

AMERICAN AESTHETICS: AN APPRECIATIVE RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

In this response to Stan Scott's thorough and thoughtful review of my lead essay in American Aesthetics: Theory and Response, I further clarify my understanding of American Aesthetics by emphasizing the dynamic contributions aesthetic concepts and judgments make to all thought and action. American Aesthetics is interpreted to embody both dominant cultural features arising from American historical experience and more universal epistemic features dependent on evolutionary, psychological, and philosophical elements as interpreted by Peirce, James, Whitehead, and Dewey..



Stan Scott has written a thoughtful and gracious review of *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice* (henceforth *AA* with quotations cited internally in this essay). I find almost nothing in his analysis and commentary with which to disagree and much to appreciate. I am deeply thankful for the time and intellectual effort he has expended in his review. So why then bother you, the reader, with more to digest?

While I may not disagree with Scott, I do offer an alternative and perhaps complementary interpretation of the primary function of aesthetics in human thought and action. Moreover, there are important aspects of how I understand American Aesthetics as a whole that are not made sufficiently clear in my introductory essay in *AA*. Scott's review sets forth the landscape of aesthetics in a way that facilitates making the needed clarifications. The result, I believe, is beneficial in advancing Polanyian studies as well as increasing appreciation for the significance of aesthetics in human functioning.

In his introductory paragraph, Scott fruitfully refers to the book's concern to locate in American thought and practice an aesthetic pattern that is relevant to cultural concerns and daily living in the United States. He properly understands that by American Aesthetics I am not referring to any and all aesthetic reflection carried out by American authors. Rather my concern is to identify an understanding of aesthetics that is uniquely American because it is grounded in uniquely American social and cultural aspects of historical experience such as revolutionary securing of independence, idealized equality, frontier individualism, the fight over slavery, "melting pot" immigration, and America's isolation from the destruction Europe experienced during the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that the thought of the so-called classic American philosophers (principally Peirce, James, Whitehead, and Dewey) best captures key aesthetic aspects of that history. Scott focuses on the connecting aesthetic pattern between American pragmatic and process philosophy and the arts. The way philosophy is engaged with the arts (and their interpretation of American experience) is,

of course, a central concern of any aesthetic theory. The book's title suggests that something more than aesthetic attention to artistic objects is at stake: many essays seek to ferret out American patterns of artistic practice and thought. However, the claim of American exceptionalism in any domain calls for additional reflection these days. Does the aesthetic pattern influencing artistic creation and evaluation in America have transcultural implications, or is it but one more regional expression of aesthetics? For if one travels to Paris, isn't there a French aesthetics? Or in China a Chinese aesthetics? In Rome an Italian aesthetics? So is American aesthetics simply a particular example of cultural and historical influence shaping some transcultural aesthetic essence? The answer requires clarification.

My intention in the book was to show that the classic American philosophers have developed a theory of aesthetics that, although influenced by some of the characteristics of American culture, creatively advances aesthetics into a form that has wide relevance beyond particular cultures. I intended the theory to have an internal integrity comparable to Kantian aesthetics, Hegelian aesthetics, Anglo-American analytic aesthetics, or similar broadly relevant theories. Scott correctly notes that I view John Dewey's *Art as Experience* as the work that most succinctly and powerfully establishes American Aesthetics both theoretically and in practice. Scott quite obviously agrees with this assessment and reinforces throughout his review article the importance of Dewey's notion of aesthetic judgment as a necessary factor in bringing any experience to harmonious unity. By "an experience," Dewey does not mean to indicate just any material of which we happen to be conscious. No, an experience has a demarcated wholeness such that we can speak of "that house" or "that concert." That is, in Dewey's understanding of experience, multiple elements have been integrated into a focal whole.

Here we have reached an ambiguity in the theory of American Aesthetics that needs attention and clarification. On the one hand, I have acknowledged the role of cultural factors in American history that have influenced aesthetic choices in the creation and assessment of works of art. The embrace of democracy in America in contrast to the class interests that prevailed in Europe promoted artistic attention to everyday life—to popular taste, individual pursuits, and ordinary social activities and cultural objects not prominent in European art. Think of Winslow Homer (or a little later Thomas Hart Benton) in painting, Charles Ives (Scott Joplin) in composing music, Walt Whitman (Emily Dickinson) in poetry, Mark Twain (Louisa May Alcott) in literature as examples largely from the late nineteenth century of typical American artistic interest in ordinary life. Yes, effete aestheticism arose in America as well as abroad during the Gilded Age. But notice that artists like James Whistler and John Singer Sargent left America for London and Paris to paint portraits of the elite in the tradition of Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Lawrence. To take recent examples of artists whose work is expressive of American aesthetic openness to anti-elite everyday culture, can one imagine Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, or Jean-Michel Basquiat rising to stardom in any place other than America?

