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Minerva and the Muses

— A Criticism of Aesthetic Subjectivism

De gustibus non disputandum est is an old Roman saying which enjoys great popularity in our day and age of European nihilism. But the age of nihilism is also the age of Weberian polytheism, so not everybody agrees with the ancient saying. Thus, Nietzsche spoke:

Und ihr sagt, Freunde, dass nichts zu streiten sei über Geschmack und Schmecken? Aber alles Leben ist Streit um Geschmack und Schmecken! ¹

The idea that we cannot discuss matters of taste in any fruitful manner is often used to defend aesthetic subjectivism. According to a popular version of that view, aesthetic evaluation is strictly a matter of taste, and reason has no place in discussions about aesthetic quality. Minerva cannot hope to join forces with the Muses, "the twain shall never meet".

In this paper, I am going to criticize aesthetic subjectivism, or more precisely subjectivism concerning the value of artworks. I shall try to show that reason has a place in aesthetic evaluation. I want to help the mistress Minerva to find her way to the Muses' abode!

Definitions and Judgements

Enough of rhetoric, let us turn to logic. And the latter demands clear-cut definitions. "Aesthetic subjectivism" I define as "the belief that aes-

¹Friedrich Nietzsche (1978): *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Reclam: Stuttgart, op. cit, pp.108-109.

thetic judgements and standards are not universally and rationally justifiable and/or falsifiable". Inspired by J.L. Mackie's discussion of the concept of moral scepticism, I regard aesthetic subjectivism basically as a negative theory. It states what is not possible, namely that it is not possible to justify or falsify aesthetic judgements and standards by rational means. Thus, an aesthetic subjectivist does not have to believe that aesthetic terms are devoid of cognitive meaning or that aesthetic judgements are strictly relative to some relativator.² She is a subjectivist in some broad sense of the word.³ Such a broad notion of subjectivism ought to range over aesthetic relativism, the emotive theory of aesthetic meaning as well as "run-of-the-mill" subjectivism, i.e. the idea that aesthetic judgements are simply a matter of taste, etc.

This discussion brings us to the concept of rationality. I will use that concept in a fairly traditional way. I will put forth a stipulative definition, to be utilized in the context of this particular paper. More precisely, it is a general definition of rationality of beliefs and it goes as follows: "a belief is rational if and only if it fulfills the following conditions a), b), c) and d): a) it is logically self-consistent; b) we can discriminate between degrees of goodness of reasons that can be given in favour of it, and that the reasons given are actually good; c) it can be supported or criticized by arguments which have universal validity; d) it is fallible in an interesting way".

Examples of beliefs as that term is used in this definition can be the belief that the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre, the belief it is a good painting, or the belief that it is immoral to smile like Mona Lisa does.

Now somebody might object to this way of using the term on the ground that beliefs are either true or false and that morality and aesthetic goodness do not admit of truth. But we cannot decide *a priori* what kind of utterances do have truth values and which do not. Actually, the physicist Maxwell thought for a while that some statements about the relative velocity of light were intrinsically incapable of determination. But even if Maxwell had been right, it certainly does sound strange to say that those who thought otherwise did not hold any beliefs about the speed of light. Our metaphysical views might be beyond truth and falsity, but it does not seem right to say that they are not beliefs. Saying that someone, who thinks God exist and that one ought to wor-

²"Relativator" is a word of my own coinage. It ranges over whatever the validity of such validity-bearers (cf. truth-bearers) as statements, theories, normative or evaluative judgement etc. can be relative to. Examples of potential relativators are conceptual schemes, historical epoches, different cultures, the perspectives of different individuals etc.

³For Mackie's definition of moral scepticism, see his (1977): *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*, London: Penguin Books, pp. 13-18.

ship him, does not really hold any belief about God seems absurd. Further, normative utterances like "people ought not to steal" certainly do not have any truth values but surely they do express beliefs. The fact that such utterances can or even must be backed up with reasons seems to ensure that they express beliefs. It looks like the concept of a belief is tied to the concept of reasons, not the concept of truth, in the sense that beliefs themselves do not have to be true or false even though some of the reasons in favour of them possibly must be. As I will show later, the concept of an aesthetic judgement is logically linked to that of reasons.

Being fallible in an interesting way means, in the first place, that a given belief is universally fallible. If proved wrong, then it is not only wrong given certain relativators, not others, cf. c), for instance only wrong given Asian standards, not European. Secondly, there are clear-cut ways of specifying the conditions under which a given belief must be regarded as wrong. "Wrong" should be understood in a broad sense of that word, not only in the sense of being wrong about an empirical fact. By implication I use "fallible" in a broad sense. Thus, a purported empirical belief which turns out to be a tautology has been falsified despite the fact that it is true! It claims to be empirical but on closer investigation that claim turns out to be wrong. The same holds for a philosophical belief which is supposed to solve a given problem but turns to be based upon a narrowly circular argumentation. Further, a theorem which turns out not to be derivable from given axioms is also falsified. We ought to be able to specify the conditions under which the beliefs mentioned above can be regarded as falsified. Thirdly, a given belief is not fallible in an interesting way if it is blatantly wrong. The belief that the moon consists of yellow cheese is fallible since testable, but obviously wrong (we think!). It is at least hard to see what arguments the follower of such a theory can marshal in its defence. On the other hand, "the planets move in circles" is fallible in an interesting way. Although thought to be refuted it could in its time be supported by interesting arguments, there was some evidence in favour of it. So the fourth requirement that a belief has to meet in order to count as "fallible in an interesting way" is that there must be some evidence in favour of it.

I shall use the term "invalidation" for "refutation of aesthetic judgements". Further, I shall call aesthetic judgements, which are fallible, "invalidable". The reason that I shy away from using words like "refutation" or "falsifiable", is that they are associated with scientific theories, not aesthetic judgements.

