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Aesthetic Value Judgements and the Challenge to Objectivity

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Abstract. Art, as a practical declination of the complex way in which human beings interact with their surroundings, might be defined as a borderline territory between individual, subjective taste and the claim for universal value judgements. While rejecting any account of 'objectivity' as correspondence to objects, we shall explore the pragmatist position outlined by John Dewey about art experience, as well as Hilary Putnam's claim to an 'objectivity without objects', which rejects any special realm of universal properties. In order to avoid mysterious entities we are probably uncomfortable with, we might admit a sort of realism 'with a human face' also in the aesthetic domain. Since the discourse about aesthetic value seems to cling to emotions, which are necessarily subjective, we shall demonstrate the plausibility of an 'emotional' account of aesthetic value judgements which does not renounce to objectivity, contra any relativism and emotivism.

Beauty is truth, and truth beauty – that is all ye know on Earth,
And all ye need to know. (John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*)

1. Introduction

In what follows we shall explore the possibility of objective value judgements about art. In some cases it seems indeed that any variability of our aesthetic evaluations disappears: when we talk about Greek sculpture or German poetry and classical music, it seems that there is little room for divergences. Is it perhaps possible to talk about an objective or absolute value of art, in order to give an account of these cases? On the other hand, 'anachronistic evaluations' of artworks might provide evidence to the contrary: as a matter of fact, some artists who have nowadays found general consent among critics were not appreciated in their time (Van Gogh, Kafka, Bach, just to mention a few well-known examples).

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Within the analytic debate, the question of the evaluation of works of art has often been neglected. First of all, because of a widespread accepted dichotomy between facts and values, according to which only 'statements of facts' are capable of being 'objectively true', while value judgements are completely outside the sphere of reason. In this sense, aesthetic and ethical judgements are meaningless if not bound to peculiar aesthetic/moral properties. A second obstacle to the formulation of value judgements is represented by an empiricist account of emotions, on which emotions constitute the most 'irrational' part of human life. Since emotions are conceived as the main responsible for aesthetic experiences, their obscure irrationality seems to contradict the possibility of an inter-subjective agreement on our aesthetic judgements.

In what follows we shall try to get rid of both obstacles, in order to secure the possibility of objective aesthetic judgements without renouncing to emotions. The challenge is to recognize that our aesthetic judgements claim objective validity and, at the same time, that they are dependent on a subject who 'feels' and 'experiences' the values in question, *contra* any emotivism and relativism.

While rejecting any account of 'objectivity' as 'correspondence to objects', we might look for a weaker approach to the question of aesthetic value, one that sees objectivity in the common exercise of rational, logical and emotional abilities within a certain form of life. We shall explore the pragmatist position outlined by John Dewey about art experience, as well as Hilary Putnam's claim to an 'objectivity without objects', which rejects any special 'Platonic' realm of universal properties. We might admit a sort of realism 'with a human face' also in the aesthetic domain, reformulating the notion of 'objectivity' as a form of well-grounded inter-subjectivity.

2. The Challenge to Objectivity

In the current philosophical debate on the matter we (still) find the contrast between two opposing views already refused by Kant: the empiricist account, which argues that an aesthetic judgement such as '*x* is graceful' can only be subjective, since everyone has their own feelings about it – feel-

ings which are utterly personal[1], – and the rationalist view, now reshaped under a 'realist' label, claiming objectivity for our value judgements insofar as they make reference to specific aesthetic qualities exemplified by the object. According to realists, when we define something as 'beautiful' we consider 'beauty' as a real property of the object, something that we grasp as well as we perceive colours and sounds. A realist account shares the neo-positivistic dichotomy between fact and value, on which only 'correspondence' to specific properties can guarantee true statements about them.

Yet, is this dichotomy tenable? Is it really possible to make a sharp distinction between verifiable 'objective' facts and merely 'subjective' values? It would seem not, since science itself presupposes values: epistemic values (reasonableness, simplicity, coherence, etc.) are values, too, even though they have been considered by logical positivists as 'objective descriptions' opposed to 'subjective evaluations' (Ayer 1936, pp. 104-126). In this sense, evaluation and description are interwoven and interdependent.

Kant challenges the empiricist view as well as the rationalist one, significantly pointing out the contrast between the claim to universality of our aesthetic judgements and their emotional 'subjectivity'. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant deals with the question of a subject who formulates an aesthetic judgement, stating for instance 'this flower is beautiful'. This judgement has two characteristics. Firstly, it aspires to universal validity, since it behaves *as if* beauty were a *real* property of the object, and *as if* the subsequent pleasure expressed were objective. Nonetheless, we deal here only with a *subjective* universality – as it is evident in the deduction of pure aesthetic judgements (§ 31). Secondly, an aesthetic judgement is singular from a logical point of view: we can only say that *this* flower at *this* time is beautiful, because only this object falls right now under our perception. We are not allowed to say that *all* flowers are beautiful; I need an individual experience of the object in question, before uttering my judgement.

