The Beautiful and the Good: Introduction

Robert Fudge

Weber State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip

Recommended Citation
The Beautiful and the Good: Introduction

Robert Fudge
Weber State University

Despite the well-established and widespread assumption within contemporary analytic philosophy that ethics and aesthetics are fundamentally different disciplines with distinct concerns, there is a long and rich history within the broader Western tradition that treats them as closely related and mutually reinforcing. This can be seen, for example, in Plato’s equation of the beautiful and the good in the Symposium, as well as in the Greek notion of kalokagathia (the beautiful-and-good). Plotinus pushes this idea further in his Enneads by introducing the notion of the beautiful soul, which Enlightenment philosophers discussed widely.¹ And even within the analytic tradition, the links between the two areas of concern have not gone unexplored. Aestheticians, for example, have written

extensively on such questions as whether moral defects or virtues of artworks affect their aesthetic value and whether artworks can be morally edifying/corrupting. Some ethicists have considered the implications of recent brain research that suggests that moral and aesthetic judgments are both produced by the same areas of the brain. And philosophers from both disciplines have examined the similarities and differences between moral and aesthetic value. The six essays in this volume seek to elucidate further areas in which the two disciplines overlap.

John McAteer leads off the volume with his work, “How to be a Moral Taste Theorist.” Against the standard interpretation of Hume as a moral sense theorist—an interpretation arguably attributable to D. D. Raphael—McAteer argues instead that he should be understood as a moral taste theorist. As used in this paper, moral sense theory holds that the moral sense is a special faculty of the mind, is instinctive, and is cognitive and/or affective but not conative. By contrast, moral taste theory holds that moral judgments are analogous to aesthetic judgments in that someone possessing good moral taste is capable of discerning moral beauty, and this requires no special mental faculties beyond those involved in aesthetic judgment. Further, moral taste is not instinctive, but can be acquired. And finally, the faculty of moral taste is both cognitive and conative. As McAteer notes, this last point has important implications for moral motivation.

In “History and Moral Exempla in Enlightenment Aesthetics,” Bálint Gárdos similarly discusses the relation between the moral and the aesthetic during the Enlightenment, but in much broader terms. Agreeing with Paul Guyer that the rise of autonomous ethics cannot be attributed to the corresponding rise of the concept of disinterestedness, Gárdos seeks instead to attribute it to the
increasing abstractness of moral philosophy, which came to rely more on principles than on moral exempla. This shift ran parallel to a similar shift in the understanding of history, which moved away from the cataloging of exempla in the service of rhetoric.

The next two pieces in the collection focus on the notion of disgust, a concept with both moral and aesthetic connotations. In “A Humean Approach to the Problem of Disgust and Aesthetic Appreciation,” Eva Dadlez addresses Hume’s notion of “emotional conversion,” in which emotions interact with and intensify one another, as a route to understanding how becoming aesthetically absorbed in an object can both depend upon and be intensified by disgust. Relying on different interpretations of conversion, Dadlez suggests that it be understood in terms of “tincture,” a term Hume also uses to describe the interplay between our emotions. Emotions can combine, blend, and affect one another in various ways, as Dadlez illustrates with passages from “The Vagina Monologues.” Through these examples, she demonstrates how the emotional response of disgust can enhance aesthetic appreciation.

Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that the emotion of disgust has a “semantic connection” with mortality and death that makes disgust aesthetically relevant in our assessment of disgusting art. While not denying disgusting art’s aesthetic value, Filippo Contesi challenges Korsmeyer’s account of disgust in “The Meanings of Disgusting Art.” Specifically, he appeals to both counterexamples and a consideration of what it means to be the formal object of an emotion to show that disgust is about more than simply mortality and death. This recognition raises important avenues of future research on the notion of moral disgust.
In “Vandals or Visionaries? The Ethical Criticism of Street Art,” Mary Beth Willard seeks a proper model for how street art should be morally and aesthetically assessed. Rejecting both the ethicist and autonomist models of the aesthetic relevance of artworks’ moral content, Willard argues for a new model that takes seriously the interplay between street art and public spaces. This model is necessitated, she claims, because street art does not qualify as art in the sense that it is not part of the art world, as traditionally conceived.

Polycarp Ikuenobe ends the collection with his “Good and Beautiful: A Moral-Aesthetic View of Personhood in African Communal Traditions.” Appealing to a variety of African cultures, Ikuenobe shows how the notion of community is essential to the African notion of personhood. From this, it follows that to be in harmony with one’s community is to be both good and beautiful. In sum, a consideration of the ontological status of the person in African culture reveals the centrality of both moral and aesthetic norms in the evaluation of the person.