The list of artists who intentionally or unintentionally have expressed typical American values could, of course, be vastly expanded. So it is that American cultural experience has influenced the aesthetic standards applied in the creation and assessment of art in America. In this sense, American Aesthetics manifests a sort of aesthetic relativism that makes it roughly a cultural alternative to Chinese or French aesthetics.

On the other hand, I believe the classic American philosophers (I'm thinking principally of Charles Peirce, William James, Alfred North Whitehead [a Brit teaching at Harvard], and John Dewey) have developed a theory that advances understanding of aesthetics as involving a hermeneutic process and producing distinctive assessments. In a journal article I wrote on a comprehensive interpretation of aesthetics, I rely

principally on Dewey to suggest that aesthetic concepts and judgments play a role in all meaning-laden thought and action (Gulick 2020). Aesthetic factors may be most evident in the arts, but that is because in the arts, human constructive cognition and imaginative activity is most needed and obviously present. Polanyi makes this point strongly in chapter 6 of *Meaning*, “Validity in Art.” However, I stress that judgments not just in art but in all domains make use of such aesthetic factors as coherence, consistency, fittingness, elegance, harmony, and completeness. Two of the most important contemporary American philosophers in the pragmatic tradition, Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, whose essays are included in *American Aesthetics*, argue for the centrality of aesthetic notions in all intellectual inquiry. In this respect, they follow the American initiator of pragmatism, Charles Peirce, who made aesthetic adequacy the mark of that which is good in itself and is therefore sought in all intellectual pursuits. This expanded understanding of aesthetics is what makes it of cross-cultural significance.

Scott notes correctly that I discuss Kant’s aesthetics as a contrast to American Aesthetics. Kant’s notion of the disinterested appreciation of artworks is far removed from Dewey’s understanding of the dynamic use of aesthetic concepts in the construction of experience. However, later in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant moves beyond his formal analysis and postulates the creative play of aesthetical ideas that cannot be captured adequately in imagery. This aspect of his thought, coupled with his analysis of the sublime, stimulated the rise of romanticism and ushered aesthetic concerns into the realm of artistic creativity in the nineteenth century.

In *AA*, I suggest that three progressively inclusive uses of aesthetic judgement can be distinguished as successively emerging in Western history:

The first domain is the disinterested approach to art that identifies beauty as the aesthetic ideal. American Aesthetics, while it acknowledges beauty as one among many aesthetic standards, reacts strongly against the apotheosis of beauty as *the* aesthetic standard. The second domain, central to American Aesthetics, recognizes that creative imagination, aesthetic sensibility, contextual savvy, and normative vocabulary conjoin in the creation and judging of art in its evolving diversity. The third domain, grounded in the thought of the classic American philosophers, involves the recognition that felt aesthetic criteria can influence any and all judgments, not just judgments about art. (*AA*, 19–20)

As already noted, I view John Dewey’s exposition of “experience” as a crucial step in liberating aesthetics from exclusive attention to art. In expanding the reach of aesthetic sensitivity and judgment, the similarity between Dewey’s dynamic notion of “experience” and Polanyi’s from-via-to theory of meaning construction becomes evident. Stan Scott makes the important point that “in Dewey’s revolutionary view, it is this increase in the coherence of the viewer’s experience that gives art its ‘esthetic’ quality” (60). Indeed, it gives all construction of meaning its aesthetic quality. Scott also effectively points out the similarity between Polanyi’s emphasis on discovery as culminating in an intuition of coherence and Dewey’s emphasis on ongoing inquiry leading to new insights. Scott’s account underscores the affinity of Polanyi’s thought with pragmatism.¹

I believe the emphasis Polanyi places on personal judgment in all aspects of inquiry, scientific as well as artistic, distinguishes his contribution to the pragmatic tradition. The significance of the enacting person also provides me with a related yet rather different account of the distinctive core of American Aesthetics than the one Scott affirms. Scott quotes a sentence from Richard Schusterman’s article in *AA* as identifying

