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COMMENTS ON JERROLD LEVINSON'S *TOWARD A NON-MINIMALIST CONCEPTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE*

1. The elements of Levinson's analysis

The main goal of Levinson's paper is to suggest an account of aesthetic experience (AE) alternative to *minimalist* accounts of AE, such as the one put forward by Noël Carroll (Carroll 2005). Levinson sums up the core of such views as follows: "aesthetic experience is just experience in which there is perception or cognition of aesthetic and/or formal properties of some object" (Levinson 2015: 86). Carroll deliberately leaves out of his account certain traditional ideas about AE, whereas Levinson provides some reasons to hold such views and concludes that Carroll's minimalist account is a defective conception of AE. The ideas generally entertained about AE and left aside by Carroll's account are: a) AE is rewarding/valuable/worthwhile (Levinson 2015: 86); b) AE is "of positive character" (Levinson 2015: 86); c) AE comports "some measure of absorption and satisfaction" (Levinson 2015: 86).

a), b) According to Levinson, AEs are always felt/considered as rewarding and/or valuable and/or worthwhile and/or pleasurable (Levinson 2015: 95). There is nothing like an AE lacking an element of positive response of the kinds listed. According to Carroll (Carroll 2005: 72), on the other hand:

some aesthetic experiences may not only be bereft of pleasure, but may lack affect altogether. For example, one might take note of the angularity of Katherine Hepburn's body, her gestures, her facial structure, and her way of speaking and, in addition, realize how this all "fits" with the "edginess" of that her characters are meant to project; and yet one may take no pleasure, nor suffer any other affect while doing so. On what grounds would it be denied that this is an aesthetic experience? And if it is not an aesthetic experience, what sort is it?

To this, Levinson replies: "it might be a cognitive experience, a perceptual experience, an analytical experience, an informative experience, and so on. It's not as if no other plausible labels are available" (Levinson 2015: 89). That experiences of paying

attention to the very same properties of objects that are central to AE are not pleasurable or rewarding ones, then, does not mean that AE is not characterized by being rewarding and “of positive character” (Levinson 2015: 87) and that such experiences should count as aesthetic ones. This is because there are alternative and appropriate ways to categorize such experiences: namely, they can count as “cognitive”, “perceptual”, “analytical”, “informative”, and so on.

c) Absorption in the object of AE can be characterized as requiring that the subject of the experience pay attention to the object with a willingness to perceive it as such, for no other reason than experiencing it in its fullness. In other words, absorption may seem to require disinterestedness on the side of the subject. Accordingly, Levinson stresses that we do not just pay attention to the relevant properties of the object of AE, but that we do it in a peculiar way, “apart from the utility of so attending” (Levinson 2015: 94). Absorption in the object of AE, then, is another aspect of AE Carroll’s account fails to make sense of.

In order to sketch his alternative account of AE, Levinson needs to show that there is at least an element of AE that Carroll’s minimalist account does not capture and that is capable of explaining why we entertain at least some of the ideas about AE listed above (a, b, c). There are two candidates for the job: the *aesthetic attitude* and the *aesthetic state of mind*, as it is conceived by Gary Iseminger (Iseminger 2005). Levinson discards the first candidate and argues that the second requires some improvement.

The *aesthetic attitude*, as Levinson observes, has generally been described as “the ignoring or suppressing of certain other mental attitudes or frames of mind, such as practical, anxious, or desirous ones” which are thought “to preclude, or at least to render difficult, the sustaining of the aesthetic one” or as “a condition of openness, receptivity, and generosity towards an object’s perceivable form and qualities” (Levinson 2015: 83). Levinson believes – *contra* e.g. George Dickie – that this notion plays a relevant role in the realm of the aesthetic and characterizes it as an essentially disinterested disposition toward an object (Dickie 1964: 56-65). However, Levinson stresses that, since adopting an aesthetic attitude means being disposed to have an AE, one can correctly claim that it is likely that AEs are *often* preceded by the adoption of an aesthetic attitude, whereas one cannot correctly claim that if a subject S has an AE, then S has adopted an aesthetic attitude. The aesthetic attitude, then, is not suited to fulfill the role of the missing element in the minimalist’s characterization of AE.

