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Aesthetic Experience as an Educational Journey

Yuriko Saito

One of the central concerns in Ronald W. Hepburn's aesthetics is the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral. While being sympathetic to the notions of a beautiful soul and a beautiful life, he points out that they must be subjected to an ultimate moral appraisal. In addition, while aesthetic considerations are indispensable to a good life and society, they alone cannot secure values such as justice, fairness, and duty. He thus recommends that the aesthetic and the moral be set neither too close to nor too far from one another.[1] However, Hepburn's *oeuvre* makes clear that for him an aesthetic experience is ultimately a moral practice of cultivating one's self in interaction with the world. I shall explore several ways in which he characterises aesthetic experience as an educational journey.

1 Aesthetic experience of the other

Hepburn is often credited with opening the subject matter of art-dominated twentieth century Anglo-American aesthetics to include nature.[2] In a number of writings, he stresses the similarity between art and nature as objects of aesthetic experience that help us develop moral sensibilities. Whether art or nature, the object of aesthetic experience constitutes 'the other' and the sort of aesthetic experience we have regarding it determines not only its aesthetic but also its moral worth.

In general, we tend to experience the world, the other, by taming its unfamiliar aspects and making it conform to the worldview familiar to us. This way of experiencing the other on *our* terms is reassuring and comforting because it does not require much effort. Speaking of art as the other, Hepburn observes

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Moral: Links and Limits Part One' and 'Aesthetic and Moral: Links and Limits Part Two' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot, 2001), 38–51 and 52–76.

2 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in idem, *'Wonder' and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighboring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), 9–35.

that we all-too-often apply 'simplifying *clichés*, lazy stereotypes of character, stereotyped expectations'.[3] However, a genuine aesthetic experience of art requires attention to its singularity, as well as to details and subtleties that cannot be captured by a generalized stereotype or category. The experience needs to be directed toward *this* painting with its specific configuration of colours and shapes and *that* novel with its unique style, plot, and character development. Full immersion in a work of art is possible when we 'think as well as feel our way into *aesthetic particulars*'.[4] That is, 'we show *respect* for a work of art when we refuse to see it as a disposable message to be read and discarded; when we see it instead as an inherently valuable, irreplaceable artefact, whose message, if any, is *individualized* by its embodiment in that *unique* object'.[5]

Failure to capture the singularity of an art object by applying stereotypes and clichés is not only an aesthetic but also a moral failure. Rather than listening to its message on *its* own terms, we are using art to extend our own world; hence, not giving it due regard and only exacerbating our self-centred orientation. When an art work is experienced this way, it 'acts only as a stimulus to the reader's or viewer's personal desires, appetites, ambitions, and offers some substitute-gratification of them'.[6] Respecting the otherness of art, in contrast, is challenging because it demands accepting the 'invitations to release one's hand from the banisters of familiar meanings and to leave familiar pathways of perception'.[7] Grasping the work's individuality and originality, therefore, according to Hepburn, 'takes much effort, sometimes courage'.[8]

If the other is nature rather than art, we often experience it through sentimentalizing, anthropomorphizing, or humanising, essentially for our enjoyment or amusement. As Hepburn puts it: 'the sentimental response is crude and undiscriminating and wilful. Its affective repertoire is eager and it wallows in easily-aroused, generalized emotion' that will 'let us "find" in nature no more (or little more) than we project into it – that is to say, features of our

3 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), 267–79, 270.

4 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Values of Art and Values of Community' in Leroy S. Rouner (ed.), *On Community* (Notre Dame, 1991), 27–55, 46 (my emphasis – Y. S.).

5 Ibid., 42 (my emphasis – Y. S.).

6 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 63–76, 72.

7 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 16–37, 18.

8 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 270.

own life that we (substantially) know already'.[9] In short, we only experience ourselves without going out to meet the other and to grow and develop as a person.

The 'getting out of our comfort zone' that is necessary in our aesthetic experience of art and nature is the same as the requirement for our interactions with other human beings: 'such exercises of reason – attentive, flexible, empathizing – are of course equally necessary to the moral context of our understanding of self and others'.[10] An individual person's specific personhood cannot be adequately captured by her age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, marital status, ethnicity, political affiliation and work. While these categories are relevant, she is not merely their sum total. Understanding and appreciating her for who she is and gaining a holistic grasp of her requires firsthand experience of interacting with her. In both art and persons, 'we look for meaning in their movements, gestures, and presentations'.[11] Hepburn's concern with this moral dimension of our interactions with objects and people is particularly clear in the following passage:

