**Vices, myopia, and experiences of beauty**

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**Preliminaries**

Main claim: socially-sustained forms of *aesthetic myopia* occlude certain kinds of *beauty* (B).

**Edification and experience of beauty.**

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 could be *spontaneous* or due to *good luck* – a sort of serendipity. But most will require – and become commoner and richer through –various activities and attainments:

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

Such attainments are *edifying* – ie educative and improving. ‘The 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 appreciate ‘weird, contorted’ Chinese buildings if he can ‘bring about within himself a transformation’ – ‘learn by his own effort to share in the life of the society’.

Such ‘efforts’ require:

1. a ‘sympathy … so penetrating’ as to open up ‘a whole new world of ideas’
2. 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 – cf. Sartwell’s *Six Names of Beauty* or ‘polytheism of B’ (Eco). Certain kinds of B will be difficult to identify and appreciate without undergoing some process of edification.

Other kinds of B: contrast familiar European appreciation of brightness/order/clarity *vs.* east Asian ‘aesthetics of the indistinct’ (eg darkness/smokiness/mist-veiled: qualities able to convey ‘an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery’ (Tanizaki – cf. *In Praise of Shadows*).

- eg *wabi* as ‘austere B’ different from ‘vivid B’ (Takeno Jōō) – a kind of B different from one celebrating perfection/richness/exuberance – *sabi* as ‘lonely B’ – *yūgen* as ‘mysterious B’

- eg sense of B of cherry blossoms connected to ‘appreciation of perishability’ (Keene)

- Sartwell urging us to ‘open ourselves to new Bs’ of ‘weathered, tarnished, scarred’.

- appreciation of *wabi-sabi* requires our entering into moral world of Buddhism, to ‘learn to appreciate a B that we were not born seeing’ (de Botton) – cf. Parkes.

(Obviously Japanese aesthetics is wider than Buddhism – eg *ukiyo-e* – eg Shinto (Kasulis))

Resonances in contemporary aesthetics: Sherri Irvin on *aesthetic exploration* – seeking new or marginalised kinds of human 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’.

**Appreciation and understanding.**

Edificationists claim that certain virtues/dispositions are integral to our ability to recognise and appreciate new kinds of B.

Which virtues? Doubtless many virtues – favourite candidates include humility, impartiality, openness, imaginativeness, reflectiveness, thoughtfulness, etc. – organisable in different ways.

Distinguish two categories (cf. Cooper’s taxonomy of ‘aesthetic virtues’):

1. *virtues of restraint* – restraining/silencing ‘personal interests, passions, prejudices, practical preoccupations’ and other factors that ‘may distort or occlude attention to and appreciation of’ other kinds of B.

- eg humility *qua* appreciation of recognition of contingency of our canons of B

1. *virtues of receptivity* – openness to, actively searching for, new kinds of B – eg ‘responsiveness and openness, imaginativeness and expansiveness’ which dispose us to appreciatively seek out novel aesthetic experiences (cf. Irvin’s list).

Our receptivity to new Bs can be enhanced by exercises of virtue of *inquisitiveness* (Watson): disposition to question well – salient to cases of ‘new’ Bs.

Consider oft-quoted Saito remark that Zen garden affords ‘a glimpse of the world as it appears to a Zen-enlightened sensibility’ (Saito). One can find Zen gardens Bful but a fuller or deeper appreciation of their B requires informed understanding of that ‘sensibility’.

Some questions one might ask to better understand what is Bful about Zen gardens:

1. is the simplicity of the garden deliberate?
2. why aren’t there more plants?
3. what does one *do* in a garden like this?
4. what does the raked gravel mean?

Questions can be simple or complex – but exercise of virtuous inquisitiveness can lead one to a better understanding of the specific B of Zen garden: movement from simple or immediate sense of its B to a deeper sense of its specific kinds of B.

But our ability to cultivate and exercise virtues is dependent on receptive social-epistemic conditions (cf. work on *social virtue epistemology* – cf. Alfano, Klein, de Ridder).

Consider social-ep conditions conductive to inquisitiveness about B of Zen gardens:

1. opportunities to learn about Zen, Japanese culture, and east Asian garden traditions in appropriately accurate and representative ways.
2. opportunities to deepen one’s understanding through discussions with other inquisitive Zen garden admirers – including access to books, museums, etc.
3. educational institutions which *inform* and *explain* and *inspire* curiosity about B, art, and other culture’s aesthetic practices and products (cf. Watson’s pessimism about this).

Such social-epistemic conditions *encourage* and *enable* virtuous inquisitiveness – a culture that rewards the asking and answering of questions - an *edifying* culture, receptive to cultivation and exercise of virtues integral to experiences of B (cf. Kǒngzı on B in relation to rituals/*lǐ* and virtue/*dé* – cf. Kidd).

