# The Dreariness of Aesthetics (Continued), with a Remedy

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In 1951, J. A. Passmore shamelessly titled an essay "The Dreariness of Aesthetics."[1] Drawing on John Wisdom's earlier complaints, he denounced aesthetics' dullness, its pretentiousness, and the fact that it was "peculiarly unilluminating." What Passmore had in mind were the vapid abstractions and metaphysical hyperbole involved in "saying nothing in the most pretentious possible way"; he thought aesthetics wasn't in touch enough with the real world of the specific, different arts. He was right. But while in the intervening years aesthetics has changed course and this complaint has largely been heeded, Passmore's uncompromising title can still provoke a ripple of embarrassment among aestheticians who suspect that the accusation might be true.

Indeed, aesthetics is still dreary, at least in one major respect. To be sure, since it deals with art and beauty, aesthetics has an incomparably interesting subject matter. And it has for the most part abandoned the empty generalizations to which Passmore attributed its dreariness. But it is still dreary anyway, at least in one central feature, though it need not be this way.

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What makes aesthetics so dreary has to do with its format, or rather, its modus operandi as a discipline, the characteristic way in which it operates. It is not the content of its theories that makes aesthetics dull, but the way in which it makes use of those often rather exciting theories. The root problem is that aesthetics is for the most part *theory driven*, rather than *driven to theory*; the issues with which it is concerned are a product of the demands and deficiencies of its theoretical constructions, not issues made pressing by the subject matter itself. If aesthetics as a discipline sometimes seems impenetrably arcane and stultifyingly dull—just more hot air from the philosophers—this may be why.

The long and ornate history of aesthetics consists in a series of theoretical formulations, each of which purports to provide a principled account of art or beauty as well as related artistic and aesthetic phenomena. Later theoretical constructions in this ongoing historical discussion typically work to amend or supersede earlier theories: so, for instance, Tolstoian expression theory tries to unseat the imitation theory handed down from Plato and Aristotle; Clive Bell's views about significant form attempt to dismiss expression theory, and so on throughout most of the history of aesthetics. To be sure, there is something these thinkers see in art that leads them to develop these revolutionizing views, but what these thinkers characteristically emphasize in presenting and defending their views is a function of the previous ones.

The introduction of a new theory typically involves a three-part process: (1) itemizing the defects of the earlier theories, especially where they are inconsistent, incomplete, or unclear; (2) articulating a new theory to supplant the old ones; and (3) pointing to works of art, or kinds of experiences, in order to confirm the new claims. In this way, aesthetics seems to contain destructive, constructive, and confirmatory elements. But notice that this process is almost entirely theory-directed: new theories are proposed because of deficiences in the old, and works of art or examples of beauty are pointed out to confirm the new. Thus the discipline is consigned to a kind of distanced, remote position vis-à-vis art and beauty themselves: in its overriding concern with theory, it never really seems to quite get around to addressing the *problems* art and beauty themselves present. Theory is constructed to answer theory, and art and beauty are dragged in only to illustrate those points.

Of course, not all work in aesthetics follows this pattern, especially in contemporary writing. There is much in aesthetics that is richly informed by sensitivity to specific cases of art and beauty, and much that is motivated by these puzzles. But where it does follow this pattern, aesthetics finds itself engaged in a largely unsuccessful process. Since aesthetics, unlike macrolevel natural science, does not have a range of uniform, comparatively stable entities to describe, theory is often precarious; aesthetics must deal with a range of continuously shifting and developing entities or states of affairs which are only sometimes said to count as art or occasions of beauty and thus to fall within its realm. Then, too, the strategy of pointing to works of art or experiences of beauty to confirm new theoretical claims is flawed: since this process is always selective (unless done at random), it is inherently biased in favor of the theory being advanced and can do no more than illustrate or explain, not prove. Thus aesthetics' condition is an unfortunate one: it is largely theory-driven, but this very theory-drivenness makes it in the end unsuccessful in advancing its claims. This is dreary indeed. It is not quite the same sort of dreariness Passmore lamented, of course, but it is a dreariness just the same: aesthetics never quite approaches the real problems raised by beauty and art. It *says* things about art, to be sure, and sometimes interesting things, but always from the little distance its theory-driven stance imposes.