> Fantasy falsifies through its overriding desire to minister to pre-existing, pre-formed wants and cravings: shirking the task of helping to re-form desire to a better-grasped reality. It smoothes out the recalcitrant individuality of things and people, making them more compliant to desire, whereas it is often these recalcitrances that prompt moral growth, elicit compassion and a turning away from egoistic ruthlessness, and compel us actually to believe in the full personhood of others.[12]

The importance, as well as the challenge, of appreciating the other on *its*, rather than on *our*, own terms is a theme Hepburn shares with other thinkers. Iris Murdoch, for example, calls this notion 'unselfing'. Concerned with the fact that 'our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world', she claims

9 Ibid., 268, 269. The same point is made regarding experiencing the other simply to satisfy one's curiosity, which Hepburn distinguishes from wonder. Experiencing an object to satisfy curiosity amounts to 'a kind of possession, a tick on the tourist's place-list' because once curiosity is satisfied or novelty wears off, we close the chapter on the object instead of dwelling on it and savouring the experience. Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Wonder' in idem, *'Wonder'*, 131–54, 134.

10 Hepburn, 'Values of Art and Values of Community', 46.

11 Ibid., 42.

12 Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics', 72.

that 'anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue'.[13] Consequently, she regards the appreciation of good art as the reward for successful unselfing, which helps one 'transcend selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility'.[14]

Also, consider John Dewey's claim that 'the moral function of art […] is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive'.[15] Specifically, 'works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own'.[16] In order for good art to take me out of my own familiar world, however, I must be able and willing to practice aesthetic engagement. The invitation of good art for me to enter *its* world, in the words of Joseph Kupfer, places 'the burden of entering into an open-ended, indeterminate creative process' without any rules to follow.[17] I gain 'responsive freedom' but it also comes with an 'aesthetic responsibility'.[18]

That this other-regarding stance applies not only to art but also to nature is recognised by other thinkers as well. For example, Yi-Fu Tuan states that 'one kind of definition of a good person, or a moral person, is that that person does not impose his or her fantasy on another. That is, he's willing to acknowledge the reality of other individuals, or even of the tree or the rock'.[19]

A Japanese Zen Buddhist priest, Dōgen (1200–1253), characterises this ethical stance regarding the other as overcoming, forgetting, or transcending one's self and as a process necessary for enlightenment.[20] Specifically, the respectful engagement with the other, predominantly natural objects like a rock or a tree, in Zen discipline, requires me to experience its raw individuality or Buddha nature, without applying the usual categorisations and classifications

13 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, 1970), 82.
14 Ibid., 85.
15 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1958), 325. Note the same metaphor of 'veil' is used by both Dewey and Murdoch.
16 Ibid., 333.
17 Joseph Kupfer, *Experience as Art: Aesthetics in Everyday Life* (Albany, 1983), 71.
18 Ibid., 73 and 77.
19 Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Yi-Fu Tuan's Good Life', *OnWisconsin Magazine*, 9 (1987).
20 The best primary text is Dōgen's major work, *Shōbōgenzō* (*The Storehouse of True Knowledge*). The most important chapters are translated and compiled by Thomas Cleary in *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen* (Honolulu, 1986).

of normal experience. I make myself 'slender' and enter into the object and become one with it, experiencing its 'thusness' or 'suchness'.[21]

The favoured vehicle for Zen discipline is artistic practice that aims not so much at acquiring skills, but rather at becoming a person whose mode of being in the world is other-regarding and ethically grounded. Commenting on Japanese artistic training, Robert Carter points out that 'ethics is primarily taught through the various arts, and is not learned as an abstract theory, or as a series of rules to remember'.[22]

Thus, whether the notion is called unselfing, respecting the other, appreciating the other on its own terms, or transcending one's own horizon, these thinkers together highlight the moral dimension of aesthetic experience, succinctly put by Hepburn as 'the aesthetic-moral value of respect'.[23]

2 Aesthetic experience as creative engagement

However, we gain such aesthetic experience never passively by nullifying our selves and simply taking in whatever the other offers us, as if we were 'sitting ducks'. Our aesthetic experience also requires us to actively engage with the other. We have seen that Hepburn argues against facile humanising and sentimentalizing attempts in nature appreciation that from the outset impose on the object what we want to experience. This will exacerbate the limitation of our own perspective. However, according to Hepburn, not all kinds of humanising should be rejected. What he calls more serious anthropomorphizing of nature encourages us to be *actively affected* by 'the dispositional power of the object […] to evoke human emotion and mood, without the mediation of a falsifying anthropomorphic interpretation.'[24]

Here, Hepburn's view is shared by John Dewey who characterises the receptive stance and the active engagement required in aesthetic experience as 'undergoing' and 'doing'. It is a dynamic process constituted by the

21 The notion of 'making oneself slender' so that one enters into the object was advocated by Matsuo Bashō in the art of making haiku. See Hattori Dohō's record of Bashō's teaching in 'The Red Booklet', trans. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague, 1981), 159–67.