Now, a perceptive reader might criticize my definition on the grounds that b) and c) are in the last analysis the same. For if c) ob-

tains, then b) obtain as well. So we are badly in need of Occam's razor, my critic will say. But c) does not necessarily obtain if b) does. For if relativism is true, then we can discern between good and bad arguments *given* a certain relativator. We can for instance have good or bad arguments for applying a given aesthetic standard in given ways. According to relativism however, arguments in favour of the standard cannot have any claim to universal validity. Therefore, we have no reason to use Occam's razor here. Anyway, I shall later in this article try to show that the reasons why aesthetic judgement can fulfill on the one hand condition b), the other condition c), are independent of one another.

It seems natural to demand that any stipulative definition of rationality squares with reasonable conceptions of rationality. Let us now see whether mine does and start by looking at part a) of the definition. Why should not we just ignore the so called law of noncontradiction and happily quote Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well, then I contradict myself!

There are number of reasons why we ought to quote the bard with care. In the first place, Aristotle correctly pointed out that the principle of non-contradiction is the precondition for all argumentation, and by implication of rationality. Arguing against the validity of the law of contradiction has the validity of that law as a precondition and is therefore self-defeating.⁴ Secondly, a self-contradictory belief has all thinkable beliefs as a logical consequence.⁵ Therefore, such a belief is not really a belief at all since having a belief means believing that such and such is case, and not the opposite. Thirdly, condition d) has a) as a pre-condition. A belief cannot be fallible unless it can be contradicted by its potential falsifiers. It has to be fallible if we are to be able to argue against it.

Now the Popperians want to exclude good reasons and by implication my condition b) from the realm of reason.⁶ Only a belief's fallibility counts as an indicator of its rationality. But surely, we cannot take the Popperian arguments seriously unless there are some good reasons for accepting them. It does not help to say like David Miller that

⁴ Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, book iv 1006a-1009a.

I try rather to capture the spirit of Aristotle's arguments than the exact way he argues, as anybody knowledgeable of his thought indeed must see.

⁵ Karl Popper (1963): *Conjectures and Refutations*, New York: Harper and Row, pp. 317-321.

⁶ See for instance David Miller (1987) "A Critique of Good Reasons", in Joseph Agassi, and I.C. Jarvie (eds.), *Rationality: The Critical View*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 343-358.

he is not really arguing in favour of the Popperian view of good reasons, for why ought we then to prefer this particular view to its opposite? On faith alone? To make matters worse, Miller is not self-consistent since he actually argues in favour of his contention. He, for instance, maintains that all valid argumentation and all arguing on the basis of alleged good reasons really is begging the question. But then his virtual arguments are question begging themselves. Besides, the falsifiability of a given theory *T* can be a good reason for preferring it to the non-fallible theory non-*T*. And as we have seen, there are all kinds of absurd contentions like "the moon is made of yellow cheese" which would qualify as rational if people like Miller had their way. Further, it is hard to see how we can call a belief 'falsified' unless we have good reasons to maintain that it is so.

Now, someone might criticize me on the grounds that I do not take heed of the possibilities that there might be different types of rationality, say one for science, another for aesthetic beliefs. Art has its reason of which science knows nothing! However, in the first place, my reasons for putting forward a general definition of rationality are pragmatic. I simply want to see whether given such a definition aesthetic judgements can get through the narrow gates of reason. Just postulating the existence of a particular aesthetic reason is taking the easy way out. Secondly, I think that any conception of rationality worth taking seriously, must be general in the sense that it cannot accept the notion of a plurality of incommensurable standards of rationality. Entertaining that notion is not particularly wise in the light of Donald Davidson's devastating attack upon the very idea of incommensurability. He says about the alleged incommensurability of conceptual schemes:

...nothing, it may be said, could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour.⁷

Mutatis mutandis, the same holds for standards of rationality that supposedly cannot be judged by our standards. The same evidence that supposedly shows that alien standards of rationality are incommensurable with ours can be used to show that the alien standards cannot be called "standards of rationality". This fact makes it difficult to maintain that arguments only have validity given certain relativators. This in turn strengthens our implicit claim in the definition that it makes sense to talk about the universal validity of reasons.

⁷ Donald Davidson (1984): "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, op.cit. p. 185.

It also follows from Davidson's analysis that if standards of alleged scientific rationality on the one hand, aesthetic on the other, are incommensurable, the same arguments can be used in favour of the contention that only one (or neither) actually is a standard of rationality. Its further implication is that we cannot relativize concepts like "aesthetic judgement", "meta-aesthetic theory" or "art" in any radical fashion. David Best maintains that to be able to recognize something as even very different art in another culture, it presupposes some overlap with our concept of art, and thereby our criterias for what counts as art. If someone would say that an activity in another culture which bears no resemblance to art in our culture, we would be at loss to know why he or she wanted to use the term "art" at all. Actually, if it were asserted that the concept of art in another culture was nothing like ours, then the assertion would be meaningless.⁸ By implication, the same would hold for the concepts of meta-aesthetic theory or aesthetic judgements. The relativist thus cannot criticize me on the ground that what I say might be true *only* given the modern, Western way of using concepts like art, aesthetic judgements etc.

It has to be emphasized that even if Davidson is wrong, it does not follow that there are radically different kinds of rationality. The burden of proof lies upon anybody who maintains that this is the case. I admit that I could have elaborated a lot more on this issue. I could also have written much more about the question whether my definition fits reasonable conceptions of rationality or not. However, what I have said should suffice for the purposes of this short paper. Let me just say that I do believe that I have made it plausible that my definition actually squares with reasonable ideas about what rationality is. The burden of proof lies upon anybody who thinks otherwise.

Let us now take a look at the concept of aesthetic judgement. I will use that concept in a fairly broad and loose sense. Thus an aesthetic judgement *can* be a judgement not only upon the aesthetic value of an art work (beauty, elegance etc.) but also upon its artistic value (good craftsmanship, originality etc.) (It can also be maintained that these two types of values are in the final analysis one.) It can also be a judgement upon the legitimacy of artforms, say ready-mades or happenings. Further, judgements where moral, emotional and cognitive value play a certain part *can* count as being aesthetic. And we cannot rule out the possibility that the judgement not only concerns the artworks internal structure but also can (or must) be a judgement upon the parts of its

⁸ David Best (1985): *Feeling and Reason in the Arts*, London: The Falmer Press, p. 51. It has to be emphasized that Best, who is a Wittgensteinian, does not quote Davidson in support of his analysis.

