Aesthetics as a Guide to Ethics

Sherri Irvin

Published in *Aesthetics Today: A Reader*, ed. Robert Stecker and Theodore Gracyk (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 370-377. Penultimate draft. To cite, please consult the original.

Most discussions of aesthetics in relation to ethics have focused on art. A central question has been whether the moral value of an artwork affects its aesthetic value: should we think that a film is worse, aesthetically, because its content is morally objectionable? There has also been considerable discussion of the contribution artworks make to moral education by moving us to recognize the plights of others or to envision new possibilities for action. Some suggest that an artwork's success in this domain may be central to its aesthetic value.

Discussions of a relationship flowing in the other direction, from aesthetic value to moral value, have been much less common. Clive Bell, who held (rather notoriously) that the only thing relevant to an artwork's value as art is its abstract form, suggested that a work with aesthetic value automatically has positive moral value: the sort of bliss it generates is of such great value that, apparently, it nullifies any negative effect of the work's representational content.[1] In general, though, the dominant view about the contribution of aesthetic value to moral value is much weaker, and is taken to be so obvious that no one bothers to argue for it. Roughly, the view is that people like things with aesthetic value, and any moral value such things have is simply derived from the fact that people like them.

Some recent developments in aesthetics, though, have paved the way for a broader exploration of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value. Chief among these is an expansion of the concept of the aesthetic. Until recent decades, the vast bulk

of discussions took art (or, in a few cases, nature) as their primary subject matter. Recently, though, aestheticians have been exploring the application of aesthetic concepts to other areas of life, such as sex, sports and so on. In the process, they have suggested that traditional aesthetic concepts are too narrow: aesthetic experiences can lie at any point on the spectrum running from positive through banal to negative, and aesthetic properties can be any properties that contribute to the qualitative feel that is central to an aesthetic experience. A consequence of this broadening is that aesthetic concepts can now be applied quite pervasively. I have argued, for instance, that the following experiences and activities are aesthetic in nature:

> I run my tongue back and forth on the insides of my closed teeth, feeling the smoothness of their central surfaces and the roughness of the separations between them. … When I am petting my cat, I crouch over his body so that I can smell his fur, which at different places smells like trapped sunshine or roasted nuts, a bit like almonds but not quite. … I move my wedding ring back and forth over the knuckle that offers it slight resistance, and I jiggle it around in my right palm to enjoy its weight before sliding it back on.[2]

If the aesthetic is pervasive in human experience, then we should expect that the interactions between aesthetic and ethical value are complex and widespread, with the aesthetic informing the ethical in many ways. Here I offer a preliminary exploration of some of the possibilities. I make no suggestion that some systematic relationship of the aesthetic to the ethical holds in all of the cases I discuss. My exploration is motivated, in considerable part, by a vague unease I have long felt about contemporary ethical theory. My concern is well captured in an observation of Lawrence Blum's:

> By and large, contemporary moral philosophy has not felt pressed to explore what it is like to be a person who lives according to its various normative theories, nor how one gets to be such a person.[3]

Aesthetics, as I see it, is in large part about matters of "what it is like": it is a consideration of the qualitative feel of human experience. An ethics that is sensitive to these matters will, I think, do a better job of capturing what it is to be a morally good person and how one is, from one's position within a particular human life, to go about becoming one.

Aesthetic Value and Moral Motivation

Imagine a person for whom a certain kind of sensual indulgence features prominently among her aesthetic values. She enjoys fine wines and cigars, luscious desserts and fine cuts of meat. The elimination of cruelty also figures among her values, though the relevance of this to her epicurean practices has not been apparent to her. She is, perhaps, vaguely aware that the production of meat sometimes involves suffering for animals. But then something increases or intensifies this awareness. She learns that veal calves and factory-farmed chickens suffer greatly throughout their lives, and that beef cattle often undergo botched slaughtering procedures that amount to torture. Her new, vivid awareness provokes a confrontation between her two values: the value of sensual pleasures, which she explicitly celebrates, and the value of avoiding cruelty, which has been a background feature in her life.

