

# Moral and Aesthetic Judgments Reconsidered

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Traditionally in philosophy, ethics and aesthetics are bracketed together under the heading of “value judgment.” This classification tends to obscure important differences between the domains of ethical and aesthetic judgment as we normally practice them. It is worth trying to gauge the differences between the two domains as they are manifested in our ordinary thought, to situate our normal practices of moral and aesthetic judgment in relation to each other, and to compare the two modes of evaluation in order to see where they diverge, overlap, and correspond. Despite philosophers who would view them as radically dissimilar systems of thought and feeling, the two realms should be marked off not by their mutually exclusive subject matters, since they have overlapping subject matters, or in terms of the kinds of properties, which are indicative rather than constitutive of the real difference, but in terms of the specific nature of the two kinds of judgment.

## 1 Making the Distinction

One seemingly obvious way to understand the difference between ethical and aesthetic judgment is in terms of their subject matter. It might be said that moral judgments usually, perhaps exclusively, concern human conduct, character, and psychological states, whereas aesthetic judgments are typically used to evaluate artifacts and features of the natural world. While there is something right about this idea, which if nothing else provides a good rule of thumb of the everyday application of these concepts, it is clear that there must be more to the distinction than this. Works of art are regularly subject to moral assessment, and there is a

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lively debate as to the relevance of the evaluations to their aesthetic status.<sup>1</sup> Less obviously, conduct and character can be judged aesthetically, as when we praise an action for its gracefulness, or a person for his wit or charm.

What makes such cases exceptions to the rule is the fact that they involve the ascription of what we take to be aesthetic properties, such as charm or grace, to the typical subjects of moral assessment and what we take to be moral properties to the typical subjects of aesthetic assessment. This suggests a promising way of distinguishing the two kinds of value, in terms of the presence of two distinctive sets of properties that include rightness, wrongness, courage, and justice on the one hand, and beauty, ugliness, and delicacy on the other. On this view, goodness and badness, equally attributable in both domains, would serve as placeholders indicating the presence of positive and negative value of either kind, or of another kind altogether. Apart from giving some names to the problem, however, this mode of distinction does not tell us a great deal. We may ask what the supposed aesthetic qualities have in common that distinguishes them from their moral counterparts. There are also a surprisingly wide range of borderline cases, as in instances of the so-called social graces. We may ask if the tact of an ambassador is more like wit or more like kindness. When a general is praised for his noble dignity, we may wonder if this is a matter of his grand bearing or his moral seriousness, or both. What are we doing when we commend someone for a life that is harmonious or censure the person for a life that is frivolous? Aside from such ambiguous cases, there seem to be occasions on which moral terms are used in an aesthetic way and aesthetic terms are used in a moral way. The author of a guidebook may promise noble mountains and kindly valleys as forms of praise but hardly as forms of moral approbation. A courtly poet may commend his lady for her sweetness and the beauty of her soul, perhaps meaning that she is generous and good-natured.

Furthermore, a classification in terms of evaluative properties misses the different structure of property-ascriptions in the two domains. The so-called thin moral properties, rightness and wrongness, have a stable connection with positive and negative evaluation respectively, and play a governing role in the application of more specific predicates. Usually, other kinds of moral approval will be withheld from an action if it was the wrong thing to do; at the least, we feel uncomfortable about bestowing such equivocal praise, and someone who thought that the wrongness of an action was no objection at all to performing the action would have put himself well beyond the moral pale. The aesthetic realm, by contrast, does not usually exhibit such orderliness. While seeking to do the right thing is arguably a necessary condition for genuine moral deliberation, many artists would scoff at the suggestion that they are striving to create beauty, seeking instead for such diverse features as grandeur, poignancy, wit, difficulty, even ugliness. While “beautiful” is generally a term of commendation wherever it is applied, it is not coextensive with aesthetic value. Members of more than one artistic movement have denied outright that beauty is a desirable quality in works of art, and even for more

<sup>1</sup> See Noel Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 36 no. 3, (1996); see also Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” in J. Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean, “Moderate Autonomism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 38, no. 2, (1998).

conventionally-minded individuals, the word seems out of place when applied to some artistic forms, most novels, for example, and to many things in nature. Sharks and volcanoes are fine to look at, but not because they are beautiful.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there seems to be no negative aesthetic term that cannot be pressed into service as an expression of praise for some new and surprising work. In general, aesthetic discourse exhibits a degree of fluidity or open-endedness that ordinary moral discourse lacks.

