appreciate, value and judge works of art. It is to some of these questions that I now want to turn.

II

One way of thinking about aesthetic appreciation and especially aesthetic judgment has led to another species of ontological theory. This is a kind of theory that has come to be called aesthetic realism. Aesthetic realism is not concerned with the ontology of the work of art as such, but with the nature of aesthetic properties. My discussion of aesthetic realism is drawn primarily from the views of Philip Pettit[4] and to a lesser degree from some of the things that Eddy Zemach says[5].

The principal thesis of aesthetic realism is that aesthetic judgments, or as they are sometimes described, "aesthetic characterizations" or "aesthetic sentences", are essentially assertions capable of being true or false; it is the view that aesthetic judgments have genuine truth-values. There is more, however, to aesthetic realism than this. Pettit goes on to say that "aesthetic properties are there to be detected and characterized" and Zemach adds that aesthetic sentences "are true if and only if the aesthetic properties they ascribe to things really characterize those things." It is thus that the existence of aesthetic properties is said to explain why aesthetic descriptions can be true. Aesthetic realism is clearly an ontological thesis, not so much about the

[3] I have tried to do that untangling in "The Literary Work of Art", in B. R. Tilghman, ed., *Language and Aesthetics: Contributions to the Philosophy of Art,* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1973). The arguments presented there have never been responded to.

[4] Philip Pettit, "The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism", in Eva Schaper, ed., *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophic Aesthetics* (Cambridge U. Press. 1983).

[5] Eddy Zemach, *Real Beauty* (Pennsylvania State U. Press, 1997).

"mode of existence" of aesthetic properties as about the fact of their existence. Among all the things catalogued when the realist takes the great inventory of the world are to be found aesthetic properties.

Aesthetic realists never manage to make explicit exactly what counts as an aesthetic property or how many of them there are. It would be an exaggeration, but perhaps not too much of one, to say that there is scarcely a word in the language that cannot be pressed into doing aesthetic duty. Is there a property answering to every possible occurrence of an aesthetic use? There are a number of words whose primary use seems to be aesthetic; "elegant", "graceful", "clumsy" are obvious examples. Think now of a poem with syllables tripping over one another or an inept verse whose feet stumble. Do the words "tripping" and "stumbling" also denote aesthetic properties? You don't have to answer that.

It strikes me that there is something very odd about asking whether a certain property exists. This is not at all like asking whether anything has a certain property. Note that there is nothing at all odd about asking whether a certain object or kind of object exists. There is nothing conceptually out of joint in wondering whether there is a seal in the bathtub or whether there are any unicorns. It is often a useful strategy in a philosophical inquiry to ask what things would be like if the thesis in question was not true. I suppose being geometrically square is a property. Some objects are square and some are not. We can imagine the situation in which nothing is square; we can describe the conditions that must be satisfied for an object to be square in shape and then note that nothing satisfies those conditions. But what would it be like for there to be no property of squareness? Would we have to say that the claim that this thing has four equal sides is just as nonsensical as the claim that this tove is slithy?

Suppose that aesthetic properties did not exist. Consider a description like this: "there is a strong diagonal movement into the space of the painting that leads the eye to the figure that is the dramatic focus of the composition". Would that then turn out to be gibberish or a kind of Jabberwocky?

What, then, is the force of the aesthetic realist's thesis that aesthetic qualities really exist? What is he denying? What view is he trying to counter? I think it is the claim that aesthetic judgments are somehow "subjective" which is to suggest that they are arbitrary and capricious and provide no grounds for agreement or rational assessment of aesthetic and artistic value. Pettit's principal target is Roger Scruton in his 1974 book *Art and Imagination.* Scruton had characterized his own position as an affective theory, that is, as a theory that claims that an aesthetic judgment does not rest on a belief that certain facts obtain, but on the having of some kind of experience. As a matter of fact, Scruton's view about aesthetic experience is taken largely from Wittgenstein's notions of seeing-as and aspect perception. Whether he gets all that right is not at issue here.

Pettit points out that like, say, judgments of color, aesthetic judgments are perceptual. This entails the commonplace that to make the judgment you must see it for yourself. But, unlike judgments of color, they are "perceptually elusive" which he explains by saying that "visual scrutiny of a picture, necessary though it may be for aesthetic knowledge, is not always sufficient to guarantee it. ... One may look and look (at a painting) and not see its elegance or economy or sadness..."[6] He goes on to add the duck-rabbit figure as an example of something that is perceptually elusive and this points to an interesting consequence for realism as I shall try to make clear.

What bothers realists such as Pettit is that they assume that aesthetic judgments are anomalous. Pettit makes this explicit when he says, "The problem intuitively is this. If aesthetic characterizations are held to direct us towards real properties of the works they characterise, how do we account for the rather unusual nature of those properties?".[7] The unusual nature of them is their perceptual elusiveness. He sees that we understand ordinary perceptual statements as when we say that something is red, but then are puzzled when another, obviously perceptual, statement is so unlike that one. The affective theorist can explain

[6] Pettit, p. 26.
[7] Pettit, p. 27.

perceptual elusiveness, according to Pettit, by the claim that you must not only see the picture, you must also have a "non-cognitive experience" (whatever that means) aroused by the picture. This is where it looks to the realist as if some kind of theory of his own is called for to counter affective theory by explaining how aesthetic judgments can be genuine assertions after all.

