

David Weissman
Sensibility and the Sublime

For my wife.

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Introduction

Many arts flourish, yet studies of aesthetics are fragmentary and diffuse.¹ The dearth of systematic works is evidence of a scorned history: aesthetics is still hobbled by the emotivist charge that its values express feelings, never cognition. It suffers, too, from assaults—on beauty, form, representation, significance, and finesse—that demoralize aesthetics from within. Plato described beauty as the zenith of perfection, though no one has identified its essential features. Unable to specify a perfection that might be realized everywhere, aestheticians are skeptical that *beauty* is univocal or that achieving beauty is obligatory anywhere. Form was a universal point of reference until action painting, stream of consciousness literature, and aleatoric music made it seem archaic. Many plays and novels have plots, buildings are designed; yet respect for form is a preference, not an artistic duty. Painters favor abstraction because photography stripped representational art of its principal role and because our secular ethos prefers decoration to mythic stories and metaphors. Brutality trumps finesse: New York's Metropolitan Museum once featured Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde. There is also this deeper wound: contemporary aesthetics emphasizes criticism and the history and philosophy of art while neglecting the pleasure, insight, and cultivation on which they depend. Dominated by an array of topics—expression, abstraction, and ontology; tradition, styles, and craft— aesthetics loses focus despite having a natural center: criticism and the arts are unified by the sensibility of those who make or respond to art.

Sensibility is a power for differentiating and responding selectively to inputs; it registers body's internal states while mediating all our engagements with other things. Yet sensibility is usually construed narrowly as preference or taste: one prefers the oboe to the oud, Michelangelo to Miró. My use of the word is broader. Every material entity, living or not, is reactive: each resonates like a tuning fork when struck. Living things (and some machines) do more: sensibility in them is receptivity and response. Drivers stop and go as lights turn red or green; experienced cooks survey a pantry's resources before creating something distinctive.

¹ George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), pp. 3-4; Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981), p. 11.

These two aspects of sensibility—receptivity and response—are fundamental. Receptivity is mind's capacity for qualification: the qualifiers are visceral changes, the sensory data caused by encounters with other people or things, and the thinking thereby provoked. We often suppose that receptivity is only passive, though activity is implied by sensibility's role as a filter. Some settings are fixed (one is color-blind); others express a current interest or distraction: "Say it again, please: I wasn't listening." That response is ambiguous: does it imply that data were not received or that they were received but unrecognized? An altered focus sometimes closes filters that could have made the data accessible to higher-order processing.

Sensibility's active side is more prominent as we follow its trajectory beyond reception to recognition and response. Sherlock Holmes recognized the significance of features that others ignored; his inferences and hypotheses were as good as his observations. Sensibility in him was an array of skills for responding selectively to circumstances. It has that role in every living thing: sensibility is the resonant—more or less educable—interface between bodies and the states of affairs to which they respond. One puts the same questions to Holmes, Cezanne, or Babe Ruth: what were your impressions, how did you construe them, what did you do? Sensibility is the individual signature expressing our disparate answers: some understand or create, others intervene.

Is sensibility identical to consciousness and self-consciousness? Both are characteristic—someone knocked out doesn't notice or respond to sensory inputs—yet sensibility is more than either or both. Consciousness is critical to focus, self-awareness inhibits and appraises, but neither is required for sensibility's activation: people incorporate street noise into their dreams. Sensibility, like an iceberg, is mostly submerged. Take a walk while groping for an idea; notice how often it appears unannounced when attention is dominated by other things. Or see the responses of people who avoid certain others because of unavowed jealousy or those whose actions are directed by a habit or plan unconsciously formulated. You often behave in this systematic way, someone remarks; I hadn't realized, you say.

Behaviorists argue that the notion of a directing but unconscious idea is constructed after the fact when an organizing form is inferred, then wrongly described as an unconscious plan. The inference, they say, is groundless but also unnecessary: games have constraining rules and

specific trajectories but no directing plan; like most lives, their outcomes are adventitious. This gloss is surely false to many human projects. Wanting to be a dentist, one goes to dental school; the aim is often out of conscious sight, though foresight is apparent in the choice of courses and companions. Persistence is a clue: frustrate choices critical to someone's aims and see the resistance.

Some novels and paintings—Jackson Pollock's, for example—exhibit directing forms that were likely conjured, applied, and revised in the course of making them. This isn't strange: many things are done with an aim but without a rigid plan for achieving it. C. S. Peirce spoke of "leading principles" or "ideas."² These are schemas that direct thought or action with or without explicit formulation or awareness. Our submission to them, between rapture and control, is evidence of sensibility's deep rhythms and organizing forms. Artists trust this unconscious direction and control because they see its efficacy. Perceivers reading a book for the first time don't know its outcome, though they anticipate its conclusion because sensibility is informed by schemas learned when other books were read.

