Aesthetics and Rationality

I

Whether our interpretations and evaluations of art-works constitute knowledge or not is a question at least as old as Plato’s Ion. Whether our determinations of the beautiful and deformed are “subjective” or “objective” has been a matter of debate since the beginning of the eighteenth century, if not before. And in recent years two related debates have been, and still are vigorously pursued: one between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, characterizing disagreements in aesthetic value as (respectively) factual or merely attitudinal; the other, concerned rather with descriptions than evaluations, characterizing aesthetic concepts as “condition-governed” or “non-condition-governed.” But all of these questions, it seems to me, are special cases of another more general one: the question of the relation, if any, between aesthetics and rationality. For if no aesthetic judgment, valuational or descriptive, no matter how bizarre or outre, would justify any doubt as to the rationality of the person who made it, then Socrates was certainly correct in telling Ion that “it is not by art or knowledge about Homer that you say what you say...”; the non-cognitivists are certainly correct in what they claim aesthetic evaluations are not, even if mistaken about what they claim they are; and those who say that no non-aesthetic description ever entails an aesthetic one are doubtless closer to the truth than their opposite numbers.

I do not propose to resolve all of these disputes here and now, even if I could. But I do hope, in placing them in a different and more expansive landscape than they usually occupy in the literature, to indicate where the direction of their resolution may lie. In the end I shall make the tentative claim that our aesthetic nature and our rational nature are bound together; that the rational man and the aesthetic man are one man, not two; that, broadly speaking, an “anything goes” attitude towards aesthetic distinctions is not compatible with rationality.

II

Let me begin by distinguishing among three different kinds of remarks that might be made about a work of art (or any other aesthetic “object”): non-aesthetic, aesthetic, and evaluative. I might say that a painting is round or blue. If I said either of these, I would be making a non-aesthetic remark. I might say that a painting is dynamic or unified or garish. If I said any of these I would be making an aesthetic remark. I might say that a painting is good or bad. If I said either of these I would be making an evaluative remark. These distinctions have been made in detail in the recent literature; and I refer the reader there for further illumination. What I have to say here must be said under the assumption that the above distinctions are intuitively obvious, and clear enough to be used as a basis for the argument to follow.

Now it seems fairly clear that non-aesthetic remarks are not the sort of remarks that we can make any old way. Whatever else may be in reasonable dispute about Raphael’s Madonna of the Chair, that it is round is not open to

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question, nor that the Blue Boy is blue. And someone who continued, in the face of reasoned argument, to insist that the Madonna of the Chair is triangular, or the Blue Boy green, would rightly be put down as an unreasonable, irrational person. Where the issue is joined, of course, is in aesthetic and evaluative remarks. Can we with justice dismiss the person who judges the Madonna of the Chair a downright bad work of art as irrational? And does rationality place any limits on what can rightly be said to be garish and what unified? The hard-nosed are liable to answer no. But perhaps this is the hardness of dogma, not rigor.

Hume, indeed—certainly not a tender-minded philosopher—thought there was, as he called it, “a species of common sense” which did suggest that in criticism, as elsewhere, there are bounds of rationality to be trespassed. “Whoever would assert,” Hume remarked, “an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean.”

Hume was thinking here primarily of value judgments; but the same “species of common sense” surely urges that someone who finds Rembrandt garish or Van Gogh subdued is slightly “off the rails,” not merely of a different opinion. This, of course, is only suggested by “common sense.” And, as Hume observed, another species of common sense “has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes.” This conclusion too can be extended to disputes about aesthetic remarks. Together they constitute the “antinomy” to which the present essay addresses itself. But the antinomy is still in too vague a form to be adequately dealt with. We must state in some detail the view that aesthetic remarks are not, in the long run, subject to rational constraints; and then present the opposite view. The same procedure must be followed in the case of evaluative remarks. We will then be in a position to determine how this dispute may perhaps be resolved.

Aesthetic terms like “dynamic” and “unified” and “garish”—the predicate terms in aesthetic remarks—have been characterized as “non-condition-governed.” The non-aesthetic, condition-governed terms with which they are contrasted seem to fall into (at least) three distinct groups: those for which there are logically necessary-and-sufficient conditions, like “equilateral triangle” or “even number,” those for which there are conditions of normal perceiver and normal perceptual situation, like color words, and those for which there are open-ended groups of conditions, none necessary, but some unspecified number sufficient, like most of the perfectly ordinary descriptive terms in use in everyday discourse—“lazy,” “intelligent,” and so on and on. No one would be so rash as to claim that aesthetic terms are governed by the kind of airtight conditions imposed upon the terms of formal systems. We cannot give a “Euclidean” demonstration that a painting is garish or unified or dynamic. Nor do aesthetic terms seem to function in the way that color words do. For there are, to begin with, no normal conditions of aesthetic perception and perceiver except those that govern all perception. And, second, the qualities named by color words are simple, whereas those named by aesthetic terms appear to be complex; that is to say, things are p (where p is an aesthetic term) in virtue of their being q, r, s, and so forth, whereas things are p (where p is a color word) simply in virtue of their being p and not in virtue of anything else they may be.

