



## METHOD AND METAPHYSICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART

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This article is concerned with the question of the proper place of substantial general metaphysics in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. For reasons articulated in writings from the 1950s, analytic aesthetics denies that there is any relation of dependence and regards the intrusion of metaphysics into reflection on art as not merely superfluous but also methodologically inappropriate. Against this I argue (1) that analytic aesthetics in its circumscription of the bounds of the discipline is not metaphysically neutral, (2) that it is vulnerable to the challenge of scientific naturalism, and (3) that a case for the necessity of metaphysics in aesthetics and the philosophy of art can be made on the grounds of the constitutive opacity of art and the aesthetic from the standpoint of ordinary consciousness. The analytic reception of Kant's aesthetic theory, I argue, supports this conclusion.

Questions of method are not much discussed in anglophone aesthetics and philosophy of art. Definite statements on the subject are common in the early writings of analytic aestheticians but hard to find in later literature.<sup>1</sup>

To decline to enter into questions of method is, however, not necessarily to neglect them: it counts as such only if there is a likelihood that something will be gained by methodological reflection, and it may be doubted that this is the case. For it may be thought that, as a rule, fruitful developments in or changes of philosophical method result from engagements with substantive first-order issues, and that attempts to theorize about philosophical methodology in the abstract, undertaken for their own sake, prove sterile. Thus in the absence of either some specific new development within aesthetics, requiring assimilation, or some external challenge to its legitimacy, requiring defensive action, methodological reflection in aesthetics has no wheels to turn and can justifiably be foregone.

A project currently running at the University of Nottingham, which aims to examine the contribution of the sciences to aesthetics and the philosophy of art, represents a challenge of the second type: nascent neuro-aesthetics and broader forms of empirical (cognitive, social, and other) psychology may be held to overtake or to undermine the modes of reflection on which aestheticians familiarly rely, that is, introspective reports, and intuitions concerning the content of concepts and the correct application of terms.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of any such hard naturalist challenge evidently depends upon a number of considerations,

<sup>1</sup> One exception is Richard Shusterman's very helpful collection of articles devoted to reflection on the analytic method: *Analytic Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> The project is directed by Gregory Currie, Matthew Kieran, and Aaron Meskin. Its aim is to demonstrate the unreliability of traditional methods by way of empirical research, rather than simply to add to the literature of empirical investigations. See



ranging from the fine detail of the putative contributions of scientific enquiry to the resolution of central problems (whether, for example, mapping brain activity can be held to elucidate the expressive power of music) to the fundamental question of whether the standpoint of empirical psychology in its very identification of the *explananda* of aesthetics and the philosophy of art – that is, by virtue of what it takes the problems to consist in – elides essential features of the object in a way that defeats its claim to philosophical relevance. The latter question is of course familiar from other areas of philosophy, such as ethics and epistemology, where purported naturalistic explanations are charged with merely changing the topic, and its resolution would require a general account of the implications of naturalism for normativity, folk psychology, and so forth.

The issue that I wish to pursue concerns a question of method which arises at the other end of the spectrum, and which looks to the past rather than to future developments. Anglophone aesthetics, as little as it draws on the results of scientific research, sets no store by general metaphysical theory. We do not find analytic aestheticians talking of art as an instantiation of the Form of Beauty or an emanation of the One, or as expressing the productive principle of *natura naturans*, or as a symbolic presentation of ideas of reason, or as a manifestation of absolute spirit, or as the letting-be of Being, or as the imperceptible being of the sensible; nor do we find them talking of aesthetic experience as revealing the conformity of nature with our power of judgement, or as a state of pure transcendental subjectivity, or as consciousness of the identity of the ideal and the real, and so on.

Instinct may tell us that it is a blessing not to be lost in such fog, but it will not be time wasted if we retrace the historical steps and philosophical moves that have led up to the clean air of analytic aesthetics. For what reason or reasons are proposals of the above type not entertained? Why are they either consigned to the history of philosophy, or regarded as of interest only to modes of philosophy deficient in rigour and more occupied with inspiration than truth? Perhaps

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<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/humanities/aesthetics/about.html>. Reconsideration of art and the aesthetic in a naturalistic perspective is of course not itself a novelty: Marxist and other sociological schools – Hippolyte Taine and Pierre Bourdieu are well known representatives – have long advocated it, and empirical psychology applied itself to aesthetic topics far back in the nineteenth century. The Nottingham project is distinguished by its attempt to motivate such a development by way of an internal critique of anglophone aesthetics. See Gregory Currie, *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), Introduction. What I am calling hard naturalism in aesthetics ranges from applications of Darwinian theory to neuroaesthetics: for examples of each see, respectively, Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, eds., *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), and the contributions to Joseph A. Goguen, ed., 'Art and the Brain', special issue, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, nos. 6–7 (1999).

the answers to these questions are blindingly obvious. If, for example, the attitude of analytic aestheticians to metaphysical theories of art derives from a well-grounded conviction that metaphysical knowledge of the relevant sort is impossible, or if it is the result of having tried out metaphysical theories and found them unsatisfactory, then there is no mystery. But it seems unlikely that the entrenched institutional attitude is supported, chiefly or exclusively, in such ways. That attempts to grasp the essence of art and the aesthetic by metaphysical means are inherently misguided is a background assumption rather than a result of analytic aesthetics.

The question that concerns me, therefore, is whether it is right to suppose that aesthetics can proceed without essential reference to or dependence on general metaphysics. Do metaphysical commitments have a legitimate role to play in reflection on art and the aesthetic, or are they of necessity *de trop* and liable to set enquiry on the wrong course? Is it plausible that aesthetics depends, at least at some level or for the final completion of its task, on general metaphysical theses and ideas? These questions are sufficiently interesting on their own account to merit discussion. What gives them further force and purpose is their direct connection with two other notable general features of anglophone aesthetics – namely, its near total dissociation from, first, the aesthetic tradition in so-called Continental philosophy, and, second, the broader legacy of the history of philosophy.

## I

Let me amplify these last points. That anglophone aesthetics is not presently in conversation with philosophers writing on art in the Continental or post-Kantian tradition, and has not been since its inception, reflects a general feature of the philosophical landscape and plausibly requires no special explanation. More striking is the broader absence of historical orientation. Certain sub-areas in analytic philosophy – philosophy of quantum mechanics, formal work in the philosophy of language and epistemology – have no historical dimension to speak of, but no other entire branch of philosophy is similarly severed from its past. Epistemology and metaphysics, moral and political philosophy, are all in living relation with a great deal of pre-analytic modern (and ancient) philosophy. In aesthetics, by contrast, the portion of historical work regarded as worth drawing on – typically Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* and some sections of Kant's 'Analytic of the Beautiful' – is extraordinarily limited. Analytic aesthetics appears to refuse all but a fraction of its inheritance.