While such distinctions in terms of subject-matter are important to our commonsense understanding of how ethics and aesthetics are related, the most fruitful way to understand the nature and scope of the differences between these kinds of judgment is by an analysis of the judgments themselves. While we cannot ignore their subject-matter and content, a better understanding of the relationship requires a fuller grasp of the conditions under which they are and can be made, the means by which they are justified, and their relation to other judgments and psychological states.

## 2 Santayana and Hampshire

An early and influential attempt to trace the differing logical shapes of the two domains was made by George Santayana. In *The Sense of Beauty*, Santayana is chiefly concerned with aesthetic appreciation, which he begins to characterize by contrasting it with moral evaluation. He observes two main points of dissimilarity, both concerning the nature of the values discerned in each form of judgment. The first concerns their polarity. Aesthetic judgments are typically positive, whereas moral judgments are in general negative. As Santayana puts it: “The appreciation of beauty and its embodiment in the arts belong to our holiday life,” as on occasions when the burden of necessity and fear is lifted and we are free to enjoy ourselves.<sup>3</sup> We are thus naturally disposed, Santayana claims, to employ our aesthetic faculties in ways that afford us pleasure, and the resulting experience will tend to be an experience of appreciation. In contrast, on his view, with morality, we try to “escape certain dreadful evils to which our nature exposes us, death, hunger, disease, weariness, isolation and contempt.”<sup>4</sup> Moral judgment primarily comprises the various modes of censure by which we dissuade each other from increasing the stock of such evils, and its typical form is thus the negative appraisal of what is wrong, bad, or vicious. There are negative aesthetic values, of which ugliness is the paradigm example, but, according to Santayana, their occurrences are either aesthetically negligible or their significance is primarily “practical and moral,” as when we are morally outraged at the erection of a hideous new building which will cause its inhabitants and their neighbors genuine distress.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Aurel Kolnai, *Ethics, Value and Reality* (London: Athlone Press, 1977), pp. 187–210.

<sup>3</sup> George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955), p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Santayana, *op. cit.*

The second contrast that Santayana draws between moral and aesthetic value concerns their immediacy. Because its purpose is mainly that of preventing evils and perhaps, to some extent, of procuring certain goods, moral value as such is a matter of mere utility. Santayana seems to hold that this is true in at least two senses. One sense is that our judgments regarding the moral features of actions and agents are based, not upon the apprehension of their intrinsic properties alone, but upon “the consciousness of benefits probably involved.”<sup>6</sup> Another sense is that the moral features of actions and persons which we thus discern are not positively or negatively valued for their own sake, but only in respect of their tendency to increase or decrease the occurrence of further features which are intrinsically good or bad *per se*. Of the features, aesthetic goods are, on the positive side, the most pervasive, because beauty is supremely worth having “in itself and for its own sake.”<sup>7</sup> Santayana seems to suggest that in the last analysis aesthetic goods are “the only pure and positive values in life,” in that they alone would survive in a world from which “the possibility of loss or variation” had been removed.<sup>8</sup> Aesthetic values are also intrinsic in the first sense, in that our apprehension of them is based on the intrinsic features of objects, and not on any of their relational properties.

