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The Birthplace of Aesthetics: Baumgarten on Aesthetical Concepts and Art Experience

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ABSTRACT. The founding of aesthetics in XVIII century implied changed understanding of both beauty and art, as well as the development of the new form of theory. To develop aesthetics, Baumgarten had to connect aesthetic experience, beauty, and art; as their common ground he chose art experience. In addition to such basis of aesthetics, he also had to define the theoretical character of the new discipline, and especially the character of its concepts. Such concepts of aesthetics have special character - they should immediately refer to the aesthetic experience, which, in turn, they make explicit and communicable. The paper will focus on art experience, as the very basis for the development of aesthetics, as well as on the character of this theory, orientated on *extensive clarity* - the concept that should differentiate between logic and aesthetics, i.e. between characters of these disciplines of philosophy. These problems will be analyzed with regard to the logic of Port Royal and philosophy of Leibniz.

1. Introduction

Although problems of beauty and art defined philosophy from its very

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beginnings in Ancient Greece, it was Alexander G. Baumgarten, who proclaimed aesthetics as a distinctive and legitimate field of philosophy in XVIII century. Baumgarten founded a new and special philosophical discipline such was never seen before – he notoriously defined it as lower gnoseology, *gnoseologia inferior*. The main issue I will address here is exactly Baumgarten's gesture of defining aesthetics as a new discipline, as a new field of philosophy.

The oddity of the Baumgartens's project is, however, often neglected (Buchenau, 2013, p. 14). Namely, the fact that aesthetical issues and problems were addressed in philosophy from its very beginning often distorts the interpretation of Baumgarten's project, presenting it as a simple, natural, and perhaps even necessary phase of the development of philosophy in its traditional form. Such interpretation is also often endorsed by another one, the interpretation that puts Baumgarten in line with the rationalistic philosophy of Descartes, Leibniz, and, of course, Christian Wolf. With regard to this particular interpretation, Baumgarten's project merely represents a kind of supplement of Wolf's endeavors, intended to systematize Leibniz's thought (Poppe, 1907, pp. 15-16, 49).

Although Baumgarten was indeed inspired by Wolf and Leibniz, and although he did in fact develop many of his views under the influence of the Rationalism, he also offered something completely new and innovative – namely, the very discipline of aesthetics (Wessel, 1972, p. 334). In my opinion, such novelty should be investigated once again – not from the perspective of the continuity of Baumgarten's project with his predecessors, but from the perspective of their differences. As a discipline of philosophy,

aesthetics is, in my opinion, a point of discontinuity, of provocation and of rapture in the fibre of traditional philosophy; and it is just Baumgarten's project that presents it as such.

Why Baumgarten? In my opinion, Baumgarten's project of aesthetics should be focused exactly because it abandons the traditional philosophical practice with regard to the problems of art and beauty, which addressed them in terms of metaphysics, or other non-aesthetical domains of philosophy. In opposition to such practice, Baumgarten presents us with *aesthetical* analysis of aesthetical problems. Namely, he tried to investigate and to define the very conditions of their proper theoretical and philosophical inquiry, at the same time rejecting their reduction to other and more usual philosophical problems and questions (metaphysical ones). His aesthetics is, therefore, a new philosophical discipline not only in terms of its new threefold subject – the unified domain of beauty, art and aesthetic experience, but also in terms of its theoretical character. It is this specific theoretical character of aesthetic that I would like to address here more precisely.

In the light of previously given distinctions, my main question could be defined as follows: why is it that the threefold domain of aesthetics should be considered as a domain that is in need of special theoretical inquiry, different from any previously known? In another words, which characteristics of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, as a special form of theory, should be considered as instrinsic to the very nature of Baumgarten's project?