If we return to the mid-twentieth-century roots of analytic aesthetics, it becomes clear that this refusal derived from a conviction that the effect of

metaphysics on aesthetics is necessarily deleterious. It is of course relevant that the particular brand of metaphysics which at that time dominated the aesthetic legacy was Idealist and thus of a piece with the specific tradition that analytic philosophy originally developed in reaction against, but the objection to traditional aesthetics went beyond its Idealist content. The founding programme of analytic aesthetics required that all potential sources of nebulosity be expunged, which meant no longer tolerating the *level of generality* that would provide metaphysics, Idealist or not, with a point of entry.

William Elton described his ground-breaking 1954 collection, *Aesthetics and Language*, as aiming to provide 'a number of pieces that may serve as models of analytical procedure in aesthetics' in so far as they 'diagnose and clarify some aesthetic confusions, which it holds to be mainly linguistic in origin'.<sup>3</sup> Citing the damning verdicts of analytic philosophers on traditional aesthetics – which C. D. Broad dismissed as 'largely bogus', while Arnold Isenberg talked of 'the present stone age of aesthetic inquiry' – Elton regarded himself as giving voice to a newly formed consensus concerning the errors that lie at its source. Traditional aesthetics, with its 'predisposition to essentialism', was prey to the 'pitfalls of generality' and mistook the 'presence of a substantive' for a guarantee of philosophical significance: its practice of 'facile generalization' resulted in 'illegitimate assimilation of differences and reductionism', and obscured the truth that the 'arts are multiple, and irreducible'. The desire to use art as a 'clue to reality' bore special responsibility for 'the peculiar dullness, pretentiousness, and woolliness characteristic of aesthetic writing'. Also at fault was the use of 'misleading analogies' promoted by the architectonic concerns of systematic theory construction. The 'tautologous, *a priori* nature of some, if not all, of its theories' empties Idealist aesthetics of genuine content. Benedetto Croce's position, for instance, is without empirical significance, since 'there is no way to prove him true or false'.

The proposals for reforming the discipline in the light of this critique involved a rejection of all abstract, synoptic, essentialist notions, and a sharp turn towards the concrete manifold of the arts and critical discourse concerning them. As W. B. Gallie put it: we should 'examine the main kinds of comparison and analogy found useful in criticism' in order to arrive at what he called a 'journeyman's' aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> John Passmore similarly declared that general aesthetics is to be repudiated in favour of 'an intensive study of the separate arts'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), Introduction, 1–4, 7.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Gallie, 'The Function of Philosophical Aesthetics', in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> John Passmore, 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics', in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 55.

The impulse behind these programmatic statements was not simply to make a fresh start but also, as it were, to get back to the things themselves. This realistic spirit expressed itself through a turn to language. As J. O. Urmson puts it, reflecting on the original motives and outlook of analytic aestheticians: they 'started from some datum which they *found* in the current conceptual and linguistic apparatus. They did *not invent* [...] they] *came upon* them in common speech';<sup>6</sup> their goal was 'to elucidate some portion of some conceptual apparatus, usually that implicit in the natural language that we speak, which is *treated as a datum to be elucidated*?' Monroe C. Beardsley, in his influential 1958 work, *Aesthetics*, elaborates this conception of aesthetics as a superstructure erected on critical language, of the philosophy of art as the handmaiden of criticism and its medium of self-elucidation, tidying up the critic's discourse and helping her to untie conceptual knots: 'As a field of knowledge, aesthetics consists of those principles that are required for clarifying and confirming critical statements. Aesthetics can be thought of, then, as the philosophy of criticism, or *metacriticism*.'<sup>8</sup> The presiding notion, therefore, is that by focusing on the quasi-object of linguistic practice, aesthetics arrives finally at something fixed and solid, an uncorrupted given, and also at something out of which conceptual structures can be distilled, furnishing something on which the 'analytic philosopher can practise his craft', as Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it.<sup>9</sup>

The narrative in the background of the analytic revolution in aesthetics was that of a long overdue Enlightenment: having been confounded for centuries by philosophical mythology, the discipline at last achieves maturity and breaks through to rational daylight. The envisaged regeneration of the discipline approximated to its (re)invention *ex nihilo*, with the implication, as some of Elton's contributors acknowledged, that the totality of aesthetics as hitherto conceived should be regarded as null and void: since the history of aesthetics is soaked in

<sup>6</sup> J. O. Urmson, 'The Methods of Aesthetics', in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 22 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis added). See also Gallie, 'Function of Philosophical Aesthetics', 29; Arnold Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 131–46, and 'Analytical Philosophy and the Study of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 125–36.

<sup>8</sup> See Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 3–4. '[W]e shall think of aesthetics as a distinctive philosophical enquiry: it is concerned with the nature and basis of criticism': '*philosophical aesthetics* [...] deals with questions about the meaning and truth of critical statements.' (p. 7)

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Philosophy of Art after Analysis and Romanticism', in Shusterman, *Analytic Aesthetics*, 37. The general analytic conception of the medium of language as fixing and stabilizing philosophical reflection is well described, and its difficulties indicated, in Mark Sacks, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Vagueness in the Metaphysics of the Analytic Tradition', in *The Analytic Tradition: Meaning, Thought and Knowledge*, ed. David Bell and Neil Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 173–96.

metaphysics, abjuring metaphysics meant abjuring history.<sup>10</sup> This development is itself, from a historical point of view, thoroughly exceptional: other schools of aesthetics may have similarly turned their back on traditional metaphysics and drawn some sort of line under the past in the name of a return to reality – early phenomenological writing on art (Roman Ingarden, Mikel Dufrenne) displays this tendency – but analytic aesthetics alone has committed itself to elucidating art without any reliance whatever on a substantive general philosophical position, guided merely by a concern for ‘clarity’.

The programme of analytic aesthetics has of course not in fact been carried through in the austere terms originally envisaged. Along with the desertion of language as the primary if not exclusive object of philosophical attention, anglophone aesthetics has expanded its remit and relaxed its borders. It now intersects freely with other areas of philosophy, to a limited extent with moral philosophy and to a great extent with philosophy of mind. The agenda of aesthetics has shifted away from a concentration on critical discourse and includes problems whose solution (in consequence of the ways in which those problems have come to be construed) depends squarely on work in other areas. Pictorial representation, for example, has become in all but name an issue in the philosophy of mind and perception. Furthermore, analytic aesthetics now includes in its own history several striking attempts at system building or at any rate comprehensive systematic elucidation of the arts: Nelson Goodman, Richard Wollheim, Arthur Danto, Kendall Walton. Also indicative of the change of outlook are the Deweyan proposals of Joseph Margolis and Richard Shusterman to bring anglophone aesthetics under the banner of pragmatism, a kind of move which in the 1950s would have been regarded as repeating the same kind of methodological mistake that had underpinned Idealist aesthetics.