A later and more systematic comparison between ethical and aesthetic judgment is to be found in “Logic and Appreciation” by Stuart Hampshire<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Santayana, Hampshire is not primarily concerned with aesthetics and questions whether philosophical aesthetics is a *bona fide* subject at all. For Hampshire, the link between aesthetics and ethics, implied by the common term “value-judgment” used in classification, merely begs the question of the status of aesthetics. He does not lay down criteria for what qualifies an area of study, but the assumption seems to be that a given discourse must offer definite solutions to a distinctive set of problems or questions. Hampshire asks: “What questions under what conditions are actually answered by aesthetic judgments?”<sup>10</sup> His view that aesthetics needs to be dissociated from ethics is based on the conclusion that no satisfactory response to the question can be provided.

Moral problems, according to Hampshire, are set for us by the world we live in. As he puts it: “throughout any day of one’s life, and from the moment of waking, one is confronted with situations which demand action.”<sup>11</sup> We cannot avoid making practical decisions, and such decisions, even decisions to do nothing, leave us subject to moral praise and censure. Works of art, in contrast, are responses to self-imposed problems set up by an artist, and aesthetic decisions that an artist makes could have been avoided or made differently, if the artist had conceived of his task in another way. Practical decision-making in the light of moral considerations is obligatory and unavoidable. Aesthetic decisions are merely gratuitous. Because moral problems are unavoidable, Hampshire holds that “a rational man looks for

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

some general method of solving them,” and that such an approach is definitive of rationality.<sup>12</sup> He maintains that “consistent policies are needed in order to meet common human predicaments,” by which he seems to mean that, since we all have to face the same problems of action, we want to be able to hold each other to account for how we respond to them, and the only way to do this is to establish commonly held principles of decision-making, and to make moral judgments only where we are prepared to commit to the concomitant generalization.<sup>13</sup> Aesthetic problems, being “gratuitous,” exhibit none of these features, and we therefore do not require consistency in judgment, and institute no principles of taste against which individual decisions may be appraised.<sup>14</sup>

Because the problems it concerns are part of our predicament, imposed upon us by the world and faced by all in common, moral discussion is purposive, both in the sense that it has to do with the point of actions in attempts to solve the problems that an agent faces, and in the sense of being practical with respect to what should be done or should have been done. For this reason, and because of the appeal to principles implicit in all moralizing, Hampshire maintains that “the moralist who condemns an action must indicate what ought to have been done in its place; for something had to be done, some choice between relative evils made.”<sup>15</sup> The right action is the best available in the circumstances, where the alternatives are not up to us to decide, and if someone cannot suggest a better alternative by putting himself in the place of the agent, his censure will carry no weight. An aesthetic third party, a critic or spectator, does not have the same responsibility. He may, according to Hampshire, “reject the work done without being required to show what the artist should have done,” because this is a problem for the artist, who set the parameters of his choice in the first place, and perhaps did so badly.<sup>16</sup> Moral judgments, Hampshire says, are always judgments of preferential choice, rankings of alternatives as responses to particular problems, whereas the standard for a work of art is not, on his view, “the best available in the circumstances,” since the circumstances are of an artist’s own devising, and critics cannot be expected to reinvent them on his behalf.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the relevant circumstances for each work of art will be different, and it is thus proper for a critic to view it in isolation, seeking its special beauty and not attempting to compare it, either advantageously or otherwise, with any other work.

The upshot of all this, Hampshire claims, is that moral judgments ought to be based on reasons, which a moralist needs to be able to supply on demand, whereas aesthetic judgment exhibits a reasonless “total irresponsibility.”<sup>18</sup> To give a reason for a moral judgment, on Hampshire’s account, is to appeal to a general principle, pointing to particular features of a supposedly right action in virtue of which any

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

relevantly similar action would be right. Moral judgment can be reason-giving in this sense, since moral principles are available, and it is required to provide reasons, since consistency is obligatory in ethics. In the absence of principles of taste, the equivalent appeal is not available to support aesthetic judgments, but then the particularity of each work of art, and the divorce from any practical context, make reason-giving irrelevant. Hampshire concludes that: “it is unnatural to ask ‘why is that picture or sonata good’ in parallel with ‘why was that the right thing to do?’.”<sup>19</sup> Some of the assumptions that Santayana and Hampshire make seem quaint, and Hampshire’s arguments in particular have been successfully challenged by a number of writers in recent years.<sup>20</sup> But whatever their faults, they raise most of the important issues for the analysis of the complex relationship between moral and critical judgment.