If we considered only her new awareness of the suffering of animals and the value she places in avoiding cruelty, we would be able to offer a simple prescription for what she should do: namely, stop eating meat. But given the value she places on the sensual, this simple prescription is likely to backfire. I have heard many people say that, although they recognize the moral value of vegetarianism, they simply can't bring themselves to

give up meat. The problem is not that they are bad people; in fact, some of them strike me as quite admirable people. The problem is that they see vegetarianism as a simple case of sacrifice, of adopting an asceticism which, from the point of view of our subject, may appear both to conflict with other things she values highly and to smack of self-righteousness.

When we are considering what she should do, we need to think about more than what she must give up. We need to think about this in the context of the life she is living and the values she strives to realize through that life. Sensual pleasure is one of these values, and nothing in her new realization about animals suggests that holding such a value is wrong in itself. What is needed is a way of integrating the value that opposes cruelty with the value placed on the sensual: our moral agent needs to find a sensual way to stop eating meat. This might involve starting out by abandoning veal, which is among the morally worst cases, while scanning the menus of her favorite restaurants for overlooked options. It might eventuate in a new enthusiasm for the cheese course, an exploration of Indian food, or the organization of a dinner with friends for which they hire an upscale vegetarian chef for the price of a meal in their favorite French restaurant.

Why should we allow that the moral value of eliminating cruelty may, or even should, be realized gradually and sensually, rather than immediately and in an attitude of sacrifice? First of all, if the moral project is undertaken in such a way as to satisfy the agent's aesthetic value, there will be little reason for her to backslide, since the void that is left by what she has given up is filled by other suitably satisfying things. Is this simply virtue for losers – moral development for people too weak to adhere to principles whose force they recognize? I would say, instead, that this sort of view is realistically responsive to facts about us as human beings. There are structural aspects of our lives and, probably, our minds that lead to an erosion, over time, in the salience of morally relevant

information (e.g., about the harms associated with factory farming), but not in the salience of our aesthetic values and desires. A moral view that aspires to practical success must take into account what human beings are really like and how they are really motivated.

Here is a second reason to see moral duties as inflected by aesthetic values. People avoid pursuing certain kinds of moral projects, or even acknowledging certain kinds of morally relevant information, because they fear that to do so would require a rather vast restructuring of their lives, or at least a very significant sacrifice of time and energy. Consider the snarl of moral problems evident in Western societies: we are, individually and collectively, using many more resources than we need, contributing to the degradation of the natural environment, causing unnecessary suffering to animals, purchasing goods produced in sweatshops, and allowing human beings in other parts of the world to starve to death and to die of preventable and treatable illnesses. The scale of these problems is vast. Since we are not prepared to modify our lives in the rather extreme ways that would signal that we have fully grasped the seriousness of a particular moral issue, and since doing relatively little doesn't seem nearly enough, consistency almost seems to demand that we simply refrain from acknowledging the issue in the first place.

But if we accept a gentler approach to moral improvement, one that endorses the attempt to integrate our moral values with our aesthetic values rather than viewing the moral values as trumps, perhaps we can allow ourselves to travel a step or two down the path of moral improvement rather than simply turning away because we are not willing to travel all the way to the destination. If we take these first steps, we may learn that we are capable of doing things we didn't expect, or that giving up certain things isn't as difficult or unpleasant as we thought. New possibilities may become visible to us, and we may be

able, or even want, to take further steps. Perhaps our epicurean subject will find that she can satisfy the value she places in sensual pleasures with fewer visits to restaurants and fewer cashmere suits; and by freeing up the resources formerly devoted to these things, she can more fully realize her moral values. She might learn, over time, that realizing her moral values is more satisfying than she expected, and she might even come to value sensuality less highly, so that the ongoing restructuring is not felt as a sacrifice at all. She might never have recognized the viability of these choices from her starting position, but they may seem perfectly reasonable, even natural, once she has begun moving in a particular direction.

Moral and Aesthetic Values in the Structure of a Life

Thus far, I have focused on how moral motivation can be enhanced when aesthetic value is harnessed in the service of moral value. There is a larger aesthetic issue at stake in many such cases, though. My particular aesthetic preferences are not the only, or the most important, way aesthetic value enters into the composition of my life. My life has an overall structure, including values, commitments, relationships, activities and behaviors. In my view, it is legitimate for each of us to attempt to structure his or her life in a way that makes it a good life for him or her.[4] When I say it is legitimate, I mean it carries moral weight: the importance to me of living a life that is good for me can outweigh or annul certain other kinds of moral demands.

