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AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS AND CRITICAL REASONS¹

Unless we equate genuine aesthetic judgements with statements about what we find pleasant or unpleasant, the question of objectivity arises as a demand for some kind of justification. If we assert that Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *Ward no.6* by Chekhov, Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Cezanne's *Bathers*, etc. are brilliant (or mediocre) artworks, we are expected to give relevant reasons for our assertion. Even though it does not have to be formulated in the sophisticated language of art criticism or artistic theory, if asked, one must be capable to give some reason which truly supports a corresponding aesthetic judgement. If we did not make that hypothesis, we would not be able to discern real aesthetic judgements from mere opinions concerning artworks. Moreover, this is an assumption that we implicitly make when we say that aesthetic judgements have a claim to objectivity or at least, in Kantian terms, to subjective generality. Nothing similar is true of statements such as: "The odour of the conifers is very pleasant", or "Cinnamon has excellent flavor", which imply that their utterer merely likes conifers or cinnamon.

In this paper I will primarily attempt to answer the question which conditions critical reasons have to satisfy in order to truly support aesthetic judgements. I shall assume that a reason X is an adequate critical reason if it makes a corresponding aesthetic judgement assertable, for the lack of a better word.² I will also assume that a critical reason does not have to make a corresponding aesthetic judgement true in order to be adequate. Even though one might find the second claim controversial, I think that we will be inclined to accept it if we reflect about logical consequences of the opposite statement. The thesis that critical reasons have to make relevant aesthetic judgements true (rather than just "assertable" or "justified") would, I

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2 I am not sure that I chose the right words. Even though words "justification" and "assertability" are sometimes used in the context of aesthetics, I think that they fit in that context only partly. Therefore, every suggestion terminological and/or substantial is welcome.

think, imply the statement that one particular property mentioned in a critical reason can by itself (on its own) make a certain artwork good, bad or mediocre. Nowadays there is universal agreement that artworks are more complex than that. Even those philosophers who argue for aesthetic generalism, philosophical conception that there are aesthetic canons which are universally valid, do not believe that there are properties which constitute individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an artwork to be good, bad, mediocre or etc. Instead, they talk about so called *pro tanto* canons (as, for example, Frank Sibley does)³ or something similar.

These preliminary remarks amount to the claim that (1) we must be able to support a genuine aesthetic judgement by a critical reason which is adequate and the claim that (2) a critical reason is adequate if it truly supports a corresponding aesthetic judgement. But these theses do not tell us enough about what makes X an adequate critical reason. In other words, even though they seem correct, they lack genuine explanatory force. Therefore, I will try to investigate necessary and sufficient conditions a critical reason has to satisfy in order to be adequate. That will tell us more about the very nature of critical reasons. I want to say that I do not presuppose that there are *individually* necessary and *jointly* sufficient conditions for adequacy of critical reasons; there might be, or again there might not. As Wittgenstein said once, we should look and see.⁴

But when we do that, it seems fairly obvious that in order to be adequate, critical reasons have to be what I shall call *prima facie* relevant, i.e. concern a work of art itself rather than some independent psychological state (independent of the specific experience that the artwork produces) or some other contingent fact of a similar nature. Thus, statements such as: “Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* is an outstanding novel because it reminds me of a dear friend who used to read me passages from it”, or “It is a profound novel because my neighbor said so”, do not count. That much is, I think, true for all arts and all genres. Critical reasons for the claim that a certain painting or a certain landscape is a good artwork should concern its intrinsic properties such as composition, balance, colour scheme, etc., or to its (precisely defined) relational properties determined by the context of its creation.

However, the fact that a particular reason is *prima facie* relevant is still not enough to support a corresponding aesthetic judgement: even though there is little doubt that *prima facie* relevance is a necessary condition for an adequate critical reason, we cannot consider it a sufficient one. I think that we will come closer to a plausible conception of an adequate critical reason if we say that it ought to be true

3 See, for example Frank Sibley, “About Taste”, in: Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p.52.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1953, §66.

as well. But this statement, no less than the previous one, needs a clarification. So, let us recall the structure of aesthetic evaluation. When I say “X is an excellent artwork because it is *f*”, the part of the sentence following “because” (including that word) expresses a critical reason for the judgement expressed by the first part of the sentence.

Now, when I say that critical reasons ought to be true in order to be adequate, I do not mean that it must be true that X is a good artwork primarily *because* it has *f*; I just want to claim that X ought to really have the mentioned quality. Thus, for the proposition “*Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch* or *Lost Illusions* are exemplary novels (primarily because of their magnificent epic comprehensiveness)” to be “justified” i.e. “assertable”, it must be true that these works of art really possess that property. As in the case of *prima facie* relevance, I find it quite obvious that a critical reason cannot be considered appropriate if this condition is not satisfied.