### 3 Polarity and Immediacy

Santayana holds that the *differentia* of aesthetic value *vis à vis* the moral are that aesthetic values is primarily positive intrinsic whereas moral value is a matter of utility. He traces this alleged disparity between the two domains to the fact that morality mainly has to do with the avoidance of suffering, while aesthetics has to do with objects that are actively pleasurable or satisfying. Even if this were true, however, it would not by itself be enough to guarantee such a great difference in polarity. That would depend on the actual quality of human conduct in relation to suffering, and on the actual quality of our environment with respect to what is aesthetically pleasurable. If people are frequently callous and sadistic, and only rarely go out of their way to relieve the distress of others, then a system of judgments having to do with suffering-avoidance will come out mainly negative. Again, if our environment is in general pleasing and if artists are generally successful, and if things are set up so that we can easily ignore blemishes and get access to beauties, then our judgments of pleurability will tend to be positive. Perhaps both situations obtain, although the notion of a generally pleasing environment with successful artists seems unduly optimistic even if the notion of people being frequently callous and sadistic has a depressing ring of truth about it. But if that is so, then the resulting polarities will be as much a result of the contingent facts of our situation and conduct as they are of the necessary function of the two kinds of judgment.

A related polarity claim is made by Aurel Kolnai in his essay on “Aesthetic and Moral Experience,” where he points to the “unequal thematic primacy” of values and disvalues in the two kinds of judgment.<sup>21</sup> While we do speak of ugliness and of moral goodness, he maintains that ugliness distresses us less, and goodness pleases us less, than do evil and beauty respectively. Where Santayana’s claim seems to

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Eddy M. Zemach, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Ethics-Aesthetics Parallelism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 29, no. 3 (1971).

<sup>21</sup> See Kolnai, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–210.

spring from certain consequentialist assumptions about the function of morality, according to Kolnai the disparity is a result of what he takes to be its overwhelmingly deontic character. If morality is, as Kolnai believes, primarily to be expressed in terms of duty and strict obligation, then moral failings will indeed tend to occupy our notice more vividly than the corresponding attainments. In the case of a strict duty, such as the duty of not lying, observance is the default position, and hence relatively uninteresting. Infringement of the principle can occur in many forms and for many reasons, and requires our urgent attention to bring matters into line with the expected norm. Like a machine which we rely on to perform a well-defined set of tasks, when all goes well we do not notice, but when it breaks down we can hardly think of anything else.

Kolnai's observations seem correct for morality as he conceives of it. They accord less well with a moral theory in which the creative attainment of positive goods is stressed, or even a moral theory, which leaves room for imperfect as well as perfect duties. Both Kolnai and Santayana seem to be wide of the mark, however, in their assertion of the relative insignificance of aesthetic disvalue. On occasions in which we are consciously and deliberately devoted to aesthetic experience, we naturally tend to seek objects of satisfaction rather than woe, but as far as our day-to-day impressions are concerned, ugliness is at least as prevalent as beauty, and are the source of at least as much distress as beauty is of pleasure. Santayana is right to say that outstanding ugliness, at least when it is man-made, tends to become a matter of moral censure. But it does so because of its being aesthetically offensive in a high degree. Perhaps the most we can expect is that moral judgment will display a bias toward negative evaluations, while in aesthetic judgment positive and negative evaluations will be more equally weighted.