The remedy for this dreariness, I'd like to suggest, is to start at the other end of aesthetic discussion: not with theory, but with actual cases, practical dilemmas, and puzzle problems about beauty and art. These are problems of the sort that specific, individual, concrete examples of beauty and art present: "Is this stick of driftwood on display in this gallery, exhibited by this well-known artist, actually *art*?" "Could that bleak landscape be beautiful, and what would we have to know about it or its viewers to determine whether it is?" "Is this piece of music really *about* what its title says?" Some slightly more extended examples, posed as philosophers' puzzle cases, display the kinds of problems which seem trivial at first but can be seen on reflection to harbor much more fundamental problems. For instance:

1. Al Meinhardt paints a portrait of art dealer Daffodil Glurt. The resulting canvas is a single solid color, chartreuse. Meinhardt hangs the canvas in the Museum of Modern Art, labelled *Portrait of Daffodil Glurt*. Daffodil is not amused. But has she actually been insulted?
2. The Louvre is on fire. You can save either the *Mona Lisa* or the guard who stands next to it, but not both. Which do you do?
3. We regard the Cycladic votive figurines, with their flat, oval faces and elongated bodies, as beautiful. We surmise that they were used as fertility goddesses in household shrines, and we believe that the culture in which they arose did not have a conception of "fine arts." Have these figurines always been beautiful, or have they come to be so only now?

Case problems of this sort have been very effectively used in various areas of normative ethics during the last decade or two, particularly in professional ethics fields like bioethics, business ethics, and the ethics of the practice of law; they have also been used in teaching law since the case method was introduced at Harvard early in the century. Their specific virtue is that while they address conflicts and points of tension within a field, they do not invite unrestrained theory construction beyond what is required to examine the case critically. They do not invite "saying nothing in the most pretentious possible way," as Passmore criticized aesthetics, since saying nothing will not resolve a case; and they do not rely on selectively biased pointing out of works of art to prove a point, since the troublesome case is already at hand. They may seem deceptively simple, even artless; but a little reflection will reveal that the issues these sorts of puzzle cases can raise are not simple at all.

Indeed, the issues these little problems raise are fundamental to the concerns of aesthetics. Deciding whether the chartreuse portrait could insult Daffodil Glurt, for instance, requires saying something about the assertoric properties of nonobjective art; deciding whether one ought to rescue the *Mona Lisa* or the guard requires determining the relative weight of aesthetic and ethical values; saying whether the Cycladic figurines were beautiful all along requires addressing the issue of the subjectivity or objectivity of beauty. The major aesthetic theories each have something to say, either directly or by implication, about each of these issues. But, generally, as long as we approach the world of art and beauty from the perspective of antecedent theoretical commitments—that is, in a theory-driven way—we may not even really see the issues at hand. So, for instance, traditional imitation theory would presumably hold that the chartreuse portrait of Daffodil Glurt cannot "say" anything and hence cannot insult her; indeed, a featureless canvas can hardly count as a *portrait* at all. On the other hand, most forms of expression theory will hold just the reverse: they will point to the negative emotions evoked by the bilious color of the chartreuse and the flatness of the canvas. But does the work insult Daffodil or not? As long as we start from the top down with a given theory and simply point to the case, we do not see the issue; and if we do not see the issue this common sort of case presents, aesthetics remains quite dull.

Starting with the cases does not mean that aesthetics ought to try to jettison those theoretical structures with which it has been concerned. Appeal to theory will still ultimately be required to address and resolve the issues which concrete puzzle cases raise, though it is appeal to theory motivated by the problems actually arising in our experience with beauty and art, not just problems generated by other theories alone. It is true that it is the theory-drivenness of aesthetics that makes it dreary, but this hardly recommends a retreat to noncritical judgment; it is simply to suggest that aesthetics ought not let theory lead it around by the nose. Aesthetics ought not and cannot discard theory nor the sophisticated discussion that the analysis of theory brings; rather, what it may hope for in the end is the kind of "reflective equilibrium" between theoretical claims and judgments in specific, concrete cases concerning art and beauty so effectively recommended in ethics.[2] But this kind of balanced position is hardly possible if aesthetics starts top-down to impose its theoretical constructs upon art and beauty; it is when we *also* start bottom-upwards with the kinds of puzzle cases art and beauty pose for us everywhere, and use them to press the theoretical issues that might allow their resolution, that aesthetics finally begins to be a genuinely exciting discipline, no longer very dreary at all.

## NOTES

1. J. A. Passmore, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," *Mind* 60, no. 239 (1951).
2. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 20 ff. and elsewhere.