[1] As well known, according to David Hume 'taste' is an individual ability to respond to things. Ultimately, aesthetic qualities are nothing but projections of human feelings on objects. An agreement on value judgements might be found only by making reference to a community of experts, who have a better perception of what is valuable. On the difficulties of Hume's argument, see Levinson 2002.

Hence I cannot decide *a priori* if something is beautiful or not. The correctness of an aesthetic judgment cannot be decided through proofs of any kind: I cannot force anyone, who holds a different opinion, to change her aesthetic judgement. Kant points out (§ 20) that a genuine aesthetic judgment implies the possibility of obtaining *argumentatively* (not demonstratively) other people's approbation, "under the presupposition that there is a common sense (by which, however, we do not mean any external sense but rather the effect of the free play of our cognitive powers)" (Kant 2000, p. 122). The judgement of taste is allowed to claim (subjective) universal validity, since it is based on a *Gemeinsinn*, on a common sense, that permits us to communicate with others. In this sense, the objectivity claimed by aesthetic judgements might be better understood as a form of *intersubjectivity*.

> Since the universal communicability of a feeling presupposes a common sense, the latter must be able to be assumed with good reason, and indeed without appeal to psychological observations, but rather as the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which is assumed in every logic and every principle of cognitions that is not skeptical (Kant 2000, p. 123).

Kant's solution of the antinomy of taste ultimately rests on the 'free play of the faculties' – on the interplay of intellect and imagination, which elicits a specific form of aesthetic pleasure. Similarly, Dewey defends the decisive role of imagination, and the importance of inter-subjective criteria for the justification of our aesthetic judgements, also rejecting the standard dichotomy between realism and empiricism. As we shall see, Dewey's aesthetics share Kant's insistence that there is an alternative to the rationalist and empiricist views, one on which judgments of beauty are subjective and singular *and* make a claim to universal validity.

3. An Inquiry of Intelligence

In 1923 John Dewey was appointed Director for Education at the Barnes Foundation[2] in Pennsylvania, so that he was exposed on a daily basis to

[2] Incidentally, we might mention that *Art as Experience* (1934) is dedicated to Albert Barnes.

works by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, to name the most famous. He was therefore well aware of the necessity of formulating *correct* value judgements about art. Dewey recalls in his texts a few examples of judgements formulated by important critics on the occasion of the Armory Exhibition in New York in 1913, which later revealed to be wrong. On that occasion, Cézanne had been defined as a "a second-rate impressionist who had now and then fair luck in painting a moderately good picture"; Van Gogh as a "moderately competent impressionist who was heavy-handed"; Matisse as "a painter who was content to daub his canvas". We obviously know, *a posteriori*, that these criticisms are wrong. But how can we defend the possibility of *objective* aesthetic judgements, since they look so variable, even regarding masterpieces and great artists? What kind of value can we ascribe to an artwork?

In Dewey's account of aesthetic value judgments, the value/fact dichotomy disappears. While traditional philosophy has erected a separate realm of values, which tries to conciliate with the realm of existence, for Dewey values permeate existence, and are immediately felt and possessed by the subject through emotions. This immediate aesthetic and emotional appreciation of an object needs a critical *justification*, which is what we usually define as an 'aesthetic judgement'. Thus, an aesthetic judgment occurs whenever we want to see if we are *justified* in our experiencing something as elegant or beautiful, whenever we wonder if the '*given* value' might be *justified by reflection* (Dewey 1981: 402).

Dewey distinguishes two traditional ways of formulating aesthetic judgements that remind us of the traditional dichotomy of realism versus empiricism, and have to be replaced by a genuine pragmatist attitude. A wrong aesthetic judgment can be twofold: 'judicial' or 'impressionist'. A *judicial* judgement is an authoritative sentence based upon standards. Critics formulated judicial judgements during classicism in the eighteenth century, when the ancients provided models from which rules could be derived. The main difficulty of such a dogmatic kind of criticism is its inability to cope with the emergence of new modes of life – of experiences that demand new modes of expression. It is way too obsolete to understand any contemporary art scene, not to mention avant-garde. An opposite tendency is apparent in the second form of traditional aesthetic judgement, rejected by Dewey, and defined as an *impressionist* judgment,

which records an 'impression' that, at a given moment, is made on us by a work of art. Obviously, impressionist judgment denies the very possibility of objectivity, condemning itself to the chaos of a subjectivity that lacks objective control.