The *aesthetic state of mind* might seem to make a better candidate. Levinson is sympathetic with Iseminger’s view of the aesthetic state of mind as “appreciating a state of affairs, where appreciating can be characterized as ‘valuing for its own sake the experiencing of that state of affairs’” (Iseminger 2005 in Levinson 2015: 90). Levinson also adds that the appreciation at issue should better be characterized as aesthetic or intrinsic, in order to distinguish it from appreciative states of the instrumental kind (Levinson 2015: 90), and that such kind of appreciation is not just a certain kind of belief, but an experience with “some sort of phenomenology” (Levinson 2015: 92).

There are, however, according to Levinson, cases of AE that are not characterized by the adoption of an aesthetic state of mind *of the kind described by Iseminger*. One such case is that of the experience of a “novel and provocative artwork that one doesn’t quite know how to regard or approach” (Levinson 2015: 93). Here is Levinson’s whole description:

Consider a novel and provocative artwork that one doesn’t quite know how to regard or approach, that one is grappling with, trying to figure out, find a way into, or grasp the point of, but so far without success. Isn’t it natural to say that one is having aesthetic experience while doing so, even though one is not, or not yet, taking satisfaction in one’s perceptual-imaginative engagement with the work’s formal or aesthetic properties? (Levinson 2015: 93-94)

Here, the subject of the experience is not “taking satisfaction in one’s perceptual-imaginative engagement with the work’s formal or aesthetic properties”, therefore one might doubt that s/he is in an aesthetic state of mind, which has been defined as the valuing (“taking satisfaction”) for its own sake of the experience of a certain object (“one’s perceptual-imaginative engagement with the work’s formal or aesthetic properties”), and hence doubt that s/he is having an aesthetic experience. However, Levinson stresses that, although the subject of the experience is not valuing the experience of a certain object’s formal or aesthetic properties for its own sake, it seems appropriate to say that s/he is enjoying his/her effort to grasp the point of the work: the latter is an experience that generates a positive response and, since it is generated by one’s engagement with an object’s formal or aesthetic properties for their own sake, it deserves to be considered an aesthetic experience (Levinson 2015: 94). Levinson, then, is largely sympathetic with Iseminger’s proposal, although he stresses that AE in some cases might not feature the kind of valuing described by Iseminger with his characterization of the aesthetic state of mind.

According to Levinson, there is a further and crucial lesson we should learn from the novel and provocative artwork case, since this example also shows what is the element of AE that is missing from the minimalist’s account:

it seems that one must then at least be taking satisfaction in or finding good that very exploratory and interrogative effort of trying to achieve a satisfying perceptual-imaginative engagement with the work. Otherwise it would be reasonable to say that one wasn’t yet having aesthetic experience of the work, but only endeavoring, with the best will in the world, to have such experience. In other words, unless there is some reward to the subject at some level, it will seem strained to claim that aesthetic experience is occurring. (Levinson 2015: 94)

From this passage it can be inferred that AE is, according to Levinson, an experience that is always rewarding at some level.

Here, then, are the elements of Levinson’s positive, non-minimalist characterization of aesthetic experience:

- i. *aesthetic attention*: “focused on an object’s character, or otherwise put, its perceivable forms and properties, for their own sake, in their full individuality, apart from the utility of so attending, on whatever content emerges from such forms and properties, and on relationships among such forms, properties, and contents”, which issues in *aesthetic perception*: “a perceptual engagement with an object in which both the imaginative capacity and the embodied corporeality of the perceiving subject should be understood to play a role” (Levinson 2015: 95);
- ii. *positive response*: “enjoying or savoring such perceiving, being moved by what one is perceiving, registering an emotion in relation to what one is perceiving, valuing the perceptual activity one is engaged in, finding worthwhile the sustaining of that perceptual activity, admiring what is revealed in the perceptual experience being had” (Levinson 2015: 95).