22 Robert Carter, *The Japanese Art and Self-Discipline* (Albany, 2008), 2. I explore this aesthetic approach to nature in my 'Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms', *Environmental Ethics,* 20 (1998), 135–49.

23 Hepburn, 'Values of Art and Values of Community', 43.

24 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 272.

object affecting a person who in turn affects the object through activating her imagination. Thus, aesthetic experience as a full, authentic, and respectful engagement with the other has a creative dimension. Hepburn states that it is an activity 'that is partly responsive, and partly creative, both receptive and formative. It is improvisatory and in important measure free'.[25] Elsewhere he characterises the optimal aesthetic appreciation of nature as 'a grateful acceptance of nature's "co-operation" […] in the joint-fashioning of what neither the subjects themselves nor nature left to itself can bring into being'.[26]

This characterisation of aesthetic experience as a collaborative experience can be compared to the notion of aesthetic engagement advocated by Arnold Berleant, despite the disagreement between Hepburn and Berleant over the notion of disinterestedness.[27] Disinterestedness for Hepburn is important for aesthetic experience insofar as it refers to open-mindedness and willingness to meet the other on its own terms. For both Hepburn and Berleant, this open-mindedness paves the way for a reciprocal exchange and a collaborative effort to bring about an aesthetic experience. This process often enables me to discover new connections and a vision of the world different from my own. In this way, my aesthetic engagement is also a moral engagement with the other. Thus, the ethical stance needed for successful interaction with the other *is* the outcome of the requirements of aesthetic engagement put forward by Berleant: open-mindedness, acceptance, humility, respect, and mutual collaboration.[28]

What exactly then is included in the creative engagement with the object? According to Hepburn, one kind of association that our imagination should 'fuse' with the object are facts about it. Without activating imagination and engaging creatively, 'the falling autumn leaf becomes a small, fluttering, reddish-brown material object – and no more: the swifts only rapidly flitting

25 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics: Philosophical Understanding and Misunderstanding' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 130–47, 137.

26 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 275.

27 Arnold Berleant and Ronald Hepburn, 'An Exchange on Disinterestedness', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 1(2003), https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=209, accessed 4 April 2019.

28 Although the ethical dimension of aesthetic engagement was always present in Berleant's early works, it is made more explicit in his recent works on social aesthetics. See Arnold Berleant, 'Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for a Social Aesthetics' in idem, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot, 2005), 147–61; *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, 2010); 'Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics', *Aesthetics Between Art and Society: Perspectives of Arnold Berleant's Postkantian Aesthetics of Engagement, Espes,* 6 (2017), 9–18.

shapes', the starry heavens are experienced as a black canopy above us with white spots, and the spiral nebula in Andromeda merely as an abstract pattern.[29] Such strictly formalist appreciation does underscore the aesthetic importance of the sensuous, but it is not being fully present to what the object is. The leaf is more than a reddish brown object, and the aesthetic experience of celestial bodies is incomplete and misleading without considering the enormous distance between here and there.

The respectful attitude required in aesthetic experience thus includes awareness of facts associated with the object. Speaking of nature, Hepburn claims that 'one way to seriousness in our aesthetic dealings with nature involved a respect for truth – more accurately, for truth such as the sciences pursue'.[30] Thus, the geological activity that shaped a particular rock formation 'need not be a piece of extra-aesthetic reflection: it may determine for us how we see and respond to the object itself'.[31] The realization that what at first appeared to be only an open expanse of beach is actually a tidal basin may cause 'the wild glad emptiness [to] be tempered by a disturbing weirdness', thereby determining the affective character of the experience.[32]

Although, as I shall discuss shortly, Hepburn's incorporation of scientific facts in the aesthetic experience of nature differs from Allen Carlson's cognitivist aesthetics of nature, he does value them as facilitating a truer, more serious, appreciation.[33] Scientific facts help us to attend more fully to the object's sensuous appearance, compared with fanciful, and often amusing, associations based upon fortuitous resemblances that our imagination may bring to the experience. His examples include a stalagmite in a limestone cave seen as the Virgin Mary and a cloud seen as a basket of laundry.[34] This latter

29 The reference to the leaf is from Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 1–15, 8; starry heaven from idem, 'Freedom and Receptivity in Aesthetic Experience', *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics,* 3 (2006), 7; spiral nebula from 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 25.

30 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 14.

31 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 25.