Yet, it is fair to say, the founding spirit of opposition to Idealism and to the presence of metaphysics per se in aesthetics remains unaltered in the following respect. The outlook of analytic aesthetics dictates not that it be independent from all assumptions and claims outside its domain – as said, it borrows willingly from moral philosophy and philosophy of mind – but that issues in aesthetics be approached without reliance on a comprehensive and systematic set of general,

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hampshire, ‘Logic and Appreciation,’ in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 161: ‘What is the subject-matter of aesthetics? Whose problems and whose methods of solution? Perhaps there is no subject-matter; this would fully explain the poverty and weakness of the books.’ Hampshire suggests that a ‘familiar way of finding the subject-matter of aesthetics’ has been by inventing Beauty on the (false) analogy with the moral Good, ‘begging the question’ (p. 162), since the ‘framework of problem and conclusion does not apply’ in the sphere of art, where ‘the notion of “reason” loses some of its meaning’ (p. 165). See also Gallie, ‘Function of Philosophical Aesthetics’, 25, on ‘informed skepticism’.

substantive philosophical principles and doctrines, and certainly not on any that are metaphysical in any but the weakest sense. The approach may be described furthermore as piecemeal or bottom up in the sense that, in so far as a 'general theory of art' may be in the offing, the belief is that we do best to approach it by moving upwards from the lower-level, firmly observable features of artworks and art discourse. Analytic aesthetics may thus be understood as an attempt to understand art by starting from natural consciousness and, by dint of rooting itself in common sense, as precluding (or at least rendering extremely unlikely) the discovery of novel or revisionary truths about art.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer's study, *Art of the Modern Age*, first published in French in 1992, may be cited as confirmation that this characterization is accurate.<sup>11</sup> Schaeffer offers a fierce critical examination of the post-Kantian development from the early German Romantics up through Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, to Heidegger. These figures (above all Nietzsche and Heidegger) define the canon of the deconstructionist, neo-structuralist, and so forth, philosophers whose treatment of art is most antithetical to that of analytic aesthetics. Schaeffer considers that deflating the pretensions of what he calls the 'speculative tradition' in the philosophy of art vindicates the analytic approach, which he regards as the only alternative. This strategy strongly recalls the endeavour of Elton's contemporaries to wipe the slate clean: the charges levelled by Schaeffer against Heidegger *et al* are essentially those levelled against Croce half a century earlier. That Schaeffer sees this instauration of analytic aesthetics as necessary so late in the day reflects his sense of 'Continental' aesthetics as exerting a pressure that needs to be countered,<sup>12</sup> a perception that anglophone analytic philosophers may not share; but the important point for present purposes is that Schaeffer testifies to the fundamentally unchanged character of the anglophone analytic project as regards its incompatibility with 'speculative' approaches to art.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, see Rainer Rochlitz, *Subversion et subvention: Art contemporain et argumentation esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), and Gérard Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 4–5: 'In this tradition, stretching from Novalis to Heidegger or Adorno, and, consequently, a bit beyond, I generally find nothing but unverifiable affirmations, rather heavily laced with the ideology of antimodernism, together with celebrations of art's revolutionary subversiveness or exalted glorifications of its power to make ontological revelations. One can, perhaps, do art no greater disservice than to overestimate its role by counterposing it, in a way smacking of obscurantism, to that of science or technology, and by unwarrantedly assimilating its message to philosophy's. [...] As a branch of general anthropology, which it necessarily is, aesthetics [...] is not called upon either to justify or excoriate the aesthetic relation; its function is, if possible, to define, describe, and analyse it.'

The many further questions which may be raised about analytic aesthetics – concerning, for example, how narrowly it should be defined and at what point it arguably becomes ‘post-analytic’<sup>13</sup> – can be put to one side. My claim is not that analytic aesthetics is monolithic or that there is a single method which it has pursued unchanged from the 1950s to the present day, nor that the discipline has failed to engage in self-reflection. Rather it is, to repeat, that analytic aesthetics regards earlier traditional, metaphysical theories of art as not a real option – or even a significant resource – and that it grounds this verdict not on any internal criticism of those theories but on a claim for the superior methodological value and philosophical probity of proceeding without reliance on any substantive general philosophical position. This outlook is, surely, still dominant, and to that extent the repudiation of metaphysics which founded analytic aesthetics has been upheld.

What I have said up until this point has sought to take analytic aesthetics at face value. It is evident, however, that there is ample scope for the speculation that anglophone aesthetics as currently practised is not in fact free from metaphysical commitment in the sense of forbearing from taking up any position on metaphysical issues, and that what in actuality grounds its exclusion of metaphysics in the present day is a positive and substantial commitment to naturalism.<sup>14</sup> This seems to be attested by the choice and formulation of topics for the philosophy of art and the range of options considered plausible and worth discussing, and by the fact that when developments outside aesthetics are regarded as candidates for incorporation, or aesthetics itself is regarded as

<sup>13</sup> Richard Shusterman, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), chap. 1, regards analytic aesthetics as wholly dominant, and the naturalism that he favours as an alternative that has still to make a place for itself. Some anglophone aestheticians do talk of analytic aesthetics as having suffered a demise, but not for reasons that are inconsistent with what I have claimed. Joseph Margolis, in ‘The Eclipse and Recovery of Analytic Aesthetics’, in Shusterman, *Analytic Aesthetics*, 161–89, talks of the ‘eclipse’ and ‘subversion’ of analytic aesthetics, but by this he means only that its original programme requires amendment and enrichment, in light of its hermeneutic and post-structuralist critics. Anita Silvers’s claim that analytic aesthetics has come to an end, in ‘Letting the Sun Shine In: Has Analytic Aesthetics Made Aesthetics Clear?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 137–49, is due to her identification of it with the purely metacritical conception of the discipline prevailing from roughly 1946 to 1962.

<sup>14</sup> To take one eminent example: Malcolm Budd defines philosophy of art in terms of the substantive question of the value of art – see the Introductions to his *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1996) and *Aesthetic Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) – but naturalism circumscribes the historical options which he takes as relevant to its answer – namely, Hume and Kant *qua* sophisticated empiricist. The key idea employed by Budd, of an object which it is intrinsically valuable to experience, is not regarded as requiring anything metaphysical for its elucidation; see *Aesthetic Essays*, chap. 2, on aesthetic essence.





a candidate for association with or integration within some broader philosophical programme, the determining rule is coherence with naturalism.