According to Levinson, then, AE requires *aesthetic attention and perception*, and it always involves a *positive response* toward the perceived object and/or the experience of perceiving it; such response is constructed broadly and – if I understand Levinson correctly – sometimes, but not always, it amounts to an *aesthetic state of mind*, conceived as “taking satisfaction in one’s perceptual-imaginative engagement with the work’s formal or aesthetic properties”. In particular, the description of *aesthetic attention* shows that absorption in the experienced object is a relevant feature of AE (c) and the description of the range of possible *positive responses* to AE captures what it is to consider AEs rewarding/valuable/worthwhile (a) and/or “of positive character” (b). Although broadly construed, AE is not under-characterized by the non-minimalist account, according to Levinson, since it can be distinguished from typical pharmacological experiences, mystical experience and from (most) sexual experiences. Together, the concepts of *aesthetic attention and perception* and of *positive response* do the explanatory job that *aesthetic attitude* and *aesthetic state of mind* were shown not to be capable of doing.

2. Missing replies to Carroll

Let me stress again the main differences between Carroll’s and Levinson’s characterizations of AE. In section 4 of his paper, Levinson criticizes a thought experiment mentioned by Carroll in order to show that AE is merely the experience of paying attention to an object’s aesthetic and formal properties. Levinson argues that Carroll’s example does not capture the fact that there is an experiential aspect to valuing. However, as I have explained, later in the paper Levinson acknowledges that the positive response involved in an AE need not consist in valuing one’s experience of an object’s formal and aesthetic properties. Nevertheless, Levinson criticism against Carroll’s example stands, because he argues that AE is distinguished by the fact that it issues in a *positive response*, and that it requires a peculiar form of attention (*aesthetic attention*), i.e., undivided attention to the object for its own sake. Both the positive

response and the manner in which we pay attention to the object of the AE give a peculiar characterization to the phenomenology of AE and it is this specific character of AE that Carroll's account fails to grasp.

There might be, however, a couple of issues raised by Carroll that Levinson fails to take into account and that might weaken the solidity of his proposal. First, Levinson's view requires a direct perceptual encounter with the object of AE but, as Carroll claims, it seems that with many works of conceptual art we do not need a direct perceptual encounter in order to appreciate them aesthetically (Carroll 2005: 78.). Levinson does not consider the topic of conceptual art in his paper, so he does not tell us whether he agrees with Carroll's view on this form of art. If he does, he would have to admit that his view of AE does not accommodate the AE of conceptual art. Perhaps this is Levinson's position since, at the end of the paper, he states that his view is meant to apply to the experience of most, but not all, works of art (Levinson 2015: 97). Be that as it may, some discussion of the problem raised by conceptual art would be helpful to clarify Levinson's position.

A more serious challenge, I believe, comes from Carroll's remarks on the case when, as he claims, our reflections on "a poem once read" give us an AE (Carroll 2005: 80). Perhaps we can remember objects once experienced and, by means of reflecting on their form and aesthetic properties, have an indirect AE of them. As Iseminger (Iseminger 2005: 100) notices

someone might be in a position to justifiably assert that the contrapuntal interplay in Mozart's symphony [No. 41] is intricate by means other than hearing that it is [...] for example, on the basis of memory or the testimony of a reliable authority. Someone who appreciates something in this sense may, but need not, become a 'spellbound spectator', lost in contemplation. Appreciation may sometimes be all-consuming and drive out all other thoughts, but [...] it seems possible that it may be relatively fleeting and casual.

