AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

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A now well-known series of arguments has succeeded in detaching aesthetic concepts from dependence on natural, non-aesthetic qualities in the objects. The aesthetic concepts in question are those of which, according to Frank Sibley's distinction, it makes sense to say that taste or perceptiveness is required in order to apply them.[1] Sibley's arguments are designed to show that whatever else we may say about how we use such terms, "there are no non-aesthetic features which serve in *any* circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms. Aesthetic or taste concepts are not in *this* respect condition-governed at all."[2] Sibley's analysis of such terms has subsequently been debated, but the basic separation has, if anything, been strengthened. For example, Isabel Hungerland rejects Sibley's notion that such concepts can be based upon a special sort of training or sensitivity. She argues that, "A-ascriptions are not intersubjectively verifiable, at least not in the straightforward way in which N-ascriptions are."[3] We are left with an understanding of aesthetic concepts based on analogies to looking or seeing in which the contrast between "looks" and "really is" disappears.[4] The only relation left between non-aesthetic and aesthetic "qualities" is that the former may supply a "range of application"[5] for the latter.

We would like to know more about how aesthetic concepts themselves function. In particular, we use such concepts to make distinctions which we do take to be intersubjectively significant even if we are prepared to admit that they are not condition-governed in terms of natural qualities. Assertions that a work of art is balanced, garish, sad, cheerful, tender, etc. are made in order to distinguish features of what we take to be the work or art. They occur within the context of critical language, and they are subject to support and explication by critical reasons. We need to know more about the nature of these aesthetic concepts themselves, therefore.

A new dimension in the relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts has emerged in recent discussions. The new factor involves the historical, cultural, or traditional formation of relations between aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms. Something of how it works can be seen in three very different approaches to aesthetic concepts, all of which are proving very fruitful in contemporary aesthetic philosophy.

Suggestions by Arthur Danto and George Dickie that art must be understood,

in Dickie's phrase, through an institutional analysis[6] typify one new theory. The fundamental thesis for this line of argument might be taken from Danto's essay on "The Artworld." Danto claims that "one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so. And part of the reason for this lies in the fact that terrain is constituted artistic in virtue of artistic theories, so that one use of theories, in addition to helping us discriminate art from the rest, consists in making art possible."[7] Danto goes on to argue that art theory produces new predications which have or acquire an independent "is" of artistic predication. Dickie follows up the notion of constitution by arguing that something becomes a work of art only through an act of conferral which must take place within a tradition--the artworld.

Danto encounters difficulties both in spelling out what would count as an art theory and what the "is of artistic predication" involves, and Dickie's notion of conferral has been subjected to considerable ciriticism. Here I want to emphasize only one feature of their position, however. For something to be a work of art at all and particularly for concepts to be applicable to some artifact as a work of art, some prior tradition is required. Thus when an aesthetic term is applied to a particular object, we are not referring to that object independently of a traditional context. The term applied becomes an aesthetic term as a result of institutional or traditional powers.

It is possible that both Danto and Dickie underestimate the extent to which language itself is the institution which constitutes an artistic terrain. Such is not the case, certainly, in the work of Nelson Goodman. In his description of the languages of art, Goodman makes it clear that both representation and expression are dependent on a symbol system. For example, "realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time."[8] Moreover, "nothing is intrinsically a representation; status as representation is relative to symbol system."[9] In Goodman's thoroughgoing nominalism, this would be true not only of art but of all representations. If we are seeking the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts, therefore, we go about it in the wrong way if we begin by opposing qualities. We should look for the differences in the symbol systems of aesthetic and non-aesthetic language. Goodman concludes, "the difference between art and science is not that between feeling and act, intuition and inference, delight and deliberation, synthesis and analysis, sensation and cerebration, concreteness and abstraction, passion and action, mediacy and immediacy, or truth and beauty, but rather a difference in domination of certain specific characteristics of symbols."[10]