If this is so, then in this respect present-day aesthetics contrasts, at least officially, with the aesthetics of the 1950s. The philosophers of Elton's generation declared themselves as much opposed to naturalism in aesthetics as they were to Idealism,<sup>15</sup> for the following straightforward reason: they supposed that by sharply circumscribing the method and task of aesthetics to conceptual analysis, the discipline would cleanly disengage from all metaphysical issues, allowing it to be claimed that analytic aesthetics presupposes nothing, one way or another, regarding the fabric of being. Contemporary analytic aestheticians are unlikely to subscribe unreservedly to the idea of pure conceptual analysis or conceptual scheme delineation, and to that extent they are not in a position to invoke the same purely methodological justification for their exclusion of metaphysics; and in so far as their reason for upholding the extrusion of general metaphysics from aesthetics is not the same as that of their predecessors, the hypothesis that anglophone aesthetics has evolved imperceptibly from a position of a-metaphysicity to a position of passive acquiescence in, if not active subscription to, naturalism, is very plausible.<sup>16</sup>

## II

The explicit objection of early analytic aestheticians to metaphysical theories of art is, we have seen, that the general statements at which they aim fall between two stools: either they are taken to carry significance for art considered empirically, in which case they turn out to be insensitive to the facts about art's diversity and therefore false; or they are accorded a status which releases them from the requirement that they register art's empirical diversity, in which case they prove empty, dreary tautologies or mere inspirational rhetoric without informative content.

<sup>15</sup> See Elton's Introduction, in *Aesthetics and Language*, 2, 10–11, and Gallie, 'Function of Philosophical Aesthetics', 25.

<sup>16</sup> The contrast should not, however, be regarded as sharp, and the later development does not amount to a subversion of the original programme: plausibly, a leaning towards empiricism and naturalism was always, from the beginning, a tendency of analytic aesthetics; what it set itself against was only naturalism in its scientifically motivated and reductionist forms. In this connection, see Anthony Savile, 'Naturalism and the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000): 46–63. Savile does not assert the dependence of analytic aesthetics on naturalism, but he does claim that the central programme of modern aesthetics goes towards it: Hume and Kant 'are both centrally concerned with the legitimacy of the assumption that naturalism tries to make good' (p. 53); and he rejects the idea of an opposition as such between the aesthetic and naturalism as due to historical misdirection, the mistaken scientism of the late nineteenth century, affirming that his own aim is to preserve in philosophical aesthetics 'the central tenets of an earlier, more relaxed naturalism' (p. 63).



If it is now asked whether this objection is effective, the short answer is that it appears to beg the question: the demand that general claims about art be cashed out empirically – that they be treated as having the character of empirical generalizations – actively presupposes that there are no philosophical truths about art which are trans-empirical yet meaningful in virtue of their role within a general philosophical system, the method and grounds of which are not supplied by conceptual analysis.<sup>17</sup>

This is of course only a sketch of a reply, since it leaves undone the work of explaining how claims about the essence of art are to be understood and how this unitary essence is related to art's diverse empirical character, but it alerts us to the fact that the case against metaphysics in the philosophy of art cannot be closed without giving each metaphysics of art a chance to explain itself (since each may defend its essentialism in a different way). If this retort seems blunt, it is because the analytic objection to metaphysical essentialism in the philosophy of art also seems blunt: in the absence of an outright proof of nominalism, it cannot be assumed *ab initio* that essentialist claims in the philosophy of art are in error.

There is, however, another objection present in the minds of Elton's contributors, closely associated with the first but not so easily deflected. It is that reliance on general philosophical positions will unavoidably result in art's being used, or abused, as a mere application instance: because art lends itself equally to assimilation by any and every well-developed metaphysical system, all that we learn about art through a metaphysical theory is, trivially, that it has the passive dispositional property of allowing the theory to be read into it; because the history of the philosophy of art is merely a history of the narcissism of metaphysical systems, it deserves to be swept aside in favour of a new approach.

The susceptibility of art to being refashioned unresistingly in accordance with metaphysical prejudice – the looking-glass problem, as it might be called – is related to a feature of art adduced by early analytic aestheticians as a motivation for their reconception of the discipline.<sup>18</sup> The domain of art and the aesthetic is not itself constituted, they argued, in the form of solutions to problems or of answers to questions; in contrast with theoretical enquiry and moral practice, it

<sup>17</sup> For confirmation, see the criticisms of Croce in Gallie's 'Function of Philosophical Aesthetics', and in Beryl Lake, 'A Study of the Irrefutability of Two Aesthetic Theories', in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, 100–113. Urmson, in 'Methods of Aesthetics', 23–24, acknowledges that R. G. Collingwood is not to be measured by the criteria of conceptual analysis, but complains that he does not see what Collingwood's aim is, nor what 'criteria of success are relevant to his enterprise'.

<sup>18</sup> See note 10. Hampshire writes: 'A work of art is essentially gratuitous' ('Logic and Appreciation', 162). See also P. F. Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', in *Freedom & Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 196–207.



is not an activity that *demands* discursive articulation. No end of discursively formulated substantive issues have been contested throughout the history of artistic practice – concerning the importance of classical models, the requirements of dramatic unity, the proper subjects of poetry and painting, the relative value of line and colour, and so on – but they are not issues that qualify, according to our conception, as *philosophical*, and this is ultimately attributable to the fact that (*contra* Idealism) art is not a mode of *thinking*. Because art does not in and of itself share the goals of thought, viz. the True and the Good, it does not stand in need of discursively formulated principles of the sort that are constitutively necessary in cognitive and moral contexts. The domain of art consequently does not, directly and of itself, generate a set of philosophical *explananda* (again, *contra* Idealism). And since it does not, the only epistemologically secure way of proceeding is to latch onto the extant critical discourses accompanying art and the concepts embedded in the everyday language of aesthetic appreciation, and to embark on the modest task of their elucidation. Anything more ambitious will end up hallucinating philosophical content into art, treating art as if it were merely an anticipation of philosophy.

Schaeffer's book pursues this objection in historical detail, as if with a view to reminding analytic philosophy of art of its own historical rationale. The key moves of speculative theory's construction of the concept of art are, Schaeffer argues, covert *stipulations*: in each case the metaphysician has merely imputed to art whatever *telos* coheres with his own metaphysical vision.<sup>19</sup>

### III

If it is true that the field of art exhibits a degree of philosophical plasticity which puts under suspicion the application to it of metaphysical theories, then this provides some, *prima facie* and negative, justification for preferring the analytic approach: we thereby protect ourselves against certain sorts of error and illusion. But it does not settle matters. Analytic aesthetics is attended with difficulties which weaken its objection to metaphysics, and a counter-case, an argument for the necessity of metaphysical input, can be made.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, esp. 284–88.