What counts as a good life in this sense? I cannot give a complete answer here. But some of the structural elements that contribute to a life's being a good one, I suggest, are irreducibly aesthetic in nature. In particular, it appears that a good life will be characterized by:

1) Fit between one's personality or character and the projects, activities and behaviors through which one's values are realized, so that one is not perpetually uncomfortable doing the things that will realize one's values.

2) Narrative coherence over time, which involves the following aspects:

a) The life structure includes projects, commitments, relationships and activities to which one adheres in the medium to long term.

b) The evolution of the structure over time makes sense in light of values that the individual held at various earlier moments.

The fit and coherence exhibited by a structure are essentially aesthetic notions, whether the structure is a building, a work of narrative fiction or the structure of one's life. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only important qualities that should be realized within the structure of one's life, or even that a higher degree of fit or coherence is always an improvement: it is possible, whether in art or elsewhere, to have a structure that suffers from being a bit too balanced, too refined or too seamless. Diversity, too, is a crucially important aesthetic feature of a life.

I emphasize fit and coherence because they are crucial in allowing us to feel at ease in our lives, and others to feel at ease in theirs (in which we are participants). A life that lacks enduring features that allow us to know what to expect is a life in which we are constantly on our guard. While unpredictability may be an experience that we prize at some moments, a life completely fragmented or unpredictable is one that cannot genuinely be *lived*; it is rather a case of one's being buffeted by forces in a way that makes nonsense of the notion of deliberation about what to do. A life involving ongoing commitments, projects, relationships and activities, then, is much more likely to be experienced as a good life from within. It also seems more likely to realize one's values

successfully; for the realization of values tends to occur through commitments that are sustained over a period of time.

I have also suggested that a good life is one in which changes in the structure over time make sense in light of the individual's values at earlier moments. This requirement need not lead to undue conservatism. Over a period of years, the evolution of the life structure may lead to an outcome that would not have been predictable given the values the individual held much earlier. Narrative coherence leaves plenty of room for the individual to develop, grow and change over time.

What is the moral relevance of these ideas about what makes a life good for the person living it? If people have a legitimate expectation of being able to structure their lives to be good in the ways I have described, then morality must be thought of as something that can be integrated and interwoven into a structure whose basic integrity must be preserved over time. And one aspect of moral agency is such integration and interweaving, an essentially creative process that involves the application of aesthetic criteria among others.

This view has implications both for how we should implement moral projects and for what it is reasonable for others to require of us. Moral ideals which demand that we abandon our current life structure typically have very little motivational force; and I suggest that this is due not to moral lassitude on our parts, but to the fact that such ideals ignore the moral weight of a life that is worth living for the agent. A classic example is the moral ideal promulgated by Peter Singer in his famous paper "Famine, Affluence and Morality."[5] Singer proposes that an individual give away his goods until he is at the point of being nearly as badly off as the people his actions are helping, perhaps taking only the bare minimum for meals and sleep that would allow him to continue functioning in his helping capacity.

When people first encounter this view, they tend to be incredulous, even when they identify with the obvious and deep compassion for others that it manifests. The demand that we abandon or demolish the structure of our lives is one that we, as agents already situated within that structure, simply cannot be expected or obligated to accept. A good life for the individual is one that satisfies certain criteria, including aesthetic ones; and these constrain what the individual may be required to sacrifice in pursuit of the good for others.

The moral relevance of aesthetic criteria provides ammunition against incredibly demanding views like Singer's; it also offers hints about how moral improvements are best pursued. When the agent is working from within the structure of her existing life, she should seek projects and activities that fit with other elements of that structure, and with her personality and character traits. This means that she may take certain elements of the structure as fixed points, at least provisionally, and aim to work around them or implement them as she develops her moral projects. Moreover, it means that she may, and indeed should, select moral projects based not just on their efficacy in securing the good for others, but also on the degree to which they cohere with her personality and existing commitments. She might choose to volunteer with programs aimed at adults rather than children, for instance, to ensure a better fit with her personality and inclinations.

