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# Aesthetic Universals

Art is Universal—but Universals in Art?

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# Art is Universal

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- ❖ As an anthropological finding, there is no known culture without at least some forms of art
- ❖ Though, of course, not all cultures have all sorts of art
- ❖ And perhaps there is no one form of art which all cultures have
- ❖ And it seems there are some forms of art which only one culture has



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# A Question

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- ❖ Might it be possible to identify some feature which all (or nearly) all forms of art, across all different cultures and times, have in common?
  - ❖ N.b. this need not be a definition, but simply a shared trait.
    - ❖ Maybe, e.g., all human beings are capable of laughter; but we need not assume, if so, that *being capable of laughter* is some manner of definition of humanity.
    - ❖ So, the stakes are lower, but not therefore without interest, even from the standpoint of definition.
      - ❖ So, Tolstoy (the communicative capacity to bind people together); Schiller (a kind of purposeful play); and, as we have seen, Bell (significant form).
  - ❖ Is artistic activity, though, predictably present in every culture?
  - ❖ If so, is there some artistic content predictably present in every culture?



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# Aristotle's Thought

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- ❖ Artistic activity is deeply *natural*:
  - ❖ Necessity begets invention, but once necessities are satisfied, it is equally natural that adornments and enrichments flow forth (*Pol.* 1329b25)
  - ❖ Children, by nature, engage in imitation, since imitation brings understanding, with the extension that people are naturally inclined to admire imitative object—and irrespective of what is represented, including what is base or lowly (*Poetics* 1448b)
- ❖ Unsurprising, then, that this observation would eventuate theories of art as imitation.



# Illustrating Aristotle's Second Point

- ❖ A Still Life of Fruit, Grapes and Foliage, with Flies and Butterflies
- ❖ Jan Mortel (c.1650–1719)





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# Illustrating Aristotle's Second Point

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“I have always found something beautiful in the grotesque—the repulsive, the awkward, the vulnerable, the psychologically enigmatic.”



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# Universals in Art

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- ❖ To many it seems a non-starter, but let us consider the possibility that the value of beauty is universal.
- ❖ For this to be true, beauty need not be easy beauty.
- ❖ Often alien beauty requires acclimatization.
  - ❖ Consider, for example, the ehru.
    - ❖ This is a two-stringed bowed instrument dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD)





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# Back to the Standard of Taste

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- ❖ Could Hume possibly be right?
  - ❖ The uniformity of taste, as natural to all, explains why ‘the same Homer who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and London.’
    - ❖ This form of beauty ‘is naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments.’
- ❖ Note, though, two dimensions of ‘taste’ here:
  - ❖ *How* things taste
  - ❖ How things tasted are *evaluated*
    - ❖ Arguably there is a conflation in Hume’s contention.



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# Moving from Subjectivism to Relativism

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- ❖ Subjectivism and Relativism agree in denying that there are no MLI value facts (whether in morality or aesthetics; here we are concerned with the latter).
- ❖ They diverge in that subjectivism analyzes values as constituted by AIR states, which are, necessarily, the states of individual subjects. Recall our definition:
  - ❖ A property  $\Phi$  is *subjective* =<sub>df</sub>  $\Phi$  constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
  - ❖ So, on this approach, an aesthetic judgment of the form, 'x is beautiful' is to be analyzed as:
    - ❖ x has a property *being beautiful*, where being beautiful is the property of being judged or regarded as being beautiful by some subject S.
- ❖ Saying that a property  $\Phi$  is relative makes no such appeal: it says nothing at all about how the property is constituted.
  - ❖ Relativism is better understood as a claim about *truth*.



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# Two Types of Relativism

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- ❖ Descriptive Relativism (DR): different societies / sub-cultures / individuals have different attitudes regarding the moral permissibility of the same sorts of acts.
  - ❖ The Romans and the Americans of an earlier day thought slavery was permissible; we do not.
  - ❖ Chinese listener tend to judge ehru playing as beautiful; Canadians from Manitoba tend not to judge ehru playing as as being beautiful.
- ❖ Aesthetic Relativism (AR): When societies / sub-cultures / individuals differ in their aesthetic judgements, their disagreements are not even in principle resolvable.
  - ❖ There are no aesthetic facts.
- ❖ Two important non-connections:
  - ❖  $DR \neq AR$
  - ❖ Possibly DR is true and AR is false. That is to say, then, that DR does not entail MR.



# Stating Relativism: Positive

- ❖ Let  $p$  be a proposition of the form:  $x$  is beautiful.
- ❖ Let  $S$  be a society, or a culture, or a sub-culture, or an epoch, or . . .
  - ❖ Aesthetic relativism: If  $p$  seems true to  $S$ , then  $p$  is true for  $S$ .
  - ❖ What do we think about the standard resolution?
    - ❖ What is this ' $p$  is true-for- $S$ '?
      - ❖ If ' $p$  is true-for- $S$ ' simply means ' $p$  seems true to  $S$ ', then the aesthetic relativism resolution holds: If  $p$  seems true to  $S$ , then  $p$  seems true to  $S$ .
      - ❖ In that case, the aesthetic relativism is unassailable.
      - ❖ Unassailable—and vapid.
- ❖ In general, stating relativism positively is difficult.



# Stating Relativism: Negative

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- ❖ There are not S-independent aesthetic facts.
  - ❖ There are, in general, no MLI-independent aesthetic facts.
- ❖ Put negatively, relativism tends to devolve into a garden variety form of anti-realism, often with a dash of DR thrown in.
- ❖ That, though, mainly muddies the water.
  - ❖ What we care about is the question of whether AR is correct, not DR.



# A Presupposition of Anti-Realism

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- ❖ There are no aesthetic facts.
- ❖ But why should we be so secure about this judgment?



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# No Queer Facts, Thank You

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- ❖ Aesthetic facts, if there were any, would be unlike all other facts, and known in ways not akin to the ways in which other facts are known.
- ❖ If esthetic facts were possible, what could these possibly be? What could explain such things?
- ❖ One familiar answer: Nothing.
  - ❖ ‘None of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these’ could explain the existence of moral facts or our knowledge of them.
  - ❖ That would be just too ‘queer’. —Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 37-38.
  - ❖ [N.b. Mackie is talking about a different kind of value fact, moral facts, but *mutatis mutandis* the same holds of MLI aesthetic facts.
    - ❖ In short: there aren’t any.