In order to answer these questions, I will put stress upon early

Baumgarten's manuscript – *Philosophical meditations on some aspects of poetical works* (*Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis Ad Poema Petrinentibus*) from 1735. Namely, it is in this manuscript that Baumgarten mentions his new discipline for the first time (Baumgarten, 1900, p. 41). Although he literally just mentions aesthetics on last few pages of the work, and although this work does not present the idea of aesthetics in its developed form, but it only announces such idea, I am convinced that it can reveal the true nature of Baumgarten's aesthetics, perhaps even more than his *Metaphysics* or *Aesthethics*. Although it was not fully developed in this early work, the very idea of aesthetics is in fact here conceived: therefore, it could also be interpreted out of this perspective in a specific manner, such that would bring forth its very meaning – the idea behind the founding of the new discipline. I will address Baumgarten's project out of two perspectives: 1) the domain of aesthetics, and 2) the character of the aesthetical theory.

2. The Domain of Aesthetics

I have already mentioned that the novelty of Baumgarten's project could be interpreted in terms of the novelty of its domain, the subject it investigates. It is well known that Baumgarten's aesthetics encompassed threefold subject – art, beauty and aesthetic experience. Such systematization of previously separated problems could be considered as a new perspective of aesthetics, as a proposal of one and unique new subject of philosophical investigation. Namely, before Baumgarten, the theory of beauty and the theory of art were not united – art and beauty were understood as separate

subjects of separate theoretical inquiries. The theory of beauty was mostly seen as a part of broader metaphysical considerations, be it Plato's theory of ideas or mediaeval problem of transcendentals. The theory of art was, on the other hand, mostly developed in terms of science and knowledge, with the special case of Aristotle. Baumgarten's gesture of unification, consequently, changed both studies in beauty and art, as well as philosophy and its further development.

Therefore, for such a gesture to be delivered, it had to be prepared with a changed understanding of both beauty and art from Baumgarten's part (Buchenau, 2013, p. 114). That implies that mentioned systematization and unification of art, beauty and aesthetic experience in one aesthetical domain is itself a novelty: it was not understood in such a way before Baumgarten, and – for it to be seen in this new way – it demanded some common ground for all of these three aspects. Hence, to develop aesthetics as a separate and legitimate field of philosophy, Baumgarten needed to reach out for some deeper ground of both beauty and art. With regard to the tradition, he should have reached out for some more abstract concept that would allow for the single theory that would encompass both problems. However, Baumgarten reached not for more abstract, but for more lifelike and more concrete basis – namely, he chose aesthetic experience as the basis of aesthetics, out of which he further developed both his understanding of art and his understanding of beauty. This is, of course, marked by the definition of aesthetics as lower gnoseology.

However, such Baumgarten's choice presents us not only with the new way of understanding of beauty and art, but also with the new way of

understanding of theory and philosophy. As we have seen, in search for the common ground of beauty and art, Baumgarten did not focus on any concept more abstract from those, he did not reach out for some kind of their common genus, to put it in Aristotelian terms. On the contrary, he reached out for the more subjectivistic solution – for the aesthetic experience. As a theory, aesthetics is not defined with regard to the 'object' it investigates (Aristotelian model of science/theory), but in terms of the subjective faculty that allows for such a theory (Descartes's model of theory/science).

It is well known that Baumgarten proclaims aesthetics to be lower gnoseology, *gnoseologia inferior*, and that he had conceived this new field of philosophy as similar to logic. The character of aesthetics is, therefore, understood with regard to knowledge and especially in respect of powers of knowledge given to human beings (reason and sensibility). Such thesis could be – and it often was – interpreted as if Baumgarten only followed previously given divisions of philosophy, mainly the one given by Christian Wolf. The implication is that he understood aesthetics as a kind of logic, as a kind of abstract and partially formal discipline, which is orientated on sensibility. However, in my opinion, that was not entirely the case: Baumgarten did in fact claim the mentioned similarity of logic and aesthetics, but he also emphasized aesthetic experience as a starting point and as a basis of aesthetical inquiry (Wessel, 1972, p. 337). The aesthetic experience is, therefore, Baumgarten's ground for the development of theory that should encompass both beauty and art as its problems and objects of inquiry.