It seems that Levinson's view would not allow for such an experience to be considered an AE, since it requires that in AE we have direct perceptual encounter with the object of the experience (ii). It seems to me, however, that more argument is called for to explain why, according to Levinson, this is a necessary requirement and therefore why, on his view, experiences such as the ones mentioned by Carroll and Iseminger do not count as AEs. Perhaps Levinson would claim, on the one hand, that remembering aesthetic features of a poem or a symphony is a cognitive, but not an aesthetic, experience, while allowing, on the other hand, that we can remember objects once experienced in a way that revives our earlier experience of them and, by means of reflecting on the form and aesthetic properties of the objects whose earlier experience we have revived, have an indirect AE of such objects.

3. Some remarks and requests of clarification

1. I am a little puzzled by the heterogeneous characterization of positive responses associated with AE that Levinson gives us:

enjoying or savoring such perceiving, being moved by what one is perceiving, registering an emotion in relation to what one is perceiving, valuing the perceptual activity one is engaged in, finding worthwhile the sustaining of that perceptual activity, admiring what is revealed in the perceptual experience being had" (Levinson 2015: 95).

Some of these are responses to the object perceived, other are responses to the experience of perceiving such object. "Registering an emotion in relation to what one is perceiving", in particular, seems very generic. Is there a common feature that all and only such kinds of positive responses share? Are there necessary and sufficient conditions that a positive response need meet in order to qualify as a positive response that characterizes aesthetic experience?

2. There might be an inconsistency in Levinson's account. In his brief discussion of the notion of *aesthetic attitude* in the first section of the paper, Levinson agrees with Carroll that *disinterestedness* may not be a feature of AE ("it may well be true that disinterestedness is not a feature of aesthetic experiences", Levinson 2015: 85) and he suggests that it is more plausibly a feature of the aesthetic attitude ("disinterestedness is most naturally understood as a feature of the attitude or frame of mind with which one approaches an object so as to experience it", Levinson 2015: 85). Later, however, while characterizing *aesthetic attention*, which he considers a necessary ingredient of AE, he writes that it is "focused on an object's character, or otherwise put, its perceivable forms and properties, for their own sake, in their full individuality, apart from the utility of so attending, on whatever content emerges from such forms and properties, and on relationships among such forms, properties, and contents" (Levinson 2015: 94). What is this, if not a description of *disinterested* attention in the object of AE? Perhaps, however, this is only a prima facie inconsistency. The disinterestedness characterizing the aesthetic attitude is a *disposition* towards focusing on an object's character and so on, which, according to Levinson, one need not have while having an AE. On the other hand, the disinterestedness characterizing AE is a *state* one happens to be in, i.e., the state one is in when one focuses on an object's character and so on, which might well be an essential feature of AE.¹

3. It is important to stress that Levinson's goal in this paper is to give us a characterization of AE and not to state what are the necessary and sufficient conditions

¹Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

for one to have an AE. It is, however, tempting for the reader to speculate about whether the characterization implicitly contains a description of the necessary and sufficient conditions for one to have an AE. According to Levinson, the perception of *aesthetic properties* is not sufficient for an AE to obtain (aesthetic properties are defined in note 8 as “higher-order, evaluation-relevant, gestalt-like perceptual properties arising from configurations of lower-order perceptual properties”). If it were sufficient, Levinson would be agreeing with Carroll, which is not the case (see esp. Levinson 2015: 87-88). Moreover, it remains an open question whether the perception of aesthetic properties is *necessary* to AE. *Aesthetic perception* certainly is not defined by Levinson as the perception of aesthetic properties. Furthermore, in a footnote remark (Levinson 2015: 94-95, n. 8) he writes: “attention can be recognizably aesthetic even when none of the properties focused on is an aesthetic property per se”. From this remark it can be inferred that, according to Levinson, provided that we have *aesthetic attention* and *aesthetic perception*, we can have AE, no matter the fact that we do not perceive any aesthetic properties. That we have aesthetic perception entails that we have a *positive experience*, because we respond positively to properties of the perceived object and/or because we respond positively to the fact of being absorbed in the task of perceiving such an object, as the case of the “novel and provocative artwork” seems to show.

