

AESTHETIC VALUE, INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE ABSOLUTE CONCEPTION OF THE WORLD

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I.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant diagnoses an antinomy of taste¹: determinate concepts exhaust judgments of taste or they do not. Judgments of taste are either objective and public or subjective and private. On the objectivity thesis, aesthetic value is predicable of objects. But who can say which concepts these would be? On the subjectivity thesis, aesthetic value is not predicable of objects. But have we no authority in asserting the aesthetic value of any object? Following John McDowell², I argue aesthetic value is neither objective nor subjective, but intersubjective. But, contra McDowell, I draw on the conceptual resource of an indeterminate absolute conception of reality to show that the validity that intersubjective aesthetic value bestows on judgments of taste must assume an indeterminate notion of common sense, according to which a judgment of taste may be valid for all subjects.

II.

Each of the contradictory theses in the antinomy of taste looks intuitive. The objectivity thesis seems to explain why aesthetic value is public: one can communicate one's tastes, where others are able to use relevant concepts to perceive a beautiful object, and can appraise another's taste by using these concepts. But the subjectivity thesis appears to show why aesthetic value is private: one can represent

¹ See Kant (2000), 5:212.

² See McDowell (1998).

beauty using concepts so different from those another uses that disagreement about beauty privileges no particular concepts and thus constitutes no real dispute. Both theses face steep challenges. In asserting that determinate concepts—concepts with precise extensions and settled criteria for application—exhaust judgments of taste, the objectivity thesis incurs the dubious task of providing fixed conditions on which aesthetic value is judgeable. And in claiming that determinate concepts do not exhaust judgments of taste, the subjectivity thesis robs these judgments of any possible conditions or limits. Whereas aesthetic objectivism threatens interpretive disputability, aesthetic subjectivism threatens publicity.

John Mackie's view that moral and aesthetic values are not part of the fabric of the world trades on the polarity of these theses. His position is that value is not the property of objects in the world, but rather is projected by subjects onto the world. It is mistaken to suppose moral or aesthetic thinking involves belief about objective properties. Value's subjectivity consists in the dependence of its intelligibility on how it affects a sentient being. By contrast, Mackie's notion of objectivity applies to properties whose intelligibility is independent of sentience. Put in the terms of the antinomy of taste, something is objective if, through some determinate concept, it is predicable of an object. Mackie argues that value satisfies his notion of subjectivity due to (i) the variation among individuals' values and (ii) the inseparability of values from individual's particular responses to objects.³ Thus, value cannot retain its force on us outside "our participation in different ways of life",⁴ and it cannot both be part of the world and have the particular phenomenal character it bears in experience, lest it be an entity "of a very strange sort".⁵ Again, in terms of the antinomy of taste, no value concept has extension and criteria for application so determinate as to trump competing concepts and thereby be predicable of an object. According to McDowell, this assumes nothing subjective could be found in the world, the disastrous implication being that we are significantly cut off from our world. Our world is objective in Mackie's sense, constituted by properties independent of those dependent on our sentience. The worry regarding aesthetic value is that, on Mackie's polarization, beauty is nowhere to be found.

³ See Mackie (1977), 36-42.

⁴ Mackie (1977), 36.

⁵ Mackie (1977), 38.

McDowell likens Mackie's notion of objectivity to what Bernard Williams calls the absolute conception of reality. It is a conception of reality as opposed to appearances, of the world as it is in itself. Williams detects a dilemma confronting this conception. On the first horn, the absolute conception has no determinate picture of things in themselves because, McDowell says, it depicts "the world merely as whatever it is of which the various particular appearances are appearances". This conception posits the world untainted by the bias and error to which appearances are vulnerable, but too abstract to provide a measure against which to explain the various appearances. On the second horn, the absolute conception has a determinate picture of the world as it is in itself, one that prescribes properties it ought to have. But this very determinacy implicates a non-absolute point of view. To avoid the dilemma, Williams recommends adopting, as McDowell puts it, "a pure or transparent mode of access to reality as it is in itself, such as is constituted by scientific inquiry".⁶ The transparency of this access apparently owes to the authority science is supposed to wield over ordinary knowledge. Williams assumes such access avoids the second horn by progressively revealing the world as it is in itself.

