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Aesthetics, Ethics, and the Meaning of Place

I

There are many reasons for distinguishing aesthetics and ethics from each other, but the most obvious ones are probably historical. The tradition stemming from Baumgarten and Kant largely understood aesthetics in the original Greek sense of the word: *aisthanomai*, to perceive or sense. Aesthetics is primarily a matter of the senses, especially the 'higher senses', seeing and hearing. Ethics is concerned with principles distinguishing morally acceptable actions from immoral ones, or setting standards for a good life. Aesthetics deals with matters that are somehow more vague and indefinite than ethical problems, and aesthetics is, indeed, based on something less reliable and permanent – the senses – compared to ethics where reason and rational justifications seem to have a greater role. This has contributed, no doubt, to the evaluation and ranking of them in philosophy: aesthetics has been seen as the least important field, coming well behind the more sophisticated and well-grounded fields of epistemology and ethics. These distinctions and their validity have been questioned,¹ and there have been numerous arguments and attempts to establish, for example, the cognitive function of art, Hans-Georg Gadamer's being one of the most well-known.² However, the ways we think about aesthetics and ethics are still strongly marked by this tradition.

I do not want to question the rationale of these divisions; I do think that we need a distinction between aesthetic and ethical issues to make more sense of our world. In this paper I consider an area crucial to our understanding of ourselves and our position in the world where the distinction becomes not only problematic but disappears altogether. In our everyday dealings with the surroundings we have made our own we are within a sphere that exemplifies how both aesthetic and ethical issues overlap

¹ See Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), translated by Andrew Inkpin, 60-102.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), second, revised edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 81-100.

to a significant degree. All this comes together in the concept of place. Place understood in the sense of a person's meaningful and significant location brings together aesthetics and ethics. When living in a place – or more existentially, when living a place – we are rooted to our surroundings in such a way that both our aesthetic and moral judgements are determined by the deep ties that we have developed. It is because of this existential foundation that the distinction between aesthetic and ethical aspects of life tends to disappear. In certain areas of life, but not in all, beauty and goodness come together.

I shall first delineate a short existential account of the concepts of 'place' and 'world' or 'life world'. I call my account 'existential' because I am interested in the structures of the life world, and the life world is determined by human existence and its structures. The 'existentials'³ of human existence are also the structures of our life world. The hermeneutic circle of human and world, or human and history, means that we as human beings are also determined by the world.⁴ The interweaving of human and world is one of my starting points, and it creates the ontological foundation for my understanding of aesthetics, ethics and their role in human existence.

My emphasis will be in environmental issues in a broad sense. I am interested in the human environment, including art, the built environment, and to some extent the natural environment. I shall discuss some consequences of my account for our understanding of the human environment, but I shall not go into issues such as ecology, conservation and restoration.

II

Let me begin with the concepts of 'culture' and 'tradition'. These are crucial terms in understanding what is meant by world or by life world. Historicity and tradition are grounding ideas in hermeneutics and figure prominently in Gadamer's thinking. For Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle was existential in nature in the sense that the human way of being, existence, was characterised by a 'fore-understanding' of Being in general.⁵ To grasp

³ Martin Heidegger introduces the notion of the 'existential', '*ein Existenzial*' to distinguish his ideas from Kantian categories. Macquarrie and Robinson translate the term as 'existentials' (pl. 'existentials'), *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 70 and 79, but this is somewhat clumsy. See *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979), 44 and 54.

⁴ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 424-449; Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 254-264.

⁵ See Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 358-364; Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 265-271.