“artscape”⁹ which are closest to the work (the craftsmanship of its maker etc.). Some say that only aesthetic values count as the “raw material” of aesthetic judgement. Others maintain that aesthetic values are in the last analysis cognitive or moral¹⁰ which is why I underlined “can” in the definition. These are meta-aesthetic theories which circumscribe the scope of what can count as aesthetic judgements. Meta-aesthetic theories do the same work in aesthetics as meta-ethical theories in ethics. In contrast to normative aesthetics they are descriptive in some broad sense of that word, and at least not overtly normative or evaluative. They try to answer “global” questions like “what is an aesthetic judgement?” or “can aesthetic theories be non-normative?”. Further, it tries to answer time-honoured questions like “what is a work of art?” or “is there such a thing as objective standards for art works?”. So aesthetic subjectivism is an example of a meta-aesthetic theory. And the same goes for Monroe Beardsley’s anti-geneticism and Morris Weitz’ contention that the concept of art is an open one. Needless to say, the theory put forth in this paper is a meta-aesthetic theory.

The Beauty and the Beast discuss Beauty.

In order not to bore my readers overmuch I have decided to tell a little tale to illustrate my arguments. Like any good story, mine has a title: “The Beauty and the beast discuss beauty”.

Let us assume that I am a guest at a grand dinner party and have the good fortune to be seated with a beautiful, brainy girl, who takes a keen interest in poetry. I converse casually with the lady and in the midst of our conversation the hors d’oeuvre is being served. I discover, much to my delight, that it basically consists of lobster, served in a fancy fashion. But unexpectedly, the lovely lady wrinkles her brows, and shows all signs of disliking the dish. Astonished, I ask her what the

⁹ It might be true that sometimes pointing out the the features of the aesthetic “landscape” surrounding it is a part of judging its aesthetic value. In some cases the part of the landscape we call “the art works’ s history” or the aesthetic practices in which it is embedded can be of importance for the judgement. Call the works aesthetic landscape its “artscape”. It must be added that if some kind of an institutional theory of art is correct, then there is no clear dividing line between the art work and its artspace.

¹⁰ Nelson Goodman maintains that aesthetic values are ultimately cognitive ones, and the Dutch philosopher J.J.A. Mooji that they are moral in the last analysis. See Goodman (1976): *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, pp. 255-262.

Mooji (1992): “Literature and Morality” in Bjørn Tysdahl (ed): *Literature and Ethics*, The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters: Oslo, pp. 99-114.

trouble is. "Well, you know, I have never really cared for lobsters", she answers. Knowing the futility of discussing taste in food I abstain from inquiring into her reasons for abhorring lobster. Instead, I ask her about the causes of her abhorrence. And having listened politely to a moving tale about food poisoning in early childhood where a grim looking lobster played an important part, I suddenly remember my companion's passion for poetry. So I ask for her opinion of William Butler Yeats' famous poem about the Irish uprising against English colonial rule, *Easter 1916*. Being a thoroughly negative person, she answers with a loud and clear "it is not a good poem at all!" In contrast to the case of the lobster, it seems natural to ask her to give reasons for her judgement (Call it J1). Tastebuds are private, but poems are public so I should at least be able to get an idea of why she does not think very highly of the poem. She ought to be able to point out features of the poem or its "artscape", which she regards as blemishes. An aesthetic judgement has, in contradiction to feelings like toothaches, an intentional object, in our case the poem *Easter 1916*. And intentional objects and reasons go together like horse and carriage. There is a logical link between the concept of reasons and that of aesthetic judgement, the Wittgensteinians maintain. Wittgenstein seems to have thought that aesthetic judgements were not simply exclamations of approval or disapproval. We do not call a man musical just because he says "Ah!" when music is played anymore than we call a dog musical just because it wags its tail whenever it hears music, Wittgenstein says.¹¹ David Best points out that the dog doubtlessly feels some kind of sensation when it hears music. But the sensation cannot be called "an aesthetic emotion" unless it has an aesthetic object or something like that as an intentional object. Secondly, the object must be the reason for the emotion and not its cause. Thirdly, the emotion must have a propositional content, and fourthly, the dog must be able to conceptualize the intentional object. And we can only conceptualize if we can give reasons for the subsumption of a certain object under a given concept or someone can reconstruct it as being based upon reasons. Needless to say, we have no reason to believe that the dog's response to music fulfills these conditions. The airwaves which transport music might cause some kind of a pleasant reaction in the dog's brain, but we have no reason to call it "an aesthetic pleasure".¹² For all we know, something similar might hold for the man who says "ah!" Only if he can point out features of the musical

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1967): *Lectures and Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, (edited by Cyrill Barrett), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 6.

¹² David Best (1989) "Feeling and Reason in the Arts: The Rationality of Feeling" in Peter Abbs (ed.) *The Symbolic Order*, London/N.Y./Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, p. 82.

piece which he thinks are aesthetic right-making features of it are we (including himself) justified in calling his positive response "an aesthetic one". Notice that statements about the features of art works do have truth values, at least given certain interpretations of the works. Therefore, the pointing out of features in the case of the man, who said "ah!", is tantamount to giving reasons in favour of his implicit judgement. The same ought to hold for any number of aesthetic judgements, be it explicit or implicit ones. Further, we can learn from this example that it is only by virtue of knowing the reasons in favour of an opinion that we are able to decide whether the opinion in question is aesthetic or not. Contrast this to our ability to understand a person who says he has a toothache. Consider the futility of us trying to evaluate his "reasons" for maintaining this, or even talk about his "reasons" for having a toothache. We draw conclusions on the basis of reasons, but we certainly do not conclude that we have toothache on the grounds of evidence. Further, it has been pointed out that other people (dentists) can identify the causes of my toothache without my aid. The dentist can identify a hole in my tooth which might or might not have caused a toothache. Thus there is a contingent relation between the toothache and its causes. But other people cannot identify the reasons for my aesthetic views without my informing them of them.