Against these two notions of an aesthetic judgement, Dewey defends a sort of 'third way' between them, holding that an aesthetic judgment is objective only insofar as we are able to provide *generally available reasons* in order to justify it – reasons that can be tested by other persons in their direct relationship with a public, shared object. An aesthetic judgment is therefore 'objective' in the sense that it can be checked by others, to whom the same objective material is available. That means, that even if

> there are no judicial standards for works of art, which can *a priori* define an object as valuable, there are nevertheless *criteria* in judgment, so that criticism does not fall in the field of mere impressionism. [...] But such criteria are not rules or prescriptions. They are the result of a critical *endeavour* to find out what a work of art is as an experience (Dewey 1989).

What follows is that every judgement "involves a *venture*, a *hypothetical element*; that it is directed to qualities which are nevertheless qualities of an object" (Dewey 1989). Any aesthetic judgment is hence objective since it can be controlled, shared, even rationally defeated by others, but it is also subjective, insofar as it is formulated by a person who actively interacts with the artwork. In this sense, an aesthetic judgement can be considered as 'a social document' that requires not only shared criteria of correctness, but also a community of people that might control it. An aesthetic judgment is therefore a reflective operation, an inquiry of intelligence formulated by a human being with a certain personal history, who interacts with a certain objects that belongs to a shared world.

Thanks to Dewey's considerations, we can hence reshape our notion of objectivity as 'inter-subjectivity', as a form of validity grounded on generally available reasons within a certain social community.

4. Against Dichotomies

In his naturalist project, Dewey rejects any dualism between subject/object, experience/nature, art/science, defending continuity in any field of human

life. Thus, aesthetics becomes a fundamental test bench for Dewey's philosophy, since it is where all dichotomies seem to disappear, the authentic *locus* of anthropological integrity. Also emotion and cognition are not conceived as opposing psychological dimensions, but rather as intertwined abilities. For the pragmatist, the world around us affects us immediately: we are not abstract minds, disembodied consciousnesses, but rather living bodies who express through arts their freedom to define themselves.

In *Experience and Nature,* Dewey outlines a peculiar definition of experience, conceived as the result of an interaction between organism and environment, rejecting any empiricist account of experience as a chaotic flux of sense data; experience is not a mere collection of atomic data, extrinsically connected by the thinking subject. '*An* experience' is one in which the material of experience is fulfilled or 'consummated', as for example when a problem is solved, or when a game is played to its conclusion. Art is conceived in complete continuity with ordinary experience: it is a paradigmatic case of an aesthetic experience, which combines activity and passivity, and in which emotional and cognitive attitudes intertwine. Art allows us to perceive – through imagination – possibilities that are not realized (yet), but that *could* be realized, outlining an effective criticism of the real conditions of life[3]; as a paradigmatic human practice, art aims at enhancing human freedom and self-reflection[4]. "In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience" (Dewey 1989).

Dewey rejects the paradigm of aesthetic autonomy, which interprets art as a mere expression of the artist's emotions. An *emotion* does not express anything private, but it rather works as a *magnet*, that selects and reorganizes the material of an experience. The artwork that results from the emotional rearrangement of the material is something active that *does* something: it is *not* an inert product and should not be seen in isolation from the process that produced it. Dewey underscores the crucial role that emotional intentionality plays in the constitution of value-experience: "emotion in its ordinary sense is something called out by objects, physical

[3] See Möllers 2015, who defines a norm as a 'positively marked possibility' that *should* be fulfilled.

[4] Bertram 2014.

and personal; it is response to an objective situation"; "emotion is, so to speak, an attitude or disposition which is a function of objective things" (Dewey 1981, p. 390). Experience in the form of art solves a lot of problems that have troubled philosophers. In particular, against any dichotomy, "it demonstrates the gratuitous falsity of notions that divide overt and executive activity from thought and feeling and thus separate mind and matter" (Dewey 1981, p. 393).

Dewey's account of emotions finds confirmation in the current philosophical debate on emotional intentionality[5]. Emotions are intentional states that are directed to peculiar objects; they are states for which we ask for reasons. *Why* are you angry? *Why* exactly are you scared? Facing these questions, we are all supposed to answer in an appropriately meaningful way. Emotions raise normative questions, about the extent to which they can be said to be rational, or can contribute to rationality. We find a public, objective dimension of emotions, besides a phenomenological-subjective one: emotions are connected to qualities of the objects, they can be differentiated, and evaluated as appropriate or not in an inter-subjective context[6]. Since irrationality usually works as a sceptical argument in support of relativistic theses, the recognition of an inner consistent structure within emotions constitutes a first step against value relativism. Therefore, aesthetic judgements are not just a question of individual preference: in this anti-relativist perspective, we might say that some judgements of beauty are more appropriate than others.