Namely, although Baumgarten in his later and more developed works on aesthetics defined the discipline as the lower gnoesology, i.e. as an investigation of sensation and sense perception as such, he sharply differentiated between the traditional sense of the term gnoseology and the new, aesthetical one, the one he himself proposes (Franke, 2008, pp. 77-78). This new sense of gnoseology is not primarily associated with the non-aesthetic sensory experience, but with the problem of beauty, given that beauty is defined as *perfect sensitive knowledge* in Baumgarten's *Aesthetics* (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 21). That is to say that *gnoseologia inferior* investigates the very essence of sensory experience, but with regard to aesthetic experience – that it is the aesthetic experience as such that can give us proper insight in inner forms and structure of the sensibility, even in possible claims for its aesthetic truth (analogy with logic) (Buchenau, 2013, p. 123).

Here we have an inversion of the traditional understanding of sensibility: aesthetic experience is here presented as the fundamental sensory experience – it is not a 'special case' or aberation of more usual and more ordinary non-aesthetical sensory experience (in this Baumgarten follows Leibniz) (Brown, 1967, pp. 71-72). Therefore, Baumgarten's basis for the new discipline of aesthetics is not conceived with regard to the traditional philosophical disciplines – even though it was named gnoseology (Franke, 2008, p. 82).

However, such inversion, claimed and developed in *Aesthetics*, is prepared early on, in *Meditations*, and with another twist – by focusing on the aesthetic experience of art. It is in this work that Baumgarten testifies

that his own endeavors started with the question of the essence of the works of art, namely the works of poetry. He presents his own project in *Meditations* starting with a brief critique of his predecessors – namely, he states that he wants to re-think those concepts and positions he already accepted concerning the question of poetry, and that he wants to do so by starting from the experience of poetry (the single concept of the poem in the soul/mind) (Baumgarten, 1900, pp. 4-5). In this case, it is obviously the experience gained through the contact with the poetry, i.e. aesthetic experience of art: the single concept of the poem in the mind could not be *a priori* concept, but *a posteriori* one – the concept which is developed from the experience of poetical works of art.

This critical stance of Baumgarten is crucial for *Meditations*, for its structure is implicitly governed by the questioning of the traditional model of the theory of art – poetics. Such questioning, finally, results with the idea of the new kind of theory of art – the one that cannot be restricted to the poetical model, but has to be legitimized on the level of more fundamental account on those features of human being that allow for any theory of art to be developed (Baumgarten, 1900, pp. 40-41). This, of course, is aesthetics.

Therefore, we can conclude that previously mentioned inversion of the relationship between ordinary, non-aesthetic sensory experience, and the aesthetical one now should be additionally clarified: it is an aesthetic experience of art - of poetry - that leads Baumgarten towards aesthetics as a discipline. This is not to say that the aesthetic experience of art has any prominent position in later Baumgarten's development of aesthetics, for it is beauty – not art – that is accentuated and made the most explicit example of

the domain of aesthetics; beauty is, as we have already seen, perfect sensitive knowledge (Aichele, 1999, pp. 88-89). Consequently, the aesthetic experience of art is here made prominent with regard to completely different problem – namely, the problem of the character of the theory that can be adequate to the domain of aesthetic experience as such. If such discipline is to be developed, one should start with the special case of aesthetic experience – with the aesthetic experience of art (poetry), out of which the fundamental simple concept of the poem in the soul is derived. Its prominent position is, thus, to be understood with regard to the problematic character of the discipline of aesthetics.

It should not surprise us that Baumgarten has chosen poetry, i.e. poetics for such questioning. His choice is governed by the very character of poetics, as a specific theoretical approach which is not suitable for any other problem but the analysis of art. In other words, he did not choose theory of beauty, because in its traditional form it has metaphysical character, because it is not restricted to the question of beauty. He chose poetics because it does present a suitable candidate for a theory specially designed and adequate to the aesthetical problems, at least to one of them. Surely, in the course of *Meditations* he questioned traditional model of poetics and abandoned it in favour of aesthetics as the more fundamental discipline.

Therefore, it seems that Baumagrten's project is, from the very beginning, orientated on the very idea of new and innovative way of philosophizing, i.e. of philosophical thinking. *Meditations* offer us a critical analysis of the traditional model of art theory and present us with the possibility of the new, more general model of aesthetics. Consequently, we

should investigate the very theoretical character of this new discipline.