Goodman makes use of the historical nature of symbols most explicitly in discussing authenticity. The aesthetic differences between an original and a forgery is not just that I may learn to perceive a difference; my present experience is

conditioned by my knowledge that the two instances have different histories and potentially divergent futures.[11] I suggest that this means that aesthetic concepts themselves are different from non-aesthetic concepts themselves are different from non-aesthetic concepts because they are bound up with the history of production of the work of art in the case of what Goodman calls autographic art and with the history of the text in the case of allographic art. In order to understand aesthetic concepts and their relation to non-aesthetic concepts, one must understand both the theory of notation and symbols and the culturally determined position of the particular symbols in question.

A radically different approach to the language of art and the theory of interpretation is found in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.[12] Gadamer sees aesthetics as the meeting of the present immediacy of the work of art with the demand that it be understood which involves translating an historical moment into a present event. Hermeneutics may be described as "the bridging of personal or historical distance between minds"[13] provided one keeps in mind that history is not simply past or present but a matrix of meaning.[14] The work of art creates a new subjective situation, but "it nevertheless does not permit just any forms of comprehension."[15] Hermeneutics in Gadamer's view is the process of interpretation of a present event which encompasses in itself a tradition being presented by language. As Gadamer says, "the encounter with art belongs within the process of integration that is involved in all human life that stands within traditions."[16] I think we may take it that the fundamental tradition is linguistic, for "the entire experience of the world is linguistically mediated, and the broadest concept of tradition is thus defined--one that includes what is not itself linguistic, but is capable of linguistic interpretation."[17]

If we locate aesthetic concepts within this hermeneutical perspective, we find two things. First, art is itself a language. Second, aesthetic concepts of the type Sibley describes are themselves acts of interpretation in the hermeneutic sense. They can be compared to the translation of one language to another. But since both what they translate and the translation have the character of events, the only possibility of understanding lies in their mutual embodiment of a common tradition in the present. Aesthetic concepts translate the immediate present of the work of art into a traditional matrix.

I have no intention of trying to synthesize three such different theoretical positions; only confusion could result from such an endeavor. Yet one common theme emerges. We began by asking how aesthetic concepts are related to non-aesthetic concepts. In three different theories, the connection appears to result from a traditional or historical movement. Two groups of concepts which cannot be connected except in the most general and unsystematic way if we look at them only in the present tense can be understood if we see them operating in a system

which is conceived traditionally or historically as well as extensively.

With this insight, we can outline some of the main features of any adequate account of the relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts. The theories and relations themselves are much too complex for a brief treatment, of course, so an example may help. Assume someone asserts that Gauguin's self-portrait in the National Gallery in Washington is garish. Such an assertion invites disagreement; to disagree, "garish" must be understood. A trip to the OED reveals that in English, "garish" carries the frequent connotation of immoral, immodest display as well as sharp, gaudy color. In trying to understand "garish" one must look at the cultural position of this portrait, at its relation to other portraits, as well as at its color patterns. Aesthetic concepts apply only within a cultural sytem.

An immediate objection that this treatment blurs the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic seeing may arise. The circularity of this objection is obvious, however. I am interested precisely in how non-aesthetic concepts do enter the aesthetic realm. It will not do simply to exclude them in advance and then conclude that there can be no relation.

A term such as "garish" is a part of language, and in order to understand it, I must understand its linguistic functioning. In this case, and I think generally, aesthetic terms are metaphorical combinations which include non-aesthetic concepts. A major step in working out the relation, therefore, must involve a theory of metaphor. Such a theory, however, cannot be constructed in isolation from the history of language. One of the ways to meet the assertion that Gauguin's self-portrait is garish is to show that the metaphorical complex of meaning which "garish" involves does not apply to this particular painting. I can do this only by explicating the metaphor itself and locating the painting in a different metaphorical complex.