McDowell points out the fantasy of supposing science can discover an Archimedean point "from which a comparison could be set up between particular representations of the world and the world itself". Indeed, he says, one's "beliefs about which sorts of transactions with the world yield knowledge of it are not prior to, but part of, one's beliefs about what the world [in itself] is like; necessarily so, since the transactions themselves take place in the world".⁷ The point we take our beliefs about what appears to us to be beliefs about reality. The task Williams sets for scientific inquiry—bridging appearances with reality through scientific comparison—is a fantasy because it ignores a constitutive feature of our beliefs about the 'sides' of a fictitious gap, namely, our beliefs about our transactions with the world are shot through with beliefs about reality beyond these transactions.

Our conception of reality must instead recognize, as Hilary Putnam⁸ says, that our method of interpreting appearances is inescapable, presupposed by appearances' very perspicuity to us. This conception, McDowell claims, safely occupies the second horn of the dilemma, "unblunted by the idea of a somehow impersonal and ahistorical

⁶ McDowell (1998), 120; see Williams (1978), 241-4.

⁷ McDowell (1998), 126.

⁸ See Putnam (1978), 32.

mode of access to reality”.⁹ He envisions, not a pure, but a familiar and historical mode of access to reality by which moral and aesthetic values are not objective in Mackie’s sense precisely because the notion of a world is not either. The notion of a world is inseparable from shareable beliefs about our transactions with the world. Any value we find in this world is thus neither objective nor merely subjective, but constitutive of beliefs we may hold in common, viz., intersubjective.

III.

McDowell sees in Williams’ need for an Archimedean point a desire for a dubious metaphysical foundation for science.¹⁰ Supposing that an empirical inquiry could reveal the essence of things—the reality beyond what appears to us—is a futile attempt at rewarding conditioned, standpoint-dependent investigation with unconditioned, standpoint-independent knowledge. But can McDowell’s conception of reality, unblunted by an impersonal, ahistorical mode of access, safely occupy the dilemma’s second horn? Is his conception of familiarly and historically accessible reality sufficient? I will argue it is not. For now, I contend a certain version of the first horn promises a better solution than McDowell’s version of the second horn. Specifically, I argue Kant’s idea of the in itself supports a defensible account of the indeterminate absolute conception of reality. This idea will exhibit a useful conceptual resource for addressing the antinomy of aesthetic judgment with which we began.

Recall the indeterminate absolute conception of reality has no determinate picture of the world in itself. It is a conception of the world as that of which appearances are appearances. Williams complains this conception is too abstract to explain appearances. Understood in terms of Kant’s idea of the in itself, this conception is indispensable, not because it *explains* appearances—that would implicate a standpoint—but because it makes the notion of appearance *intelligible*.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant offers two theses¹¹ for why the appearances that comprise our experience of reality presupposes the idea of the in itself. The first thesis states: “the word ‘appearance’ must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility...must be something, i.e., an object independent of

⁹ McDowell (1998), 128.

¹⁰ See McDowell (1998), 128-9.

¹¹ These theses are modelled on what Franks (2005) calls Kant’s analytic and synthetic commitments to the in itself (43-5).

sensibility”. Denying this implies “the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears”.¹²

The entailment in the first thesis—an appearance entails that something appears—extends to the thought that a standpoint entails that thing in itself on which one takes a standpoint. On its own, this thesis is too thin to support an indeterminate absolute conception of reality. It supports the view that whereas appearances are objects of possible experience falling under determinate concepts, things in themselves are objects we cannot know and so cannot fall under such concepts. But it does not say which sort of concept is proper to thinking things in themselves and it does not reveal the significance of such thinking. The second thesis accomplishes these tasks.