32 Ibid., 19.

33 Allen Carlson's works on environmental aesthetics are too numerous to list, but the best summaries can be found in his *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York, 2009) and 'Environmental Aesthetics' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/environmental-aesthetics/, accessed 4 April, 2019.

34 The reference to Virgin Mary is from 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 11 and basket of laundry from 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 29.

case can be contrasted with imagining 'the inner turbulence of the cloud, the winds sweeping up within and around it, determining its structure and visible form'.[35] These two ways of appreciating a cloud are characterised as going from 'easy beauty to difficult and more serious beauty', the latter 'less superficial or contrived than the other, […] truer to nature, and for that reason more worth having'.[36] Enjoying the fortuitous resemblance does not take us further than amusement, just as in the case of taking pleasure in novelty and satisfying curiosity, which runs its course too quickly without generating further experiences or revealing heretofore unrecognised dimensions of the object.[37]

However, we should not too quickly consider Hepburn as embracing the cognitivist nature aesthetics developed by Allen Carlson. Carlson has steadily maintained that the appropriate appreciation of nature is based upon scientific understanding of what it is, although this can include common sense knowledge and does not have to be the specialized kind available only to professionals. Hepburn seems hesitant to commit to a strong form of cognitivism that favours scientific facts over other associated facts, because for him cognitive components can be of many kinds: historical and literary, as well as scientific. More importantly, scientific facts are relevant to the aesthetic experience of nature for Hepburn only insofar as they stimulate our emotive engagement with the object. Too much emphasis on scientific considerations may compromise the nature of aesthetic experience, and make it more like a scientific project. Instead, we open ourselves to the possibility that 'the cognitive factors themselves may generate new, distinctive emergent emotional qualities' and 'encourage and foster emotional responses to the items or scenes of nature, responses in terms of human wants and fears, exultations and shrinkings of spirit'.[38]

Finally, Hepburn seems to allow freedom when creating an aesthetic experience by deciding 'whether to admit *this*, to soft-pedal or exclude *that*' associated fact.[39] He recognises the increasing awareness of ecological concerns in our experience of nature and he does not deny their relevance, but he also cautions against such concerns dominating the aesthetic experience because they would 'displace the luxury of "fine-tuning"'.[40] I shall explore this point in the last section.

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 For his discussion on curiosity and novelty, see 'Wonder'.
38 Hepburn, 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics', 137 and 138.
39 Ibid., 137.
40 Ibid., 142.

3 Aesthetic experience as an educational process

Aesthetic experience described by Hepburn is thus a *process* that does and should take time. This process is important not just for the outcome, which is often pleasurable. He invites us to consider a thought experiment where an electronic device can recreate 'an identical state of excitation to that aroused by a work of art'.[41] Such an experience will not be a substitute for the genuine aesthetic experience because it does not include our experience of becoming aware of '*how* […] a represented world emerges from the use of a visual medium in a particular way, and *how* thought is guided by factors inside and outside the canvas itself'.[42] In other words, '*the synthesizing of levels*, the spectator's guided and animated *exploration* of the work, are all part of the total, valued aesthetic experience, not disposable means to it'.[43]

Hepburn's overall view can be summarized as 'aesthetics as experience', adapting Dewey's 'art as experience' to a wider application. It is like a journey, according to Hepburn, that is not simply a spatial movement that changes one's location continuously, but more importantly a process in which the previous experience informs and transforms the present experience, which in turn directs the subsequent experience. He characterises this process as many-levelled, layered, improvisationary, exploratory and creative. It is an open process whereby we are receptive to whatever we encounter in our journey, but at the same time we are not passive recipients simply absorbing whatever comes at us. We are the creators of the aesthetic experience while being faithful to the object of that experience. It is the process of aesthetic engagement with undergoing and doing.

As we practice making aesthetic journeys, the nature of our experiences develop and mature, from trivial and superficial to profound and rich. Despite promoting exercising freedom of the imagination in aesthetic experience, Hepburn does not advocate the 'anything goes' stance. We have examined trivial and superficial experiences that are not sufficiently object-centred. They include a strictly formalist approach and using the object for one's fantasy, reverie and amusement. He also discriminates between different emotive responses. Sometimes they are cheap sentimentality typical of greeting cards and generate experiences that are *easy*. In a passage in *On the Aesthetic Education*

41 Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics', 74.
42 Ibid. (my emphasis – Y. S.).
43 Ibid. (my emphasis – Y. S.).

of Man, Friedrich Schiller describes such easy attraction, part of which is cited by Hepburn:

> we see crude taste first seizing on what is new and startling, gaudy, fantastic and bizarre, what is violent and wild, and avoiding nothing so much as simplicity and quiet. It fashions grotesque shapes, loves swift transitions, exuberant forms, striking contrasts, glaring shades, pathetic songs. In this age beautiful means simply what excites a man...[44]

Perhaps the experiences that Schiller describes are those with which we embark on our life-long journey of practicing aesthetic education, just as children start with appreciating colourful images, simple story lines and amusing movements. However, parents and educators expose them to a wider variety of visual arts, music, theatre and literature with increasing difficulty and sophistication. Aesthetic education aims at cultivating a capacity to appreciate monochrome images, complex stories without happy endings, music with a different tonal structure, and subtle actions on the stage.

