

AESTHETICS AS METACRITICISM : A NOTE

In recent years, it has been claimed that we cannot do aesthetics until we have some critical statements to work on. I shall argue here that such a view is defective. In what follows, I shall make an attempt to show that there are at least some basic problems of aesthetics that do not arise directly from merely what we *say* about works of art; and, that metacriticism represents only a truncated area of philosophical aesthetics.

In his book *Aesthetics : Problems in the philosophy of criticism*, Beardsley remarks :

“As a field of study, aesthetics consists of a rather heterogeneous collection of problems: those that arise when we make a serious effort to say something true and warranted about a work of art. 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*.”¹

Elsewhere, he states :

“In my view, aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, is essentially metacriticism. It deals with philosophical problems that arise when we make statements about works of art and other aesthetic objects. And aesthetic theory, as a body of knowledge (or atleast reasoned belief) consists of general principles that provide solutions to those problems and thus serve as theoretical understandings for art criticism.”²

The view that aesthetics is metacriticism raises, in my view, serious problems. I shall begin by making the following two points: First, the analytic philosopher clearly demarcates an area of philosophical pursuit quite different

from the domain of traditional aesthetics. The latter, it may be pointed out, was characterised by its pronounced proclivity for theory-making. Secondly, the attempt to 'define' aesthetics in terms of metacriticism stems from the analytic philosopher's rejection of the traditional goals in philosophy.³ For him, questions of the sort "What is art?" do not properly belong to the province of the philosophy of art. However, Beardsley's own conception of the subject matter of aesthetics carries with it a recommendation: Aesthetics *ought* to concern itself with linguistic analysis and clarification of statements made *about* works of art.

I find it necessary to focus on the following point. According to Beardsley, the problems that gain legitimacy as belonging to aesthetics (in his sense of the term) are those that arise from the "critical statements" made about works of art. I will add that there are two sorts of activities involved here: There are some statements we make *about* work of art — which Beardsley calls "critical statements" (hereafter, we shall call them CS). Secondly, an attempt is made to analyse and clarify CS; and, this will be done in terms of certain other statements — let us call them AS. I want to stress the point that the distinction between CS and AS must be clear, as also the relation between the two. Without CS there can be no AS; and, only AS belongs to metacriticism i.e., aesthetics proper, not CS. This, I think, in brief, is the position held by Beardsley.

Now, to turn to certain points of detail in the above account, let us see what Beardsley means by the term "critical statement" (CS):

"I will use the term 'critical statement', very broadly, to refer to any statement about a work of art, that is, any statement about such objects as poems, paintings, plays, statutes, symphonies."⁴

Further,

"...it need not be a value judgment at all — nor is it necessarily a statement made by a professional critic."⁵

Thus, CS is "any statement about a work of art". But here a crucial question may be raised: How do we know that something *is* a work of art? Imagine the following situation. I take my Scandinavian friend along to see a performance of Indian classical dance — an art form with which my friend does not have much familiarity. After the performance I turn to him and remark, "This is good". The friend, however, in a puzzled tone counters, "Is this a work of art?" or, "Is this really a *dance* performance?" The point I want to stress here is this. A CS is possible or meaningful if we *know* that what we are talking about is a work of art. But, often *this* may be in question.

Now, let us attend to the latter part of Beardsley's utterance which he seems to make by way of an explanation "that is, any statement about such objects as poems, paintings, plays, statues, symphonies". This at once raises the following two questions: (a) How do we know that *other* things may also be included in the category of art objects? E.g., it may be a legitimate question to ask whether cabaret dance is to be included as an art form. (b) How do we know that something is a painting and not a mere wall-hanging, a poem and not a mere juxtaposition of words, a play and not a real life situation/incident? Clearly, not only need we have a general theory of art, there should be theories relating to each individual art form.⁶ While (a) is a demand for a general theory of art, (b) seeks a clarification as to what characterises each of the individual art forms. But such attempts would be quite out of place as far as the domain of metacriticism is concerned.

It seems that the proponent of metacriticism takes a position which has inherent in it two basic assumptions. For metacriticism to be possible (i) there must be such a thing as a finished work of art, and (ii) that there must be some critical statements about it. Unless (i) and (ii) are fulfilled philosophical aesthetics, as outlined by Beardsley, cannot begin. This way of putting the matter brings out clearly the relation between CS and AS: It is quite evident that

without CS the philosopher cannot begin an activity which will lead him to AS. All the same, CS will not count as aesthetics; only AS constitutes the proper subject matter of philosophical aesthetics.