**Aesthetic myopia.**

Edificationist aspires to a broad, deep, plural conception of B – appreciative receptivity to many kinds of B through exercises of a variety of human attainments (virtues etc.) But there is a clear negative counterpart: certain *vices* – or *vicious stances* – could occlude certain Bs.

*Aesthetic myopia* as an unduly constrained aesthetic outlook – measured along dimensions of *narrowness* and *shallowness* (counterparts to edificationist *breadth* and *depth* about B):

1. a *narrow* conception of B occludes various diverse *kinds* of B.
2. a *shallow* conception occludes certain deeper *conceptions* of nature/significance of B.

Consider some candidates – note these are aesthetic theories so must be *argued against*, rather than question-begging rejected for not-being-edificationist. So this is an invitation to view them in a new critical light – not, by itself, a way of ‘refuting’ them:

1. *Facilism*

Core conviction: ‘experience of something as Bful too facile, simple, and immediate to invite information description and explanation’ (Cooper) – no sense to talk of success or failure in appreciation of B – no need for virtues/effort/‘inner transformation’.

- 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)

Facilism evident in subjectivism + relativism – ‘B in eye of the beholder’.

Kirwan: B is a ‘sensation’ of pleasure, ‘feeling is the necessary and sufficient condition’ for the Bful – B is ‘irreducibly subjective’, ‘not a serious enough concept’ for aesthetics or art – a term that ‘has completely lost its meaning’.

How does facilism encourage aesthetic myopia? It denies sense to *deep* conceptions of B. Such talk (a) treated as *senseless* or (b) dismissed as *exaggerated* or hyperbolic or (c) explained away as a non-culpable *error*.

Some deeper conceptions of B:

- B is a value that ‘defines what a fully human life means’ (Danto)

- B offers ‘the promise of happiness’ (Stendahl)

- B can ‘save the world’ (Dostoyevsky).

One need not *endorse* such claims: but *endorsing* not necessary to *understanding*.

Someone with internalised facilist convictions, confronted with such talk, may dismiss it as overblown/ high-falutin’ / exaggerated etc. Or they could stop, wonder, explore and so in effect exercise the virtues of restraint and receptivity.

It is not *unintelligible* or *absurd* for Gadamer to propose the function of B is to ‘bridge the chasm between the ideal and real’ by lending ‘visibility’ to the ideal – ‘a potentially whole and holy order of things’ of ‘the experience of B’ is an ‘invocation’.

Inference from ‘*I can’t make sense of it*’ to‘*It is senseless*’ is arrogant.

Only someone in the grip of facilist conceptions of B could be tempted to conclude Gadamer *et al* were making too much of what are *really* mere feelings/pleasurable sensations/etc.

Such a person – a diehard facilist – has indeed become aesthetically myopic.

Facilism feeds aesthetic myopia by denying that there *are* – or *could be* – deep, difficult Bs. It only admits shallow/simple/superficial/easy/immediate kinds of B.

**Chauvinism and philistinism.**

Consider a kind of aesthetic myopia involving *narrowness*:

1. *Chauvinism*

Core conviction: the only standards/kinds of B are those of one’s own culture, class, or circle – so talk of other/alien/unfamiliar Bs is oxymoronic (cf. Cooper).

- attitude that ‘what a person currently finds Bful should be taken as the limit of all that he or she can ever love’ (de Botton)

- ‘*Our* Bs are the only Bs!’

Aesthetic chauvinism – ranges from passive presumption of one’s own canons of B through to aggressive denial of other kinds of B.

eg C19 European chauvinism about Chinese art (even while sinological interest was growing – cf. Chu and Milam’s *Beyond Chinoserie*) – context for Baudelaire’s remarks.

- ‘the Chinese lack what is meant by the word imagination’ (Théodore Duret)

- Chinese culture is all ‘drab sadness and miserable boredom’ (Enrico Cernuschi)

Baudelaire right that such chauvinists lacked *impartiality* and *sympathy*.

eg 1900 Natsume Soseki ‘once laughed at because I invited someone for a snow-viewing’ – admiring mossy path only to be told gardener would soon ‘scrape [it] away’.

Note that (a) some Japanese writers – Tanizaki and Yanagi – are as myopic as Western writers (dismissing most W art as gaudy/vulgar – cf C20 ‘Japanism’) and (b) note forms of *inverted chauvinism* – ie repudiating Bs of one’s own culture/tradition in favour of Other Bs.

How does chauvinism encourage aesthetic myopia? It *narrows* the range of Bs to which one is receptive to those already ‘in place’.