With respect to the immediacy of the two kinds of value, Santayana's argument appears to reveal confusion, though with a kernel of truth. As Christine Korsgaard has pointed out, there is no simple opposition between intrinsic and instrumental values.<sup>22</sup> Intrinsic goods, in the sense of objects that are somehow good in themselves, are to be contrasted with extrinsic goods that are good from some relation they have to other objects. Instrumental goods should be valued as means to some further end and are to be contrasted not with intrinsic goods but with final goods, which are to be valued for their own sake or as ends. Santayana does appear to conflate these distinctions. He thinks that aesthetic values are intrinsic inasmuch as our judgments are "based on the character of the immediate experience, and never ... on the ideal of an eventual utility in the object," which seems to connote both a non-relational source of value in a beautiful object itself, and a non-instrumental appreciation of an object as an end and not as a means.<sup>23</sup> Again, on his view, moral value is non-intrinsic inasmuch as it is good "because of the value of its consequences," and because it is "merely useful ... or excellent only as means."<sup>24</sup> Putting aside the apparent conflict with his earlier claim that moral valuations are rarely if ever positive, it seems clear that an unreflective consequentialist bias

<sup>22</sup> See "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* vol. 92, no. 2, (1983).

<sup>23</sup> Santayana, op. cit. p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

informs both claims. Followers of Kant, as well as Aristotle, would be unlikely to say that the value of a good will or character lay in its causal relation to certain good outcomes, or that neither was worth valuing as an end in itself.

At a more general level, however, morality as a whole, whatever its exact structure of values, is useful insofar as it allows us to achieve certain ends that have crucially to do with making the world a less dreadful place in ways which do not have to be characterized in moral terms. There is, as Santayana observes, something aesthetical, about the “consecration” of aspects of morality which are removed from fighting against suffering.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the whole practice of aesthetic valuation does not subserve some further end. Even if we do value the arts in general for their contribution to human happiness, their contribution is still to be understood in terms of a distinctively aesthetic enjoyment. In Korsgaard’s terms, the practice of morality is an extrinsic good inasmuch as its goodness depends on its relation to certain non-moral aspects of the world, and even if we value certain moral properties for their own sake, the propriety of our doing so is contingent on this relation. By contrast, our aesthetic practices as a whole are intrinsic goods inasmuch as their value does not depend on the value of anything that is not aesthetic, and we could properly value aesthetic excellence as an end in itself even if all connections to non-aesthetic goods were severed.

#### 4 Practicality

At the heart of Hampshire’s thesis are the unavoidability of moral decision-making and the comparative gratuitousness of aesthetics. This dichotomy arises from the claim that, while we are all forced into taking moral choices because we have to take action and all action is subject to moral appraisal, we do not have to make aesthetic decisions as these have no necessary connection with our active lives. Moral evaluation is practical, both because we make moral evaluations in answering questions about what to do and because moral evaluations tend to have implications for what someone making a moral evaluation actually does. Aesthetic judgment, on this line of argument, is not practical. An aesthetic judgment only indicates whether it is good for some object to be as it is, and occurs only in a contemplative mood, without issuing in action. There is some truth in this. Most of the aesthetic responses of a spectator will not obviously be responses to actions, except in cases where the aesthetic qualities of an action are being assessed. This can be misleading, however. When the object of assessment is a work of art, its aesthetic qualities are the result of a series of practical decisions taken by an artist, which the artist makes primarily on aesthetic grounds. Evaluating a work consists partly in evaluating the actions of its creator, something which is obvious in the case of the performing arts, but equally true elsewhere. With respect to actions issuing from judgments, the moral case is not as exclusively practical and the aesthetic case is not as exquisitely disinterested as proponents of this view make out. Negotiating a troubling moral dilemma is partly a matter of working out what to do but also a matter of trying to see the situation

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



correctly and understanding where the moral boundaries really lie. This is true even if we believe the boundaries to be fixed by our own considered attitudes, as a moral subjectivist holds. As well, while critical scrutiny is a matter of trying to see whatever is in question for what it is, critical scrutiny also has implications for how we will behave toward whatever is in question in the future. We may go out of our way to hear music by composers we judge to possess artistic worth and avoid sexual liaisons with people we find ugly. As we are apt to exaggerate the role that moral considerations play in our day-to-day decision-making, so we forget the number and variety of things we do for aesthetic reasons.<sup>26</sup> We also forget that others make aesthetic evaluations of the results of our own actions, even if we do not expect them to. We can no more escape the aesthetic estimation of others than we can be free of praise or blame of others for our moral choices.

