

Reviews

one cares about. In those situations, clear, kind, and tender reassurance speak louder than fury.

Luke Brunning

luke.brunning@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

This review first published online 8 March 2018

Aesthetic Pursuits: Essays in the Philosophy of Art

By Jerrold Levinson

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 197, £35

ISBN-13: 978-0198767213

doi:10.1017/S0031819118000037

Aesthetic Pursuits is Jerrold Levinson's fifth collection of essays, joining a series running back to his *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (1990) which, alongside the monograph *Music in the Moment* (1998), make for a formidable body of work. In contrast to Levinson's most recent collection, *Musical Concerns* (2015), which focussed entirely on music, the essays in this new volume tackle a broad array of aesthetic and artistic topics, and do so through explorations of various media and genres of art (literary, visual, and musical; elite and demotic). Levinson also employs a variety of different modes of expression and types of essay as vehicles of philosophical argument, though all of them are characterized by Levinson's trademark combination of precision and elegance. All the pieces presented here are thought provoking interventions; some (particularly the three essays focussing respectively on contextualism, aesthetic experience, and beauty) are major statements destined to become significant reference points in future debate.

Though not broken down into sections, the essays comprising the volume are carefully sequenced. *Aesthetic Pursuits* begins with a trio of essays devoted to the basic concepts of aesthetics: 'Farewell to the Aesthetician?', 'Aesthetic Contextualism', and 'Towards an Adequate Conception of Aesthetic Experience'. The succeeding two essays, 'Artistic Achievement and Artistic Value' and 'Artistic Worth and Personal Taste', segue into discussions concerned with artistic value (though unsurprisingly, given Levinson's views about the centrality of aesthetic experience to artistic value, a concern with the aesthetic continues to play a central role in this pair of essays). In the second of these two essays, Levinson revisits and develops ideas (on Hume's 'standard of taste') originally set out in earlier work (as he does later in the volume in relation to previous work on intention

and interpretation, and on the phenomenology of film viewing). The next pair of essays, 'Falling in Love with a Book' and 'Immoral Jokes', shift focus to two specific forms of verbal art, the novel and the joke, in each case exploring the relationship between the artistic form and a broader question of human value and experience – love in relation to the novel, (im)morality in relation to jokes. The subsequent essay, 'Beauty is Not One: The Irreducible Variety of Visual Beauty', provides a panoramic view of visual beauty, while 'Emotional Upheavals' expands the focus on love to take in emotion and emotional experience as a whole (via a commentary on Martha Nussbaum's book of the same name, the essay culminating in a detailed and persuasive critical interpretation of one of Mahler's *Songs on the Death of Children*, an analysis serving to point up certain limitations in Nussbaum's approach to Mahler's composition). In 'Artful Intentions' (a critical notice of Paisley Livingston's *Art and Intention*) and 'Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism', Levinson picks up the gauntlet thrown down – indeed positively battered through repeated flingings – by critics of his 'hypothetical intentionalist' stance on interpretation. 'Seeing, Imaginarily, at the Movies', and 'Sound in Film: Design vs Commentary', close out the book with reflections on the art of film, first through a general defence of the idea that film viewing involves 'imagining seeing' (and not merely visually recognizing) the space represented by a film, and then through a careful, complementary consideration of the role of the soundtrack in film experience, supported by a close analysis of Godard's *Masculin-Féminin*. Charting a course, then, from the most general questions about the nature of aesthetics and the role of the aesthetician in the volume's opening essays, to very specific questions arising from an encounter with a specific work, *Aesthetic Pursuits* furnishes us with further evidence of the remarkable range of Levinson's interests, and his great skill in weaving together the most abstract theorizing with fine-grained criticism. When Levinson characterizes the (Humean) 'ideal critic' as 'someone who is at home with many forms of artistic creativity, who welcomes such diversity of the artistic imagination, and who recognizes that artistic worth can be achieved in many different ways' (66), he might be describing himself.

As a genre, the essay collection has many virtues – among them, the freedom it offers its author to roam without the pressure of a single unifying focus, and the parallel freedom afforded the reader to enter the text at many points without a disorienting loss of sense. Just as the short-form art work (short story, short film, sonatina) offers aesthetic pleasures and opportunities for excellence distinct from long-form works (novel, feature film and television series,

Reviews

opera and symphony), so the academic essay affords the essayist possibilities absent (or at least more remote) in the sustained, full-length monograph – in particular the opportunity to distil, with miniaturist precision, a striking perspective on a given theory, concept, work, or group of works. But these special opportunities are mirrored by risks – among them the risk that a focus on the internal precision of each individual essay will not be matched by attention to the consistency of argument across the essays comprising the collection as a whole. There is no guarantee of a consistent through-line of argument in the monograph either, but there is certainly greater pressure on the author of such a work to achieve overall unity. As we will see shortly, here and there in Levinson's collection, one sees signs of this trade-off between the carefully-honed individual essay and the more loosely-unified whole.