It is only in the third way of condition-governing that the possibility of aesthetic terms being condition-governed becomes a real option. And here it is, I think, that we are confronted with two opposing “intuitions”: two species of common sense. Those who view aesthetic terms as non-condition-governed claim that no matter how many non-aesthetic p-making features an object may be described as having (where p is an aesthetic term), there is always room for disagreement. No matter how many garish-making features of color and line (say) a painting is described as having, someone can always claim that it may not be garish at all. No non-aesthetic description of an object ever implies that it is garish. As I would put the claim here, no person could ever be rightfully suspected of irrationality on the basis of denying that any object is p (where p is an aesthetic term).
And this is in sharp contrast to even the third kind of condition-governed term. For although we cannot, for example, give the necessary-and-sufficient conditions for intelligence, we are nevertheless not logically free to deny that someone is intelligent if that person has an overwhelming number of intelligent-making characteristics. Someone who denied that the panel on "Information Please" or "The Quiz Kids" consisted of intelligent persons would be a candidate for irrationality, as someone who denied that the Diabelli Variations is unified would not. Such is the claim, as I understand it, that aesthetic terms are "non-condition-governed."

I have discussed at some length elsewhere the arguments heretofore advanced to establish that aesthetic terms are non-condition-governed, and have provided there what I still believe are adequate grounds for rejecting them.7 If I am right, then common sense is far from undivided in its deliberations on this regard. But such a negative result of course still leaves open the possibility that the conclusion of these arguments is true, even though the arguments themselves are defective: that aesthetic terms are indeed non-condition-governed. How, then, are we to finally resolve the question? All we can say at this stage is that there is at least no compelling reason for believing that aesthetic terms are non-condition-governed, and that the claim itself, though perhaps appealing to common sense, is not entirely untroubled by common-sensical appeals in the opposite direction. Until we can satisfy ourselves that such distinctions are independent of our concept of rationality, we cannot decide in favor of a non-condition-governed model; and, contrariwise, until we satisfy ourselves of a direct connection between aesthetics and rationality, we cannot decisively reject it.

I V

The question of evaluation lends itself to the same treatment, and to the same dilemma. No one, I presume, would wish to claim that "good work of art" functions like either "equilateral triangle" or "red rose." If the phrase "good work of art" is condition-governed at all, then it is certainly condition-governed in the way that "intelligent person" is. And there is, it seems to me, at least a prima facie case to be made for the claim that it is condition-governed in this third way,8 although turning the prima facie case into an airtight one involves us in the very same issue of rationality.

Let us suppose that someone agrees to the following description of a play: moving; sublime; deeply insightful into human nature; unified; interspersed with periods of lyricism and humor; well-motivated. Would that person be still able to logically deny that the play was "a good work of art?" At least on first reflection, such a combination of admission and denial seems every bit as odd—as irrational, if you will—as if I were to be fully apprised of John Stuart Mill's intellectual gifts and yet were to deny that he was an "intelligent" man. In neither case, of course, would the admission and denial amount to a formal contradiction. But in the latter case the situation would be bizarre enough to raise serious doubts about my rationality. And the former case bears a very strong family resemblance to the latter. We cannot simply dismiss it out of hand without begging an important question.9

Nevertheless, aesthetic skepticism may very well raise its ugly head here and suggest that the cases are not analogous. For, after all, has not common sense determined that there is no disputing about tastes? Isn't pushpin as good as poetry, and beauty in the eyes of the beholder?

So again we confront a conflict of intuitions which can only be resolved by making some kind of decision about what is to count as rationality. Does the person who finds King Lear without merit raise thereby no doubts about his or her status as a rational animal? With regard to aesthetic evaluations, are all things permitted? Or are there bounds of rationality to be trespassed here, in spite of the fact that a venerable Latin motto suggests otherwise?

