



WILEY

Mothering and Metaphor

Author(s): Arnold Berleant

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Summer, 1999, Vol. 57, No. 3
(Summer, 1999), pp. 363-365

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/432202>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The American Society for Aesthetics and Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

JSTOR

tent with Kant's characterization of the harmony of the cognitive faculties in §9 of the *Critique of Judgment*.

Several points, however, count against any interpretation of the harmony of the faculties that characterizes it exclusively as a subjective condition definable without reference to any specific concepts or intuitions. These are:

- Kant's conception of "purposiveness without purpose" (*Critique of Judgment*, §10) states that we "make intelligible to ourselves" how an object appears to be purposive, and this suggests that intellectual activity is a necessary part of aesthetic experience, even though aesthetic feeling is independent of conceptual determination.
- Apprehending any specifically presented configuration as having an intelligibly organized character can only be determined against a background of rich experience, so a wealth of comparisons must be presupposed in order to recognize an intelligibly organized form as such.
- Appreciating great works of art entails that we allow the multitude of forms and meanings within the work to resonate in imagination (*Critique of Judgment*, §49), so the imaginative faculty, when in play, must be richly in play.

All of this conflicts with an interpretation of the harmony of the faculties that conceives it exclusively as an abstracted, rarefied, and compartmentalized metalevel activity. The aesthetic experience of both nature and art indicates that this harmony includes the specific contents of the faculties as essential constituents in the faculties' free play.

In conclusion, G is consistent with the interpretation I previously offered. The alternative Guyer actually had in mind coincides with the meaning of G only to some extent, because it does not fit the example of tattooed faces well. It fails specifically to capture how beauty can shine through an imperfect embodiment. Guyer's abstracted conception of the harmony of the faculties, which informs his critique of dependent beauty as the appreciation of teleological style, also remains questionable, insofar as a metalevel subjective condition conceived in isolation remains theoretically distant from the concrete apprehension of purposiveness without purpose, the conditions for determining that a configuration is organized, and the experience of artistic beauty.

ROBERT WICKS

Department of Philosophy
The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

INTERNET: R.WICKS@AUCKLAND.AC.NZ

1. Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 247.

2. In short, one needs to disregard the visual and/or auditory "noise" in a work, in order to appreciate whatever beauty it has.

3. We are referring here to the kind of Maori tattoos Kant had in mind, which is not to assume that Kant understood the meanings of Maori tattoos. Considered independently of anthropological contexts, better examples of the free-form tattoo designs Kant generally described can be seen in the tattoos of the Caduveo women in Brazil. For excellent illustrations of these, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Saudades do Brasil, A Photographic Memoir*; trans. Sylvia Modelski (University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 71–77.

4. Consider a perfectly spherical object with a cube inscribed within it. It is necessary for an object to be perfectly spherical if it is to be an example of a beautiful spherical form. If a cubical form were inscribed within the spherical object (supposing the sphere is transparent or translucent), then the cubical form would be incompatible with the spherical form, insofar as spheres and cubes are geometrically incompatible in principle. The cube's presence, however, would negate neither the object's sphericity nor the object's beauty.

5. If any necessary condition for a certain kind of thing is lacking in some object, then the object cannot be of that kind of thing, and, hence, cannot be a beautiful thing of that kind. The position in (1b) and (1b*) extends this reasoning by recognizing necessary conditions for the beauty of a thing of a certain kind, such that if these are lacking, then the thing cannot be a beautiful thing of that kind.

6. See Robert Wicks, "Dependent Beauty as the Appreciation of Teleological Style," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 387–400.

Mothering and Metaphor

In "Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 355–364, Marcia Muelder Eaton weaves a set of interpretive variations on Joseph Brodsky's comment that "aesthetics is the mother of ethics." She elaborates alternative readings of the relation, first as a causal connection from aesthetic to ethical experience, and then by a conceptual relation in which the formalistic choice of a style or a life story precedes its ethical content. But she shows how simple causation or formalism does not explain the connection between ethics and aesthetics, and it seems hard to take issue with her claim that the best way to account for the relation is to regard them as conceptually interdependent. Here neither the ethical nor the aesthetic asserts priority, but both are required for moral understanding and behavior (p. 361). In this gentle, circumspect, conciliatory conclusion, the interdependence of the two disciplines involves developed "powers of perception, reflection,

and imagination" (p. 362), and it is skills such as these that aesthetics can help supply. Such interdependence, Eaton acknowledges, however, obliges us to give up the idea that aesthetics comes first.