Being in general we must study human existence, and this is what Heidegger does in *Being and Time*. For Gadamer, the question is more 'mundane': the role of historicity in understanding in the humanities, and the importance of tradition in human life. Gadamer criticizes the Enlightenment for neglecting the role of history and for operating with the concept of pure, non-historical reason, and he goes so far as to make morals also relative to a tradition:

That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us – and not just what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behaviour. ... The real force of morals, for example, is based on tradition. They are freely taken over but by no means created by a free insight or grounded on reasons. This is precisely what we call tradition: the ground of their validity. And in fact it is to romanticism that we owe this correction of the Enlightenment: that tradition has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding and in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes.⁶

I shall not take a stance on the question of whether all moral principles are based only on tradition or whether they have a more fundamental justification, be it rational or otherwise. But when we come to aesthetic problems, then, I think, we are firmly on a historical foundation. Our aesthetic culture – our practices within the arts as well as judgements concerning the aesthetic value of our environment – has gained its present form during the course of history. There would not be any aesthetic culture without its tradition, and if its tradition had been different, our aesthetic culture would also be different. Our aesthetic culture is structured in certain ways and quite complex, with a number of contrasting tendencies.

It is also *time* that makes a cultural practice possible and guarantees its existence. The longer a tradition is, the stronger it is. A tradition always has the tendency to multiply itself by producing objects and events of the same kind and creating new practices around itself. This means that the structures are further strengthened and their existence is taken more and more for granted. Here, 'the test of time' means that time justifies the existence of certain practices as well as objects and events that go with it; there are no timeless criteria which would constitute the test and through which different objects and events would have to pass. There is no logic beyond time that would provide an explanation and a rationale for the present state of affairs.

Once there is a tradition its structures are always the basis for new things to come. But in the development of the Western art world, there can occur

⁶ Gadamer, *ibid.*, 280-281.

strands at certain times in history which go very much against of the tradition. This is what many avant-garde movements have done. A general theory cannot explain why these sorts of developments take place, or why many other different kinds of developments take place. We have to refer to particular circumstances – economic, religious, social – and to particular individuals living and making decisions in these circumstances.

The Heideggerian ideas of the relatedness of Being in general and human existence could be applied to clarify the relationship between cultural structures and an individual living within them. The *Sein*, being, in our *Dasein*, there-being, is formed by the different cultural structures into which we are born. One of the ‘sites’ (*das Da*) which we inhabit is the aesthetic culture. The way we exist in our aesthetic culture, that is, what we as human beings in the existential sense are as far as aesthetic matters are concerned, is set by constituents of that culture. We have an ‘aesthetic nature’ of a certain kind because we were ‘thrown into’⁷ an aesthetic culture of a certain kind. One of the existentials of our existence is the ‘aesthetic existential’. In a Heideggerian manner we could also investigate the nature of our aesthetic culture through a study of our ‘aesthetic existential’; and *vice versa* by exploring the aesthetic culture we throw light on ourselves as entities existing in this culture.⁸

I have been talking about ‘aesthetic culture’. I understand the word ‘culture’ as synonymous with the word ‘world’, so, we can use the expression, ‘aesthetic world’. This raises further Heideggerian points. Heidegger writes about the world and its relation to entities within it as follows:

The world itself is not an entity within-the-world; and yet it is so determinative for such entities that only in so far as ‘there is’ a world can they be encountered and show themselves, in their Being, as entities which have been discovered. But in what way ‘is there’ a world? If *Dasein* is ontically constituted by Being-in-the-World, and if an understanding of the Being of its Self belongs just as essentially to its Being ... then does not *Dasein* have an understanding of the world – a pre-ontological understanding, which indeed can and does get along without explicit ontological insights? With those entities which are

⁷ In *Being and Time* Heidegger defines ‘thrownness’: »This characteristic of *Dasein*’s Being – this ‘that it is’ – is veiled in its ‘whence’ and ‘whither’, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the ‘*thrownness*’ of this entity into its ‘there’; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the ‘there’.« (174)

⁸ This reciprocity has important consequences for many traditional problems in aesthetics, for example interpretation; see Arto Haapala, »Interpretation, Context, and the Ethics of Interpretation – An Essay in Existential Aesthetics«, in *Interpretation and Its Boundaries* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999), edited by Arto Haapala and Ossi Naukkarinen, 162-176.