V

At the prospect of expounding the nature and limits of rationality, any rational animal must tremble. And I have no intention of rushing in where rational animals fear to tread. But I would be an intellectual coward if, having come this far, I left the field completely unexplored. As I suggested at the outset, I tentatively plump for the view that
there are limits to what we can reasonably say of a work of art; and although this position cannot be adequately supported (or refuted) short of an adequate account of rationality, I can, I think, make at least some preliminary remarks in support of what is, at this point, an intuition only.

I shall assume, to begin with, that part of what we mean by a rational person is someone who accepts deductive arguments: a logically consistent person. I shall assume also that part of what we mean by a rational person is someone who forms his or her opinions about what will and what has happened (and why) according to an inductive policy. And, finally, I shall assume, following one prominent trend in contemporary moral theory, as well as a familiar tradition, that there is some kind of intimate conceptual connection between rational behavior and moral behavior, and between rational precepts and moral precepts. Over all of these assumptions we must also lay the blanket of “linguistic competence”: we are talking about people who “speak the language.” The second and third assumptions are, of course, controversial ones. But every argument must begin somewhere; and it seems to me that the notion of rationality outlined above is at least less controversial than a notion of rationality that included aesthetic distinctions outright. So if we can indicate some connections between the making of aesthetic distinctions and these assumptions, we will have given some added support to the view that there is a rational and irrational in the realm of aesthetic describing and evaluating.

One thing, I think, is clear. Someone who thought that King Lear or the Madonna of the Chair was a downright bad work of art would not on that account alone be a candidate for a mental institution. What we would want to know before committal papers were signed is why such an opinion was reached. One might, after all, have very ingenious reasons for holding this extremely outre view (as did Tolstoy for his aberrant estimations of Shakespeare and Beethoven). What we rebel at is someone who agrees that a play is moving, sublime, deeply insightful into human nature, unified, interspersed with periods of lyricism and humor, well-motivated, and still insists that it is a downright bad work of art. Why I think our minds would boggle at such a person—and this, essentially, is the argument I want to develop—is that aesthetic views of such eccentricity must surely lead, if we track them down, to conflicts with our more hard-core intuitions about rationality. What I am suggesting, then, is that “irrational” aesthetic views will, in the long run, come into conflict with at least one of the assumptions made previously to limn our picture of the rational person (or assumptions very much like them). Our beliefs, attitudes, preferences, evaluations, ranking orders, etc., are, after all, interconnected, even where we are not consciously systematic in forming them. And maintaining “an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton” must, I believe, eventually come into conflict somewhere along the line with our more cherished and more obviously rational policies.

Specifically, what I have in mind is something like this sort of thing. The aesthetic skeptic we are now considering acknowledges that, among other things, a play displays deep insight into human nature; yet he insists the play is a bad work of art. But play-evaluation is, after all, just one of many evaluative tasks of various kinds that we face in a lifetime. And someone who, for example, does not accept deep insight into human nature as a good-making feature of plays, is an odd-ball in his evaluative policies: either that or he is inconsistent, which immediately settles his hash as far as any claim to rationality is concerned. Will he also not accept deep insight into human nature as a good-making feature of persons? If we present him an argument to the effect that insight into human nature, wherever it is displayed, has been shown to have utilitarian benefits, will he then reject utility as a good-making feature of acts and states of affairs? If so, we are now in a position to claim that our aesthetic skeptic may very well have transgressed the bounds of rationality as drawn by our third assumption. The aesthetic skeptic may now riposte by becoming an ethical skeptic as well. But that is a far more controversial skepticism than the aesthetic variety he has been professing. And if we have driven the aesthetic skeptic to such a desperate measure, we have surely advanced the cause of aesthetic rationality at least some little distance.
But perhaps this is not a characteristic illustration. Let us try another. What of the person who will not count unity as a good-making feature of art-works? If we dispose of two misunderstandings that have usually accompanied this question, I think we can see that there would be an even more fundamental irrationality here than in the previous case; for what I would argue is that someone who does not count unity as a good-making feature of art-works simply cannot know what “unified” means. The two misunderstandings I have in mind are these. First, to say that unity is a good-making feature of art-works is to say that its absence is always a bad-making feature. I say this is a misunderstanding because there are other good-making features which are incompatible with the presence of unity—the impression of improvisatory spontaneity, for example—and in these cases we are not disparaging a work of art by saying that it lacks unity; for it cannot have unity and still have the features which we are praising it for having. Second, there are cases in which unity seems to be a bad-making feature: for example, in the case of a musical composition which consists entirely of middle C sustained for a minute-and-a-half on the trumpet. I underscore seems because there are two quite satisfactory ways, I think, of dealing with such cases, which preserve the good-making character of unity.