3. The Character of the Aesthetical Theory

As we have seen, it is an experience – and not a concept – that should lead us to the new discipline of aesthetics. Such claim should not be misunderstood: given that aesthetics is conceived as philosophy and as similar to logic, such discipline demands for a proper conceptual framework. However, concepts adequate to aesthetics are not to be understood logically – they are not concepts of logic, or the concepts of metaphysics. Moreover, they are not concepts of epistemology, regardless of the definition of aesthetics as lower gnoseology (Wessel, 1972, p. 338). These aesthetical concepts should have special character, one that corresponds to their origin: namely, they should refer to the aesthetic experience, which, in turn, they are to make explicit and communicable. Finally, as concepts, as products of reason, they should allow for the specific theory of aesthetical character – aesthetics.

Interpreting Baumgarten, we should, therefore, differentiate between two problems: between aesthetical domain (of beauty and art), given with aesthetic experience, on the one side, and the aesthetics as a theory on the other. In other words, aesthetics as the problem is here understood in terms of questioning if such separate field of philosophy is even possible. Its domain, aesthetic experience, poses the question with regard to questioning if such experience, which is fundamentally subjective, concrete and bound to the senses, closely related to life itself, could ever be adequately

expressed by any kind of concepts. As we can see, both problems have one common ground – namely, aesthetical concepts, concepts that would be suitable for the theory and that would not neglect aesthetic experience.

Baumgaren is well aware of this problem, and he has proposed the solution. His solution is given in terms of *extensive clarity*, the concept that should differentiate between logical and aesthetical concepts, i.e. between characters of these disciplines of philosophy. Extensive clarity is, therefore, juxtaposed with *intensive clarity*, which is characteristic for the concepts of logic – and for the traditional concepts of philosophy, I might add (Buchenau, 2013, pp. 124-125). Such intensive clarity is intensive because it intensifies the meaning of the concept, because it emphasizes the aspect of unity that connects various and multiple objects to which such concept could be predicated (Baumgarten, 1900, p. 9). On the other hand, extensive clarity emphasizes the very multiplicity – not the unity: such concept presents us with nuances and variations of meaning that are by definition abstracted in concepts of intensive clarity. In other words, concepts of extensive clarity do not emphasize the multiplicity in terms of broadening the referential domain of concept; on the contrary, if a concept is more extensive, its referential domain is more narrow and vice versa (Baumgarten, 1900, p. 10).

Extensive clarity, as a proposed special character of aesthetic concepts in opposition to the logical ones, represents the very difference between aesthetics and other disciplines of philosophy. Namely, it presents us with completely new idea of a concept – such that turns away from the discursive forms of reason (distinct ideas) and opts for the discursive possibilities of

sensation, of sense perception as such. It follows from here that extensively clear concepts allow for completely new form of their unification with regard to judgements or arguments, and finally concerning the complete theory. Although we use terms like 'judgement' and 'argument' which belong to logic, connections between extensively clear concepts would not operate in the same manner in which intensively clear concepts (concepts of logic) operate. That is to say that, although Baumgarten claims the analogy between logic and aesthetics, he does not claim that they are the same – nor does he claim that aesthetics is a kind of subdiscipline of logic.

However, logic is here of some importance: now we can trace one of neglected origins of Baumgarten's aesthetics – namely logic, as it was understood in rationalist philosophies of Modern Ages. Previously mentioned inverse relation between meaning and reference of an extensively clear concept is logical in its origin, and the possibility to make use of such traditional logical principles in terms of extensive clarity draws from Port-Royal Logic and from the understanding of the *determination* which was developed in this context. A. Arnauld and P. Nicolle made an effort to explain how judgements and arguments can be developed from ideas, i.e. from the building-blocks of consciousness, making a single idea – and not a single term - the very basis of logic (Wahl, 2008, pp. 670-672). In turn, this opened a new possibility: if an idea could be *explained*, that means that it is clarified in terms of making its content explicit; on the other hand, if an idea should be *determined*, that means that it is clarified in terms of making its content more concrete and more individual (Arnauld and Nicolle, 2003, pp. 37, 40, 44-45). In both cases, logic in its core is to be developed from the

private consciousness by means of clarification and explication of its contents, which is very similar to Baumgarten's understanding of aesthetics.

