

Editorial: Concept of Aesthetic Experience

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"Aesthetic experience" refers to the mental event in which a person apprehends and enjoys an art work or a beautiful object. What makes this type of experience aesthetic and distinguishes it from other types of experience such as moral, religious, cognitive, or sexual experiences? It would seem that an adequate understanding of the concept of aesthetic experience should be the starting point in our study of the nature of art and aesthetic evaluation; for it is reasonable to hold that we cannot explain the meaning and possibility of aesthetic judgment, on the one hand, and what makes an object or event art or beautiful, on the other, if we do not first experience the object or event. For example, how can I say that Michelangelo's *David* is beautiful, or that it is art, if I do not first experience, or feel, its beauty or artistic aspect? The assertion that *David* is beautiful, or that it is an art work, reflects, it indeed articulates, the way I experience these two different aspects of the statue.

But a number of contemporary aestheticians (Hospers, Dickie, Price, Kennick, Weitz) denied the significance of the concept of aesthetic experience in our attempt to understand the nature of art and the basis of aesthetic judgment and called for its dismissal from the realm of aesthetic discourse for at least three reasons: (1) we cannot intelligibly speak of "aesthetic experience" primarily because we cannot identify or capture the reality to which this expression refers, and we cannot capture this reality because it lacks a structure which we can conceive or in some way describe; (2) we cannot discover a feature or set of features common to the class of events called "aesthetic."

Structure of the Aesthetic Experience

When I speak of the structure of aesthetic experience I mean the elements— emotions, ideas, images, moods, insight — which constitute its being

and distinguish it as a particular identity to which we can refer and which we can describe in certain ways; I also mean the way these elements are organized into a coherent whole. In this experience the attention of the perceiver is totally given to the objective properties of the aesthetic object, i.e., to the lines, colors, sounds, words, marble, or motions which present themselves as a *significant form*. The perception of these properties produces in the perceiver what we may call a complex percept. This percept is an affective state; its texture is feeling. The term "feeling" may be used in two ways: (1) as "the faculty or power by which one feels," and (2) "what one feels in regard to something." (OED) This definition suggests that feeling is a basic, primitive, mental operation by which the mind perceives an aspect or an object and forms an impression of it in the activity of perception. The mind is not, in this activity, a passive but an active, creative power which apprehends not only the qualities, relations, and objectivities which make up the given object as form but also what this form means, suggests, or signifies. The mind is a main factor in unifying, or integrating, the elements of the aesthetic experience into an organic whole.

Aesthetic experience is, broadly speaking, composed of three basic types of element: vehicle, affects, and aesthetic qualities.

1. *Vehicle*. This term refers to the sensuous "form" which the artist produces during the process of artistic creation, e.g., the painting which hangs on the wall of a museum or the film which I now see on the screen. This form is the most basic ingredient of the aesthetic experience. It should not be viewed as a separate or independent part of the experience but as an integral element of it, for in the activity of aesthetic perception the sensuous character of the art work acquires a new identity and a new mode of being; it is transformed into a living, spiritual reality in and by the consciousness which perceives it. The vehicle is, moreover, the structured medium, i.e., foundation, of the aesthetic experience within which the rest of the elements cohere and play their individual rolls in the course of the experience. In an aesthetic experience a person one, i.e., identical, with the aesthetic object.

2. *Affects*. In addition to the vehicle, we encounter in the aesthetic experience a multitude of mental states: emotions, images, desires, excitements, ideas, moods, intentions, expectations, insights. These states are formed in the course of responding to and apprehending the aesthetic character of the art work. The fundamental response to the art work, however, is affective in character; we respond to it not in terms of ideas, description, or judgment but in terms of feeling,

and the basic content of this feeling is affects. This is based on the assumption that an art work is not, generally speaking, a scientific or philosophical treatise; it is an expressive object intended for the affective faculty of the imagination. Even in literary works where ideas are dominant the aim of the artist is not to argue, theorize, describe, or judge but to make us, by the power of form, see, hear, touch — in short, to make us feel. Affects are modes of feeling essential features of reality.

3. *Aesthetic Qualities.* By “aesthetic quality” we usually mean aspects like “elegance,” “grandeur,” “cheerfulness,” or “beauty.” These qualities are the highest point, indeed *raison d’être*, of the art work and the aesthetic experience. An aesthetic quality acquires the status of “aesthetic value” when it is realized and apprehended as meaning in the course of the aesthetic experience. Discourse about aesthetic value is essentially discourse about aesthetic meaning.

Unity of Aesthetic Experience

What makes an experience a distinct identity is possession of a dominant aesthetic quality. This quality creates an atmosphere — a general mood — in terms of which consciousness actualizes the aesthetic object in its experience. Accordingly, aesthetic quality is the basic principle of the unity of the aesthetic experience.