<sup>20</sup> Some remarks on Schaeffer are due at this point, in view of the scope and detail of his argument against metaphysical theories of art. Schaeffer maintains that there is a crucial methodological difference of the speculative theory inaugurated by the German Romantics from Kant, whom he aligns with 'meta-aesthetical' enquiry, and with a purely critical conception of philosophy in its relation to art and the aesthetic, as opposed to the 'objectual' view of discourse about art, and the production of a philosophical 'doctrine' of art, ascribed to the Romantics. But it is hard to see how Kant's supposedly 'critical' theory falls short of supplying a doctrine – it gives us, after all, an essence for art, as Schaeffer seems to concede (*ibid.*, 55). Schaeffer's charge that 'with romanticism



As said earlier, conceptual analysis means to begin by extracting a perspicuous structure from materials that are more or less given. A problem presents itself at the outset concerning the identification of this given. The aesthetic and artistic natural consciousness of late modern folk is inhabited by diverse and conflicting ideas about art: all manner of accretions from the history of critical reflection on art are washed up inside it. Nor is the discourse of critics, in the present highly pluralistic state of the humanities, at all homogenous.<sup>21</sup> That a sufficiently stable and coherent, non-arbitrarily determined set of data exists for conceptual analysis to get started on is therefore not something that can be taken for granted. To some degree, the given needs to be constructed, if only through acts of selection.

It would be a mistake to allow this contingency the last word, for, if we go far enough down, it becomes plausible that universals can be found: it would seem that certain very basic notions – possession of aesthetic qualities, conceptions of music as expressive and of literary works as having a special kind of meaning – are constitutive features of the relevant type of object. The question is whether what remains, once abstraction has been made, is rich enough in content to provide the basis for answering the philosophical questions which these notions can be taken to raise: if for example we abstract the bare notion of ‘aesthetic quality’ from all of the myriad determinate conceptions of the features of objects which count as instances of it, and at the same time forswear speculation about

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is born a confusion heavy with consequences’, and that it commits a ‘*category error*’ (p. 64), is also problematic: the fact that ‘the speculative theory of Art treats art as a specific ontic domain *by virtue of its value*’ hardly counts as a confusion, given the Romantics’ non-Kantian, neo-platonic conception of the ontological status of value. Schaeffer later appears to withdraw the charge of mere confusion when he goes on to point out that ‘the fundamental rupture’ of the Romantics from Kant lies in their ‘positive decision’ to ‘sacralize’ the arts. This leaves it unclear what the imputation of methodological or logical error amounts to. The speculative theory of art does not of course come out of nowhere, and Schaeffer acknowledges the existence of a background story to be told about what makes it seem warranted: Part Two of the book is meant to expose the grounds of each of the forms of the speculative theory treated in it. Schaeffer does not, however, consider how the motivation for the metaphysics which engender the speculative theory of art may be held to carry over to the speculative theory of art itself, and without an estimation of this point, and in the absence of any logical or methodological flaw in the speculative theory’s foundation, and of an assessment of the relative success or failure of the rival analytical approach in dealing with the same problems, Schaeffer cannot claim to have put us in a position to pass judgement on the speculative theory. He is entitled only to the conditional judgement that the speculative theory of art can only be as good as the metaphysical conceptions which it deploys.

<sup>21</sup> If clear limits are not set in advance on what counts as critical discourse – which, for example, Beardsley’s definition of a ‘critical statement’ as ‘an *internal statement about an aesthetic object*’ (*Aesthetics*, 64) does not – it is hard to see what Beardsley’s conception of aesthetics as metacriticism could, these days, be thought to exclude.

an order of being or structure of subjectivity that could be thought to sponsor them, how will it be possible to make progress with the question of their explanation? The danger therefore is that determination to avoid the falsities of metaphysical theories of art may lead methodologically to a position which immunizes itself against error at the cost of being unable to generate philosophically interesting proposals.

A second issue has emerged. If the first stage of conceptual analysis consists in distillation and abstraction, conceptual cartography and taxonomy, the question arises what should be done with its results. What sorts of elaboration and extrapolation are appropriate at the second stage, and, in particular, at what point is the remit of conceptual analysis fulfilled and at what point is it exceeded?

The understanding of analysis as literal decomposition into parts was associated in the original analytic conception with an ideal of *clarification*, and the notion of clarification carries in turn the implication of displaying the object of analysis in a fashion that eliminates its perplexing features, whereby the object ceases to demand *explanation*. As long as the position is taken that philosophical problems are ultimately mere puzzles due to confusions, or that the ultimate constituents of reality are simples that either explain themselves or give the notion of explanation no purchase, this programme makes sense; but when confidence in the existence of simples and the reducibility of philosophical problems to misapprehensions of logical form and so on weakens, then the relation between analysis as mere decomposition and analysis in the sense of explanation becomes problematic. The issue of circumscribing 'analysis' is of course germane to conceptual analysis in all areas of philosophy,<sup>22</sup> and the history of analytic philosophy exhibits a movement from 'literal' analysis to something more expansive, but in aesthetics it is especially pressing for the reason that a dimension of unexplainedness appears constitutive of art, in ways that I will come to shortly, and that when this dimension is encountered a decision must be made – whether to call a halt, at the risk of leaving so much of the traditional explanatory ambition of philosophy unfulfilled as to surrender its own claim to significance, or whether to press onwards in search of underlying grounds, at the risk of giving too much away: if conceptual analysis is engaged in a task of explanation, then it is playing the same game as Idealist aesthetics and must allow its own results to be measured by the same standards.

<sup>22</sup> Focused discussion may be found in Michael Beaney, ed., *The Analytic Turn* (London: Routledge, 2007), especially the articles in Part I, and the editor's Introduction and chap. 11, concerning the distinction between 'decompositional' and 'transformative' analysis. As Beaney notes, the various forms of analysis can all be glossed as 'working back to something more fundamental' (p. 197) and so as aiming at explanation in some sense.

Defining 'analysis' was a concern of early analytic aestheticians, who were well aware of the way in which it shades into explanation, but their attempts at demarcation cannot really be regarded as successful. Isenberg allows that aesthetics 'has always been to some degree analytical' and characterizes the new anglophone development merely as 'a more single-minded and rigorous application of analysis to aesthetic problems.'<sup>23</sup> Urmson makes the same concession and is equally uninformative as to the qualitative distinction of 'analytic' from 'pre-analytic' analysis: 'Conceptual analysis has always played a major role in philosophy from the time of Plato and Aristotle. The only innovation in recent times is that analytic questions are now more commonly than in former times treated on their own and for their own sake rather than as subsidiary to other issues and that we now attempt to treat them more accurately and exhaustively than of old.'<sup>24</sup> This forces us to ask what was amiss with the 'other issues' of old and why it should be thought desirable, or even possible, to detach analysis from them, and the question is appropriate, since Urmson himself allows that there are many questions in aesthetics which are 'not analytic.'<sup>25</sup> The reason he gives for nonetheless preferring the analytic focus is 'the difficulty of determining to what controls' non-analytic aesthetics is subject'<sup>26</sup> – which goes back to the motive of error avoidance cited earlier and appears to recommend that philosophy acknowledge as problems only those epistemically low-risk issues that it believes it can make solid progress with.