encountered within-the-world – that is to say, with their character as within-the-world – does not something like the world show itself for the concerned Being-in-the-world?⁹

Humans as entities existing in the world are constituted by being-in-the-aesthetic-world. And in so far as we have been acquainted with the aesthetic world, we have also developed a pre-ontological understanding of its structures. As we are dealing with or taking care of the entities existing in the aesthetic world – works of art, buildings, design objects, natural objects and landscapes – we are at the same time necessarily taking care of the aesthetic world, although the world itself is not an object or event in the same sense as entities within-the-world. The aesthetic world is indeed the precondition of any aesthetic object and event, but at the same time the world would not exist without its objects. The world makes individual things possible, and it can exist and manifest itself only through these entities. This is also true for the strand of human existence I have called the ‘aesthetic existential’: there is a mutual dependence between this aspect of human being and the aesthetic world.

I have so far deliberately avoided the expression ‘art world’, and used instead the broader expression ‘aesthetic world’. Worlds of art – music, visual arts, literature, film, theatre, etc. – are paradigmatic examples of the aesthetic world. Many of our aesthetic practises have been established in one art form or another, and the practices vary depending on the era and the art form. Visual arts in the Middle Ages were very different compared to now. The observations I have made of the aesthetic world apply to the art world as well. But I would like to broaden the scope because my concerns in this essay are mainly about non-artistic objects. However, I do not deny the significance and influence of art on our aesthetic culture as a whole.

III

I have now established the foundation of our aesthetic culture, and shown some of the complicated relations there are between the aesthetic world, aesthetic objects and human existence. Let me now turn to the concept of place. The concept has become common and popular in recent analysis of the human environment. It is worth noting that Heidegger’s writings on ‘dwelling’ have inspired numerous writers.¹⁰ Rather than going into a

⁹ Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 102.

¹⁰ See Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 17-18, 37-41; Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place – Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-*

discussion of the concept of place, let me simply stipulate a meaning for the term. This will allow me to clarify its relationship to the aesthetic world and our experience of aesthetic objects. This will in turn provide a path to considering how aesthetic and ethics coincide in this context.

When writing this essay at my office I have a place. I occupy a place in the straight forward physical sense: I am sitting in my chair, which is in my office, which is in a building, etc. But I am not interested in the Cartesian sense – as Heidegger calls it – of an object and its place in the world.¹¹ I do not want to define place in terms of a fixed space so that a certain space or spaces would be necessary for my place. I have a place in the more sophisticated sense of the word. I have a place in the sense that I have a relationship to humans, to different things and events around me. My place is meaningful and significant for me because I have construed different kinds of relations to entities surrounding me. I have familiarised myself with the immediate surroundings of my office. Most of the things inside the office are ‘ready-to-hand’ – they are there for me so that I can use them. The computer, telephone and all the books and papers are familiar to me, within my reach, and I see them as entities which exist for my purposes.¹² But also the view from the window, the corridor behind my office door, the different routes I take to the office, the lecture halls in which I teach, these also constitute my place. I create a place for myself within the structures of a cultural world by connecting different sorts of ties to different sorts of entities. My place has more or less permanent features to which I return almost every day, like my home and my office.

In the existential sense that I want to define it, place is, thus, the former-significant-and-meaningful-collection-of-entities. I am using the word ‘entity’ broadly to cover not only physical things, but also all kinds of cultural objects and events, such as different organisations and institutions, cultural practices and conventions, but also other human beings who are defined by their relations to entities which are significant and meaningful to them. World is the historically structured foundation that gives us entities with meaning and value; place is a selection of different culturally meaningful entities that are significant for particular individuals because of their actions, interests, or anything that has an influence on their evaluations and decisions.

World (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 109-145. I have analysed the concept of place in more detail in my ‘On the Aesthetics of the Everyday – Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place’, forthcoming in *Philosophy and Geography*, Vol. IV: *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, 1999.