In 'Towards an Adequate Conception of Aesthetic Experience', Levinson sets about reconstructing and rehabilitating a conception of aesthetic experience – alongside the related concepts of aesthetic attitude, attention, and value – fit to motivate and underwrite an aesthetic account of art (that is, one according to which a, or the, principal role of art is to afford aesthetic experience). In doing so, Levinson tackles head on the debunking arguments advanced by George Dickie in the 1960s – arguments which cast aesthetic experience as a 'phantom' and the aesthetic attitude as a 'myth' – as well as the deflated account of aesthetic experience advanced by Noël Carroll, according to whom the latter amounts to nothing more than the act of directing one's attention to the formal properties (e.g. narrative structure) and/or aesthetic properties (e.g. gracefulness) of an object. One might think of Carroll's characterization of aesthetic experience as the most minimal revival of aesthetic experience possible, putting just enough air back into the concept to get it upright again. (It is instructive in this context to remember that Carroll was taught and supervised by Dickie as a graduate student.) Levinson, by contrast, argues that a much 'thicker' conception of aesthetic experience is both warranted (by our appreciative practices) and defensible.

Levinson arrives at the following formulation: '*Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception*' (39). The critical part of this proposal, in terms of distinguishing it from more minimal proposals such as Carroll's, lies in the final clause. Here, Levinson insists that aesthetic experience is characterized by a second-order dimension which consists in an evaluative response towards the first-order dimension of

the experience. (Elsewhere Levinson describes this foundational layer as the ‘sensory-perceptual-imaginative engagement’ (44) with the objects of aesthetic attention; perhaps it is also important to add that, for Levinson, these objects encompass the ‘forms, qualities, and meanings’ (42; my emphasis) of art works, so there is no danger of a slide into formalism here.) Evaluation is the key idea here, insofar as both hedonic and affective responses embody an evaluative stance towards their objects – in hedonic terms, a response is more or less pleasurable or painful; in affective terms, a response will be more or less positive or negative (joyful or depressing, appealing or disgusting, for example). Levinson further argues that such valuing ‘must be an *active* or *occurrent* stance; a *finding-valuable*’ (37), and that the default attitude underpinning such active, experiential valuing is a positive one. That is, when we engage with something aesthetically – when we enter into an aesthetic experience – we do so with the expectation that the experience will be ‘*rewarding* or *valuable* in some way’ (32).

Levinson’s account of the aesthetic – of aesthetic properties, objects, attention, attitude, experience, pleasure, value, and the relations among these phenomena – is surely one of the leading accounts in contemporary aesthetics. But here is one way one might quibble with it. If we grant that aesthetic experience intrinsically involves an active evaluative dimension, why accentuate the positive? That is, why make *positive* evaluation the default expectation or outcome of the evaluative process? The query is sharpened by thinking about the proposal in relation to those two other major normative domains, ethics and epistemology: when we evaluate an act morally, or a truth claim epistemically, it is not as if our evaluative dials are set to expect or favour positive outcomes – finding moral fault or detecting failures in truth-telling are pervasive parts of our moral and epistemic evaluative experience. And even if our moral compasses and bullshit detectors were biased towards positive findings, we don’t think of the experiences arising from their employment as becoming something other than moral or epistemic experiences when they issue in negative judgements. The issue, then, is how to place ‘disvalue’ within the act of aesthetic evaluation. Levinson acknowledges and answers this point by stating that ‘the positive character of aesthetic experience is best understood as a *default*, rather than a strictly necessary feature of such experience’ (32); so negative aesthetic experiences are possible, if undesirable and atypical. But in another passage, faced with the challenge of accounting for our experience of innovative, recalcitrant, and difficult works of art, Levinson writes that ‘unless there is some reward to the subject, at

Reviews

some level, it seems strained to hold that aesthetic experience is occurring' (38). What is at stake here, then, is whether to think of such 'misfiring' responses to aesthetic objects, which for whatever reason issue in little or no rewarding experience or finding-of-value, as *poor aesthetic experiences*, or as *attempted but failed aesthetic experiences* – that is, as *non-aesthetic experiences*.

Although Levinson does not comment on the connection, his analysis of immoral jokes in a later chapter provides a useful test case for his theory of aesthetic experience. An immoral joke, of the type that Levinson is concerned with, is a joke whose humour (on a mild formulation) requires us to entertain certain morally offensive implications (typically racist, sexist, or demeaning of some other minority group), or (on a stronger formulation), whose humour is strengthened by or even depends on these implications. The primary burden of argument in this chapter is to show concretely how their immoral content actually dampens or undercuts the humorous response they invite; Levinson also accepts – in the spirit of Humean 'ethicism' – that the immoral dimension of such jokes is an aesthetic demerit (94). Levinson writes that in appreciating immoral jokes, 'one is called on to temporarily entertain, assume, or inhabit [attitudes] that most hearers recognise as morally repugnant... one sees the basic funniness of such jokes, normally residing in some cleverly engineered incongruity, but... one doesn't entirely want to be the sort of person who can be freely amused at such material, because of the implicit tolerance of morally objectionable thoughts or perspectives that is arguably involved, at least minimally, in their recounting and reception' (86).

