**Aesthetic Myopia**

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I sketch an **edificationist**account of experiences of beauty as an **achievement**, then describe three kinds of **aesthetic myopia**, defined as failures to achieve openness to kinds of beauty.

1. **Beauty and edification.**

Core claim: people sometimes experience Bs of a kind that are new to them, ones significantly unlike any they have previously experienced (Cooper). Such experiences require various kinds of attainment:

1. exercises of various virtues and other excellences of character
2. exercises of imagination, effort, and intelligence
3. initiation into new traditions, practices, and cultural contexts

Such attainments are **edifying**: educative and improving: ‘[t]he life of a person who comes to recognize beauties of a new kind has become a better one, for he or she has made good a lack that has hitherto occluded beauties that are there to be experienced’ (Cooper).

Example: Baudelaire’s review of 1855 Paris *Exposition Universelle*: a European observer can only come to appreciate ‘weird, contorted’ Chinese buildings if he can ‘bring about within himself a transformation’ and ‘learn by his own effort to share in the life of the society’.

Such ‘efforts’ require (i) a ‘sympathy … so penetrating’ as to open up ‘a whole new world of ideas’ and (ii) an ‘impartiality’ enabling one to undergo such a ‘transformation’.

A sympathetically impartial stance reveals what is Bful about Chinese buildings – qualities woefully lacking in those who can – or will – see them *only* as ‘weird’.

Edification presupposes **kallic pluralism**: the existence of different *kinds* of B (Sartwell), a ‘polytheism of B’ (Eco). Certain Bs can only be identified and appreciated if one is edified.

What ‘other kinds of B’? Some examples from Japanese aesthetics (Keene, Parkes):

* east Asian ‘aesthetics of the indistinct’ (Cooper, Tanizaki)
* *wabi* – B of imperfection, simplicity, austerity – different from ‘vivid B’ (Takeno Jōō)
* *sabi* – B of the worn, weathered, ‘call to mind the past that made them’ (Tanizaki)
* *yūgen* – ‘mysterious profundity’ – evoking depths to our world we cannot understand

All different Bs from those celebrating perfection/richness/exuberance/*claritas* (Aquinas)

Appreciating these kinds of B requires that we ‘open ourselves to new Bs’ of ‘weathered, tarnished, scarred’ (Sartwell) – enter into moral world of Buddhism and to ‘learn to appreciate a B that we were not born seeing’ (de Botton) – ditto Shinto (Kasulis).

Contemporary resonances: Irvin on *aesthetic exploration* of marginalised kinds of bodily B by cultivating ‘a sense of adventure, a willingness to encounter and celebrate the unique and surprising [and] to tolerate and persist through moments of experience that are jarring’.

Ditto environmental aesthetics (Macfarlane on mountains) – kinds of gardens – ruins.

1. **Aesthetic myopia.**

For an edificationist, appreciation of new Bs is an **achievement** that inspires **happiness**, both the direct pleasure afforded by the B and an indirect happiness of correcting prior limitations.

But there is a negative converse phenomenon: **aesthetic myopia** – a limited, constrained aesthetic outlook which has two dimensions:

1. **narrowness** – failures to imagine or experience the broader range of kinds of B
2. **shallowness** – failures to appreciate deeper conceptions of the significance of B

Consider three general types of aesthetic myopia: **facilism**, **chauvinism**, and **philistinism**.

1. **Facilism**

Core conviction: ‘experience of something as Bful too facile, simple, and immediate to invite information description and explanation’ (Cooper). For facilists, a vocabulary of success/failure makes no sense in relation to B:

* B as sensations affording ‘occasions of pleasure’ (Hutcheson)
* B as simple property one just ‘sees’ – no ‘education’ required (Moore)
* judgments of B ‘simply … express certain feelings’ (Ayer)
* B a ‘sensation’ of pleasure so ‘feeling is the necessary and sufficient condition’ for the Bful – B is ‘irreducibly subjective’, ‘not a serious enough concept’ for aesthetics or art and in fact a term that ‘has completely lost its meaning’ (Kirwan)
* Harvey on ‘contrived depthlessness’ of po-mo art – ‘there is no profundity, there are no depths, because everything occurs at the surface level’ (quoted in Wheale).