This process of developing an increasingly sophisticated aesthetic sensibility is also emphasised by Aldo Leopold in his land aesthetics. He observes that 'the taste for country displays the same diversity in aesthetic competence among individuals as the taste for opera, or oils. There are those who are willing to be herded in droves through "scenic" places; who find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes. To such the Kansas plains are tedious'.[45] Education in land aesthetics sharpens our power of perception that is informed by natural history and ecology so that we recognise that 'a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches'.[46] According to Leopold, this development of sensibility in land aesthetics can be compared to aesthetic education regarding arts: 'Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language'.[47]

Engaging in aesthetic education requires effort on my part as it mobilises imagination while focusing firmly on the object itself. But by doing so, my aesthetic life becomes richer and more rewarding with 'the deepening and

44 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York, 1977), 135. Part of this passage is cited by Hepburn in 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics', 134.

45 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York, 1966), 179–80.

46 Ibid., 180.

47 Ibid., 102.

diversifying of feeling' and 'wonderfully complex aesthetic interactions'.[48] Furthermore, I gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of the other, develop a more discriminating sensibility, and nurture open-mindedness and respect toward the other. Delicacy of taste thus cultivated parallels sensibility toward others, including humans and non-humans, that is indispensable in our moral interactions with them based upon respect, humility, compassion and gentleness.

Suppose a person refuses to engage in aesthetic education and remains wholly content with greeting cards and soap operas because they provide immediate gratification without requiring any work. I think we are justified in being critical of such a person not simply for her impoverished aesthetic life but also for an implied moral failing. Her attitude signals a refusal to get out of her comfort zone and to truly meet the other on its own terms and to look at the world from a different point of view. Such effort is required for a moral life, not just for gaining a satisfying aesthetic experience.

4 Objects worthy of respectful aesthetic experience

Thus far, in discussing the moral dimension of aesthetic experience, the assumption has been that the object of aesthetic experience is worthy of attention and appreciation. That is, it rewards my effort toward unselfing, focusing and engaging in a creative act by exercising my imagination. However, there are works of art that fail to meet me halfway when I make an effort. If the object is a case of what Kupfer calls 'cheap' or 'vulgar' art, it 'dulls the sensibility, inhibits imagination, and disposes toward intransigence' because it merely presents a world all-too-familiar and all-too-comfortable to me and exacerbates my complacency and lethargy.[49] Murdoch also condemns bad art for providing forms that are 'the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream'.[50]

Or the work of art may be too esoteric, elitist or idiosyncratic to be capable of inviting me to enter its world. As a result, my readiness and willingness to engage with the object are not responded to and I may have to decide that it is not worth the effort. It may also be the case, as Hepburn points out, that the work lacks artistic merit or is dominated by theorizing: 'If no intelligible story

48 Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', 268.
49 Kupfer, *Experience as Art*, 68.
50 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

whatever can be offered, we are entitled to suspect that a work is empty. If much is said about it, yet little or none of that can be read back into the look or the sound of the work itself, but remains external to it, we are entitled to suspect that theorizing has supplanted art'.[51]

Thus, some works of art simply do not measure up to our attempt to develop an aesthetic experience. However, despite the different degrees of worthiness of our respect, the *default* assumption is that works of art are one kind of thing that merits our respectful attention and handling. When it comes to nature, a stronger case can be made that every part of it, even if unattractive or (seemingly) useless, is worthy of respect because it is not 'ours'.[52] Particularly today, we are painfully aware of the negative consequences of the anthropocentric attitude toward nature, which regards nature as 'It' rather than 'Thou' in Martin Buber's formulation, that is, as resources to be utilised.[53] Hence, with the development of environmental ethics, the domain of things worthy of moral respect has expanded to include non-human animals and arguably natural objects and eco-systems.