There is a difference between the two domains, which concerns the permissibility of opting out. An agent cannot avoid the aesthetic judgments that other people choose to make regarding his own person and behavior, but he can reject them and announce that he does not care about his own appearance or deportment. Such an act of refusal allows an agent to bypass criticism from an aesthetic point of view, after which, he is no longer obliged to take account of such matters. The same is not true in ethics. An announcement by an agent that he does not care whether his actions are right or wrong does not exempt him from his moral obligations, even if he continues to fulfill them anyway. Failure to take account of good and evil is a moral fault, whereas a lack of concern for aesthetic value puts an agent beyond the reach of aesthetic evaluation. While there are amoralists who believe that morality is optional, and super-aesthetes who view style as obligatory, our intuitions presuppose a distinction between hypothetical and categorical judgments, allowing individuals to opt out in aesthetic but not moral evaluation.

The exception to the hypothetical nature of aesthetic imperatives has to do with artists themselves. At least with respect to their work, artists voluntarily take on the role of aesthetes, and paying attention to aesthetic value becomes for them strictly obligatory. A painter or poet who tried to opt out and announced that he had no concern for the quality of his own work would be hard to make sense of. Insofar as we continue to regard such a person as an artist, we do not think that he is any more free to reject aesthetic evaluation than the rest of us are to reject moral appraisal. The fact that only few people are artists, whereas we are all moral agents, creates an asymmetry. In each case, being subject to appraisal goes with taking on a particular role, but the distribution of the roles is strongly asymmetrical. To this extent, Hampshire is right to point out that “the critic is not another artist, as the moral censor is another agent.”<sup>27</sup>

## 5 Artist, Critic, and Agent

The existence of distinct and restricted roles such as the roles of artist and critic creates interesting disanalogies between the moral and aesthetic realms. For artists

<sup>26</sup> See David Novitz, *The Boundaries of Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Hampshire, *op. cit.*, p.165.

and, to a lesser extent, critics, we readily acknowledge the existence of aesthetic expertise. Full aesthetic agency is a matter of talent and practice beyond the reach of most people. An artist judges in the light of a body of specialist knowledge, using specially developed faculties that most of us do not pretend to possess. In contrast, moral agency is a democratic free-for-all. The best actions are, within the reach of all, or so we like to think. Although moral virtue exists in greater and lesser degrees, it is something of an article of faith that we are each capable of knowing the right action to perform when the moment comes to act. Perhaps the contrast is a matter of a residual Romantic veneration of artists on the one hand, and of Protestant moral egalitarianism on the other, although Plato makes a similar distinction in the *Protagoras*. The sophist asks his audience to imagine a society in which flute-playing is as important to civic harmony as virtue is in Athens. In such a situation, flute-playing would assume the social place of virtue. From being a minority expertise, passed down through a few musical families, it would become the business of everyone. If the art were taught and encouraged everywhere, everybody would develop considerable ability at it, although there would remain differences arising from natural talent. Protagoras is not a moral egalitarian, but he does believe that the differences in virtue to be found in a civilized society are small when compared to the turpitude of barbarians who “lack education and law-courts and the pervasive pressure to cultivate virtue.”<sup>28</sup>