Now, I find it possible to make the following remarks:—

(1) There is a paradox involved in the analyst's position as outlined above. Suppose that the contention, that CS will not count as aesthetics, only AS will, had been impressed upon the mind of the early philosopher of art. Why would he then take the trouble of issuing forth CS at all? At the same time, he would remain a non-starter as far as his philosophical concern relating to the arts goes, because in the absence of any CS a systematic programme of analysis leading to AS would not become possible. The point that needs to be stressed here is this. The theory-maker with his avowed philosophical concern makes some *general* statement about art which is not related to any *particular* work of art. But given the constraints of meta-criticism such an activity cannot claim to belong to philosophical aesthetics (i.e., in the sense Beardsley defines it). On the other hand, if general remarks about art are not considered as of philosophical nature or value, how could one make particular remarks about *particular* works of art? The critic's remarks about particular works of art i.e., CS can have relevance only in the context of some *general* theory of art.

(2) Secondly, if till now the traditionally inclined philosopher has conscientiously generated CS in the good faith that he was doing aesthetics it does not follow from this that he would for that matter not think of embarking on a programme having to do with the clarification and analysis of such statements i.e., AS. I suggest that the task of clarification and analysis of statements about works of art i.e., CS may well be integrated with theory-making — a goal which was wholeheartedly pursued by the traditional aesthetician.

It may perhaps be argued on behalf of the analyst that even if the professional philosopher himself did not begin with CS there would be others such as critics, lovers of art, viewers and audiences etc., to help him in the task as it is *they* who are responsible for CS. Neatly put, it would mean identification of a clear division between two sorts of activity: making critical statements about works of art, CS; and, putting such statements to philosophical analysis, AS. This may well be true but from this it does not follow that the two activities must be carried out by two different class of people i.e., critics and philosophers. The primary concern of the critic, no doubt, remains that of understanding and evaluating the concrete individual work of art. So, for a while, it may be thought as if there were people who do only CS and therefore have no philosophical concern with the arts in general. But, it would be worthwhile to ask: Can the critic really do his job properly in the absence of some sort of a general theory of art? I suggest that the critic who makes CS not only must be thoroughly familiar with a large number of other works of art, such statements can be made only in the light and context of some general theory of art. Such a theory may be what he takes over from the professional philosopher or may himself make in course of his repeated contacts with objects of art.

The relation between criticism and theory is characterised by their mutual inter-dependence. A CS made by the critic presupposes some knowledge, even though held implicitly, of a general theory of art. But for Beardesley:

“When, however, we ask questions, not about works of art, but about what the critic *says* about works of art, that is, about his questions or his answers, then we are on another level of discourse.”⁷

My immediate response to this would be: What of questions we *do* ask about works of art? Aren't they genuine philosophical questions? It seems to me that we would ask questions about what the critic *says* about works of art *if only* we consider them as quite worthwhile and significant

utterances. But on what grounds do we distinguish such statements? Let us consider the following kinds of CS:—

- (x) W is P.
- (y) W is Q.
- (z) W is good/bad.

In each of the above statement W stands for some work of art of which "P" and "Q" and "good/bad" are predicated. It is important to note here that the object of predication i.e., W is already known to be a work of art as the speaker goes on to describe, interpret or evaluate the work. Further, predications like "P", "Q" and "good/bad" are all made within the framework of aesthetic context. In (x), "P" may stand for some aesthetic predicates such as "sad", "sombre", "gay", "profound", "intelligent" etc. However, if for "P" we use predicates like "costly", "big", "moth-eaten" the statement so made will not count as CS in the sense we take it to stand for. Similarly, "Q" in (y) and "good/bad" in (z) must be understood in the aesthetic context. What would distinguish the aesthetic use from the non-aesthetic one would be based on the reasons that may be advanced in support of any such statement. E.g., W may be considered "good" on the non-aesthetic ground that being a small painting it may be more appropriate for the size of the room where it will be on display. This, however, is not to judge the painting "aesthetically". It may be somewhat more difficult to distinguish between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic senses in the realm of interpretative statements. Here, an appeal to the artist's intention may often be confusing as some of these imputations may lack any objective validity. The aesthetic/non-aesthetic distinction is crucial as (x), (y) and (z) may all be cast within non-aesthetic framework. The point I am trying to argue here is that we will require some general aesthetic theory in order that we may be able to distinguish statements that are CS from those that are not. Thus, even though Beardsley distinguishes between questions we ask "about works of

art" and those we ask "about what the critic *says* about works of art", to suggest that only the latter are "questions of aesthetics" is in my view rather arbitrary. We not only can and do ask questions about works of art, we *must* as well if we want to ask questions about what the critic *says* about such works.

I have so far discussed how (x), (y) and (z) may, under certain conditions, count as CS. Beardsley argues, as I have outlined earlier, that only questions relating to CS belong properly to aesthetics. The position I hold here is that without atleast some questions asked about works of art it would not be possible to ask questions about CS. The reasons for holding such a view may be outlined in terms of the following questions:—

- (Q₁) How could I say "W is good" unless I have some notion of what constitutes a *good* work of art?
- (Q₂) How could I say "W is good" unless I have some general theory of *art* which helps me to distinguish what is art from what is not?
- (Q₃) How could I say "W is good" unless I have some general theory of what constitutes *a* work of art?