Note first that we have here a good example of aesthetic attention to *meaning*. Understanding ('getting') and appreciating a joke involves more than attention to a formal incongruity, even though appreciating a joke looks like a paradigm case of an activity valued for its own sake (which is not to deny that jokes certainly can be told to affirm in-group identity, to humiliate individuals or demean groups, and so forth). Second, and what is most pertinent in relation to Levinson's account of aesthetic experience, immoral jokes on this analysis exemplify a type of aesthetic experience combining value and disvalue. (In this respect, they may be very typical of ordinary aesthetic experiences: perhaps only exceptionally are we fortunate enough to have unblemished aesthetic encounters, occasions where our experience is wholly rewarding, and nothing about the art work with which we engage strikes us as flawed or ill-formed.) On either the weak or the strong interpretation of the immorality of immoral jokes, the positive or rewarding character of our experience of them is (at least)

compromised by recognition of their immoral content. Immoral jokes are, as Levinson puts it, ‘imperfectly’ funny (92), guilty pleasures (87) – where the guilt is of a genuine moral variety, not some mild embarrassment arising from a taste for soap opera or cream cakes – noting that ‘it is appropriate to feel a bit guilty for indulging in such humor, rather than deceive ourselves with the rationalization that such humor is entirely harmless’ (88). Levinson would doubtless maintain that the case fits comfortably within his theory of aesthetic experience, since appreciating the joke as a joke retains its rewarding aspect. But the case fits just as well a theory which allows that aesthetic experience is still in play when disvalue overwhelms positive value, even to the extent of finding a joke entirely repugnant. According to such an account, our engaging with the joke remains, so to speak, an aesthetic endeavour, even though it issues in an entirely negative outcome.

My point in laying out how the case of immoral jokes looks from these two perspectives on the valuing component of aesthetic experience is not to suggest that Levinson’s theory, in which positive value occupies the default stance, is necessarily mistaken – but rather to show how the two essays have implications for one another that are not pursued in the book, in part because the book is a set of largely autonomous essays. Let me add a second and perhaps more problematic example, where the relationship between two essays – or at least important and related claims within the two essays – seems to be one of tension or inconsistency, rather than enriching-but-unrealized mutual implication (as it is in the case of aesthetic experience and immoral jokes). I refer here to the pair of essays on intention and interpretation, in which Levinson defends and compares his favoured theory of interpretation, ‘hypothetical intentionalism’ (HI), with (moderate) ‘actual intentionalism’ (AI). In the first of these essays, ‘Artful Intentions’, Levinson avers that novels, films, and art works in general ‘constitute *utterances*, ones anchored in particular agents and contexts...but they are ones whose meanings are not rightly identified, even in part, with what meanings those agents *actually intended* to convey in those contexts...’ (144). Through passages such as this, Levinson presses the argument that the target of interpretation is utterance, not utterer’s, meaning. In the essay that follows – ‘Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism’ – however, we encounter this sentence: ‘...the interpreter’s task is ...to hypothesize, in a fully contextually informed manner, about the *actual author*, seeking to arrive at what that author is most plausibly and charitably understood as meaning via the text he or she has produced...’ (148). The space between utterer’s and utterance meaning, and between actual and hypothetical

Reviews

intentionalism, looks vanishingly small in the light of this second quotation, and raises the following question: is HI a thesis about the epistemology, or the ontology, of intention and interpretation? Are the intentions that we hypothesize in HI supposed to model and track, albeit fallibly, the actual author's intentions – as hypotheses in explanations generally function to track actual events and processes – as the second of these quotations seems to suggest? Or is the activity of hypothesizing in HI more aptly characterized as inventing or 'optimally project[ing]' (144) the intentions (most) plausibly attributed to the actual author, but *not* identified with that author's actual intentions, as the first quotation holds? In sum, what is the target and purpose of the hypotheses in hypothetical intentionalism? We can be confident as to what Levinson's answer to this question is, for he states in the Introduction that he regards HI as a type of 'non-intentionalism' (6). Whether Levinson's intended meaning meshes with the utterance meaning of *Aesthetics Pursuits* is, of course, another matter – I leave it to the reader to hypothesize what they regard as the most plausible interpretation of the text in context!

In looking at these passages in extreme close-up, subtle differences emerge, differences which can perhaps be accounted for in terms of a difference in emphasis on the various aspects of Levinson's theory of interpretation. No author can chase down every implication of an argument, nor check for every conflicting implication across the parts of a large-scale work. The point rather is to highlight some of the fertile tensions, and intriguing, open questions, which Levinson generates through his *Aesthetic Pursuits*.

Murray Smith

M.S.Smith@kent.ac.uk

murrayss@princeton.edu

This review first published online 21 March 2018