We might encounter an objection from Sibley at this point. Sibley grants that we employ metaphors in aesthetics and that many aesthetic terms have come to their aesthetic application by metaphorical transference. But, he concludes, "many words, including the most common. . ., are certainly not being used metaphorically when employed as aesthetic terms, the very good reason being that this is theri primary or only use, some of them having no current non-aesthetic uses."[18] One way to meet this objection is a theory of metaphor which reverses the relation of literal and metaphorical use. Owen Barfield, for example, argues that words only become literal by a process of development from metaphorical origins. Literal usage retains its metaphorical meaning. If we want to understand a literal usage, we will have to discover the applicable portion of its metaphorical roots.[19] In any event, the fact that a term is used literally does not exclude metaphorical understanding unless one takes a very narrow and restrictive view of metaphor and of language itself. In our expample, the use of a term includes the assertion of that

term by someone, but the meaning of the term may exceed the intent of the one who asserts it. Our understanding must include the act of assertion. But it must also include the painting, which does not exist in historical isolation, and it must consider the resources of language which have created the "literal" meaning of the term. All of these factors meet in a present event which may be modifying them further. A theory of language which does not include all of these elements will not be able to understand aesthetic concepts.

There is a tendency implicit in the question about how non-aesthetic concepts are related to aesthetic concepts to assume that such terms function descriptively. This does not seem to be the case. To the extent that they have an object which can be described, a descriptive element is included. But such concepts function primarily in critical contexts. One critical function is to get someone else to see what the critic sees; the critic, by his choice of language, acts both to guide and to create someone else's perception. But this is not the only critical function. For example, critics act to construct larger patterns of meaning, and they act to explicate and in a sense to verify what the work of art "says." If we cannot limit the critical function to looking or seeing, we also cannot understand aesthetic concepts solely in terms of descriptive functions.

If we locate aesthetic concepts in the context of critical theory, the institutional activity takes on a new significance. It is not status as a work of art which is conferred by critical status. By asserting that Gauguin's self-portrait is garish, someone seeks to confer a critical status upon the painting. The success or failure of this act is, in one sense, the very act of assertion does confer the status "critical object" on the particular object. Dickie's account of works of art runs into difficulty because it seems to imply that anyone may be a member of the artworld and thus can make anything a work of art. It is much easier to accept that we are all critics by virtue of our ability to apply aesthetic concepts. Virtually anything can and has become the object of critical discussion.

One final point remains. Aesthetic concepts develop and change just as language itself develops and changes. To the extent that non-aesthetic qualities are fixed by an object, they can never serve as necessary or sufficient conditions for aesthetic concepts. Aesthetic concepts create a present meaning which may modify and go beyond all past meanings. New metaphorical meanings are being attached, for example, and the old meanings are thus modified. That is what justifies Gadamer in saying that "the language of art means the excess of meaning that is present in the work itself."[20] As aesthetic object, the work itself is never complete or fixed. But radical cultural dislocation raises difficulties in translation. The continuity of history or tradition may be broken. An existential hermeneutic emphasizes that language is an event which creates new meaning through confrontation. Such a hermeneutic may easily lose sight of the difficulties in

transcending differences in linguistic systems. Aesthetic concepts may indeed have to be developed as Sibley saw. but it will not be primarily a training in sensitivity or perceptiveness. It will have to be an education or initiation into a cultural tradition.

NOTES

1. Frank N. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 1XVIII (October, 1959) reprinted in *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Frank A Tillman and Steven M. Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 573.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 575.
3. Isabel Creed Hungerland, "Once Again, Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics*, ed. Harold Osborne (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 107.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
6. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1974).
7. Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXIV (1964) 572.
8. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968). p. 37.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" written in 1964; in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. & ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
18. Sibley, p. 574.
19. Owen Barfield, "The Meaning of the Word 'Literal'" in *The Proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium of the Colston Research Society* (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1960).
20. Gadamer, p. 102.