IV

Now we have a view to the basic ontological structure of the world and humans within it in terms of aesthetic world and place. Where does the relationship between aesthetics and ethics come in? The idea of aesthetic culture already raises the basic issues in aesthetics, such as aesthetic value. Let me look at the status of aesthetic values within the aesthetic world and proceed in this way to the more general problems of values and evaluation.

Our aesthetic culture is deeply marked by values; the structures defining our aesthetic existential and from which all aesthetic objects are born are value-laden. The role of values is manifested very clearly in pieces that are regarded as classics – a classic is by definition valuable in some respect. In the arts in particular, classics are defined within a period or style. J.S. Bach's pieces are classics within the corpus of baroque music; Tolstoy's novels are classics within the canon of Russian literature. The criteria of goodness in Bach's music and in Tolstoy's novels differ understandably to a great extent already because music and literature appeal to different aspects of our existence, music more often to our emotions, literature to our cognitive faculties. To be a real classic, the piece must go beyond its original context; Bach is clearly not limited to the Baroque, but to the whole tradition of Western music. As Gadamer puts it:

...when we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all circumstances of time – a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.¹³

I shall, however, concentrate here on the more personal side of our aesthetic evaluations. Joseph Margolis has made a distinction between 'appreciative judgments' and 'findings'. When talking about 'findings' there is a widely accepted set of norms to which one refers in justifying a claim, whereas in appreciative judgments personal preferences, or 'taste' as he calls it, have a role to play. He writes:

... findings obtain where some set of the actual properties of an object are, on a theory, taken to be sufficient for the ascription of a certain value; the informality with which such properties may be specified does not affect the logical status of findings. But appreciative judgments obtain where, precisely, the actual (the minimally describable) properties of an object are 'filtered' through the personal tastes and

¹¹Heidegger, *ibid.*, 122-134.

¹²This is Heidegger's 'Umsicht', *Sein und Zeit*, 69; in English translation, 'circumspection', *Being and Time*, 98.

¹³Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 288.

sensibilities of the agent of judging; there, no set of the actual properties of an object are sufficient to justify the ascription of the relevant value. Hence, on an appropriate theory, we say that an object *has* a certain value (findings) or one is justified only in *ascribing* a certain value to that object (appreciative judgments).¹⁴

I am interested in appreciative judgments rather than findings. A finding is a judgment about a constitutive feature within the aesthetic world – like »Bach’s ‘Matthew Passion’ has great artistic (or aesthetic) merit« – an appreciative judgment says more about the speaker – »Finnish landscapes in the winter are very calming and beautiful«. But both findings and appreciative judgments play a role in aesthetics; in Margolis’s view »appreciative matters dominate ... in the aesthetic domain«. ¹⁵

What is it that makes some aesthetic objects more significant for us than others? Why is it that certain works speak to us more than others? There are cases in which we acknowledge the value of a piece, it may even be a classic, and still we cannot enjoy it. This does not have to be a case of ‘aesthetic acrasia’, i.e. that we cannot enjoy the aesthetic value of a piece because of some kind of personal defect in us. I want to look at cases where we are able to create a particularly deep relation to an aesthetic object. These kinds of bonds are, I think, often based in particular characteristics of our place.

I can develop a taste for certain kinds of art by systematically studying a particular style and getting more and more familiar with the features that constitute it. Or I may develop a taste unknowingly, for example when living in a particular environment, be it rural or urban, and I may start to appreciate that particular environment or that kind of milieu more generally. I might begin to feel attached to particular kinds of aesthetic objects. Because of my place and the ‘horizon’ that is created by it, I have an affinity with certain kinds of aesthetic objects. Some of these affinities are based on very fundamental human existentials: to be a man or to be a woman clearly shapes different kinds of affinities. These primary divisions are, however, made more complicated by numerous other factors that define human existence – all the cultural aspects that are essential for the human way of being, as well as the personal aspects of individuals living and acting in a culture.