The way in which narrow 'literal' analysis has ceded to more explanatorily ambitious projects is reflected in the tension that now inhabits analytic aesthetics, which is caught between a lingering austerity, a commitment to the old programme of sticking with extant concepts, and explanatory aims that jeopardize its good conscience. Walton's theory of the representational arts, widely criticized for the contentlessness of its distended concept of make-believe, is one prime case signalling a mismatch between explanatory ambition and the meagreness of licensed explanatory resources. The same tension arguably shows itself in the way that the debates concerning pictorial representation and musical expression have unfolded: constructive theoretical proposals are criticized on the grounds that they lack a purely conceptual warrant and fail the test of full perspicuity.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Isenberg, 'Analytical Philosophy', 128.

<sup>24</sup> Urmson, 'Methods of Aesthetics', 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. By way of illustration, Urmson cites claims of Hume and Hutchinson regarding the grounds of beauty.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Particularly revealing of this pattern are Budd's criticisms of Roger Scruton's theory of the role of metaphor in musical experience, and of Wollheim's theories of seeing-in and of projective properties and expressive perception. See Budd, *Aesthetic Essays*, chaps. 8, 10, and 12. The degree to which Wollheim intended his aesthetic writings to be taken alongside his psychoanalytic conception of the mind – and thus departed

If we now return to the option sketched at the outset of submitting aesthetics to a rigorous scientific overhaul, we can see why the hard naturalist challenge is entirely apposite. If the recurrent systematic problem facing accounts given in analytic aesthetics is that either (1) their *explanantia* are tied too closely to their *explananda* for anything non-trivial to result, confining them within ever-shrinking conceptual circles, or alternatively (2) they take a step outside the orbit of existing concepts and incur the charge of arbitrariness, then there is excellent reason to hand over the domain of art and the aesthetic *in toto* to the natural and human sciences – since these are forms of explanation which we do independently accept as substantive and authoritative. Philosophical aesthetics would then find a new (diminished) role for itself in mediating the results of the sciences, which would now constitute (in place of art and the aesthetic themselves) its proper object. It is an urgent question for analytic aesthetics why it should not accept this reform; the naturalist may reasonably suggest that it merely represents the completion of a tendency already underway to hypothesize sub-personal vehicles playing the key role in the constitution of musical meaning, pictorial representation, engagement with fiction, and so forth.

The very same consideration that early analytic aestheticians invoked in order to remove art from metaphysics can therefore, it seems, be re-added to compel acceptance of a hard naturalistic turn: if there is not enough rational, conceptual, discursive structure in aesthetic natural consciousness to allow metaphysical commitments to be teased out of it, then it is equally true that there is not enough in it to generate an autonomous philosophy of art. If this is so, then the choice lies between, on the one hand, a super-thin aesthetics restricted to inventorizing concepts and, on the other, a methodological innovation that, there is reason to believe, will allow the traditional questions to receive substantial answers, albeit not of the sort traditionally anticipated.<sup>28</sup>

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from the original programme of analytic aesthetics – is I think generally underappreciated. (That their integration into a single package makes Wollheim's aesthetic claims harder to assess is not a reason for taking them independently of one another.)

<sup>28</sup> Squeezed between these, arguably, lies a third option: to elucidate art in terms of a general philosophical theory of human beings that is naturalistic but not reductively or scientifically so. This is roughly the strategy of Joseph Margolis in 'A Strategy for a Philosophy of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1979): 445–54, and *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford California Press, 2009). See also Patrick Romanell, 'Prolegomena to Any Naturalistic Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19 (1960): 139–43, and Thomas Munro, 'Meanings of "Naturalism" in Philosophy and Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19 (1960): 133–37. Relatively little work in analytic aesthetics subscribes to this model, perhaps reflecting a lack of confidence in the feasibility of a general philosophical theory that meets the conditions of (i) being free from metaphysical and other tendentious commitment, and yet (ii) also going sufficiently far beyond ordinary understanding to yield substantive explanation in aesthetics.

## IV

The 'hard' naturalization of aesthetics may be resisted in the following familiar terms:

Whatever may be true of art regarded as a complex historical and cultural object, it is essential to it as an object of *philosophical* concern that the terms of its consideration be those of our ordinary understanding. This is already indicated when it is said that our focus should be on the *concept* of art, which makes implicit reference to the conditions of the concept's *correct* application. The normativity of concept application is connected in the present instance with matters of value in a deeper sense: the concept of art is refused application (at any rate, paradigmatic application) to objects that do not afford the requisite experience of intrinsic value.<sup>29</sup> By dint of its ambition to transcend ordinary understanding, hard naturalistic consideration of art cannot respect these basic necessities, and because it cannot honour our axiological and normative commitments, it may be concluded on purely methodological grounds that whatever it comes up with will have at most secondary pertinence to aesthetic enquiry.

Now it is here, in the notion of an internal connection of the proper object of philosophical aesthetics with the standpoint of self-conscious recognition of art as a source of intrinsic value, that positive reasons for thinking that art demands a general metaphysics may be located: it is every bit as constitutive of the concept of art that it *transcends ordinary understanding* as that it concerns an intrinsically valuable form of experience.

There are so many ways of putting this idea, and so many ways in which it has been put in the history of aesthetics, that it is hard to know where to begin, and there is certainly no prospect of doing justice to them in the space that remains; but the basic, unrefined point – not much more than a truism – is that nothing that we *could* explain in ordinary terms could hold artistic interest for us. Art presupposes a rupture with empirical reality and transposition to a plane where the organization of elements follows different principles and yields objects exhibiting a different type of intelligibility from those exhibited by either things in nature qua objects of theoretical cognition or persons qua rational agents. The heterogeneity of the experience of art with quotidian experience is reflected both in the inadequacy of the psychological categories of folk psychology to elucidate the experience of art and in the consequent resort to the catch-all concepts of emotion and imagination.

The dialectical force of this commonplace is straightforward. If the ordinary concept of art is precisely of something that resists ordinary understanding, then (1) *if* there is to be understanding of art, conceptual analysis cannot provide it, (2) whether or not this understanding can be provided in some other way, analytic

<sup>29</sup> The formula is Budd's. See note 14.



aesthetics, in suppressing the aporeticity of the concept of art – the manner in which it, as it were, confesses its own inadequacy and points beyond itself – has only a truncated view of its object.