In the first *Critique*, Kant claims: “the proper principle of reason in general (in its logical use) is to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding [i.e., cognitions of appearances], with which its unity will be completed”.¹³ And in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, he claims that only in thinking the in itself “does reason find completion and satisfaction, which it could never hope to find in the derivation of the appearances from the homogeneous grounds of those appearances”.¹⁴ Why must the unity of our cognitions of appearances be *complete*?

Kant explains it is part of “the very concept of the conditioned that something is referred to as a condition, and if this condition is again itself conditioned, to a more remote condition, and so through all the members of the series”. He adds that it is a “logical requirement that we should have adequate premises for any given conclusion”.¹⁵ His syllogistic aim is to avoid a regress of conditions by ensuring the series of cognitions culminates in a unity—basic premise—that our experience of appearances—conclusions drawn from experience—cannot provide. Reason asserts as its basic premise the “necessary idea” of the unconditioned condition of this series, which is the idea of the in itself: “that which necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience and all appearances is the unconditioned, which reason necessarily and with every right demands in things in themselves for everything that is conditioned, thereby demanding the series of conditions as something completed”.¹⁶

¹² Kant (1998), A252, Bxxvii.

¹³ Kant (1998), A307/B364.

¹⁴ Kant (1950), 4:355.

¹⁵ Kant (1998), A498/B526, A521/B549.

¹⁶ Kant (1998), Bxx-xxi.

The second thesis contains another entailment: the concept of what is conditioned entails the concept of what conditions it—a conclusion entails its adequate premises. This entailment accomplishes those tasks the first thesis cannot: the concept proper to thinking the unconditioned condition of our cognitions of appearances is the idea of the in itself, the significance of thinking this idea being the satisfaction of reason's demand for a complete unity of such cognitions.

Now, the second thesis extends to the thought that the world is both (a) as we experience it and (b) independent of our experience of it. Since appearances are conditioned by our modes of understanding, they are conclusions drawn from the ways we experience the world. But insofar as appearances presuppose what is unconditioned by our mode of understanding—the in itself—they presuppose the premise adequate to the thought of a mind-independent world. It is noteworthy that the extended second thesis accords with a specific absolute conception of reality. Since the content of (a) falls within the bounds of human sensibility, whereas that of (b) does not, the extended second thesis' commitment to mind-independent reality must rest on a regulative assumption. The significance of thinking the idea of the in itself is that it does not constitute, but regulates our cognitions of appearances. The concept proper to this thinking thus cannot have a determinate extension or settled criteria for application: it must be indeterminate. The extended second thesis thus supports an indeterminate absolute conception of reality that renders appearances intelligible, rather than explaining them.

IV.

In arguing that aesthetic value is neither subjective nor objective in Mackie's sense, McDowell rejects the indeterminate absolute conception of reality, opting for a conception of reality our access to which is familiar and historical. It may be that he rejects this conception, not only for its abstractness, but for its inability to explain appearances. But I argue this conception is indispensable for appearances' intelligibility. If this is sound, it not only vindicates Kant's version of the first horn of the dilemma that Williams says confronts the absolute conception of reality: it challenges the sufficiency of McDowell's blunted version of the second horn.

In Section 3, I extended Kant's first thesis: a standpoint entails a conception of the thing in itself on which one takes a standpoint. A standpoint is a perspective one takes up in experience and to which certain things appear. As the first thesis states, an

appearance logically presupposes that which appears, namely, the impersonal and ahistorical thing in itself—impersonal because it transcends our peculiar modes of sensibility, ahistorical because its falling under no determinate concept entails its falling under no historically contingent concept. The extended first thesis reveals the entailment from which the notion of a standpoint derives its logical unity. I suspect McDowell's conception of familiarly and historically accessible reality is insufficient for deriving the logical unity of a standpoint. If my standpoint is bound only by what is familiar and historical, then since the content of this standpoint falls within the bounds of human sensibility, my conception of the world would be confined to the thought that (a) it is as I experience it. It would lack the other thought of the extended second thesis, that (b) the world is independent of my experience of it. My standpoint would consist of empirical conclusions that, conditioned by my mode of understanding, could not provide their own basic premise.