Of course there are dissident voices. They say that in the last analysis, reasons for aesthetic judgements actually are causes. The reason, they maintain, is that the connection between the aesthetic object and a spectator's response is contingent. His/her feeling of pleasure and displeasure with the object can namely be expressed separately from the reasons given by him. We can, in other words, discover the causes of the pleasure or displeasure which the spectator is unaware of. He might think that the experience of unity in a given painting is the reason for him getting pleasure from it, while the actual cause is a red spot in its right corner or that it unconsciously reminds him of his mother. In that case the relationship between the object and the response is contingent.¹³

To this argument I have the following rejoinder: if there is only a causal relation between the object and the pleasure felt, why should we not maintain that the dog in Wittgenstein's example feels

¹³ This is more or less Andrew Ward's position. He seems to be strongly influenced by David Pears who maintains that the intentional objects of emotions are causes and that in some cases, we can mistakenly identify these objects. Ward (1992): "judgement, aesthetic" in David Cooper (ed.) *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 243-249.

Pears (1975): "Causes and Objects of some Feelings and Psychological Reactions" in *Questions in the Philosophy of Mind*, London: Duckworth, pp.56-79.

aesthetic pleasure? But as we have seen, entertaining that notion is preposterous. Further, we can get some help from Robert Solomon, a staunch follower of the cognitive theory of emotions. Imagine the following situation, he says: in the first you are standing in line to board a bus, when a crowd behind you pushes you abruptly and you fall into an elderly woman, knocking her down in the gutter. In the other you obey a malicious whim and push her down with the same result. Following both incidents you find yourself being confronted by an indignant old lady and suffering from an intense feeling, in the first case from embarrassment, the other from shame. But the feelings involved in these cases are of little use in discriminating between the emotions. Only 'the logic of the situation' can give us the necessary clues. In the first case, the situation is such that even if we do find ourselves in an awkward situation, we are not responsible for what happened and therefore we feel embarrassment. In the second case we certainly are responsible and therefore we feel shame. Maybe on closer inspection, we can find a relevant difference between our sensations in both cases, but the logic of the situation gives us the information we need.¹⁴ An important part of the logic in question are the reasons we have in each case. We feel embarrassment in the first situation because of certain reasons, shame in the other case *because* the reasons are different. Applied to our case, discriminating aesthetic pleasure (or indeed any other aesthetic emotions) from other types of pleasure depends upon the logic of the situation, not causal relations. The logic of the situation involves the art work in a certain setting, certain modes of approaching it, etc. Certain reasons create aesthetic emotions, other reasons non-aesthetic ones. Reasons for emotions, aesthetic or not, cannot be treated as causes, Solomon says. It might be shown that sexual deprivation is the ultimate cause of my love for somebody, but my reasons are quite different. The reason can be that I think that somebody can make me happy and so on. Notice how the concept of reasons and that of an intentional object are interwoven. My belief about the intentional object of my love function as a reason in favour of being in love with that object. If this is true, then the same must hold for aesthetic emotions. Whatever ultimate causes my strong emotional pro-attitude towards Beethoven's fifth symphony might have, my reasons for this attitude are not causes.

Further, the argument I am criticizing presupposes that the giving of reasons for aesthetic judgement is simply an explication of the emotions felt when art works are being experienced. But to this I have the following rejoinder: it has often been pointed out that we do not

¹⁴ Robert C. Solomon (1976): *The Passions*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, pp. 159-162.

commit any logical mistake by saying "art work A gives me a positive emotional experience, but I admit that it is not particularly good". Therefore, there are no compelling reasons for accepting emotions as the ground for all aesthetic evaluation. To further strengthen this conjecture, let us consider a spectator committed to regard originality as the supreme artistic value. Richard J. Yanal has pointed out that such a spectator could have the same amount of pleasure in experiencing an art work before and after having discovered by probing into art history that it is not original at all. Nevertheless, he is committed to value it much less than before.¹⁵ Notice that his change of mind is based upon certain reasons, just as his original appreciation of the musical piece was.

Of course, one might flatly deny that such artistic values as originality have any place in aesthetic evaluation. But unity and complexity certainly are aesthetic values. And one can without any logical problem maintain that a certain work has the good-making feature of being unified and complex but it still does not give rise to any positive emotional experience whatsoever. However diverse our conceptions of unity or complexity might be, I see no reason why they have to be explications of our emotional experiences, nor indeed of any other type of subjective states or happenings. The experienced is not a necessary basis for aesthetic judgements. I might for instance regard unity as the supreme value of art works and symmetry as a *conditio sine qua non* for the unity of paintings without getting the least bit of pleasure out of symmetry. I might just believe that it holds generally that anything that is unified must be symmetrical, just as I believe that two and two equals four. I just apply a certain rule to paintings. These rules then function as arguments in favour of my judgement.¹⁶ And even if rules turn out not to play any important role in aesthetic judgement, it would not change the issue. Absence of rules as such does not make our judgements emotional nor relegate them into a shadowy world where reasons play no part.

My conclusion is that aesthetic judgements are logically based upon reasons, whether these judgements are emotional or not, rule-based or not.

¹⁵ Robert J. Yanal (1985) : "Aesthetic Value and Genius". in Peter J. McCormick (ed.): *The Reasons of Art*, Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, pp. 325-326.

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, I have met people who are not the least bit interested in poetry but firmly believe that the presence of rhyme in a poem is a decisive good-making feature. They apply this rule to poetry without getting any particular pleasure out of rhyme, but believe that the rule is somehow objectively correct. Of course, phenomena might be saved by claiming that they just echo the pleasure that some influential people in the past got out of rhymed poetry. But as far as I know, there is no empirical evidence for this claim and it is certainly not a logical necessity.

Meta-aesthetics and Judgements.