In contrast, in the Western philosophical tradition, artefacts are often characterised as 'mere things', a quintessential 'It' to which we owe no moral consideration. There is no moral problem with using objects merely as a means to our ends, with possible exceptions like historically significant objects and structures, national flags and gravestones. This is why we are not supposed to treat other humans and nature as if they were objects, implying such handling of objects is morally acceptable. Accordingly, there seems to be no moral consideration necessary for our aesthetic experience of these objects, unlike in the cases of art and nature. It appears then that our aesthetic experience of artefacts allows complete freedom where 'anything goes'.

However, I believe that we need to examine this commonly-accepted relationship with things and our aesthetic experiences of them, particularly regarding consumer products. It is widely agreed that today's consumerism is driven by the aesthetic appetite for the new, the fashionable and the up-to-date, although these aesthetic ideals are largely manufactured and imposed on consumers by industries. It is a well-known secret that industries have shifted their commercial strategy from planned obsolescence regarding functionality

51 Hepburn, 'Values of Art and Values of Community', 48.

52 For this view, see the essays included in the section on 'Nature and Positive Aesthetics' in Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (eds), *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (New York, 2007).

53 Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1970).

to perceived obsolescence, sometimes referred to as aesthetic obsolescence. We consumers are caught in the never-ending search for the most stylish and fashionable. The speed with which we buy and discard various objects discourages us from cultivating any meaningful relationship with them, as they are considered disposables. Needless to say, this treatment of material goods exacts a heavy toll on the environment caused by resource extraction, manufacturing processes, transportation and disposal. Moreover, it results in the egregious violation of the rights of workers in factories and at disposal sites and endangers the wellbeing of those who are affected by environmental harm. The most tragic example is the 2013 garment factory collapse in Bangladesh with 1,134 deaths and roughly 2,500 injured.[54]

One may agree that the damage caused by global production systems and consumerism is problematic and needs to be addressed, but one may also question the relevance of this to our aesthetic experience of material goods. For example, Jane Forsey claims that the fact that objects were made 'in a third-world factory under dismal condition' should affect 'our moral judgements of the objects […] but not our aesthetic judgements of their beauty'.[55] However, even if it is possible to separate the aesthetic and the moral and thereby protect the autonomy of the aesthetic realm, I believe that doing so is morally problematic particularly regarding consumer goods with which we directly interact by purchasing, using and throwing away.

My research on everyday aesthetics convinces me that, whether we like it or not and whether we recognise it or not, aesthetics *does* exert a considerable influence on our decision-making that results in actions with consequences. This finding leads me to two conclusions. First, I am sceptical about our ability to act as good Kantians by making morally consequential decisions solely on the basis of rational deliberation regardless of, or sometimes despite, our sensible nature, namely our feelings. Second, if aesthetic is a powerful motivator for action, its power should be harnessed, rather than denied.[56]

Regarding the first point, I find support from those who are inspired by the notion of aesthetic education advocated by Schiller. Schiller is sceptical of the

54 I explore aesthetics as the primary engine behind today's consumerism and its relationship to environmental ethics in 'Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*,76 (2018), 429–39.

55 Jane Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford, 2013), 186.

56 In Part III: 'Consequences: Everyday Aesthetics and World-Making', I explore aesthetics' role in directing our decisions and actions in everyday life, cf. my *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford, 2017), 141–224.

practical applicability of Kantian ethics based solely on reason, arguing for the efficacy of the emotive power to compel us to act morally:

> Reason has accomplished all she can in discovering and expounding Law; it is the task of courageous will and lively feeling to execute it. If Truth is to gain the victory in the struggle with Force, she must first become herself a *force*, and find some *impulse* to champion her in the realm of phenomena; for impulses are the only motive forces in the sensible world.[57]

In short, Schiller declares that 'the way to the head must lie through the heart' and what is most pressing is 'training of the sensibility'.[58]

Contemporary versions of Schiller's aesthetic education are many, particularly among those who are concerned about environmental problems. A classic case in point is Leopold's land aesthetics that was developed on the basis of his conviction that 'we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love', and that it is 'inconceivable […] that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value'.[59]

David Orr also advocates environmental education based on aesthetics when he states: 'we are moved to act more often, more consistently, and more profoundly by the experience of beauty in all of its forms than by intellectual arguments, abstract appeals to duty or even by fear'. Therefore, he continues, 'we must be inspired to act by examples that we can see, touch and experience', toward which we can develop an 'emotional attachment' and a 'deep affection'.[60] It is noteworthy that practitioners concerned with sustainability, namely designers and architects, also argue against addressing the issues only as environmental concerns and invoke aesthetic considerations as an indispensable ingredient.[61]

57 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education*, 48.

58 Ibid., 50.

59 Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 251, 261.