5. Towards a Realism 'with a Human Face'

Deeply influenced by Dewey's philosophy, Hilary Putnam, in *Ethics without Ontology,* rejects any ontological account of 'objectivity' as 'correspondence to objects', suggesting a sort of realism 'with a human face' that we might

[5] For instance, fear is always fear *of something*, which is perceived – correctly or incorrectly – as dangerous: a specific formal object characterizes each kind of emotion. See Deonna, Teroni 2012.

[6] Sociology of culture has to deal with the problems concerning translation and understanding of emotions within different linguistic and cultural context. Current intercultural research has identified a small number of universally recognized emotions, which can be translated into any language: joy, sadness, fear, anger, astonishment and disgust.

now apply to the aesthetic domain[7].

According to Putnam, the dichotomy 'fact versus value judgment' has prevented us from realizing how description and evaluation are interwoven and interdependent. Following Dewey's approach, and relying on Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis, Putnam defends the entanglement of facts and values, claiming that values and normativity permeate the complexity of human experience. Value judgements are not as 'subjective' as a relativist might claim, and are not "completely outside the sphere of reason" (Putnam 2002): on the contrary, values can be rationally discussed, and, to put it differently, "there is a notion of rationality applicable to normative questions" (Putnam 2002). It is time "we stopped equating objectivity with description. There are many sorts of statements [...] that are not descriptions, but that are under rational control, governed by standards appropriate to their particular functions and contexts" (Putnam 2002, p. 33). The science itself presupposes epistemic values of coherence, plausibility, and simplicity.

The worst thing about the fact/value dichotomy is that "in practice it functions as a discussion-stopper, and not just as a discussion-stopper, but a thought-stopper" (Putnam 2002, p. 44). Indeed, if values are put outside the realm of rational argument, no discussion about them is allowed. On the contrary, value judgements are capable of "warranted assertibility and warranted deniability" (Putnam 2002, p. 110); they are cognitively meaningful, not only in ethics but also in aesthetics.

While defending the belief in the objectivity of value judgements, Putnam rejects any 'Platonic' realm of ethical (or aesthetic) properties. He follows Dewey's rejection of any form of dogmatism: an aesthetic value judgement always entails a certain hypothetical element, hence, a certain risk of being wrong. When we formulate a value judgement, we need to make reference to our own experiences, so that the work of art becomes part of our experience. An interaction occurs between the object's structure and the critic's past, sensibility, and knowledge. We do not have any general rules, prescriptions, or quantitative standards which could possibly guarantee the correctness of our aesthetic judgements. "Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities

[7] Putnam does not explicitly deal with aesthetics.

of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration" (Dewey 1989).

Nonetheless, since critics insist on the public qualities of a work of art, others who have the same material at their disposal can evaluate their judgement. In this regard, the aesthetic value judgement can be defined as '*objective*', insofar as it demands to be shared, in virtue of the common world we are all in. Any value judgement must have the possibility to be evaluated by other people: we need to provide *reasons* for our formulations, making reference to a common external world with which we constantly interact. Value judgements formulated by critics draw a sort of topography of a new country that might be useful for other travellers.

In order to defend our claim to objectivity for our aesthetic value judgements, we need to make reference to a 'common sense'[8], to a common *Lebensform*, within which our judgements can be communicated. In this respect, 'objectivity' means as much as controllable, inter-subjective, subject to shared criteria of correctness. In itself, the concept of 'objectivity' is devoid of any ontological dimension and becomes a merely epistemic concept. We might use Hilary Putnam's expression of "an objectivity without object" (Putnam 2004), if we interpret it as a rejection of a realist account of aesthetic properties. It is now apparent that, although the experience of an aesthetic value is rooted in our sensibility and contingence, it is possible to formulate 'objective' aesthetic judgements. A reshape of our concept of 'objectivity' has been required, insofar as objectivity does not mean correspondence to peculiar, aesthetic properties.

Art, as a practical declination of the complex way in which human beings interact with their surroundings, is a borderline territory situated between individual, subjective taste and the claim for universal value judgements. Although it often seems to exceed the context of human practices, art is not separate from the wider context of human activities and abilities, and cannot be considered as isolated.

To share John Dewey's and Hilary Putnam's view of an 'objectivity without objects' means to uphold a sort of 'quasi-realist' approach, defending both the realist claim to objective aesthetic judgements and a pragmatist, anti-dogmatic view on values. A realism 'with a human face' in

[8] In Kant's sense, as *Gemeinsinn*.

the aesthetic field attempts to outline a third way between relativism and dogmatism: we might recognize that our aesthetic judgements claim objective validity, that they are based on thick arguments, on rational, shared criteria and, at the same time, that they are dependent on our emotional responses to things. Objectivity and anthropocentrism are not antagonist any more: an aesthetic judgement is always *anthropocentric* – since there is always a personal, emotional experience involved – but, at the same time, it can be *objective*, namely in the sense of being rationally justified by good reasons and hence interpersonally valid.

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