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ART AND THE CHIEF USE OF WISDOM IN DESCARTES

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Abstract

This paper contests the position that Descartes is a philosopher opposed to aesthetics. In the *Compendium of Music*, Descartes argues that, since every sense can experience pleasure, we can judge any external object to be beautiful. However, according to a letter to Mersenne, because judgments concerning pleasure are highly individualized insofar as our dispositions and experiences are unique, there are no objective criteria for beautiful objects. Yet, the *Compendium* does give rules for the composition of pleasant music: small, arithmetic variety in the parts of the piece. Since the aim of music is to arouse various emotions, these rules should lead to judgments of pleasure or beauty. Emotions, however, rely on judgments of the object. In *The Passions of the Soul*, a beautiful object is judged as agreeable to our nature, leading to the emotion of attraction, while an ugly object is judged contrary to our nature, leading to repulsion. Attraction gives rise to the desire to enjoy, repulsion to avoidance or aversion. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes explains our enjoyment of tragedies, despite their seeming unpleasantness, as judging ourselves virtuous for having compassion for the characters. In *The Passions*, this compassion is the pity of a strong and generous soul. Pity is enjoyable because we reflect on our feeling bad as something about which to feel good. This joy is intellectual, leading to what he calls contentment in the letter to Elizabeth, and what he calls the repose at the end of a piece of music in the *Compendium*. The intellectual joy of such judgments about our emotions allows us to learn how to control the emotions, leading to what Descartes calls, in *The Passions*, the chief use of wisdom. Thus, Descartes is not an anti-aesthetic thinker, but one who sees in art an important role in intellectual and passionate life.

The philosopher of art Tom Leddy (2104) writes that Descartes is an anti-aesthetic philosopher because he seeks to “erase anything aesthetic from human existence.” The very fact that Descartes tries to close himself off from sensory input in order to meditate on his existence shows that he wants to destroy aesthetic experience. One question that might arise from this common position on Descartes is why the stopping up of ears, etc. is not itself an aesthetic accomplishment. This act occurs in the fictional setting of Descartes sitting in his room by the candle and so on. As fictional, this act is written and must be read in order for it to have effect or meaning. It is, in its framework if not its content, an aesthetic experience. This would be a bit of an irony to the whole Cartesian project, if it is anti-aesthetic: To draw us away from aesthetic experience in general, he must draw us into a particular aesthetic experience.

Descartes does not say much about aesthetics. The most sustained aesthetic piece is the early *Compendium of Music*. There are also scattered discussions of beauty in letters, in particular one from March 18, 1630, to Mersenne, and a brief discussion in *The Passions of the Soul*. But there are other topics on which Descartes does not write much, and he by and large would prefer not to spend as much time on metaphysics as he wound up doing. It is to his philosophical credit that he does spend time on these topics. Doing so is what Daniel Garber (1992, p. 2) will say separates Descartes from Galileo, making him a philosopher rather than simply an important mathematician and scientist. With some topics, work needs to be done to extract what Descartes thinks about them. Aesthetics would appear to be one such topic. Thus, it seems worthwhile to look at what Descartes says about beauty or aesthetic experience in general. Whether he turns out to be anti-aesthetic remains to be seen. To make this determination, it will be necessary to first come to grips with his main aesthetic categories and then to work out how these relate to the mental activities involved in aesthetic judgment. Afterwards, I will look to a more specific type of aesthetic experience as Descartes understands it because doing so will make clearer both how aesthetic judgment works and why it is important for our use of wisdom.

1.

To begin this process, it is important to lay out what Descartes means by beauty and ugliness. Beauty and ugliness are the fundamental aesthetic categories for him, so coming to terms with what things come to be called beautiful

and what come to be called ugly, as well as why they come to be called either, is the necessary first step in an understanding of Descartes' aesthetic theory. This laying out will involve looking at the works mentioned above—the letter to Mersenne, *The Passions*, and the *Compendium*—as well as a letter to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia from October 6, 1645. I will first engage what Descartes means by beauty, ugliness, and pleasure or pleasantness, then turn to how all of this relates to the passions. Although aesthetic judgment for Descartes is not unrelated to the intellectual activity of, say, metaphysics, its activity remains of a different order because the ways that objects come to be called beautiful or ugly depends on the ways our passions engage them. Thus, taking account of the passions will be the necessary second step to understanding how aesthetics in general works.

A.

In the letter to Mersenne, Descartes addresses the essence of beauty, relating it to an earlier question as to why one sound is more pleasing than another. What is beautiful is especially related to the sense of sight, and what is pleasant is a more general term applicable to any sensory experience. As he explains in the *Compendium*, "*All senses are capable of experiencing pleasure*" (Descartes 1618, p. 11). Thus, if beauty is related to sight, the other senses can experience pleasure akin to the pleasure of seeing a beautiful object, and so the essence of beauty involves the essence of the pleasant or pleasure.