But what becomes of Brodsky's metaphor, or of André Gide's earlier claim, which she also cites, that ethics is a branch of aesthetics? Eaton attempts to preserve something of them, not in the notion of priority, but in the ideas that each member in a mother-child relation is defined in terms of the other and that the relation involves long and deep nurturing. Through these, aesthetics offers ethics "a kind of understanding that is not gratuitous" (p. 363).

Eaton has clearly shown that a logical reading of the metaphor does not work. Yet, to relinquish priority for interdependence is to sacrifice the metaphor, for the mother relation is clearly a kind of priority. Eaton is prepared to do this. She is troubled further by the gendered character of the metaphor as well as by the one-way direction that mothering connotes even though the nurturing she hopes to retain may, in fact, imply such a direction. If, as she shows convincingly, the relation between aesthetics and ethics is not logical or causal, then must we be content merely with "a kind of understanding" gained by a nurturing interdependence? After Eaton's logical analysis, can so weak a conclusion be all that is left of Brodsky's metaphor? Does the metaphor indeed fail?

These questions invite further thought, for it is easy to dismiss the metaphor on such a reading. Yet the fault may lie in the reading rather than the writing. Eaton reads Brodsky as a logician, but Brodsky wrote as a poet and needs to be interpreted as one. Perhaps we should rephrase the issue as, What kind of priority could a poet have in mind? Can his mother metaphor be understood as the observation of a poet, not a logician?

It will not serve to follow Eaton in attributing to Brodsky the intention of convincing his audience of the importance of art (p. 363). This reduces his claim to blandness. Moreover, Brodsky is talking about aesthetics, not art, and surely a poet does not choose his words casually: It is aesthetics, not art, that is the mother of ethics. What is it, then, that Brodsky was saying about aesthetics? Surely more than that art is important. And surely a poet's metaphor is not dispensable.

Few poets or other artists are especially interested in constructing a logical argument for their views. And if they try, they rarely succeed. Most artists work instead to some degree, often to a great degree, on an intuitive level. Perhaps Brodsky is probing the relationship intuitively and, if this is so, then what poetic intuition could be embedded in the metaphor? For on the poetic level other interpretations are possible. Let me offer one, though there are surely others.

To say that aesthetics is the mother of ethics may be a way of saying that aesthetics is the *source* of ethics,

as the mother is the source of her child. Most parents know painfully well that their causal (let alone logical) priority to their children is embarrassingly modest and exists only in the narrow, genetic sense. They are rather the source of that life and usually try their best to help inform and shape it. Perhaps in some such sense aesthetics is the source of ethics, not by determining its logical content or implying a specific kind of ethical system, and certainly not by causing ethical behavior, but rather by informing and helping to shape our ethical understanding, much as parents attempt with their children. How can this be?

Europeans, often so adept at language, tend to be more sensitive to etymology than we are at times. I would wager that Brodsky was not unaware of the perceptual content that is embodied in the meaning of aesthetics. I am inclined to think he is saying that through the perceptual directness of aesthetic experience we can grasp the meaning and human significance of ethical values. And through such experience we come to an ethics that is more than a formal principle, but has a body and a heart. This makes it meaningful to say that aesthetics is the mother of ethics.

What happens to the relationship of aesthetics to ethics when we think of works of art, not in formalistic, object-centered ways (p. 363), but contextually, in experiential terms? The notion of source suggests a broader setting and a looser network, one that values the role aesthetic experience plays in developing or increasing our moral sensibility. That is a significant influence (even if it is not a logical one!), and it recognizes the difference between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, while at the same time affirming their relationship. We can learn and grow in moral understanding through the novels we read, the plays we witness, the films we see, the dance we attend to—in some way and to some degree through our engagement in all the arts. Is not this what makes the arts socially valuable, indeed powerful humanizing forces?

The boundary between ethics and aesthetics is indeed not distinct, as Eaton rightly argues; there is always something of aesthetics in ethics. Moral experience is often repugnance, a strong feeling of disapproval or outrage at certain actions or practices. Sometimes it rests on more positive experience, such as admiration or gratitude. These aesthetic prehensions (to use a term Virgil Aldrich derived from Whitehead) precede principles, strictures, and the elaborations of ethical theory. Through aesthetic experience we can develop an awareness and sensitivity to the experience of actions and situations that are the conditions from which ethical deliberation is born.