Nevertheless, if we hold that critical reasons have to be true in the sense I have just specified, we are faced with an uncomfortable epistemological problem: how can we know whether our ascription of certain aesthetic property figuring in a corresponding critical reason is true or false? Is there any proof that can be given? If the answer to that question is negative, maybe we can provide something close to that. Can we, after all, reasonably talk about objectivity in the context of aesthetics? That question has taken different forms from Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste”⁵ and Kant’s third *Critique*⁶ to the contemporary debate on objectivity in aesthetics. Hume, for example, thought that in order to discern whether some aesthetic judgement is correct or not, we should appeal to opinions of good critics. A common opinion of such critics, possessing appropriate knowledge as well as suitable psychological dispositions, is some kind of criteria we refer to (or should refer to) in answering the question whether a particular aesthetic judgement is correct.

However, if we want to give an elucidated answer to the question raised, we are required to say which conditions are included in a set of criteria that makes some person a good critic. “Strong sense”, says Hume, “united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can along entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty”.⁷ Apart of these knowledges and psychological dispositions, in the very same essay Hume also mentions some occurent conditions which have to be satisfied in order for the

5 David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” in: *David Hume, The Four Dissertations*, London: Printed for A.Millar in the Strand, 1757.

6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

7 “Of the Standard of Taste”, p.227-228.

real qualities of an artwork to be properly appreciated. “A perfect serenity of mind,” he says, “a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, [...] we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty.”⁸

Similarly to Hume, Kant also tries to answer the question what guaranties that our aesthetic judgements are true.⁹ In his opinion, an item is beautiful if it produces so called disinterested satisfaction. Experiencing disinterested satisfaction induced by an object, broadly speaking, amounts to enjoying the object not in a relation with some practical utility, appetite or inclination but for its own sake. If we appreciate some beautiful thing in this manner, all of us will, claims Kant, assent that a given object is beautiful. Kant finds the basis of this thesis in epistemological powers and categories we share as human beings but, unlike Hume, he holds that those dispositions are sufficient to make some person a good judge concerning beauty wherever it emerges.

The search for the standards of taste continued to exist in contemporary aesthetics. In his papers “Colours” and “Objectivity and Aesthetics”,¹⁰ British philosopher, Frank Sibley was trying to answer the question what guarantees objectivity of our aesthetic judgements. He gave an outline for the theory of colours and developed an analogy between colours and aesthetic properties. That analogy is, to put it briefly, grounded in the fact that one oneself must be directly acquainted with a given item if he is to know that it really possesses those qualities. In other words, there are no strictly defined rules for applying aesthetic concepts in the same way, though from a different reason, as there are no rules for using colour words. But, if this is the case, it is clear that if we are to find criterion whether something is aesthetically worthy or not, we should turn to subject’s sensitivity. However, the fact that we have to appeal to subject’s taste in order to answer the question if an artwork has particular aesthetic property, still does not mean that these things are totally subjective or a matter of taste. Just like Hume, Sibley appeals to the common judgement of those critics with the most subtle and, we can add, the most reliable appreciation. Thus, the test of truth and falsehood in the field of aesthetics amounts to the maximum or the most detailed discrimination agreement, that is agreement among the people who agree on the most cases and whose assessments are the most sophisticated.

Putting aside how this position is to be criticized, I just want to point to one important difference between it and traditional conceptions such as Hume’s. Even though Hume’s aesthetic views were indubitably known to Sibley, Hume is never

8 “Of the Standard of Taste”, p.212-213.

9 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §2.

10 Frank Sibley, “Colours”, in: *Approach to Aesthetics*, p.54-70; Frank Sibley, “Objectivity and Aesthetics”, in: *Approach to Aesthetics*, p. 71-87.

mentioned in Sibley's papers on the problem of aesthetic objectivity. Despite the significant similarities between their positions, it seems that Sibley alludes only once to Hume's idea of the good critic: "Just as we do not select the colour-sighted by physiological examination, so we do not select critics by 'ideal spectator' criteria; we select both by performance."¹¹ Bearing in mind that Sibley bases his argument upon the analogy between aesthetic qualities and colours, it is very likely that he, all things considered, believed that in the field of aesthetics we can reach, generally speaking, similar standards of objectivity. An implicit assumption he (as well as some of his followers and critics) seems to accept is that we can find some neutral, independent and, I would say, scientifically respectable criterion for testing the subject's capability to discriminate and appreciate aesthetic qualities; if such a criterion could be found than we could dispense with 'ideal spectator' criteria.