To start with, we can admit straightaway that our one-note composition is a notably bad one, agree that it has unity, insist that its unity does contribute to its goodness, and insist further that its irredeemable badness is due to the complete lack of any other good-making features, in fact, the complete lack of any other features whatever. (Good art, after all, does not live by unity alone.) There is, by the way, a composition of Henry Purcell’s called Fantasia upon One Note, in which one of the instruments plays middle C only, throughout the entire piece. Here, clearly, the one note does contribute to the unity, and we have no scruples about saying that the unity of the work is one of its good-making features. What preserves Purcell’s Fantasia upon One Note from the fate of our composition for trumpet is, of course, the existence of other good-making features besides its unity.

The second alternative is to insist that unity requires a relation of parts, that a composition consisting of middle C sustained on a trumpet for a minute-and-a-half has no parts, and hence is not—cannot be—unified but uniform. And if uniformity is a bad-making feature, this fails to show that unity is, since uniformity and unity are different features.

If, then, we avoid these common confusions, I think it will become obvious that unity can no more be a bad-making feature of art than cowardice can be a virtue. And I would claim, as well, that this is true not just of unity in art but unity in its non-aesthetic contexts as well. Unity can no more be a bad-making feature of a political party, or a nation, than of a symphony, or novel. And, I suggest, the same confusions would be occurring if we thought otherwise, and could be cleared up in the same ways. The Republicans cannot be worse off because of their unity, although they can be unified and badly off as well, if other things have gone wrong. The Democrats may be well off, even though not unified, and it may be that other good-making features of the Democratic Party are incompatible with the good-making feature of unity. Thus, I think, the concept of unity is made of whole cloth; and one can say “its unity makes it bad” of a work of art only on pain of talking nonsense or being inconsistent with one’s discourse in other domains.

VI

Turning for a moment to aesthetic terms, we find a kind of duality which bears directly on our problem. Some of these terms, such as “unified,” or “dynamic,” seem to have non-aesthetic uses as well; whereas others, like “garish,” do not. We might perfectly well call a nation or a political party “unified,” or a business man “dynamic,” without either remark in the least suggesting anything aesthetic; but it is next to impossible to think of “garish” being used except aesthetically, although the range of objects to which it might apply is not by any means restricted to what we think of as the typically “aesthetic” ones. The significance of this duality is that, with regard to the former kinds of aesthetic terms, connections can be drawn between aesthetic and non-aesthetic uses. And just such connections, I have been arguing, support the
claim that we cannot make aesthetic distinctions willy nilly and still be counted rational persons.

To take a case in point, let us contrast the criteria for ascribing unity to a symphony or a novel with the criteria relevant to its predication of a political party or a nation. A political party or nation is unified by its common goals, aspirations, values, organizational structure, shared principles, and the like. A symphony is unified in virtue of common themes, motives, rhythms, chord-progressions, key relationships, mood, tone color, and so on. A novel is unified in virtue both of its “musical” properties—recurrent phrases, metaphors, images, assonances, alliterations, and the like—and its dealing with one character, group of characters, or family, its subject matter, mood, psychological point of view, political philosophy, and so on. But in each instance—in the political party or nation, symphony or novel—what we look for when we look for unity are the same kinds of things: common elements, recurrent patterns, shared structures: something common.

Suppose, now, that someone applied the term “unity” to nations and political parties in complete disregard of the sorts of criteria we have been enumerating. Would we not be justified in concluding that he didn’t know what he was talking about—that he didn’t really know what “unified” means? And are we not justified in reaching the same conclusion if he similarly disregarded the criteria we ordinarily employ in ascribing unity to symphonies and novels? Further, would someone who employed the criteria when using “unified” in its non-aesthetic contexts but eschewed them in its aesthetic ones not be justly accused of inconsistency? “Unity,” after all, is a perfectly well-behaved word in the English language: it does not go berserk when we apply it to a novel rather than a nation.

Again, it is often claimed that works of music exhibit emotive qualities like “sadness,” “cheerfulness,” “melancholy,” and the like. So too, of course, do faces and figures. A good deal of ink has been spilled in trying to deal with these notorious “expressive” qualities; and I do not want to spill a great deal more here. But there is some reason to believe, I would suggest, that we are not using “melancholy” (for example) in any strange or esoteric way when applying it to music rather than to faces and figures. On the contrary, the criteria are much the same.