Now, when we characterize an aesthetic experience as “unified” we mean that its elements are inter-related; this inter-relatedness bestows upon it a distinct identity, or character which distinguishes it from other experiences, things, or events. What is the basis of this inter-relatedness? An answer to this question is crucial, for the mere structuring of the data of an experience according to a certain pattern is not sufficient to make them unified. For example, many of the cities of the contemporary world are in a sense structured, but they are not aesthetically unified. I may read a poem and comprehend the meaning of its words and follow it sentence by sentence, but I may not make sense of it. Mere structuring is a necessary condition for unity, but it is not sufficient to make it possible. In order for the elements of an event or an object to be unified each element must cohere with the other elements; it must share with them a definite relation. In this relation it contributes to the general character of the whole, on the one hand, and acquires a particular role and significance in the life of the whole, on the other. The inter-relatedness of a whole produces a general character which is peculiar to the whole. This character emerges from the *dynamic* relatedness of the parts to each other. When the elements of an aesthetic experience are related

in this way, they are unified. The basis of this unity, however, is the complex of the aesthetic qualities which the artist has created in the artistic process and embodied in the work as a significant form. These qualities are not given as ready-made realities but as potentialities awaiting realization in the aesthetic experience. This is why most aestheticians from Kant and Hegel to Beardsley and Osborne have maintained that the art work is essentially a schematic formation. This formation is the basis of the aesthetic experience. Its structure determines what happens in the aesthetic experience; it determines, in other words, the very structure of the aesthetic experience, for in this event the art work as a sensuous (or imaginary) form is not only the ontological basis of the experience but also an essential ingredient of it. It provides the material and direction of the aesthetic experience.

What Makes an Experience Aesthetic?

Or, under what conditions does an experience acquire an aesthetic character? Some aestheticians (Kant, Schopenhauer, Vivas, Stolnitz, Bullough) have argued that the principle of aesthetic distinction, that is, the aesthetic-making fact, or the fact that makes or entitles a quality or an object to be aesthetic, is the manner, interest, vision, or attitude by means of which we approach and perceive an art work. As given to sense-perception the art work is simply an ordinary, or natural, object which we may classify or identify historically, archaeologically, religiously, psychologically, or perhaps artifactualy, but it is not aesthetic; it becomes aesthetic, and we may refer to it as such, only if or when we perceive it in a certain way, and this certain way means assuming what is generally known as the aesthetic attitude. The differentia of this sort of attitude is disinterestedness; that is, an object becomes aesthetic when I perceive it under the conditions of disinterestedness, i.e., objectively — without any ulterior motives, for its own sake, for what it has to offer as a unique object. An experience had under the conditions of disinterestedness is an aesthetic experience. But this theory of what makes an experience aesthetic has been subjected to devastating criticism during the past three decades; for, if the aesthetic attitude is what makes an experience aesthetic, what makes the attitude itself aesthetic? Can we characterize an attitude, which is a mental disposition, by a predicate such as "aesthetic?" Can we assume an aesthetic attitude toward evil or ugly objects?

It is more appropriate to hold that the principle of aesthetic distinction is *work as a significant form*, that is, as a complex of aesthetic qualities. The

realization of these qualities, i.e., their apprehension and enjoyment, in the experience of an art work (or a beautiful object) is what makes the experience of the work or object aesthetic. What is the mode of existence of these qualities? We should immediately grant that they are not given to our senses or imagination as ready-made realities but as potentialities, and as potentialities they exist in, and consequently belong to, the work of art. They become actual, under certain perceptual conditions, in the course of the aesthetic experience. And when I say "belong" I mean they originate from the art work; they are a function of its formal organization. Their identity, depth, and richness depend on the identity, depth, and richness of the art work as a significant form. ~~The unity of~~ these qualities constitute what we may call "aesthetic object." We should accordingly make a distinction between "art work" and "aesthetic object." An aesthetic object is the art work perceived aesthetically; and it is perceived aesthetically when a person actualizes in his or her experience the fullness of its aesthetic qualities. The medium of this actualization is the process of aesthetic perception.

Now in what sense does aesthetic quality "make" an experience aesthetic? I raise this question because one might assume, or imply, that "an experience" as a mental event can exist as an independent reality and that aesthetic quality acts on it in a certain way and so causes it to be or become aesthetic. This way of viewing the relationship between "experience" and "aesthetic quality" is naive and unwarranted, mainly because an experience-in-itself does not exist. An experience is always an experience of something; therefore, its identity is determined by the sort of object which actuates it. In daily life we are always engaged in doing something, mental or physical; the experiences we undergo constitute a stream of events. What distinguishes an experience from another in this stream is the unique quality—mood—which one enjoys as a value in having that experience. The point which merit special attention here is that experiences do not simply happen; they do not exist discretely. They are always the experiences of a person, a conscious subject, who presides over them and who organizes and can claim them to be his or hers.

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