4. A related issue concerns the case of bad art. Let us look again at the passage from footnote no. 8 (Levinson 2015: 94-95): “attention can be recognizably aesthetic even when none of the properties focused on is an aesthetic property per se”. This might open the door to AE of absolutely ordinary objects. Consider, however, that Levinson also claims, *contra* Carroll: “when artworks are mediocre, or landscapes are ordinary, it is not clear that we are having aesthetic experience of them when we register some of their formal and/or aesthetic properties, even if we are undeniably experiencing them in some fashion” (Levinson 2015: 86; Carroll 2005: 82). Perhaps we cannot have an AE of bad artworks *regarded as works of art* but, if we can have AE of ordinary objects, it might be that we can also have AE of bad artworks, merely *regarded as artifacts of a certain kind*. Suppose a work of art *W* has certain aesthetic properties and is intended to have a certain representational content that should also enrich our AE of it. Suppose also that *W* is a bad artwork, in that the interplay between its aesthetic properties and its representational content issues in a dull and uninteresting object. That *W* is considered dull and uninteresting discourages us from paying aesthetic attention to it, i.e., to be absorbed in it, therefore we have no AE of *W*. Now, suppose we decide not to focus on the interplay between aesthetic properties and representational content in *W* and focus only on *W*'s aesthetic properties. It seems that we can pay aesthetic attention to this aspect of *W* and therefore have an AE of this aspect of *W*. The same would be true also if *W* had no aesthetic properties, if Levinson allows for there to be AE of objects that do not have aesthetic properties. Would Levinson accept such claims?

5. The considerations put forward in point 3 above also bring me to look at the role of *aesthetic attention* in Levinson's account of AE. Aesthetic attention, according to Levinson, certainly is a necessary ingredient of AE, together with *aesthetic perception*. Depending on how question 3 is answered we will have either that *aesthetic attention* and *aesthetic perception* together are not sufficient for AE, because also the perception of *aesthetic properties* is necessary, or that *aesthetic attention* and *aesthetic perception* together are sufficient for AE. Now, as we have seen, there are two central phenomenological features of AE, according to Levinson. One, absorption in the object perceived (reached by paying *aesthetic attention*), is probably a necessary condition for AE, whereas the other, a *positive response* on the side of the subject of the experience, tells us what it looks like for a subject to have an AE, i.e., what, once all the necessary conditions for AE have been met, happens to the subject who is having an AE. It remains an open question, however, where the positive response that characterizes the phenomenology of AE comes from. That, according to Levinson, a broad variety of positive responses characterizes AE, perhaps testifies to the fact that the perception of aesthetic properties might be, but need not be an ingredient of AE. When it happens to be a component of a given AE, then it is possible that the positive response to the AE consist (at least in part) in the pleasure felt in perceiving certain aesthetic properties. When there is no perception of aesthetic properties, but an AE nevertheless, then either the positive response that characterizes the phenomenology of the AE is a positive response to the experience being had (finding it rewarding, etc.) rather than to the experienced object, or it is a positive response to some striking non-aesthetic property of the object experienced (e.g. its particular shade of color).

6. Suppose Levinson believes that *aesthetic attention* and *aesthetic perception* are conjointly necessary and sufficient to AE. Would it be possible to think of a case where, even though there are aesthetic attention and aesthetic perception, there is no *positive response* and therefore no AE, contra Levinson? It seems to me that Levinson would rule out any such case because he claims that aesthetic attention and perception result in absorption in the perceived object and that absorption is something we always value positively (see point 3 above). So there might not be any feeling of pleasure to a certain AE, but there always is absorption and this is enough to make the AE valuable to us and therefore to arouse in us a positive response. If this were correct, then it would remain an open question why we always value positively experiences of absorption in objects, but answering such question might not be a task for the philosopher.²

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