We must, however, be careful to distinguish between a face and figure, or a piece of music, expressing melancholy, and having a melancholy quality about them. A face can have a melancholy expression, and a figure a melancholy attitude, without expressing melancholy: a person can have a sad face and melancholy figure without being sad or melancholy. Likewise, a piece of music can have a melancholy cast without there being anyone whose melancholy it is expressing (and, of course, it cannot be expressing its own melancholy, since pieces of music cannot be in the psychological state of melancholy, as they cannot be in a psychological state at all). It is this second sense of “expression” with which I am concerned: the sense in which a face and figure, or a musical composition can be melancholy without there being any melancholy expressed.

Now in our culture there are perfectly well-known criteria for calling a face and figure melancholy, that is, having a melancholy quality: drooping eyes and mouth, sagging shoulders, slow and halting gait, lack of energy, and so on. And the criteria for applying “melancholy” to music are much the same: dropping musical figures, slow tempi, halting rhythms, lack of musical energy, etc. Is there not a clear continuity here? If one is not free to ascribe melancholy to any face and figure he pleases, regardless of its features, is he free to ascribe melancholy to any piece of music, regardless of its features? Are there not well-established criteria in the latter case, as in the former? And are not the criteria of the two obviously related? Is a person not using the term “melancholy” inconsistently if he calls a face and figure melancholy in virtue of drooping eyes and mouth, sagging shoulders, slow and halting gait, lack of energy, but refuses to call a funeral march melancholy in virtue of its dropping musical figures, slow tempo, halting rhythm, lack of musical energy? There is, I urge, a continuity in the aesthetic and non-aesthetic uses of emotive terms which, when breached, is a sign of inconsistency or linguistic incompetence.

But though connections can, it would
appear, be drawn between aesthetic terms like “unified,” or “dynamic,” or “melancholy,” and their non-aesthetic counterparts. Such connections are absent in the case of “garish,” and its ilk. Perhaps this means that we have crossed here the logical border between aesthetic remarks that can and those that cannot, in the long run, be rationally justified. If there is such a border, it will be of the utmost importance to aesthetics and the philosophy of art that it be carefully surveyed.

VII

The claim I am making, then, and which the above examples are meant to illustrate, is this: that both in our applications of aesthetic terms and in our aesthetic evaluations there are limits which, if transgressed, warrant us in identifying the transgressor as “irrational.” My idea is not that it is transparently evident when an aesthetic judgment is “out of the ballpark.” If that were so, there would be no need to write a defense of aesthetic rationality. Rather, I have suggested that eventually we will be able to trace aesthetic aberrations back to more central assumptions of rationality which they violate by implication. But such a claim can only be made out by substantial spadework: by a thorough-going analysis of the concept of rationality and by the tracing out of many kinds of suspect aesthetic judgments that might be thought to conflict with it. Nor is this the proper place for so ambitious a project. What I give here is not so much a position as a program. Where that program leads I can now only guess; but I hope I may have at least succeeded in making that guess an educated one.

I am deeply grateful to Alan Tormey for his insightful and sympathetic criticism of this paper. Of course he is not to be held responsible for the blunders of one who at times remains obstinate in error.

4 Sibley, op. cit.
5 When speaking of the “conditions” of normal perception and perceiver, we are, it should be noted, using “conditions” in a different sense from Sibley’s “governing conditions.” On this, see my Speaking of Art, pp. 4–5.
6 I am not claiming that Sibley puts things in just this way. He did not. What I am claiming is that if his position is taken to its logical conclusion, this is the result.
9 I do not mean to suggest that I have bridged the notorious gap between descriptions and evaluations; for “moving,” “sublime,” “deeply insightful into human nature,” etc., are themselves evaluative: expressions which name good-making features. I leave it an open question whether or not a “pure description” of a work of art ever entails an aesthetic evaluation.
10 I am indebted for this distinction to Alan Tormey’s careful analysis in The Concept of Expression: A Study in Philosophical Psychology and Aesthetics (Princeton, 1971), pp. 39–43. But Professor Tormey and I differ with regard to whether aesthetic terms in general, and “expressive” aesthetic terms in particular, are condition governed. Cf. The Concept of Expression, pp. 132–133, and his “Critical Judgments,” Theoria, XXXIX (1973).
11 My argument is meant to apply only to aesthetic descriptions and evaluations, not to aesthetic likes and dislikes, which I construe as distinct from both. The reason for my circumspection here is that it may not make any sense to talk about rational and irrational preferences and aversions. Thus, although I am claiming that it would be irrational to think King Lear a bad play, I am not claiming that it would be irrational to dislike the play. I am assuming, of course, that it would make sense to say “X is a good work of art but I don’t like it” and “X is a bad work of art but I like it.”