I do not think that we find such a criterion in aesthetics. We cannot test aesthetic sensitivity in the way we can test colour sensitivity – by marking colour samples and waiting to see if a subject is going to sort them consistently – because that kind of testing requires repeatability in order to confirm consistency in discrimination. That repeatability cannot, at least not in the same manner, be accomplished in aesthetics because there are no artworks with indiscernible qualities, just as there are no indiscernible artworks. In other words, regardless of how precisely defined they are, aesthetic properties (unlike specific colour tints) are not indistinguishable when they occur in different artworks. Individuality of characters in Henry James' *Wings of the Dove* is not indiscernible from individuality of characters in Constant's *Adolphe* in the way that 'green 132' and 'green 132' are, even though they are instances of the same aesthetic quality.

As Aristotle said in his *Nicomachean ethics*,¹² the field of "human good", and certainly "human things" in general is not suitable for mathematical precision and, I would add, nor for some "scientific" proof. The genuine character of an artwork, what is important about it, primarily concerns the way how it appears to us, human beings. Therefore, someone who is not a good critic cannot even in a principle test someone's disposition to make maximum or most detailed discriminations concerning art. Those things include something inherently subjective and we do not have a reason to bewail on that fact because the most noble satisfactions human beings are capable to experience are due to the difference between the objective and the subjective reality.

According to the previous, I dare to claim that we should and have to select critics by "ideal spectator" criteria, namely those mentioned by Hume in his essay on the standard of taste. That is the most we can achieve in this field, and that is enough. Nevertheless, the mere fact that someone is a good critic is still not

11 "Objectivity and Aesthetics", p. 82.

12 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 1094b12-28.

sufficient to enable him to judge correctly. That is, one cannot discern whether certain artwork has a particular aesthetic property, and consequently whether a given reason is adequate, if he or she is not acquainted with which artistic category particular work belongs to and what is the interpretative background on which it is to be understood. As Kendall Walton showed in his brilliant paper “Categories of Art”,¹³ one’s perception and assessment of an artwork will vary depending on artistic form, genre, style, etc., in which it is produced. But our troubles with aesthetic objectivity are not over on this point. As aesthetic qualities can be perceived only on the background of an interpretation, in order for artwork not to lose its identity, we must require that interpretation to be not just coherent or plausible but also true. Even though good reasons could be put forward to support this thesis, here I cannot go into the details of what would be a very complex argumentation.

Instead, I want to return to the problem of critical reasons by introducing the question as to whether critical reasons have to be suitable for generalization in order to be adequate; do they, in other words, generate aesthetical canons. Is it, after all, true to say: every work of art which possesses some particular quality is *pro tanto* successful? When we look closer to the artworks, art genres and particular arts themselves, I think it is obvious that the answer on that question is negative: some aesthetic properties that figure in critical reasons – the property that something has when it is true to life, for example – being often an advantage (in Bunuel’s *Viridiana*), could sometimes (in his *The Exterminating Angel* or Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*) represent a flaw. Therefore, I think that aesthetic particularism has, generally speaking, better chances to be a plausible theory of aesthetic canons than aesthetic generalism.¹⁴

When we look more carefully for conditions that adequate critical reasons have to satisfy, we see that a reason of this sort must refer to some property of an artwork whose presence has important (and rather direct) effect on the specific character of a given artwork. I think that this requirement, together with two conditions mentioned before, constitutes *a* set of jointly sufficient conditions for adequacy of critical reasons. At the very end, I want only to raise the question if something less than that might also be enough. If some property usually i.e. in most of the cases

13 Kendall L. Walton, “Categories of Art”, *The Philosophical Review*, 79 (3), 1970: 334–367.

14 For the most prominent defenses of generalism see Monroe Beardsley, “On the Generality of Critical Reasons”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 59 (18), 1962:477-486.; Frank Sibley, “General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics”, in John Fisher, ed., *Essays on Aesthetics: Perspective on the Work of Monroe C. Beardsley*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983, p. 3-20. Also see: John W. Bender, “General but Defeasible Reasons in Aesthetic Evaluation: The Particularist/Generalist Dispute”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (4), 1995:379-392. For a recent view that disputes Sibley is a generalist, see: Anna Bergqvist, “Why Sibley is Not a Generalist After All”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (1), 2010:1-14.

contributes to the value of an artwork, even though that (unknown to the subject) is not the case here, maybe we can replace the previous condition by this, somewhat weaker requirement giving at the same time a peculiar concession to the aesthetical generalists.

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