60 David Orr, *The Nature of Design* (Oxford, 2002), 178–9, 185, 25 and 26.

61 See Joan Iverson Nassauer, 'Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics with Ecology' in Joan Iverson Nassauer (ed.), *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Washington, D. C., 1997), 67–83; Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, trans. Robert P. Crease (University Park, Penn., 2005); Stuart Walker, *Sustainable by Design: Explorations in Theory and Practice* (London, 2006); Lance Hosey, *The Shape of Green: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Design* (Washington, D. C., 2012).

5 Ethically-grounded aesthetic experience of mere things?

What does this mean for our aesthetic experience of material objects? What would be Hepburn's position? Unfortunately, he never got a chance to address what, if any, would be expected of our aesthetic experience of mere things. However, let me explore his possible response based upon some passages and examples he offers, as well as his view on the ethically-grounded aesthetic experiences of art and nature that I have discussed.

In the following passage, Hepburn seems to indicate that we should separate the aesthetic appeal of an object promoted by advertising and its moral implications:

> There is no *necessary* link between imaginative power and moral (or metaphysical) acceptability, although the exhilarating shock of aesthetic response to a vivid image can readily be mistaken for justified conviction of the truth-claim, empirical-factual or moral – that it purports to make. On the everyday level, this happens often enough when advertizing materials bowls over susceptible readers and viewers […]. In a word, we need both to cherish successful and memorable fusions of moral and aesthetic, *and* to be on the alert for deceptive ones, where for all their attractive pull, it is *extrication* of the moral from the allurement of the aesthetic that is necessary, and not contentment with their fusion – and confusion.[62]

Insofar as this passage is concerned, he seems to leave open the possibility that the 'attractive pull' and 'allurement of the aesthetic' of the object can remain intact, although we need to question the moral implications of the object and at times resist the aesthetic attraction.

This passage is the only place where Hepburn comes close to addressing consumerism. However, two other examples, although admittedly not regarding consumer goods, indicate a more nuanced consideration. The only specific examples of artefacts he discusses are wind turbines that are becoming increasingly familiar in landscapes world over. Although not a consumer product, the fundamental issue is the same: whether or not the environmental effect (in this case positive, while in the case of consumer goods negative) should be part of the aesthetic experience. The general populace's primary

62 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Moral: Links and Limits, Part Two', 60.

objection to wind turbines is aesthetic, as they are typically considered eyesores that destroy landscapes and seascapes. At the same time, wind power is also regarded as a form of alternative energy with little environmental harm, in comparison with conventional forms of energy, such as hydro, coal, oil and nuclear.[63] Hepburn formulates the challenge to aesthetics as follows: 'how the sense-perceptual and the contribution of our freedom-and-reason can be in tension or conflict, as well as mutually enhancing and enriching'.[64] Specifically, in the case of wind turbines, 'is the benign thought component here powerful (authoritative?) enough to achieve this transformation?' or, instead, 'are we left with two non-merging items of experience, aesthetic appraisal (negative) and welfare appraisal (positive)?'[65]

Hepburn's own response to this question is tentative: 'in such cases the options for decision can be several, defying simple appeal to rule or principle, and requiring case-by-case appraisal'.[66] Here, his emphasis on the singularity of the object of aesthetic experience regarding art and nature discussed previously is paramount. The design of wind turbines, at least currently, is fairly uniform consisting of a tall pole with three whirling blades at the top. However, their placement, arrangement and geographical context (regarding not only the topography but also the surrounding area's character and cultural/historical significance) vary from project to project. Locations range from oceans and deserts to mountains and farmland. Sometimes the site is next to an historically significant place or a residential area and other times it is in the middle of an industrial zone.

I agree with Hepburn's case-by-case approach because I believe it is unwise to have a hasty, knee-jerk reaction either for or against the aesthetics of wind turbines, based, in one case, upon their presumed eyesore effect and, in the other, upon their environmental value. In the first case, we can be justifiably accused of being close-minded. When the aesthetic harm is not too blatant, I believe it is reasonable to allow some room for the environmental value to be

63 I am aware of the possible harm to birds and to human hearing but for the purpose of discussion here I am only addressing the environmental benefit of renewable energy. I explore various issues related to the aesthetics of wind turbines in my 'Machines in the Ocean: The Aesthetics of Wind Farm', *Contemporary Aesthetics,* 2 (2004), http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=247&searchstr=Yuriko+Saito; and 'Response to Jon Boone's Critique', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 3 (2005), http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=321&searchstr=Yuriko+Saito, both accessed 4 April 2019.