Given our own egalitarian assumptions about moral agency, we cannot, as Hampshire points out, get away with criticizing the actions of others without recommending a better course. We expect to be able to put ourselves in the shoes of other people without placing excessive strain on our imagination. In criticism of works of art, by contrast, critics are permitted to reject without recommending. They are not expected to have the gifts that artists have. But this observation needs to be qualified. As Eddy M. Zemach points out in his response to Hampshire, a critic who does not tell an artist his business explicitly may do so by implication.<sup>29</sup> Simply by finding fault in some aspect of a work, a critic implies that the aspect should be changed. If he says, for example, that the orchestration in an *adagio* is too dense, he does not have to spell out that he believes that a sparser orchestration would be an improvement. Moral censure also often carries unspoken recommendation. If an agent announces that the prison system in his country treats inmates too harshly, it goes without saying that a milder system is what he has in mind. A negative judgment of either kind that carried no such implication would not be very informative. Similarly, just as the critic needs to have something of the creative intelligence of an artist, so an artist needs something of the powers of discrimination of a critic. In taking aesthetic decisions, he puts himself in the position of a spectator to the finished work, trying to assess the relative effect of each proposed change. If a scene that was intended to be moving ends up being inadvertently funny, or if an attempt at musical sonority comes through as merely muddy and indistinct, then he can be faulted for his failure of critical imagination.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 327a–d, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> See Zemach, *op. cit.*

Much as we acknowledge artistic expertise, we defer to fine critical judgment in a way that is largely unheard of in ethics. Even if a listener reacts with indifference bordering on mild dislike to all works within a particular genre of music, he knows that people who are well-versed in the genre make fine discriminations between individual works and regard the best of them as performances of high aesthetic merit. It would be a mark of prejudice in a listener to treat their own considered reactions as canonical. Unless the listener has strong reason to doubt the insight of people conversant with the genre, it behoves him to suspend judgment. Likewise, even if a listener is drawn to works which more seasoned judges regard as vulgar or meretricious, the listener may suspend judgment as to aesthetic merit. A comparable deference in ethics is much rarer. If an agent can honestly see nothing wrong with a certain proscribed course of action, although he may refrain from engaging in the course of action in order to avoid censure, he will not continue to regard it as wrong just because other people who are seemingly qualified maintain that it is wrong.

## 6 Acquaintance and Description

Arbiters of aesthetic taste receive deference largely because they are supposed to have more direct experience of the art forms in question and are also better versed in them than the rest of us. In ethics, although we still maintain respect for people whose broad experiences of life gives them enhanced *savoir faire*, direct experience is not thought to be a necessary condition of sound moral judgment. We cheerfully condemn the vicious actions of people who died many years before we were born and consider ourselves qualified to determine the rights and wrongs of purely hypothetical actions in imaginary situations. In contrast, it seems that sound aesthetic judgments can be made only on direct confrontation with the subject matter they concern. Direct confrontation seems to be a prerequisite for the bare possibility of aesthetic judgment. A person may come to believe that Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* is beautiful on the basis of description, but he cannot judge that it is beautiful unless he has seen it or at least seen a good reproduction of it. Exactly how immediate the confrontation must be may be moot, but there appears to be what Michael Tanner takes to be a principle of acquaintance operating in the domain of aesthetics that is largely foreign to the domain of ethics.<sup>30</sup>

According to Tanner, the principle of acquaintance is in place because the aesthetic properties of an object cannot be inferred from any description of the formal features of the object. This is a corollary of the unprincipled nature of aesthetic judgment, and hence does not generally apply in ethics where an appeal to moral axioms can carry us from description to judgment. Its application to aesthetics is perhaps less universal than Tanner supposes. Where the conventions governing an art form are strong and associated with a precise descriptive vocabulary, a description passed between two expert practitioners might well be sufficient for informed aesthetic judgment. When it comes to architecture, a description of a

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<sup>30</sup> See Michael Tanner, "Ethics and Aesthetics Are – ?", in José Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner, eds., *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002).

simple building that included its dimensions, the style and period of its construction, the materials from which it was built, and the orientation of windows, doors, pillars, and decorative features might give an architectural expert with a strong visual imagination all the material he needed for an assessment of its merits. Most of the arts are not like this, and the utility of description-based judgment in architecture would stop well short of Chartres Cathedral. What this possibility shows, however, is that the need for direct acquaintance is a matter of the extreme sensitivity and fineness of grain exhibited by our aesthetic judgments, as well as the imprecision of the descriptive terminology associated with most art forms. To judge adequately of the merits of a work of art requires responsiveness to the effects and interactions of a many features, the smallest of which can make a comprehensive difference to the impression made by the whole. Given this, verbal description is rarely an adequate substitute for direct acquaintance.