What has allowed this constitutive feature of art to be overlooked in anglophone discussion, and the warrant which it furnishes for metaphysical construction in aesthetics to be disregarded, is the one-sided concentration on the problem of aesthetic justification – the dominant concern, inherited from the eighteenth century and definitively brought into focus by Kant, to demonstrate that aesthetic judgement possesses validity and runs on a parallel rational track with moral judgement and theoretical knowledge. This epistemological-cum-justificatory problem is genuine – the mode in which aesthetic judgements can be supported with reasons does indeed need to be determined – but it is equally essential to make clear what is *not* thereby grasped: to delineate the different types of supervenience of artistically merit-bestowing qualities on the non-aesthetic properties of works, in a way that makes sense of critical practice, is not to have insight into the *very possibility* of ‘artistically merit-bestowing qualities’. The sphere within which aesthetic rationalization is possible cannot itself be rationalized in any other, independent set of terms available to ordinary understanding. Familiar aesthetic notions such as the inseparability of form and content, and the peculiar modal and mereological profile of works of art – the free-yet-necessary character of the relation of their parts to the whole – testify to their anomalous character. The paradox of art, it might therefore be said, is that it presents us with what is in one respect a clarification of experience, and in another respect an original species of obscurity: the experience of art possesses a heightened degree of lucidity, not found in quotidian experience, yet we have no understanding of how it is achieved, and this incomprehension constitutes the obscurity integral to art. In the Kantian phrase, it is an incomprehensibility that we nonetheless comprehend: our inability to ‘see through’ art is not experienced as contra-purposive or taken as a reason for doubting its meaningfulness; on the contrary, it feels ‘right’ that our comprehension should stop where it does. Whether art is in fact anything more than a magic trick, a mental sleight of hand, can certainly be asked, but we cannot, from *within* the perspective that art affords, think it possible that art is mere deception. Whether or not the gnomic and sententious pronouncements on the nature of art found in much Continental philosophy shed any glimmer of light on their subject, they are right in insisting on its fundamentally enigmatic character.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Hard naturalists in aesthetics can be expected to agree with much of what is said in this paragraph, since the limits of ordinary understanding can be advanced also as a justification for turning the aesthetic over to scientific explanation. Hard naturalists do

The interweaving of comprehension and incomprehension in the experience of art sponsors metaphysical reflection. The relation here is two-way: the actuality of art warrants *prima facie* whatever reconception of reality at large makes room for such objects and forms of experience; but only on the basis of some independently furnished metaphysics can the empirically unaccountable significance of our experience of works of art be drawn out.<sup>31</sup> Not all metaphysical reflection, however, is equally entitled to claim that it grasps the implicit content of art. The mutual adjustment of aesthetics and general metaphysics on a recognizably modern plane – that is, with subjectivity duly factored in – can be regarded as a rational historical process having its beginnings in the eighteenth century: Baumgarten grasped and sought to correct the mismatch of art with the Leibnizian account of its nature, the Aristotelian dogmas of classicism were challenged by British empiricism, and theories of art in classical German philosophy attempted to integrate aesthetic consciousness and artistic production with *a priori* structures of subjectivity. That this historical process has, of course, not reached any conclusion – the debate continues down to the present day – does not affect the point at issue: if the philosophy of art has need of metaphysics, then this need is not extinguished by the unavailability to date of agreed metaphysical truth.<sup>32</sup>

The foregoing is, of course, highly contestable, and the suggestion that art involves essentially a dimension of ineffability relative to ordinary understanding

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not even need to contest the characterization of aesthetic consciousness as representing itself and its objects in non-naturalistic terms: there is no shortage of avenues to be explored concerning the reasons why human beings should be disposed, as it were, to take a mental holiday from naturalistic reality.

<sup>31</sup> This is the explicit order of argument in Dieter Henrich, *Versuch über Kunst und Leben: Subjektivität, Weltverstehen, Kunst* (Munich: Hanser, 2001). Henrich's claim is the exact opposite of Schaeffer's: Henrich argues that reflection on art must go hand in hand with the construction of a general theory of subjectivity of the speculative kind found in classical German philosophy.

<sup>32</sup> What is said here links up with another argument for the existence of an internal connection of art with metaphysics – namely, that the value of art is unaccountable unless art is centrally cognitive and that, since empirical and moral propositions are not plausible candidates for artistic cognition, philosophy is required to grasp the truth-content of art. The complex and distinctive doxastic state involved in the experience of art may also be argued to support the conclusion. See my 'Philosophical Aestheticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75–121. Raymond Geuss, in *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), chaps. 11 and 12, targets the post-Kantian cognitivist inflation of art. Geuss assumes *ab initio* that a metaphysical grounding of the Platonic-Romantic conception of art (as he calls it) is impossible and accordingly reconstrues it in terms of a thesis of the objective fit of feelings and objects which, he argues, cannot be sustained. Geuss's Nietzschean discussion may therefore be taken to support the necessity of metaphysics for any claim for the cognitive value of poetry.



will be rejected by many as a gratuitous mystification, cloaking art in religiosity and offering phoney grounds for taking art seriously.<sup>33</sup> To offer this as an objection would, however, be to miss the point of the argument, which is precisely designed to avoid allowing the issue to reduce to a mere question of philosophical sensibility: if it is dogmatic to submit that the value of art is bound up with its non-naturalistic character, then it is no less dogmatic to insist that art be accounted for in terms that press it into conformity with the naturalistic image of reality. The vital point is that, in so far as no decision on the truth of naturalism has already been made, art does not *of itself* point in its direction; if and in so far as art itself could be claimed to furnish a neutral point of reflection on itself, free from philosophical prejudice, its self-reflection would not be naturalistic. If philosophers are in any doubt about this, then a consultation of the history of writing on art, by philosophers, artists, critics, and other artworld participants, is in order.<sup>34</sup>

## V

The free use that I have made throughout of the term metaphysics has been intended to accommodate all forms of trans-empirical aesthetic essentialism, but it is worth emphasizing that the standpoint I have tried to articulate is Kant's just as much as it is Plotinus' or Heidegger's, and that it can be defended in specifically Kantian terms.

Kant's aesthetic theory has served as a cornerstone for analytic aesthetics,<sup>35</sup> but in ways that reflect a very abridged reception of his thought. The systematic connection that Kant explores with morality, the role of transcendental idealism, and Kant's own conception of art, have not met with approval. The systematic role of the aesthetic in the architectonic of the third *Critique* has of course been disregarded entirely. What have instead been regarded as of enduring value are Kant's notion of disinterestedness and his theory of aesthetic response. These are connected in turn with Kant's formalism, which has had considerable appeal: from its earliest days, analytic aesthetics was in close contact with broadly formalist

<sup>33</sup> It is worth asking in this connection how seriously hard – or even soft – naturalism allows art to be taken. See Stephen Pinker, 'The Biology of Fiction', in *Human Nature: Fact and Fiction; Literature, Science and Human Nature*, ed. Robin Headlam Wells and Johnjo McFadden (London: Continuum, 2006), 27–39, and John Passmore, *Serious Art: A Study of the Concept in All the Major Arts* (London: Duckworth, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Relevant quotations would fill volumes. A start might be made with Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897; Project Gutenberg, 2006), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17731> (and Conrad was no *Schwärmer*). George Steiner's *Real Presences* (London: Faber, 1989) attempts to retrieve the subliminal metaphysicality of late modern art consciousness.