So I think that the Wittgensteinians are right in maintaining that there is a logical link between reasons and aesthetic judgements. And I will use this Wittgensteinian ladder to climb to higher regions and I certainly will not kick the ladder away! For whatever virtues these arguments might possess, they do not help us to show that we can discriminate between degrees of goodness of reasons for the beliefs expressed in aesthetic judgements, and thereby proof that they can fulfill condition a) of rationality. In order to show that these beliefs actually can fulfill condition b), and indeed conditions c) and d) as well, we must return to the dinner table and continue to relate our tale of lobster tails and taste in art works. Let us assume that the girl has a low opinion of the poem because she thinks it is not original at all. In actual fact, she thinks it is a plagiarization of a poem by the unknown Irish poet Jim Delaney O'Connor. She vehemently opposes T.S. Eliot's famous dictum "a bad poet borrows, a good poet steals"!

On the face of it, this seems to be a perfectly legitimate judgement upon the qualities of the poem. But interestingly enough, Monroe Beardsley denied that artworks can be evaluated in the dimension of originality. If we do judge artworks in terms of originality or lack of it, we commit the terrible crime of genetic fallacy. Any attempted aesthetic judgement, where references to the circumstances of the artworks creation (or indeed any other part of its artscape) plays a part, is not really an aesthetic judgement at all, Beardsley says. Now what has all this to do with originality? The answer is that according to Beardsley, originality cannot count as a value of an artwork, because determining an artworks originality requires probing into its history, its genesis, not its internal features. At most, we evaluate the artist's ingenuity when we discuss originality, but not the artwork itself.¹⁷ It simply is not an aesthetic judgement.

I do think that it holds generally for meta-aesthetic theories and not only Beardsley's anti-geneticism that they put constraints upon what kind of aesthetic judgements one can regard as legitimate.¹⁸ Such

¹⁷ Beardsley (1981): *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (2nd Edition), Cambridge and Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, p.460.

¹⁸ Richard Shusterman, who read an early draft of this paper, pointed out to me that he put forth a similar theory in his first book, though he utilizes it for different purposes. Shusterman (1984): *The Object of Literary Criticism*, Würzburg/Amsterdam: Rodopi/K&N, pp.50-77.

theories circumscribe the scope of legitimate aesthetic judgements. The imitation theory of art obviously rules out judgements favourable to non-representative art. I further believe that it holds for a class of meta-aesthetic theories that they can be invoked as arguments (reasons) for or against certain judgements. The imitation theory can be used in order to defend the judgement that Munch's painting *The Scream* is a bad imitation of reality and by implication a bad work of art. Further Weitz' theory of the openness of the concept of art can be invoked as an argument in favour of *avante-garde* art.¹⁹ (Remember that I said that an aesthetic judgement can be a judgement upon the legitimacy of artistic practices.) To see that this is the case, let us look at the following: Critic A maintains that a given artwork expresses the essence of art. In this case critic B, can invoke Weitz's meta-aesthetic arguments: A's judgement is based upon a mistaken view of art. There cannot be found both necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept in question. Therefore, art has no essence and consequently no art work can express it. Thus, Weitz's meta-aesthetic theory can be used to invalidate a given judgement. Another meta-aesthetic theory, the essentialist one A subscribes to, can be used to argue in favour of the same judgement. Interestingly enough, the artist Donald Judd explicitly evokes a certain answer to the meta-aesthetic question "what is art?" as an argument in favour of the legitimacy of a certain artistic practice. He maintains that one can call anything one wants "art" so if I point towards a stone and say "this is a work of art" then it is so! He says "if one calls it art then it is art!"²⁰

Meta-aesthetic theories entail in the first place statements about what *kind* of judgements count as aesthetic judgements in contrast to those which only apparently are such judgements. An example is the way Beardsley's anti-geneticism entails that only judgement about the perceivable qualities of artworks count as aesthetic judgements and not genetic judgements as those about originality. Secondly, at least some of them entail statements about what *kind* of reasons in favour of judgements are better than others. Thus, Weitzian meta-aesthetics en-

¹⁹ Actually, Weitz himself in defending this view explicitly said that one of its virtues was that it did not preclude inventions and experiments in art, rather the opposite. Morris Weitz (1956): "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XV, pp. 121-132.

²⁰ Quoted after Joseph Kosuth : "Kunst etter filosofi" (Art after Philosophy) *Morgenbladet* 14-17, January 1994). Henry Flynt once said that if the subjectivity of artistic excellence makes the individual the supreme judge in aesthetic matters, then the best conceivable artistic objects are those made by the individual herself. There is method to these people's madness. As we later shall see, aesthetic subjectivism can be used to defend certain judgements: Henry Flynt (1990): "Mutations of the Vanguard, Pre-Fluxus, during Fluxus, after Fluxus" in *Ubi Fluxus, ibi Motus 1990-1962*, Catalogue, The Biennial in Venedig.

tail statements like “a judgement which has the essential openness of the concept of art as one of its premisses is *ceteris paribus* better than judgements which have essentialistic views of the concept as one of its premisses.” Thirdly, as we later shall see, at least some of them entail statements about what *kind* of standards and judgments we cannot accept. Statements about kinds of judgements are obviously factual so whatever my sins might be, committing the naturalistic fallacy is not one of them. I do not, in other words, believe that given evaluative judgements are entailed by given meta-aesthetic theories. Accepting Weitz’s meta-aesthetics does not compel us to regard Duchamp’s ready-mades as good works of art or indeed art works at all.

It seems to hold for a class of meta-aesthetic statements that they have truth values. Thus either some kind of an aesthetic subjectivism or an objectivism is true, or there might even be a mixture of those two which is true. I cannot see any other conceivable alternatives. I also think it is either true or false that the concept of art is an open concept or that a judgment cannot be called “aesthetic” if it is based upon a genetic argument. The burden of proof lies upon anybody who maintains that this is not the case. At least, it seems impossible to maintain that all answers to a given meta-aesthetic question enjoy the same argumentative support. For instance, the logical positivistic efforts to show that aesthetic judgements are entirely subjective seems pretty bad since it is based upon a questionable theory of meaning. The error theory enjoy a better argumentative support *ceteris paribus*, since it is not based upon such a dubious theory of meaning. Let us call a meta-aesthetic theory which enjoys a better argumentative support than its rival “a good theory”.