The three questions are to be clearly distinguished. (Q₁) calls for a theory of aesthetic judgment. Evaluative statements which are often made by the professional critic or even by the lay viewer can find their justification on the secure foundations of a rationally established general theory as to what may count as good art. This, however, is not to be confused with (Q₂) which raises the issue of distinguishing things/events that *are* works of art from those that are not. And, finally, one would hardly be able to discuss meaningfully (Q₂) without for that matter settling for some sort of an answer to (Q₃). In other words, it would seem that an innocuous statement such as "W is such-and-such" (where W stands for some work of art) could be made by the critic if only he has a fairly good idea of what

things to include as works of art. His choice of W as a work of art about which something significant can be said points to an implicitly held theory of art. Further, the critic's decision to say something significant about a work of art will require him to be clear about what is it that is "*a*" or "*the*" work of art.

I shall now briefly work out a distinction between two types of statements which, I believe, has a crucial bearing on the issue under discussion. Let me begin by recalling the meaning we have sketched out, with certain qualifications, of the term "critical statement" (CS)—i.e., a statement made *about* some work of art. E.g., if we make a statement of the sort "W is P", then if W is a work of art the statement would be a CS. Let us now imagine a situation in which someone is asking whether a certain object is a work of art. Suppose that a statement is made that "W is a work of art". What sort of statement is this? Can it claim the logical status of a CS? Again, e.g., if someone makes the statement "Guernica is a work of art", is he making a CS in the sense in which Beardsley understands it? My answer is that such a statement cannot be a CS. A CS is what is *about* a work of art, but the statement we are considering says *that* something is a work of art. A possible objection here may run as follows: The statement "W is a work of art" or "Guernica is a work of art" exemplifies the *evaluative* use of the term "work of art". But, I shall rejoice that such use is quite restricted in its scope and extent. It is perfectly possible to imagine situations where the statement of the sort "W is a work of art" or "Guernica is a work of art" may be used simply to assert *that* something (W or Guernica) is a work of art. In such cases the statement used would be an identity statement.

The crux of the matter is that a statement of the sort "W is a work of art" or "Guernica is a work of art" will remain outside the domain of CS and is, yet, amenable to the aesthetical question, "On what grounds is W a work of art?" This at once exposes the fallacy inherent in

Beardsley's position. For him, only a CS can be a legitimate starting point for any proper aesthetical enquiry. My argument, on the other hand, is that a statement of the sort "W is a work of art" which is not *about* any work of art — i.e., not a CS in Beardsley's sense — can trigger off a basic aesthetical question viz., what is art? or, what things can claim to be works of art, and on what grounds? I call it a 'basic' question, because it is about *works of art* rather than about what "the critic *says* about" them. The strength of my point viz., that the statement "W is a work of art" is *not* a CS, I claim, can be demonstrated in a slightly different way. Consider the statement "W is *not* a work of art". Obviously, this statement is not about any *work of art*, even though the statement "W is *not* P" is still *about* some work of art — and therefore, a CS. Statements like "This work of art (W) is *not* profound", "This work of art (W) is *not* good" etc., will be treated as CS, because they are *about* works of art. But, a statement which merely asserts *that* something is or is not a work of art cannot claim to be a CS. Beardsley's contention that only critical statements are amenable to philosophical problems is an overstatement; for, some of the basic problems of aesthetics are an immediate fall out from our direct interaction with actual work of art.

In conclusion, I would say that Beardsley's formulation of the view viz., aesthetics is metacriticism is quite untenable. True, many of the aesthetical problems are an outcome of our critical analysis and investigation of our talk *about* art. Any attempt to highlight such questions and bring them into the mainstream of aesthetics would mark a welcome move. There is need here for such analysis and clarification of our talk about art. But all this, I suggest, not to the exclusion of certain basic questions that would arise as soon as we are faced with some actual works of art. Even the critical statements that we might make about works of art presuppose certain general theory of art and an awareness of some basic questions relating to the arts.

The domain of philosophical aesthetics is much wider than that of metacriticism. The view that aesthetics is metacriticism is found to be defective, and I have tried to argue this point by considering the questions outlined at Q₁, Q₂, and Q₃. Further, I have argued that Beardsley's formulation of what he calls "critical statement" cannot lay claim to a statement of the sort "W is a work of art" which in turn is capable of giving rise to genuine philosophical questions. Thus, in my view, metacriticism alone does not provide the hunting ground for philosophical aesthetics; there is much more to it than that.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. M. C. Beardsley. *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1958), pp. 3-4.
2. M. C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Theory and Educational Theory", in R. A. Smith (ed.), *Aesthetic Concepts and Education*, (University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 3.
3. See Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XV, 1956.
4. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. I have here in mind Susanne K. Langer's approach to aesthetics which is marked by her responsiveness to the differences among the various art forms inspite of her awareness that there is some basic unity among all the arts. For a critical assessment of such a view, see also my article, "The Alleged duality in Susanne K. Langer's aesthetics: a reassessment", in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, July, 1980.
7. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 3.