<sup>35</sup> See note 14 regarding Budd, and note 20 regarding Schaeffer.



developments in modernist literary and art criticism – T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, William Empson, William K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, Clement Greenberg<sup>36</sup> – and its sympathies have tended to remain in that area. The intention that art be put safely out of range of, and out of competition with, the truth-directed representations of the natural and human sciences is well served by a doctrine of aesthetic form. Indeed, the maintenance of aesthetics as an autonomous field of philosophical study has seemed to require a commitment to the integrity of broadly formalist (in opposition to contextualist and historicist) approaches to artworks.

A difficulty facing this severely pruned Kantianism is that, by extracting doctrines concerning mental processes from their Kantian systematic surroundings, it risks defeating one of its own main purposes – namely, the vindication of the autonomy of the aesthetic. The concept of disinterestedness shows why. As treated in anglophone analytic appropriations, the contemplation without interest that Kant describes in the First Moment of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' as a condition of the pure judgement of taste becomes a psychological feature, roughly equivalent to the causal disengagement of perceptual processing from the mind's cognitive and practical dynamics. But from this alone it is (as has been often observed) impossible to see how anything qualitatively distinctive, a new domain of objects and form of experience, can arise. Why should the mere subtraction of interest afford access to a new phenomenological plane? The analytic neo-Kantian is forced simply to postulate, as Beardsley does, an 'aesthetic point of view', with felt freedom, affect, attentiveness, and so on, as its ingredients.<sup>37</sup>

Does Kant, when his theory is taken in full, have a better story to tell? He does, and it has two parts. First, Kant does not think that disinterestedness as such suffices to ground the autonomy of the aesthetic, nor that the theory of the harmony of the faculties provides its sufficient explanation.<sup>38</sup> What is

<sup>36</sup> Richard Shusterman, in 'Analytic Aesthetics, Literary Theory, and Deconstruction', *Monist* 69 (1986): 34, observes the close association of early analytic aesthetics with contemporaneous developments in literary criticism.

<sup>37</sup> Summarized in Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, lxii, and described in detail in his *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> A general Kantian-style argument contra the assumption that art is best elucidated by application of the resources of the philosophy of mind, an argument related to but independent of the specific claims of Kant's referred to below, may be constructed. Schematically: To identify the primary data of aesthetics with mental states, or to offer reductive explanations of aesthetic phenomena in terms of mental states, is to embrace psychologism. It may be agreed that in the experience of art and perhaps that of aesthetic objects in general the subject *figures for itself* – it enters into the content of the object/experience – in a way that is not true of either empirical or moral cognition. This reflexivity receives due emphasis in Kant. In this sense, there is a special 'mental

exposed by Kant in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' is not self-contained. We only understand disinterestedness and the free play of imagination and understanding, on Kant's account, when we grasp them in relation to the structure of reason exhibited in morality. The rupture of aesthetic from ordinary objectual consciousness registered in disinterestedness is a reflection and expression of the heterogeneity of Freedom and Nature, and the free play of imagination and understanding is propelled, conditioned, and made possible by the interest that pure reason has in overcoming their heterogeneity. Kant's analysis of art in terms of the expression of rational ideas by aesthetic ideas, a relation which traverses the 'immeasurable gulf' which separates Freedom from Nature, confirms this: were there no gulf, and no impetus in reason to sublimate it, the epistemic shortfall required to generate aesthetic wonder would not exist, and the domains of art and natural beauty would vanish. Aesthetic response is, according to Kant, a form of conceptually determined feeling, and the concepts which determine feeling cannot be grasped without the full systematic context.

Second, and in close connection, Kant does not think that the aesthetic can be made transparent (though it can be freed from philosophical error), and transcendental idealism is the explanation for why it cannot: in order to grasp the grounds of an object's occasioning a judgement of taste we would need insight, which it is impossible for a discursive intellect to have, into the shared supersensible root of subjectivity and Nature. The aesthetic resists philosophical as well as ordinary understanding, as of course does much else for Kant. Hence my earlier invocation of Kant's formula of 'comprehended incomprehensibility'.

The moral of the analytic reception of Kant, from Kant's own standpoint, is that the autonomy of art requires the *non*-autonomy of the *philosophy* of art: if we are to think of works of art as objects with their own *sui generis* existence, subject to laws that are self-prescribed, and determining their own species of value and norms of assessment, then it is not enough simply to assert that this is how things are according to the conceptual scheme embedded in ordinary understanding. A metaphysics is required to launch and ground the autonomy of art; whether it, like Kant's, declares that there are limits to the philosophical, as well as to the ordinary, understanding of art and the aesthetic, or, like the metaphysics of his Idealist successors, maintains that philosophy succeeds in grasping what ordinary understanding cannot, is a separate matter.

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component' in the aesthetic, which has no analogue in theoretical and practical cognition. But this inclusion of subjectivity is quite different from, and does not warrant, consideration of subjective states *in abstraction from the way in which they figure for the subject*: to look at 'the experience of art' as a matter of 'mental states' is to take a sideways-on view (to look at the eye and expect to see vision).

## VI

Let me summarize what I take the discussion, for all its extreme sketchiness, to have made at least minimally plausible. The philosophical achievement of analytic aesthetics is not open to doubt: no one could sensibly deny the permanence of its contribution or that it has rendered the field of aesthetics clear to view in a way that has no historical precedent. The present enquiry, however, has concerned a different matter: namely, whether or not its claim to have displaced metaphysical theories of art – its claim to exhaustiveness – can be upheld. The problem here, I have suggested, is that the analytic refusal of metaphysical claims about art cannot be grounded in neutral considerations of method and so must revert to a substantial assumption of naturalism. Its objection to metaphysical theories will thus appear, from their standpoint, dogmatic. The case for rejecting metaphysics in aesthetics does, however, have one ground which is independent of naturalism: if we proceed from within some given metaphysics, the philosophy of art threatens to reduce to a collection of chapters within general philosophical systems; if art does not offer sufficient friction in its interaction with general metaphysics, then it seems the philosophy of art will consist simply in tracing the implications of pre-formed philosophical positions for the particular case of art. But the looking-glass problem can be mitigated, for it is not true that all metaphysical theories are equally well attuned to the distinctive features of art and the aesthetic, and when the condition of attunement is met, the position of metaphysical theories in their endeavour to elucidate art is at least no worse, epistemically, than that of analytic aesthetics in its appeal to extant concepts and critical practices. And in one regard it has the edge: metaphysical theories enter constructive, ‘theory-laden’ claims about art which no conceptual analysis can vindicate and are not susceptible to proof, but in so doing they are responding to an invitation that art itself extends. Particular speculative claims may be criticized as dogmatic, arbitrary, or defective in any number of different ways, but the epistemic risk needs to be run, for the only alternative is a contraction of the scope of philosophical aesthetics which, it can be known in advance, will not give satisfaction. The challenge of scientific naturalism to analytic aesthetics underscores this point. The aesthetic metaphysician and the hard naturalist aesthetician agree on one thing: at the end of the day, one must choose between them, for in aesthetics and the philosophy of art the practice of conceptual elucidation is not adequate to its object.

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