“the core of the *pattern* that connects American philosophy and the arts” (66). Schusterman writes, “Dewey followed James in placing experience at the core of his entire philosophical project, since this rich notion can unify many of the divisive dualisms that thwart our thinking and our lives” (*AA*, 105). I am less inclined than many Polanyians to see intellectual dualisms as the great philosophical issue needing to be dealt with today. Of course, one should not fall prey to substance dualism, positivism, rigid distinctions in a non-linear world, etc. But these issues have been critiqued by a parade of thinkers including Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and, yes, James. Furthermore, it is not clear to me that aesthetic concepts and judgments necessarily avoid dualistic distinctions. Even the aesthetic experience of coherence can be contrasted with incoherence. I worry that prioritizing experience above all else can slide one into idealism and a problematic form of individualistic anthropocentrism. An emerging cosmos within which human experience is a tiny, late development—that seems to me the basal reality within which all thought develops.

All of the above correctly identifies me as a kind of realist who takes the discoveries of science seriously but also recognizes its limits as a linguistically expressed phenomenon. I value the unifying importance of experience but see it as embedded in living bodies themselves embedded in non-linear processes inadequately captured within human experience. I appreciate much of James’s pioneering work in psychology and can relate his notion of “pure” experience to the pre-reflective states discussed by some phenomenologists and neuroscientists. Just as aesthetic factors can influence the course of a Whiteheadian concrescence, so aesthetic sensitivities can theoretically influence the integrations that are essential to Polanyi’s focal awareness and meaning making. This is a little studied aspect of Polanyi’s epistemology.

Perhaps I am making more of a difference between my view of aesthetic experience and Scott’s view than is the case. For when he refers to experience as agency and discovery, I am right there with him. I think he has done a fine job of summarizing some of the essays in *AA*. When there is so much that he writes that I find right and compelling, it seems ungracious of me to pick out several points of disagreement. Actually, my initial problem is with Polanyi’s notion of contemplation followed by Scott’s use of that notion for deep experience of art. How can one set aside all frameworks to arrive at direct experience (*PK* 196-97, Scott 67-68)? Doesn’t that eliminate Polanyi’s use of subsidiaries and the “from” of the “from-to”? Isn’t the real point that one can lose self-consciousness and criticism in viewing art? The term “direct experience” can easily be misleading because all perception and thought is mediated by biological processes and is typically influenced unconsciously by such things as mood, prejudice, hopes, and the lessons of past experience. Even if one were able to erase all dispositional influences in contemplation, that would not affect a person’s assumption of an objectivist framework for the many situations in life where a contemplative approach is inappropriate. Moreover, post-critical knowing does not involve an escape from the world into contemplation so much as it affirms committed involvement in the world based on awareness of and responsibility for one’s particular personal contribution to what one knows and does.

Given the ambiguities and questions already raised, how do I finally come to understand American Aesthetics? Stan Scott aptly begins an answer: “For Gulick, American Aesthetics differs from approaches to art and literature that are object-centered or emphasize formalistic principles to the exclusion of the artist’s biography, the experience of the viewer, or the social or political conditions in which an artwork is produced” (62). Scott attends here to my take on typical American concerns that tend to shape artistic selection and production of content in the arts. But what of my theoretical view that aesthetical elements are found throughout thought and action? This is the insight initially advanced by the classical American philosophers. In short, I have a hybrid view of American Aesthetics that includes both the relatively particular or regional

and the imputed universal. This combination is illuminated by the full title of the book: *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*. Typical American content in the arts is described in essays dealing with aesthetic aspects of *practice*; the embodied conceptual influence of aesthetic apprehension, conceptualization, and judgment is addressed when the topic is *theory*. Both theory and practice bloom from American roots. Context should illuminate which of the intertwined aspects of American Aesthetics is at the center of attention.

I conclude by again expressing my appreciation to Stan Scott for the thoughtful attention he has given the book's content.

ENDNOTE

¹J. E. Tiles states that Polanyi mentions both pragmatism and Dewey in dismissive terms (*PK*, 234 and 328), "but terms which betrayed a superficial appreciation of both the man and movement" (1991–1992, 9). I have argued that Polanyi's commitment to a free society and moral values in general entails his adoption of a "confessional, pragmatic theory of truth, subservient to larger purposes" (2021, 19). The congruence of Polanyi's thought with different strands of the pragmatist tradition is worthy of further examination. Phil Mullins (who offered some thoughtful comments on this essay) has carried out this examination with respect to the relation between the philosophies of Polanyi and Peirce in several articles. Robert Innis is another thinker who has explored these issues in a variety of books and articles.

REFERENCES

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