A meta-aesthetic theory which is true or at least good, must, like any other meta-aesthetic theory, determine a scope of what judgements really count as aesthetic. Further, we have seen that there is a class of meta-aesthetic theories which can be used as arguments for or against certain aesthetic judgements. From this it follows that the judgements, supportable or invalidable by meta-aesthetic theories, are supportable or invalidable by universally valid arguments, given that the meta-aesthetic theories, belonging to this particular class, actually are decidable. We have no particular reason to believe that they are not, so we can safely conclude that the aesthetic judgements in question possess the rational virtues of being fallible and supportable by arguments, thanks to the peculiar nature of meta-aesthetic theories.

Let us now consider the possibility that meta-aesthetic statements actually are undecidable statements, speculative ones like “the universe doubles its size every nano-second”. If this is the case, then

meta-aesthetic statements cannot be assigned any truth-value. My critic could point that we do not have any agreement upon any single meta-aesthetic question. Surely, this fact strengthens the theory that meta-aesthetic statements actually are undecidable, my critic might say. She could add that meta-aesthetic statements are only rationalization of actual or potential forms of art. It might be maintained that Weitz' idea of the concept of art being an open one is basically a rationalization of modernistic art with its proliferation of new and unexpected ways of doing art. But in the first place, even if it seems to be extra-ordinary difficult to decide the truth-value of meta-aesthetic statements it does not follow that they do not have any. For all we know, man might be such a feeble minded creature that finding meta-aesthetic truths might be beyond his reach. We do not seem to possess any method to discover these truths, as my learned readership is painfully aware of. Secondly, we could ask our critic if she could exclude the possibility that her statement "meta-aesthetic statements are not decidable" is itself undecidable. Thirdly, her contention is itself not without evaluative consequences. The contention can namely be utilized for the purposes of defending an extreme *evaluative* (not meta-aesthetic!) subjectivism in the following way: "since the question 'what is art?' is unanswerable, then we can call anything we want 'art'." (Obviously such questions are not answerable if meta-aesthetic statements are not decidable.) Further, the idea that meta-aesthetic theories are rationalizations can be used as a defense of what might be called "communitarian meta-aesthetics". Followers of such aesthetics could maintain that a correct judgement is a judgement passed according to the aesthetic standards of a given aesthetic community and that the role of the aesthetician should be to increase solidarity within that community. Such a meta-aesthetics has the evaluative consequences of being utilizable to defend the notion that judgements consciously passed according to the standards of a given community are *ceteris paribus* better than those with universal pretensions.

Now someone might object to my analysis on the ground that meta-sentences are on a different logical level than object-sentences. If that is true then my analysis of the relationship between meta-aesthetics and evaluative judgements is in vain. However, it has become quite customary among philosophers of ethics to believe that meta-ethics and normative ethics cannot be entirely separated. The reason for this is in the first place that because linguistic and substantive (normative and evaluative in the case of ethics) questions cannot be neatly separated. Substantive questions are just as much the domain of linguistic analysis

as questions of meta-ethics.²¹ Secondly, meta-ethical theories are at least up to a point explications of normative intuitions so meta-ethics has its substantive side. If this is right then the same ought to hold for the relationship between meta-aesthetics and evaluative aesthetic judgements. Be it as it is, I think that my own analysis ought to show that there is something wrong with any neat separation between these two dimensions.

We have still to consider the possibility that somebody, who just ignores meta-aesthetic theories, nevertheless passes aesthetic judgements. Can that somebody then escape the constraints, seemingly built into the meta-aesthetic dimension? I answer this question with a firm “no”. I maintain that every aesthetic judgement has meta-aesthetic preconditions. An aesthetic judgement is an explicit or implicit application of some aesthetic concepts. Without such an application of concepts like “a work of art” or “the aesthetic” it is hard to see how a given judgement can pass as an aesthetic one. Now concepts are virtual theories, and theories which answer questions like “what is an artwork?” or “what is the aesthetic?” are meta-aesthetic theories. Therefore, every aesthetic judgement has meta-aesthetic theories as preconditions, however implicit. At least some of those theories ought to have evaluative consequences.

On the High Road to Reason

So where does this discussion lead us? The answer is: to the high road of aesthetic reason. Let us look at the following judgement **J2**:

Premiss (**P1**): “It is legitimate to call Duchamp’s ready-made “works of art” because the concept of art is open, and it is sufficiently similar to accepted artworks”.

Evaluative premiss (**P2**): “The ready-mades have the good-making feature of celebrating the essential openness of the concept of art, and any artwork that does so is good”.

Verdict (**V**): “Duchamp’s ready-mades are good works of art”.

Remember that reasons belong essentially to aesthetic judgement so the premisses are actually parts of **J2**. What we ordinary call “judgement” is here referred to as “verdict”. Notice further that **P1** and **P2** are expressions of Weitzian meta-aesthetics. If that particular meta-aesthetics is wrong, **P1** obviously is, **P2** less obviously. However, closer

²¹ Gilbert Harman (1977): *The Nature of Morality*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, viii.

scrutiny shows that if the concept of art is not open, it makes no sense maintaining that celebrating its openness is a good-making feature. A non-existent feature cannot be good-making. It is hard to see how we can prove that the feature in question nor indeed any other feature can be good-making. But we can invalidate its claim, as we have seen, and therefore there seems to be a logical asymmetry between validation and invalidation in aesthetic judgements. The former seems logically impossible, the latter possible.