Bridge between Port-Royal Logic and Baumgarten, G. W. Leibniz, took this idea even further, connecting the *determinative* way of thinking not with reason and its operations (logic), but with sense perception, for the first time proclaiming sensibility to be clear and, therefore, true in special cases – in cases of aesthetic experience of beauty (Brown, 1967, pp. 70-71, 73). Relying on Leibniz, Baumgarten is now in a position to make a demand for special aesthetical concepts, concepts of extensive clarity adequate to (aesthetic) experience, such that would make the basis for the development of an *aesthetic* theory. Such theory should, therefore, be aesthetic not only with regard to the subject of its inquiry – art and beauty, but also in terms of its own theoretical character, exemplified in its concepts.

The main point which is here to be noted is that these extensivelly clear concepts are essentially bound to the aesthetic experience. It follows from here that such concepts cannot be purely rational, cannot be products of pure reason. And even more: it seems that their origin is not reason at all, although they are called concepts – in a way, they present us with forms of sensitivity such is derived by the sensitivity and out of the sensitivity as such.

In other words, these concepts are not purely descriptive, they do not just tag some sense perception. On the contrary, they bring inner operations of sensitivity to clarity – i.e. to the specific aesthetic form. Such form, of course, is not to be understood as a logical form of concept, firstly because logical form is a product of reason – it brings to clarity inner operations of

reason, and secondly because logical form of concepts is without any meaningful content. Extensively clear concepts, on the other hand, cannot be purely formal – their form is of another kind, while it represents the multiplicity of sensation in its given unity – the unity which is always given for a consciousness and which has its roots in consciousness. Nevertheless, they are rightly named concepts because they do function as such – they allow for non-descriptive inner unification of presentations given via sensation.

Finally, such concepts are very problematic. Namely, if they are a kind of clear forms of the inner operations of sensitivity, they are properly used only in aesthetical, i.e. poetical speeches – that is, in poetry. Hence Baumgarten in *Meditations* almost identifies extensive clarity with the poetic character of discourse (Baumgarten, 1900, p. 6). That implies that only art presents us with true extensive clarity. However, if this is so, what can we say with regard to the aesthetics and its concepts? Are they also poetical ones? They could not be, while such conclusion would mean that there could be no theory of art – that there could be only art as such.

Baumgarten never made a comment on this problem explicitly. However, we can at least conclude that aesthetics as a theory has to deal with such poetical, i.e. extensively clear concepts - that it has to investigate and analyse them. In other words, we can conclude that aesthetics, as a discipline of philosophy, may well be using reason and form some more traditional concepts and arguments, but that it has to do so never leaving the domain of aesthetic experience which presents its very basis. Therefore, Baumgarten's project would move from the aesthetic experience, via

extensively clear/poetical concepts, towards a new theory of aesthetics, which is to be built upon such grounds.

Finally, by presenting his *Meditations* as a kind of poetics, Baumgarten clearly puts his new ideas in the context of old Renaissance quarrel between logic and poetics; in turn, poetical speeches will become a basis for the aesthetical ones.

4. Concluding Remarks

In my opinion, Baumgarten's project of aesthetics was in fact a project of the new perspective of philosophy as such, whether he personally conceived it as such or not.

Namely, aesthetics opened the possibility of aesthetical truth – the possibility of knowledge that is not, in any way, determined or delivered with the help of our rational capacities. Such knowledge is, consequently, adequate to the domain of the contingent, the individual, affective and personal side of human being. However, Baumgarten's efforts did not rely on just any perception and experience; although his aesthetics was determined as *gnoseologia inferior*, it was not conceived as a mere theory of sense perception in traditional terms. It also was not conceived as a theory of aesthetic experience of beauty, which was emphasized by Leibniz; it has started as a theory of aesthetic experience of art.

Baumgarten did in fact understood his aesthetics as a theory of sense experience in general terms, but he also did emphasize the aesthetic experience of art as a key which would allow for understanding of any other

possible kind of experience. Therefore, specific aesthetical concepts, that we considered earlier, should also be referring to the aesthetic experience of art, making it extensively clear and communicable in a form of theory.

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