The essence signified by *beauty* and *pleasant*, to return to the letter to Mersenne, is "*simply a relation between our judgement and an object*" (Descartes 1630, p. 19). In other words, the essence of beauty is a non-essence insofar as it is only a relation between things that have essences, an object or thing and our judgment. As laid out in the *Meditations*, judgments fall under the category of thoughts which include "*something more than the likeness of that thing*" in question, a category which also includes volitions and emotions (Descartes 1641, p. 26). The other major category of thoughts is ideas as images of things, whether such things are "*a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God*" (Descartes 1641, p. 25). So, the experience of the pleasant or of pleasure, beauty being the pleasure associated with the sense of sight, emerges from something we add to the likeness or idea we have in our mind of the object being contemplated through our faculty of judgment. The essence of beauty is found in this relationship between the object or thing itself and what we add to our idea of it via judgment.

In the letter to Mersenne, because we each gain an idea of the object in different ways and because our judgments "*differ so much from each other, neither beauty nor pleasantness can be said to have any definite measure*" (Descartes 1630, p. 19). That is, there is no what we would call objective criterion for beauty. As Descartes (1630, p. 20) explains at the end of the letter, "*what makes some people want to dance may make others want to cry*" because the music may conjure up ideas of past positive or negative events associated with the sounds. This does not mean, of course, that there are no criteria at all for judgments of beauty or the pleasant. As he points out in the *Compendium*, the relationship between the idea of the object and our judgment of it resulting in pleasure depends on a certain "*proportional relation of some kind between the object and the sense itself*" (Descartes 1618, p. 11). Gunfire and thunder are judged not to be pleasurable because they hurt the ears. The sound is disproportionately loud for the sense perceiving it, and so the idea in the mind cannot be judged as pleasant. In addition, the senses find more satisfaction in objects that do not present themselves in "*too complicated or confused a fashion*" so that the sense can take in the whole of the design with relative ease (Descartes 1618, p. 12). This ease of perception is possible when the difference between the parts of the object is smaller, a smaller difference that is possible "*when there is greater proportion between*" those parts, especially when that proportion is arithmetic, not geometric (Descartes 1618, p. 12). However, continuing with the *Compendium* though this is quoted by Descartes in his letter to Mersenne, it cannot be that the small, arithmetically proportional differences between the parts of the object to be judged aesthetically are too easily perceived. They should rather be neither too complex nor too simple. The senses are drawn to an object by a "*natural desire*" that is "*not quite*" satisfied, though an overly complex object will tire the senses (Descartes 1618, p. 13).

Thus, the essence of beauty or the pleasant is found in the relation between, first, the idea of an object that presents itself to the senses with neither too much complexity nor too much simplicity through small, arithmetically proportional differences in its parts in such a way that our memories or other individual aspects we bring to our perception of the object allow us to add to the idea of that object a judgment of pleasure and, second, the judgment which is added to the idea of the object. It is a tall order for an object to be experienced by an individual as pleasant, then. Since it is a tall order, Descartes (1630, p. 20) claims in the letter to Mersenne that, though in theory we could call something "*the most beautiful without qualification*," because it could only be called this insofar as the most individuals judge it pleasant, what we could call beautiful without qualification can never be determined. And yet, in

the *Compendium*, art has an aim: “to please and to arouse various emotions in us” (Descartes 1618, p. 11). The creation of arithmetically proportional artworks, insofar as they adhere to the general criteria of successful art, would seem to move us in the direction of a judgment of beauty or pleasure. However, since there is nothing beautiful without qualification, the aim of arousing various emotions is going to be as important as the arithmetic proportionality of presentation.

B.

Although both judgments and passions add something to the likeness of a thing, they remain different. As Descartes explains it to Princess Elizabeth in his 1645 letter, impressions in the brain are formed from external objects or interior to the self. When formed interior to the self, they are formed by bodily dispositions, memories, or agitations of the animal spirits from the heart or soul. Simultaneously, the soul can have thoughts excited in it by any of these impressions. When these thoughts do not depend on the will, they are generally considered passions. However, passions proper are something more specific. The animal spirits can be agitated by sensations that are themselves either external or internal. Of the internal sensations, when they depend on memories and a normal agitation, they are dreams, whether while asleep or awake; when the soul uses the will to make a new thought, it imagines; and when the soul regularly excites thoughts of a given kind, it is not a passion but one’s nature or humor. What remains of the internal sensations are “those thoughts which come from some particular agitation of the spirits, and of which we sense the effects in the soul itself” (Descartes 1645, p. 119). These are the passions proper. Passions proper are also distinct from the inclinations or habits that dispose us to them as well as from the judgments or imaginings which lead to them. Thus, although both judgments and passions add something to the idea of the thing, the judgment comes first and concerns the object itself, while the passions depend on the judgment and remain within the soul. Passions concern the self and depend on the judgment of the object, even if the object needs to be presented to the senses for the judgment to be made and the passion consequently felt.