Facilism is aesthetically myopic: it insists that allegedly ‘deeper’ accounts of the nature and value of experiences of B are senseless, confused, exaggerated, erroneous, high-falutin’.

Some deeper conceptions of B:

* Platonic and Neoplatonic association of B with longing and love (Mothersill) – as echoed by Nehemas and Scarry on B relating to desire, aspiration, hope, life.

- not just Western: Buddhist monks trained to ‘go beautifully in order to attract the people’s hearts’, arousing ‘longing’ for the ‘holy life’ (Samuels – cf. Kidd).

* B is a value that ‘defines what a fully human life means’ (Danto)
* B offers ‘the promise of happiness’ (Stendahl – cf. Nehemas)
* Gadamer: the function of B is to ‘bridge the chasm between the ideal and real’ by lending ‘visibility’ to an ideal – ‘a potentially whole and holy order of things’ – of which ‘the experience of B’ is an ‘invocation’.

Such claims are complex and require articulation and careful appraisal. But facilism maintains that such exercises *cannot* yield anything intelligible – certainly no ‘promise of happiness’ etc.

Moreover, facilist will struggle to provide satisfying explanations of (a) why beauty *matters* to people as it does and (b) the moral and religious significance of experiences of beauty.

1. **Chauvinism and philistinism.**

If facilism is *shallow*, then chauvinism is *narrow*, and philistinism is more radical than either.

1. **Chauvinism**

Core conviction: the only standards or kinds of B are those of one’s own culture, class, or circle. If so, talk of ‘other/new/alien Bs’ is oxymoronic, that ‘what a person currently finds Bful should be taken as the limit of all that he or she can ever love’ (de Botton).

Aesthetic chauvinism – passive presumption of one’s own canons of B, denial of other canons of B, derogation of alien Bs:

* C19 European attitudes to Chinese art tradition (cf. Chu and Milam):
  + ‘the Chinese lack what is meant by the word imagination’ (Théodore Duret)
  + Chinese art is all ‘drab sadness and miserable boredom’ (Enrico Cernuschi)
* Natsume Soseki ‘once laughed at because I invited someone for a snow-viewing’ or admiring mossy path only to be told the gardener would soon ‘scrape [it] away’.

But note (i) aesthetic chauvinism is not exclusively European (Tanziaki and Yanagi dismissed Western art as gaudy/vulgar – C 20th Japanism – Hiroshi Nara on Kuki Shūzō) and (ii) *inverted chauvinism* as repudiation of Bs celebrated in one’s own culture/tradition in favour of ‘Others’

Chauvinism is aesthetically myopic because it narrows the range of kinds of Bs one will countenance to those already recognised and endorsed in one’s culture/class/community.

1. **Philistinism**

Core conviction: B not sufficiently weighty/important to merit serious concern or interest

It often extends to derogation of aesthetic concern and the arts as effete, élite, snobbish.

For a philistine, there is no achievement or reward for undertaking the work of edifying self-transformation – no deeper meaning, significance, no sense that B *matters* (Scruton).

Consider two – theoretically specific – kinds of philistinism:

* **scientism**: evo- or neuro-aesthetics: B is reduced to a non-aesthetic value.

– B as a ‘biological adaptation’ helping to impel ‘the survival of our genes’ (Etcoff)

– B of music as ‘auditory cheesecake’ (Pinker)

Such claims wittily criticised by Tallis and parodied by Ramachandran.

* **kalliphobia** – derogation of B as a serious aesthetic ideal, now ‘epidemic in *avant-garde* circles since the early 20th century’ – evident in artists for whom ‘the mere whiff of B in one’s work is tantamount to selling out to the establishment’ (Danto).

For kalliphobes, good art should be *challenging*/*shocking*/*provocative*, not *Bful*

– ‘death of B’ theses (eg Dada) are often exaggerated – B persists because our concept usually develops rather than dies (Cooper on ‘disappearance thesis’)

– Steiner vocabulary of ‘exile’ and ‘rejection’ of B – ‘B is back’ (Schjeldahl).

1. **Summary**

Overcoming these kinds of aesthetic myopia in oneself requires edifying self-transformation: it is a genuine and deep achievement that better enables us to explore ‘perpetual possibilities for the experience of beauty’ (Sartwell).

IJK

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