Only the Bs one already recognises are accepted – others either denied or treated as inferior variants (‘weird’) – tied up with racism/sexism/Eurocentrism (eg Taylor),

If a person internalises Chauvinist attitudes, they will not develop an expansive sense of the diversity of potential Bs – limiting scope for exercise of *virtues of receptivity* (nothing to be ‘open’ to – cf. Battaly on vice of closedmindedness).

Consider, finally, a more radical challenge to *B itself*.

1. *Philistinism*

Core conviction: B not sufficiently weighty/important to merit serious concern/interest. It is a more radical denial of the value/importance of *B itself*.

Many manifestations of philistinism in general:

- marginalisation of arts in schools curriculum.

- dismissal of aesthetic interests as effete, élite, snobbish.

But specific derogations of B as an ideal – eg Danto’s on *kalliphobia*, ‘epidemic in *avant-garde* circles since the early twentieth century’, still present in modern artists for whom ‘the mere whiff of B in one’s work is tantamount to selling out to the establishment’ – for whom *good* art is *challenging* or *shocking*, not Bful.

- but note that provocative kalliphobic rhetoric often continuous with ‘inflections’ and transformations of B (cf. Cooper on ‘disappearance thesis’).

- If people internalise a background sense that B is not serious – or not real – there is no incentive to do the work of edifying ‘self-transformation’ (what would be the reward?)

All virtues require work – a culture should help us develop the necessary motivations for doing that work.

**Challenging myopia.**

Doubtless many other ‘isms’ conspire to feed forms of aesthetic myopia: making us fail to see, or accept, that B is ‘multiform and multicoloured’ (Baudelaire) – that B *matters* (Scruton).

How do we combat aesthetic myopia – in effect, broaden and deepen our vision of B?

Two main options:

1. *Art movements* – many self-consciously aspire to expose/reveal new kinds of B.

Early C20 developments:

- ‘create a new sort of B’ – beyond ‘loveliness’ (Georges Braque)

- ‘aim for a B’ different from sorts ‘inherited from the Greeks’ (Jean Dubuffet)

- Futurists aimed for ‘new B’, B for the future that ‘will not conform to the past’

Sartwell: arrival of *avant garde* meant ‘crucial decision’ needed: ‘whether … B died around 1895, except to refer to movie starlets and chrysanthemums, or became much more difficult and strange … developing in a subterranean way’.

But embrace of one kind of B should not, need not, require abandoning or impugning other, older, more familiar kinds of B. Swapping *A* for *B* is not pluralism (cf. tendencies to sneer at ‘old-fashioned’, ‘boring’ kinds of B: *expand* our ‘portfolio of Bs’ (Cooper).

- Reactionary abolitionism is as anti-pluralist as dogmatic chauvinism.

1. *Philosophical aesthetics* – theoretical efforts to expand sense of kinds of B, challenge facilism and promote broader and deeper ways of thinking about B.

‘Positive’ functions:

- new/revived attention to aes of character, environmental aes, cross-cultural aes, ‘aes of the everyday’ each offering new objects of B (one exemplar: Saito).

- Irvin-style practices of ‘aesthetic exploration’.

- Andy Hamilton’s *humanism*: music ‘has to be understood through its history’, as ‘interfused with human life’ – related to moral ideals and social practices and cultural history – to visions of the good life.

‘Negative’ functions: challenge facilism/chauvinism – eg familiar critical challenges to ‘scientism’ in aesthetics.

- ethnomusicological criticisms of Pinker on music as ‘auditory cheesecake’.

- fixations on evolutionary and neurological accounts of human sense of B – eg Etcoff’s *Survival of the Prettiest*: ‘B is a biological adaptation … that provokes pleasure … and impels actions that help to ensure the survival of our genes’.

- evolutionary accounts – satirised by Ramachandran.

- Tallis on neuro-aesthetics – neuroimaging searches for ‘the beauty spot’.

Scientism narrows our range of understanding and discoursing about B – qua evolved functions, neurological ‘sparkles’, ‘pattern recognition’, etc.

- Wittgenstein’s lament that ‘people nowadays think scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure’.

Of course, a lot of modern aesthetic education, at least in UK, *reinforces* Facilism etc.

Insofar as such artistic and academic developments encourage us to seek, explore, and take seriously the rich diversity of kinds of B and their relations to human aspirations and life, they should be welcomed. All can challenge myopia by creating socio-epistemic conditions that are more receptive to the cultivation and exercise of the virtues integral to edificationism.

An ancient and venerable ideal, but one worth reviving since those cultures will be *kalligenic* – organised to foster new and expanded experiences of B (cf. Kidd).

IJK

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