Each sensibility is educated to specificity after beginning as a determinable mental state: born with the capacity to speak any language, one learns English or Dutch. This use of *sensibility* is dispositional, not structural: it implies reactivity without indicating the mechanics of response. There will be a day when physiology maps this structure. Just now, we argue, like Aristotle, from activity to capacitating "faculties."³ He was baffled by the structural bases for mental activity; like him, we proceed by telling what mind does, not how the brain does it. Knowing little or nothing about the material basis for tastes and skills, we distinguish good from ordinary cooks by the work they do. The aspects of sensibility important to aesthetics are equally opaque: we consider works created and responses to them, not the empowered structures, the bodies and brains, of people who make art or enjoy it.

Aesthetic theory is contentious because sensibility's role is construed differently by the three contrary hypotheses that dominate

² C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vols. i-vi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935, 1936), vol. v, paras. 5.365-5.369, pp. 226-229.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1045b28-1049b38, pp. 820-828.

aesthetic theory. *Objectivism* (classicism) is the view that aesthetic qualities inhere in things themselves. Beauty is said to be a primary property or one that is secondary because consequent on properties such as the proportion and scale of things: Greek temples, for example.. Sensibility is a bystander if objectivism is true: we learn to see things as they are.

Subjectivism (romanticism) urges that art be considered from the standpoint of its perceivers. Two versions dominate. One, reminiscent of Protagoras,⁴ argues that art is good or bad because of its effects on the imagination or emotions of those perceiving it. But this is implausible, given that anything may provoke us: why not see beauty in an abattoir? The alternative view, subjectivism with an objective turn, was proposed by Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood.⁵ They argued that knowing a work's inspiring idea is the necessary and sufficient condition for aesthetic appreciation: a song or sonata is merely the platform from which imagination leaps when perceivers intuit an artist's creative intention. Yet observers have only paintings or poems as evidence of ideas that inspired their makers. The hope of discerning those motivating ideas is confounded because any number of unrecoverable inspirations might have impelled a work, because artists often create as they go without a formulated or formulable idea to direct them, and because artists long dead can't explain themselves. A work and its inspiring idea do sometimes coalesce: a portrait may be a good representation of its subject. But most viewers don't care that the painting is photographic: they look for depth and revelation in the portrait without caring that it resembles its subject to some degree. It resonates in them, whatever the artist's intention.

The third—*relational*—alternative binds subjects to objects: it reduces a perceiver's interpretive freedom by emphasizing sensibility's link to works thought or perceived. It alleges that the experience of beauty is a perceptual, cognitive, or emotional response to a thing's properties: temples are not beautiful in themselves, though one perceives them as beautiful because of their proportion and scale. This third

⁴ Protagoras, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, eds. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 411.

⁵ Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, trans. Patrick Romanell (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 8-9; R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 125-152.

hypothesis applies Locke's theory of secondary properties to aesthetic experience:⁶ things are not red, blue, or beautiful in themselves, though they may be perceived as one or the other because light irradiates the object and eye.

Objectivism errs because things sometimes seen as beautiful often seem ordinary. Sensibility is the decisive variable if beauty comes and goes though the properties of things perceived are unchanged: wake up to the Parthenon every day and you sometimes fail to see it as beautiful. Could it be true that sensibility is temporarily blind to a property that endures, whether or not perceived? That is possible, though objectivism also fails in other ways: it doesn't supply a unitary scale for ranking the diversity of things said to be beautiful (music, sculpture, and fog); it can't resolve the competing appraisals of parents disputing the relative beauty of their children; it fails to cite beauty's constituent properties or the family resemblance that binds its disparate expressions. Subjectivism errs because the properties of things are incidental if aesthetic experience is self-generated. Why cherish art's craft and style if anything can excite us; why require that aesthetic objects be perceived or even that they exist if imagination is sufficient to excite us?

Only the relational view is adequate to aesthetic experience because it aligns sensibility to things thought or perceived. Locke's formulation restores aesthesis to the core of aesthetic experience: it makes sensibility the complement to properties that excite illumination, pleasure, or dismay. For nothing has aesthetic value, nothing is beautiful or ugly, terrifying or appeasing, if it is not or cannot be subject to appraising thought or perception. People tone-deaf don't hear music as beautiful, but neither do those who hear well but haven't listened. Educating sensibility helps the second, not the first. This is not the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder irrespective of things thought or perceived. It affirms that aesthetics is unalterably grounded in these coupled terms: sensibility and things to which it responds. In aesthetics, if nowhere else, *esse* (to be an object of aesthetic appreciation) *est percipi*.

The relational view implies balance and reciprocity in the relation of artists and perceivers. It affirms that cooks have no vocation in the

⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vols. 1-2, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 179-180.