In *The Passions*, the judgment of an object such that we consider it beautiful or ugly relates to external objects, or at least to our external sensory representation of ideas of these objects. This judgment is related to love and hatred. Most generally, love is a movement of animal spirits whereby the soul is impelled “to join itself willingly to objects that appear agreeable to it” (Descartes 1649, p. 356). If our internal senses or reason judge something to be agreeable to our nature, we consider it good. If an object is represented by our external senses as an idea agreeable to our nature, we call it beautiful. These two forms of agreeability give rise to two kinds of love, for good things and for beautiful things, and the love for beautiful things is called attraction. Hatred is a movement of the animal spirits whereby the soul is impelled “to be separated from objects which are presented to it as harmful” (Descartes 1649, p. 356). If the internal senses judge something to be contrary to our nature, we consider it evil, while an object represented by the external senses as an idea contrary to our nature is called ugly. As with good and beautiful things, these two forms of contrariness give rise to two kinds of hatred, for evil and for ugly things. The hatred for ugly things is called repulsion.

Attraction and repulsion are more violent and contain less truth than other kinds of love and hatred. They are more violent, Descartes (1649, p. 358) claims, “because what enters the soul through the senses affects it more strongly than what is represented to it by reason.” Thus, judgments of the beautiful and the ugly are the most deceptive of the passions, and so we should be careful not to rely on them. In other words, what we are attracted to is not necessarily good for us, nor is what we are repulsed by necessarily harmful.

Nonetheless, attraction and repulsion give rise to certain desires. Desires are agitations of the soul caused by animal spirits disposing the soul “to wish, in the future, for the things it represents to itself as agreeable” (Descartes 1649, p. 358). Repulsion can give rise to a desire because desire has no opposite: “it is always one and the same movement which gives rise to the pursuit of a good and at the same time the avoidance of the opposite evil” (Descartes 1649, p. 359). Thus, repulsion and the judgment of something as evil lead to a desire, a desire to get away. We judge ourselves to lack the absence of the ugly or evil thing, and the absence of evil is good.

The desire to which attraction gives rise is enjoyment of the thing in question. What kind of enjoyment depends on the object. For instance, attraction to a beautiful flower gives rise to the desire to enjoy it by looking, while the attraction to fruit gives rise to the desire to enjoy them by eating. However, there is a form of attraction which “comes from the perfections we imagine in a person who we think capable of becoming a second self” (Descartes 1649, p. 360). This desire to enjoy the other person “provide[s] writers of romances and poets with their principal subject matter” (Descartes 1649, p. 360). The desire to which repulsion gives rise is aversion or avoidance of the object. Simple examples of repulsive objects or experiences are “the touch of an earthworm, the sound of a rustling leaf, or

our shadow" (Descartes 1649, pp. 359-360). We are repulsed by and desire to avoid or avert these objects because they, for whatever individualized reasons we might have, "*represent to the soul a sudden and unexpected death*" (Descartes 1649, p. 359).

In short, the desire to enjoy an object arises because of the passion of attraction that emerges from the judgment that an object is agreeable to our natures, while the desire to avoid an object arises because of the passion of repulsion that emerges from the judgment that an object is contrary to our natures. Our natures are individualized, reliant on memory as well as humors and bodily dispositions, so we will not be able to call any object most pleasant without qualification. However, if the artist works to arouse emotions in us, he or she works to prompt the passions regardless of these individualized aspects. For this reason, Descartes suggests the small, arithmetically proportional differences of the objects in question. While this suggestion is focused on what will be necessary to generate pleasure, art aims to arouse **various** emotions in us, so feeling pleasant is not the sole aim or possibility of art. Indeed, if, according to the *Compendium*, "*variety is in all things most pleasing*," the emotions generated by the work cannot solely be the attraction which gives rise to the desire to enjoy the object (Descartes 1618, p. 13). Descartes seems to mean by this that dissonance is sometimes necessary for a piece not to be boring or insubstantial like candy. However, following other moments in Descartes' corpus, it is clear that variety in the emotions aroused is necessary for art.

II.

To make fuller sense of what it means for art to present itself with variety, I turn in more detail to the 1645 letter to Elizabeth, dealing with tragedy. I will then look to the *Compendium* to connect these letters to some of the rules for elegant composition.