The realist response goes something like this. Ordinary perceptual judgments can be assessed as true or false only given a standard observer and standard conditions of perception. This is obvious and uncontested. (For judgments of color to be reliable they must be made by people with normal eyesight under conditions of normal lighting and so on.) The realist must claim that aesthetic judgments have standard conditions also. One condition is that the object must be "positioned" in a certain class. He illustrates this idea of positioning with a figure that looks like a letter of the alphabet when seen positioned in a sequence of letters and looks like a numeral when positioned in a sequence of numerals. He then offers this formula with an aesthetic example: "X is sad if and only if X looks sad under standard presentation and under suitable positioning."[8] He warns us that not every positioning is correct; the positioning must be suitable.

He goes on to say that if a picture is so positioned that it presents itself as a representation of a woman, for example, that naturally affects how it may be positioned with a view to displaying economy or lavishness, dreaminess or matter-of-factness, sadness or gaiety. This interactive influence means that for a given kind of property certain reference classes will be inappropriate, certain positionings wrong.

I want to call attention to the phrase "If a picture is so positioned that it presents itself *as* a representation of a woman". Pettit's remark suggests that under certain circumstances we see the picture *as* a woman. This further suggests that there is something curious about the picture, perhaps it is a cubist decomposition of the female form and we have some difficulty in making sense of it. In this case it makes sense

[8] Pettit, p.31.

to say that I cannot see it as a woman. A conventional picture of a woman, however, does not requires this kind of "positioning"; we see right away what it is; we do not see it *as* a woman. Its economy or lavishness may be another matter. Sargent's portrait *The Wyndham Sisters* can appear lavish by contrast with Klimt's portrait of Margaret Stoneborough-Wittgenstein, but not, say, by contrast with Girodet's painting of his mistress as Deianeira. We may, of course, have to see it as representive of a particular period or style.

What Pettit says about seeing things in relation to other things, which is essentially what he means when he speaks of the need to "position" them and his use of the "presented itself as" locution, strikes me as very much like what Wittgenstein says in explaining the various concepts of seeing-as and aspect perception. Recall that he mentioned the duck-rabbit as an example of perceptual elusiveness, the very example that Wittgenstein uses to introduce the notion of an aspect. In this there is a marvleous irony. Wittgenstein makes clear that aspects are not properties. To see one thing as another is rather to see an internal relation between it and something else. I suppose that we can say that it is a property of these two weights that they balance one another on a scale, but when we see the painting as balanced we are not seeing a property of the painting, but rather an aspect of it. We see the figures in the painting as like weights balancing in a scale. By describing aesthetic judgments as he does I believe that Pettit has undercut his own theory: his account of aesthetic judgments makes them sound like aspect reports rather than ordinary factual statements.

Pettit has tried to domesticate aesthetic judgments by claiming that they are not essentially unlike other judgments of perception. They all require a background of relations in which they must be "positioned". In saying this, however, he comes perilously close to holding that all perception is seeing-as – we see the picture as a woman, etc.

There is something in the realist's position that seems very persuasive. He touches something we all want to agree with when he says that aesthetic properties are *there to be seen.* This is indeed how it seems. Once I have seen the changing aspects of the duck-rabbit I can

neither think them away nor make them into kangaroos or hippopotamuses. Having heard the sadness in the music I cannot make it laugh and I can invite others to hear the sadness too. But what have I seen and what have I heard? Surely aspects and not properties. The alternative to aesthetic realism is not the anti-realism of "affective" theories. Aesthetics and art appreciation are concerned with seeing and hearing aspects of things. Aspect perception need not be "subjective", arbitrary or otherwise idiosyncratic. Others can be brought to see what I see and I can be brought to see what more artistically knowledgable and sensitive people have seen. The realist wants to say that aesthetic judgments are genuine propositions with truth values. I want to say that it won't do to say that the judgment "the music is sad" is true of the music as the statement "the music is in the key of A" is true of it. What is true is that the music can be heard that way.

The realist says that the affective *theorist* must offer an explanation of perceptual elusiveness of aesthetic properties, an explanation that the realist must counter with his own theory. Perhaps we need to get away from theories. Wittgenstein said that ontology is better understood as grammar and that is a suggestion worth pursuing. The first thing to do is to question the assumption that aesthetic judgments are anomalous and question the project of trying to domesticate them. Instead of asking whether aesthetic properties really exist and whether aesthetic judgments really can be true we ought to look instead at how they actually function in our language and in our life. The use of the words that enter into aesthetic discussion and judgment are far more varied than are dreamt of in most philosophies and cannot be separated from a host of practices and traditions. Here must be mentioned, of course, the reports of aspects seen that I have referred to, words used in secondary senses, the importance of the reliance on imponderable evidence, not to mention the role of expert judgment. In its insistence that aesthetic terms denote properties realism tends to overlook this infinite variety as well as overlook the point of aesthetic discussion and its importance in our lives. Aesthetic realism is bothered by the "perceptual elusiveness" of aesthetic qualities and seeks a theory to

bring aesthetic judgment into the fold of ordinary propositions. There is no reason, however, to be bothered by this feature of aesthetics and we should remind ourselves that aesthetic discussion involves different uses of language. We should be content to offer descriptions of the workings of this language and give up looking for a theory to show that it is something that it is not.

It strikes me that the theory of aesthetic realism is consistent with complete indifference to the properties allegedly denoted by aesthetic judgments. If I were a realist, I could agree that compositional balance is indeed a real property and agree that the statement "This painting is balanced" is true and at the same time shrug my shoulders and say, "so what?" Both aesthetic appreciation and art appreciation must be a matter not only of how we see things but also how we react to them. The aim of discussion in aesthetics, among other things, is to help us see and appreciate more deeply, to bring us to share experiences, to learn from what we see and to connect us to a culture and its traditions. This is why the grammatical investigation is so important; it focuses attention on what is so important in our traffic with art and aesthetics.