Whether we think that the domain of ethics shares this feature will depend on our commitments in normative moral theory. Absolutist deontologists will be most likely to accept the adequacy of descriptions for moral judgment. From their point of view, once an action has been identified as an instance of lying or betrayal, it will be irrelevant, and perhaps a mark of moral degeneracy, to plead extenuating circumstances in the form of good intentions or fortunate consequences. For most consequentialists, however, the consideration of further facts will always have the potential to alter a moral judgment. For most consequentialists, the problem is not the inadequacy of our descriptive terms, since the features of an act and its consequences relevant to moral assessment are in most cases readily describable, but the possibility that an adequate description would have to be indefinitely long. A similar problem arises in direct acquaintance, however, since not all causally significant features can be discerned and not all consequences enumerated, which leads to the familiar objection that consequentialists make moral knowledge impossible.

There is some reason to believe that the distinction between description and acquaintance will be only minimally applicable. Proponents of virtue often assert the so-called uncodifiability of moral judgment thesis that the range of features exhibited by a situation or of an action in response to the situation, mesh together to form an intricate pattern in which no element bears a preordained moral relevance. The contribution of each element cannot be assessed outside of its relationship to the others. On this basis, it is often said that correct judgment must be determined not by the application of any general theory or system of rules, but simply by close attention, typically on the part of a virtuous agent, to the overall pattern exhibited in each particular case. This does not strictly entail a rule of acquaintance in ethics, but it does suggest that, on such an account, moral judgment will require a more intimate familiarity with the particulars than is provided by typical philosophical examples.

Aesthetic appraisal exhibits a greater concern for positive evaluation than does moral judgment, although this fact depends on certain unfortunate features of human conduct and on some controversial aspects of moral theory. There is a sense in which aesthetic value is more fully intrinsic than its moral counterpart. Aesthetic judgment has some practical content and implications, but it does not have the

categorical relationship of morality with action. Aesthetic practice is subject to expertise in judgment and is marked by a differentiation in roles between agent and critic largely foreign to morality, but the roles are not as rigidly defined as is sometimes supposed. While direct acquaintance is probably always necessary for competent aesthetic judgment, the same is not generally held true in ethics, though some forms of moral theory support a limited principle of acquaintance. If all of this seems heterogeneous and somewhat equivocal, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, depending as it does upon the peculiarities of our often untidy evaluative practices, is not simple. It changes with time and is always open to further revision. Past communities of judgment have not observed the distinction in the same way, or with the same degree of strictness, as we do now. Individual moralists have repeatedly attempted to persuade their audiences to make the division in a different place, or to dispense with it altogether. Such revisionist enterprises are historically and conceptually interesting. They also enhance our understanding of how contemporary moral philosophers negotiate the debatable boundary with aesthetic matters.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

Moral and aesthetic judgments are, as far as most of us are concerned, usually distinct. The zones of ambiguity and continuity are restricted and the respects in which they differ are numerous. If the attempt to separate them out is in tension with our normal ways of thinking, then any theory which would have us assimilate them both to the same model also does violence to ordinary thought by compression. But common sense is not always right, especially if the common element is taken to refer to majority or mainstream modes of judgment. Assimilationist and separatist accounts of ethics and aesthetics need not be presented as schemata for ordinary evaluative practice. Someone might accept the position that moral and aesthetic judgments are usually distinct and yet point out that boundaries are not forever fixed by what most people accept and that within certain limits of intelligibility there is room for individuals and communities to reconsider the divide between ethics and aesthetics on their own terms. Perhaps most of us do tend to keep our moral and aesthetic faculties in separate boxes and take the deliverances of ethics more seriously, but perhaps we should not do so, either, on realist grounds, because this practice misrepresents the true nature of the respective values, or because it would be more rewarding to do things differently.<sup>31</sup>

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