Eaton ends her paper by inviting others to confirm her conclusion. I am afraid I cannot do that, since I think Brodsky (and Gide) had a firmer grasp—though

merely a poetic one—of the relation of aesthetics to ethics.

ARNOLD BERLEANT
P.O. Box 52
Castine, Maine 04421

INTERNET: BERLEANT@ACADIA.NET

The Mother Metaphor

Arnold Berleant correctly observes that when Joseph Brodsky described aesthetics as “the mother of ethics” he was speaking as a poet, not as a philosopher, let alone as a logician. I readily admit that it is as a philosopher, one interested in what, if any, connections there are between moral and aesthetic value, that I find his phrase intriguing. I do try throughout my paper “Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?” to emphasize that Brodsky was speaking metaphorically. Nonetheless the metaphor is one that is relevant to the philosopher and not just to the poet, I believe. But its importance, I argue, does not reside in there being a satisfactory way of giving to aesthetics priority over ethics. I find no way that is not question-begging of establishing that it is necessary, let alone sufficient, for someone to develop aesthetic values before ethical values. Rather, the importance of Brodsky’s metaphor lies in its reminding us of something that has all too often been denied by formalist theorists and critics: there is a deep, mutual interconnectedness between moral and aesthetic considerations, judgments, and attitudes.

Berleant takes issue with my failure to grant more to Brodsky. He insists that there is a kind of priority, not just a connection. He offers one: aesthetics as mother is a *source* of ethics, he asserts. It works “by informing and helping to shape our ethical understanding, much as parents attempt with their children.” In my paper (and in several other articles and books) I emphatically agree that aesthetic objects and experiences inform and shape moral judgments. Where Berleant and I disagree is in thinking that this shaping is primarily in the direction from aesthetics to ethics. Clearly one of the two qualifies as *source* only if one precedes or is somehow more important than the other. My view is that the shaping and informing is mutual: ethical values influence aesthetic values and aesthetic values influence ethical values. Insisting that either comes first is, I think, a mistake. And, poet or philosopher, anyone who insists on priority—something implied by a strong or strict understanding of the mothering relation—is mistaken. Berleant seems to think that the remarks of a poet must be taken

very strictly; but if this is true then, in order to be a mother, aesthetics must be *the* source of ethics, not just *a* source. I prefer a much looser interpretation of Brodsky’s metaphor, one that drops priority but retains what I think is its core value: stressing the inseparability of the two-way relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

Berleant credits Europeans with a greater sensitivity to etymology than Americans—in particular, one assumes, *this* American. Brodsky, he suggests, would have been fully aware of the fact that “aesthetic” has its roots in *perception*. And it is perceptual acuteness of the sort that aesthetically inclined individuals manifest that is required for grasping “the meaning and human significance of ethical values.” I have two objections to basing the importance of aesthetics exclusively or primarily in perception. I think it is wrong, and I think it is dangerous for aesthetics.

First, the mistake. Suppose one grants that aesthetic perceptiveness is required for adequate ethical comprehension. This in no way implies that the former is a source of or prior to the latter. I must have vision to see the tree. That in no way implies that my vision is the source of or prior to the tree. Perhaps Berleant intends to build something into grasping “meaning and significance.” But the burden is then on him—he must explain exactly how this requires aesthetic skills. I would welcome his laying this out in detail in a longer paper. Presumably he would do this along the lines of a discussion and application of Virgil Aldrich’s notion of “aesthetic prehension,” which he refers to near the end of his note.

Second, the danger. I am aware of the historical bias toward perception in the original use of “aesthetic.” It is a bias that has had the effect of leading (misleading, in my opinion) aesthetic theorists down the formalist path. I discuss why I think this approach has been insidious in my paper. I know from his other writings that Berleant is equally distrustful of this path. The theory of an “aesthetics of engagement” that he develops elsewhere requires an inclusive aesthetic that is not limited to attention to perceptual or formal qualities of objects and events. One must perceive, of course, but aesthetic perceiving is not, I urge, separable from reflecting. This is, again, reason for integrating the ethical and the aesthetic, not for separating them, even if this means that the aesthetic cannot be prior.

Berleant hopes that his reliance on aesthetics as the *source* of ethics will provide a way of valuing the former for its role in “developing or increasing our moral sensibility.” I explicitly acknowledge such a role; what I also recognize is the unfortunate fact that aesthetic sensitivity does not guarantee moral sensitivity. I will not here repeat the counterexamples that I provide in my paper. Certainly, as Berleant says, we *can* grow morally from the novels we read, the films we see, and