McDowell's conception has damaging effects for scientific inquiry. By forgoing the presupposition of what logically unifies a standpoint, it makes the collective pursuit of scientific knowledge consist of an aggregate of individually incomplete perspectives. The lack of unity in these elements robs the pursuit of its own unity. Despite McDowell's claim, this fails to blunt the second horn of the dilemma: these elements are confined to the thought in (a) and thereby restricted from the thought in (b). And, contra Williams, this pursuit could not strive to produce its own unity by progressing toward the fantasy of an Archimedean point shared by appearances and reality. The missing unity of a standpoint or set of standpoints is only to be found in the extended second thesis' idea of that which transcends a subject's experiences by putting these experiences in common with other subjects. Intersubjectivity without commonality is no unity.

McDowell's view cannot accommodate the extended second thesis. Since the first thesis depends on the second thesis to discharge its tasks of showing which concept is proper to thinking the in itself and what the significance of this thinking is, his dispensing with the second thesis forfeits a conceptual resource indispensable for the intelligibility of appearances. *A fortiori, it forfeits a conceptual resource indispensable for the intelligibility of aesthetic value.* Without an indeterminate absolute conception of the world, McDowell cannot make use of this conception's *indeterminate form* in order to show how judgments of taste share what in the third *Critique* Kant calls a universal voice. This voice is represented by the "indeterminate

norm” or idea of a common sense in matters of taste. Judgments of taste, he argues, are non-cognitive, lacking a principle of objectivity, and yet not merely subjective, in which case “one would never even have a thought of their necessity”. Rather, they expect or solicit the agreement of all, viz., a common sense.¹⁷ This is the expectation of a normative confrontation that would make intersubjective agreement and criticism regarding taste so much as possible. Without presupposing common sense, judgments of taste could not have subjective universal validity—validity for all judging subjects—since they would reflect standards of aesthetic value specific to the local common sense of a subject’s particular community. Like scientific knowledge, aesthetic value on McDowell’s conception of reality must rest on an aggregate of standpoints, on intersubjectivity with no unity.

Of course, on Kant’s view of taste, the idea of aesthetic common sense *qua* indeterminate concept can have no precise extension or settled criteria for its application. To avoid the objectivity thesis in the antinomy of taste, this idea cannot privilege any particular set of judgments of taste, and its application cannot depend on the conventions of any particular familiar or historical standpoint. But this idea must be regulatively assumed to avoid the subjectivity thesis and thereby secure an intersubjective space for aesthetic value. Such an idea may raise questions of which particular norms it allows among judging subjects. But its indeterminacy is precisely what allows for intersubjective validity in judgments of taste: it leaves open a space between Mackie’s polarized notions of objectivity and subjectivity in which aesthetic value is neither reducible to objective properties nor interminably relative to a particular culture or epoch. By contrast, I want to suggest, McDowell’s conception of reality sacrifices unified intersubjectivity and universal validity for familiarity and historicity.

My criticism of McDowell is that he cannot painlessly take the second horn of the dilemma facing the absolute conception of reality. Nothing regulates or unifies his conception of the standpoint of taste in the absence of the indeterminate form of Kant’s notion of aesthetic common sense. (It is not hard to see how this might push McDowell toward the subjectivity thesis in the antinomy of taste.) We grasp this form by taking a certain path around the dilemma: whereas the dogmatist thinks a determinate absolute conception of reality is attainable and the skeptic denies that it

¹⁷ Kant (2000), 5:240.

is, they both incorrectly assume that actually attaining it is the point of either epistemic or evaluative inquiry. A Kantian understanding of the indeterminate absolute conception of reality shows why this is not the point, desirable though it may be.

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