Actually **J2** is fallible in an interesting manner. It can in the first place be defended by arguments which are far from being blatantly wrong, but obviously fallible. Those arguments are the ones in favour of the Weitzian meta-aesthetics, and empirical arguments in favour of the ready-mades being similar to accepted forms of art. Secondly, the conditions under which these arguments might be deemed as wrong ought to be fairly easy to specify. In the case of the similarity, some of the conditions are fairly obviously empirical ones. But questions like whether it makes logical sense to talk about absolute similarity also play a role. And if the anti-geneticist argument is correct, then comparing the ready-mades to objects which are accepted as artworks at a given period of time is committing the genetic fallacy. As the idea of the openness of the concept of art is concerned, the conditions in question are ones like their possible lack of logical consistency, too narrowly circular argumentation, or that we have some very good reasons to accept the arguments of its critics. Thirdly, Weitzian meta-aesthetics either hold universally or not. It does not make any sense to say that the concept of art is open in the West but not the East, in 1996 B.C but not A.D. In short, Weitzian meta-aesthetics are not relative to a relativator. And given our analysis in the last section, meta-aesthetic statements, including the Weitzian ones, have truth-values. Therefore, **J2** is universally fallible and it can be supported or criticized by arguments which have universal validity. Thus conditions c) and d) obtain. Now anybody, who is committed to the Weitzian meta-aesthetics, is committed to acknowledge that reasons like **P1** and **P2** are *ceteris paribus* better than those which have the belief that art has an essence as its precondition. Thus, we can discern between the degree of goodness of reasons in favour of aesthetic judgements and thereby the latter fulfill condition b) of our definition of rational beliefs. I see no reason to think that **J2** is or cannot be logically self-consistent so condition a) obtains as well. Thus, there is at least one aesthetic judgement which fulfills conditions a)-d) and can therefore be said to be an expression of a rational belief, given our initial definition of such beliefs. As far as I can see, **J2** is a fairly normal aesthetic judgement. I cannot see anything wrong with say

praising a given painting by Matisse for celebrating life and by implication nothing wrong with **P2**. If someone were to object to **P2** on the ground that it is hazy and speculative, that someone implicitly admits that we can discern between good and bad reasons for judgement. Good reasons would presumably be reasons which invoke concrete features of the art work, and our critic is obviously playing our game. Certainly, there is a cognitive moment in **P2**, it refers to an alleged fact. But we have already maintained that cognitive values can play a role in judgements and besides, the fact in question has to do with art. Therefore we might say that an artistic value also plays a part in **J2**.

I see no reason to regard **J2** as an anomaly. There ought to be a host of actual or potential aesthetic judgements which are sufficiently similar to **J2** in order to fulfill the conditions. And given our analysis of the logical interplay between meta-aesthetics and aesthetic judgements, the same ought to hold for an infinite number of actual or potential judgements, though I do not doubt that there are judgements which do not fulfil the conditions in questions. From this it follows that aesthetic judgements can be rational and aesthetic subjectivism is by implication wrong.

Even if it can be shown that one or more of these conditions cannot be fulfilled, or that there is something seriously wrong with my definition of rationality, I still have an extra argument up my sleeve. I think we can use what I call “peritropic arguments” against aesthetic subjectivism, i.e. we can show that holding this view leads to performative inconsistencies for its proponents.²² (I think it is fairly obvious that aesthetic subjectivism is not semantically inconsistent.) In the first place, aesthetic subjectivism can, as we have already seen, be used as an argument in favour of certain aesthetic judgements. The post-modernists actually defend the idea that it is perfectly in order to revive older forms of art by saying that aesthetic judgements are subjective so anything goes. Secondly, a subjectivist is bound to admit that subjectivist meta-aesthetic arguments in favour of a judgement are better than objectivist ones. To understand this, let us return to the dinner table for the third and last time. A man, sitting opposite our Lady of Negativity, having listened carefully to our conversation, suddenly exclaims “*Easter 1916* is the best poem ever written because it is the only poem which

²² More precisely, I define “peritropic arguments” as “arguments which try to prove certain beliefs by showing that denying them leads to performative inconsistencies”. In our case, we try to show that some kind of aesthetic objectivism or rationalism is correct because denying them (in effect advocating aesthetic subjectivism) leads to such inconsistencies. A paradigm example of peritropic argumentation is Socrates arguments against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. They have come to be called “the peritrope”. In Greek, “peritrope” can mean “a turning back on one”. A suggestive image is that of a snake trying to devour its own tail. Hence “peritropic arguments”.

really conforms to an eternally correct standard of aesthetic goodness" (call this J3). Still another person, the man's wife, wants to have her say "I agree with my dear husband on the greatness of the poem. But the reason for my thinking so is simply that it appeals to me and that is enough for me because taste just is subjective". (Call this J4). From the point of view of subjectivism, there is nothing wrong with J4 while J3 must be utterly absurd. But then it holds universally that there is a class of aesthetic judgements (J4 and suchlike) which enjoy better argumentative support than a certain other class of judgements (J3 and suchlike). Notice that the result would also be the same if the pair of judgements in question were on the one hand an openly relativistic one, on the other an openly objectivistic one. A follower of the relativistic brand of aesthetic subjectivism is bound to admit that it holds universally that the former judgement enjoys a better argumentative support than the latter. (We have indeed anticipated this argument in our discussion of communitarian meta-aesthetics.) But according to aesthetic subjectivism, there is no possibility of universally discerning between good and bad argumentative support of aesthetic judgement. Thus, aesthetic subjectivism is wrong if it is right, because holding it commits us to think that certain judgements are better than others. Aesthetic subjectivism is, in other words, self-destructive, i.e. advocating it leads to performative inconsistencies. There is no way to escape out of the horizon of reason, no escape from argumentative space.²³

The reason for the debacle of aesthetic subjectivism is that it, just like many other meta-aesthetic view, puts constraints upon what kind of judgements and standards its followers can legitimately accept. If we focus upon standards, we see that the aesthetic subjectivist can choose in an arbitrary fashion between say the standard of originality and some kind of formalistic standard. But he cannot continue to be an aesthetic subjectivist and adopt an aesthetic standard which has objectivist premises. Such a standard could be the pre-modern standard of perfection, i.e. the idea that say Greek art was the embodiment of perfection and that value of an art work consists in their resemblance to the Greek ideal. But given the subjectivists own premisses he ought to be logically free to adopt any standard he wants, which he obviously is not. It should be obvious that my peritropic argument is but a variation