Similarly, this view implies that, in many cases, the blame for an individual's failure to pursue certain morally desirable projects should be mitigated. A person may recognize the great value of public political activism, especially in an age in which many people feel disempowered or apathetic, and may greatly admire those who engage in it. But he may also recognize that such activism involves aspects that would make him profoundly uncomfortable, including a willingness to interact regularly with strangers

and engage them in ways that may lead to confrontation. It is legitimate for him to express his moral values, instead, through activities that do not clash with central elements of his personality.

This view might seem to let the agent off the hook too easily. After all, if one recognizes that a particular sort of moral project is especially admirable, shouldn't one strive to be the kind of person who can pursue such projects and ideals? My answer is a qualified "yes." The proper response to such situations will sometimes be to set oneself upon a path by way of which, over time, significant changes to both one's personality and the structure of one's life will result. But there are a number of things to keep in mind. First, there are limits on the degree to which personality can be altered; and there may be certain aspects of the life structure that are so central to that life's integrity, and to the identity of the person whose life it is, that their abandonment cannot be contemplated. Second, both the path and its endpoint may look quite different depending on whose life structure is in question. This means that, for many types of moral claim, it will be wrong to think that they apply universally. Third, the fact that what is advocated is a path or process rather than simply an endpoint, and that the nature of the path is constrained by aesthetic criteria of fit and coherence, is already a significant departure from the prescriptions contained within most moral views. Fourth, this sort of view makes it much more likely that moral motivation will be generated and sustained. Moral and aesthetic values, rather than being in competition, will be mutually reinforcing, which makes it more likely that the moral values will continue to be successfully realized over time.

The Moral Value of Aesthetic Satisfaction

At this point I will introduce another relationship between the moral and the aesthetic: namely that the pursuit of aesthetic satisfaction is, itself, morally good. I have argued elsewhere that it is possible to cultivate a thoroughgoing aesthetic sensibility that

may enhance everyday moments of life, such as time spent in meetings at work or standing in line at the grocery store. Indeed, I think this is a significant part of what certain spiritual traditions, such as meditative varieties of Buddhism, should be seen as advocating.

If we can increase our levels of satisfaction by developing our aesthetic sensibility in this way, then we have self-interested reasons for doing so. But is this morally relevant? I suggest that it is.[6] First, current strategies of pursuing aesthetic satisfaction in industrialized countries tend to involve pernicious patterns of consumption. Purchasing a consumer product leads to short-term satisfaction that erodes quickly and raises the bar for future satisfactions. For this reason, consumers frequently abandon products that are still perfectly usable and devote vast resources to acquiring objects that satisfy their needs either inefficiently or not at all. In addition to the obvious harms to the natural environment, this continually escalating pattern leads people to feel that they have no time, energy or money to give away: any excess resources may be needed in the future to secure the ever-higher standard of living one will need to feel even partial satisfaction. If we can learn to achieve true aesthetic satisfaction by attending to the rich and diverse stimuli available to us in everyday life, this may free up great quantities of resources for moral projects that benefit others.

The effects of enhanced aesthetic satisfaction in everyday life seem likely to extend beyond the material as well. People whose lives are relatively barren in satisfactions are, it seems, rarely moral exemplars. Those who are in the best position to express compassion, generosity and other morally admirable traits are those who see the beauty in life, even while they perceive the suffering of others. Attention to the aesthetic satisfactions available in everyday moments may free people from excessive concern with their own satisfactions so that they can devote more attention to the needs of others.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to argue for a loose-knit collection of claims about the moral relevance of the aesthetic. I have argued that attention to aesthetic values may promote moral motivation; that aesthetic values should be regarded as constraining moral demands; and that the pursuit of aesthetic satisfactions may itself have positive moral value. These arguments suggest that moral thinking should be aesthetically informed to a much greater degree than has been typical. The aesthetic is a central dimension of a good life, and a life's being good for the person living it has considerable moral weight, both in itself and because of the positive consequences for others that stem from it. Moral thinking that neglects aesthetic considerations, then, is likely to result in theories that are deficient not only from an aesthetic but from a moral point of view.

Notes

1. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913).

2. Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Everyday Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 30-31.

3. Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 183.

4. There are some limits to this. Perhaps there are pedophiles for whom nothing but a life including child sexual abuse could be experienced from the inside as a "good" life, and in such a case it would not be legitimate for them to pursue this form of life.

5. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), p. 231.

6. Irvin, "Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic," especially pp. 41-42.