64 Hepburn, 'Freedom and Receptivity in Aesthetic Experience', 12.

65 Ibid., 11.

66 Ibid., 12.

fused with the structure's appearance, such as its movement in the open air, to render the structure aesthetically positive, or at least aesthetically benign. At the same time, no matter how environmentally valuable the structure may be, the aesthetics of its relationship to the surroundings may be too negative to make incorporation or fusion of environmental benefit possible. In such a case, we should uphold the centrality of the sensuous and not let the environmental value dictate the aesthetic value.

In some cases, the fusion of the environmental considerations and the aesthetic surface of an object may be easier. The environmental harms of the American obsession with weeds-free, smooth green lawns as the ideal domestic landscape are well documented.[67] They include the use of toxic fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides, an inordinate amount of water, gasoline for powering lawn mowers and other machineries. What at first appear to be factors that cannot be integrated into the appearance of the green carpet may help us notice things that had not been noticed before. For example, because of the toxicity of the chemicals applied, birds and butterflies seldom flock to the green lawns, while the alternative, environmentally healthier gardens with wildflowers and edible plants are alive with these creatures. Furthermore, the rich diversity of colours and textures of the alternative landscaping makes the appearance of green lawns pale in comparison. As a result, the green lawns start *looking* eerily sterile, lifeless and monotonous.

But the case of consumer goods remains challenging because the environmental harm and the human rights violations often occur half the world away. Unlike in the case of the lawn, the associated facts cannot be fused with the perceptual features of the objects. There is indeed a disconnect between the objects and the various associated harms. As Orr points out:

> the problem is that we do not often see the true ugliness of the consumer economy and so are not compelled to do much about it. The distance between shopping malls and the mines, wells, corporate farms, factories, toxic dumps, and landfills, sometimes half a world away, dampens our perceptions that something is fundamentally wrong.[68]

67 See Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D. C., 1994); F. Herbert Bormann, et al., *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony* (New Haven, 2001); and Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York, 2006).

68 Orr, *The Nature of Design*, 179.

Does this case then mark the limit of how far we can take the ethical considerations to affect the aesthetic experience?

Although it concerns nature aesthetics, consider the following discussion by Hepburn of the predation necessary for animals in an otherwise pleasurable landscape. I am assuming that the phenomenon of predation is not available to the sense experience in this case. Hepburn wonders whether the freedom of imagination can legitimately extend to wilfully ignoring this fact about the landscape. 'I may employ my improvisatory freedom in being self-indulgently selective of only the benign aspects of the animal relationships in a landscape. Then I may sense a measure of "bad faith" in my screening out thoughts that would jeopardize the overall agreeable tone of my aesthetic experience'.[69] We are then confronted with the challenge of incorporating disharmonious or disconcerting associations into an overall synthesized aesthetic whole, what he characterises as 'self-correction, to "retune" towards a manageable aesthetic experience', or to decide 'to leave the aesthetic mode' if the disharmonious associations overwhelm the fragile aesthetic whole.[70]

If we pursue the educational process and value of aesthetic experiences regarding art and nature that is emphasised by Hepburn, we could claim that the initial attractiveness of the object needs to go through modifications or 'retuning' with further knowledge we gain and that ignoring or excluding it amounts to not fully supporting and practicing this educational process and is indeed a case of bad faith. Insofar as a material object also constitutes 'the other', our aesthetic experience needs to attend to its singularity and wholeness.

Specifically, in today's global economy, we tend to view consumer goods simply as objects on the store shelf with no story or history. Far from being story-less, however, such an object has often gone through quite a journey with its production process and will continue the journey into its so-called 'afterlife' in the junkyard. The story of its journey is often dark with various environmental problems and human hardships. A more holistic aesthetic experience of the object with its own story may make the content of the experience less harmonious and more complicated and messy, but one could argue, following Hepburn's discussion of art and nature aesthetics, that it is a 'truer' or richer experience, although not pleasant or comfortable. Its sensuous appeal will be felt as more fragile and precarious. Feeling the weight of its dark history would encourage a more respectful interaction with the object by cherishing it, caring for it, prolonging its longevity by repairing it when

69 Hepburn, 'Freedom and Receptivity in Aesthetic Experience', 8.

70 Ibid., 9.

needed, rather than throwing it away at the first sign that it no longer satisfies our aesthetic appetite. Ultimately, the kind of aesthetic experience we develop toward the material world determines our mode of being in the world.

* * *

This paper is a journey in pursuit of some possible consequences of Hepburn's work on the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, particularly regarding its application to the aesthetics of mere things. Aesthetic experience plays an indispensable role in cultivating an ethically-grounded interaction with the other, whether it be other people, art, nature, or, as I argue, the material world in general. As such, developing aesthetic experience not only enriches our lives but also improves our way of being in the world and of interacting with 'the other'.[71]

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