²³ There are obvious resemblances between this argument and the attempts of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel to show that moral subjectivism leads to performative inconsistencies. The same goes for my argumentation against the Popperians earlier in this paper. But my arguments require no idea of communicative reason in contrast to theirs. And their arguments, in contrast to mine, do not require the invoking of meta-constraints. See for instance Habermas(1983): *Moralbewusstsein und Kommunikatives Handeln*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

on the theme of my arguments from the constraints. Further, we have here another example of the asymmetry between validation and invalidation in aesthetic reasoning. No standards or judgement follow logically from the aesthetic subjectivists premisses, but from these premisses it follows that certain kind of standards and judgements are not acceptable.

Before we claim to have defeated aesthetic subjectivism with the aid of peritropic arguments, we must look at one possible rejoinder. Possibly a peritropic test like this can be performed on any type of beliefs. But then it would hold that there is no such thing as a realm of subjectivity, it would even be performatively inconsistent to maintain that gustatory beliefs are subjective. Since that kind of beliefs actually are subjective, then something must be wrong with my performative test, the argument might go. And what about questionable beliefs as those of the astrologer, the critic might ask. Can we perform the test upon them and show that it is performatively inconsistent to deny that such beliefs can be objective? Before I answer the last question, I want to answer the one about the gustatory beliefs. Actually, I do not think that it makes sense to apply the test to such beliefs. For we cannot give reasons in favour of our gustatory beliefs and therefore it does not make sense to say that certain types of beliefs enjoy better argumentative support than others. As for astrology, the test is not applicable of the opposite reason. For if the reasons given in favour of an astrological belief can only be subjective, then it is meaningless to do astrology. Either an astrological prediction comes true or it does not, either astrological beliefs are testable or they are not. Any comparison of two set of astrological beliefs, the one being subjectivist, the other objectivist, is worthless for the simple reason that the first set can hardly be called "astrological", just as it is meaningless to talk of "objectivistic gustatory beliefs". The particular type of peritropic test which I performed upon aesthetic judgements is applicable to them because of their peculiar nature of being in between the objective and the subjective. Objective at least in the sense of having intentional objects and potential reasons, subjective at least in the sense of being personal. As David Best points out, there is an oddity about claiming that "George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is a fine novel, but I have never read it". But there is no such oddity present in my claiming that "acid makes litmus paper red, but I have never seen it happen". (Neither is such an oddity present if I say "astrological predictions often come true, but I have never performed one".) Aesthetic judgement are personal in the sense that they cannot be made second-hand.²⁴ Because aesthetic judgements are thus

²⁴ Best (1985), pp. 44-46.

situated between the objective and the subjective, there is nothing absurd *per se* about either aesthetic subjectivism or objectivism. Therefore the peritropic test is applicable to aesthetic judgements.

So if no one can strangle the self-devouring snake, show that peritropic arguments are not universally valid, then we have won a hands down victory over the subjectivists.

Conclusion

The place of reason in aesthetic evaluation is located in a logical point where meta-aesthetic theories and aesthetic judgements meet. Aesthetic rationality arises in the logical interplay between the two. This conception of rationality is a fallibilistic one, so an aesthetic judgement or standard does not have to be justified beyond doubt in order to qualify for the honorific "rational". If we, the modern, maintain that scientific theories can neither be verified nor falsified with absolute certainty, then why should we demand rock-bottom validation of aesthetic judgements and standards?²⁵ However, one should not push the analogy between scientific and aesthetic judgements to far. It must be stressed that I do not doubt the possibility of there being a particular (non-general) aesthetic rationality that is analogous to scientific debates about the claims of concrete theories.²⁶ However, there is a time for every purpose under the heavens and a possible, particular rationality is not the issue in this paper, only a refutation of aesthetic subjectivism. But it might be noted that the interplay between meta-aesthetics and judgements has no equivalent in science, so the rationality arising in that interplay might be called "particular to aesthetics". Further, it might be noted that this brand of rationality is quite formal. Given a certain meta-aesthetic theory, say the Weitzian one, then certain *kind* of reasons for aesthetic judgements are better than others, as we have indeed seen. But accepting a given meta-aesthetic theory does not help us to determine what *content* a singular aesthetic judgement should have in

²⁵ I.C. Jarvie has made an interesting attempt to defend a fallibilistic view of aesthetic rationality. See his (1987) "The Objectivity of Criticism of the Arts" in Joseph Agassi and I.C. Jarvie: *Rationality: The Critical View*, Dordrecht etc.: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, pp. 201-216.

²⁶ Interesting attempts to ground such a particular rationality can be found in the writings of David Best and Kjell S. Johannessen. See Best (1985) and a newer version of that book (1992) *The Rationality of Feeling*, London and Washington DC: The Falmer Press. For Johannessen's arguments, see for instance his (1981) "Language, Art, and Aesthetic Practice" in Johannessen and Nordenstam (eds.): *Wittgenstein - Aesthetics and Transcendental Philosophy*, Vienna.

order to qualify as rational. Again, the possibility of a particular aesthetic rationality, which might help us to answer substantive questions about content, cannot be ruled out.

However, I do not think we have any rational means to decide whether Magritte's paintings are better than Dalí's, or whether rap is better than country and western. But this is a fact that need not be lamented by art lovers. Evaluating art would become a bore if there was no room for irrationality in our commerce with it, no way to relate to it in a playful and subjective manner. "The world is too much with us", the poet Wordsworth says, and sometimes reason is too much with us. Sometimes we need to plunge into the deep, dark waters of unreason in order to stay sane.

Night is the time of these waters. At night strikes the hour of art. At dusk the owl of Minerva spreads its mighty wings and flies to the Muses' dwelling to join them in their everlasting dance.