It might seem that tragedy should not hold up very well to the Cartesian understanding of beauty and art, insofar as the events depicted are not pleasant. They are sometimes unpleasant without variety. Descartes (1645, p. 118) claims that the pleasure in tragedy can be related to believing that one "*is doing something virtuous in having compassion for the afflicted*." As he explains it in *The Passions*, compassion, or pity, "*is a kind of sadness mingled with love or with good will towards those whom we see suffering from some evil which we think they do not deserve*" (Descartes 1649, p. 395). Those inclined to pity are both the very weak, because they consider the evil as one which might befall them, and the very generous and strong, because being generous involves having goodwill to everyone and so pity the weakness of those who suffer. The pity of the very strong, though, is not bitter because "*it is more external, affecting the senses more than the interior of the soul, which yet has the satisfaction of thinking that it is doing its duty in feeling compassion for those afflicted*" (Descartes 1649, p. 395). Being moved to tears in compassion for the characters in a tragedy is a feeling good about feeling bad. If we have goodwill, we do not wish to see people suffering as they do in tragedies. Insofar as the events onstage are known to be fictional, they can be external for even the weakest, so we can witness them without feeling the bitter pity of one who worries the same might happen to him or her. It is pleasant to know that we feel badly for someone who suffers so, and the tragedy, as an artwork, brings us to this knowledge about ourselves by presenting the matter according to the right proportions.

However, we should be careful about what we mean by the pleasure involved in the pity we feel when watching a tragedy. It does not result in enjoyment or joy, and so the desire to watch a tragedy is not a desire to enjoy, even if it is pleasant. Rather, according to the 1645 letter to Elizabeth, the compassion or pity from watching a tragedy brings about contentment. This pleasure of contentment after watching a tragedy comes from feeling good about our compassion. We are moved by the actions onstage because it is a pity that they happen to anyone, and "*the soul is pleased in feeling itself moved by passions, no matter what nature they are, so long as it remains in control*" (Descartes 1645, p. 118). The judgment that a tragedy is pleasant gives rise to an attraction to the events onstage insofar as we are attracted to our own goodwill. The attraction to our goodwill gives rise to the desire to watch a tragedy insofar as it is a desire to seek out contentment. In *The Passions*, there is a difference between the passion of joy and intellectual joy. The passion of joy is "*a pleasant emotion which the soul has when it enjoys a good which impressions in the brain represent to it as its own*," while intellectual joy is "*a pleasant emotion which the soul arouses in itself whenever it enjoys a good which its understanding represents to it as its own*" (Descartes 1649, pp. 360-361). Contentment, insofar as it is a feeling good about feeling bad, is a pleasure the soul arouses in itself that the understanding represents as its own. The feeling bad would be a non-intellectual sadness brought about by the events on stage, but the feeling good about feeling bad is the result of a judgment by the soul about itself, and so is a more intellectual pleasure than the passion of joy. Intellectual joy may give rise to a non-intellectual joy, but they remain distinct, and the contentment from watching a tragedy is this intellectual joy. That it is intellectual is indicated

by Descartes when he writes to Elizabeth that the soul is pleased in feeling moved by passions “so long as it remains in control.” In the last sentence of *The Passions*, Descartes (1649, p. 404) writes that “the chief use of wisdom lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils of which they are a cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy.” Such joy will be intellectual insofar as it is a use of wisdom’s control, and the contentment we feel after watching a tragedy is this kind of joy because it allows the mind to find control over the passions. We do not simply feel bad. We feel good about our feeling bad.

Thus, if an artwork has the aim of arousing emotions, these emotions do not need to be simply pleasurable. In fact, the pleasures involved in the greatest artworks help us gain control over our emotions and not be simply immersed in them. As a result, the variety at hand in artistic endeavors can help us feel, for instance, the pity of the strong for the weak, but also to know that we feel this kind of pity. In making us know this kind of pity, we learn to control our emotions, leading us to the chief use of wisdom. The aesthetic judgment at hand will not just be a question of whether the artwork is beautiful, whether we feel it to be agreeable to our nature, but whether it can help us come to be aware of ourselves, of our emotions, and to gain control over them or at least not to be at their mercy. Thus, while an artwork should aim to arouse emotions and be judged beautiful, not every part of its arithmetically proportional, small parts need be beautiful. Variety within the artwork itself, even a little ugliness, can make it pleasant in the intellectual sense, leaving us content.

Hence, it seems as though Leddy is wrong to claim that Descartes is an anti-aesthetic philosopher. Instead, even if Descartes is not explicitly concerned with thinking aesthetically, it is a concern for him, at least at times. What is more, if thinking aesthetically or engaging aesthetic works can lead us to control our emotions, and if this control is so important as to be considered wisdom’s chief use, then thinking aesthetically or engaging aesthetic works is of primary practico-ethical importance for Descartes. Perhaps it is the case that not all thinking or philosophizing need be aesthetic for him, but that is a far cry from being opposed to aesthetic experience as such, as Leddy claims.

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