Place is, indeed, the horizon that determines our perceptions and preferences. Gadamer defines ‘horizon’ in this way:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of ‘situation’ by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence the essential concept of situation is the

¹⁴ Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1989), 223-224.

¹⁵ Margolis, *ibid.*, 224.

concept of 'horizon'. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of the narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening of new horizons, and so forth.¹⁶

Our places and horizons are by no means fixed, on the contrary, the existential and historicist conception of human existence I have developed is very explicit about the possibility of change. But it is also an existential fact that the range of choices diminishes in the course of time – my existence is by now much more determined than twenty years ago. It is this construal of one's existence that limits our choices and decides our preferences.

The connection between a place and aesthetics is, however, more complicated than that. There is a tendency to feel affinity to something familiar that is part of one's own existence, but one of the striving forces behind different developments in Western art is the search for something new. In the visual arts this tendency has been very clear, and it reveals the other side to aesthetics – the values innovativeness and strangeness. In the contemporary arts, the uncanny and the shocking have played a significant role. By contrast, in everyday surroundings strangeness has had a significantly minor role, not only in the aesthetics of natural environments but also in urban settings. Although one can point out singular examples of striking buildings and built areas, as well as spectacular natural scenes, it is still true to say, that generally speaking strangeness does not have such importance in environmental aesthetics.

In the 'aesthetics of place' I am putting emphasis on those aspects of aesthetics where familiarity rather than strangeness dominate. My place is dear to me because it is part of my existence. All features of one's place do not have to be beautiful in any strong or definite sense of the word, but there is a tendency to value them positively. The relation between a person and entities constituting his or her place is an affectionate one; when we are in constant contact with our surroundings and have created our very own personal ties to it, it becomes something to which we cannot have an indifferent attitude. Our place is too close to us for us to have any distance from it.

As I have tried to show above, this closeness is ontological in nature: is not something independent from us but precisely the personal in our existence. This means that there can be tensions and contradictions between a person's aesthetic preferences and more generally accepted aesthetic standards. A suburban area can be very dear to somebody who has lived

¹⁶Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 302.

there during his or her childhood even though an outsider would estimate its aesthetic value to be very low. We gain satisfaction through a kind of comforting security: the aesthetic pleasure of place is based on the fact that we know it so well; it is something we can trust; it is not threatening; it does not question our preferences, values or indeed, existence.

Even the ugly aspects of one's place – ugly again by some culturally defined standards – gain some aesthetic value. They may contribute to the stability and comfort that is essential in place. An old pair of shoes may be repulsive to someone who does not know their history and has not used them. For the owner, they are both familiar and comfortable, and it is in this that their aesthetic value lies. This does not mean, however, that we prefer no changes to our surroundings. We may well be willing to allow even major modifications if the surroundings are aesthetically, socially, or in some other respects defective. The point I am making is that being part of a place imbues every entity with value for a person.

This value can be understood also in ethical terms: my place defines my way of existing and any change in the place has some consequences for my existence. Let me take an extreme example to illustrate these moral implications. It is morally wrong to move people from an area without a compelling reason. A compelling reason could be, for example, that there is something poisonous in the area that constitutes a health hazard to people living there. There could be other compelling reasons, but for my argument it is not necessary to define as what constitutes a compelling reason.

It is clear that there are reasons which are not compelling from the point of view of those living there. To force people to move because of their race or age, is, generally speaking, morally wrong, although there might be singular cases and contexts in which even such actions could be justified. With recent shocking cases of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, it becomes obvious that the arguments used by all parties of the conflict are of the form that a particular area is an essential part of a nation's identity. The reference is to larger cultural structures that then serve as a ground for the constitution of individual places, and in this way are also parts of places. So there is a very deep existential and moral dimension in the concept of place.

V

The existential, the moral, and the aesthetic aspects are intertwined together in complicated ways. My judgments about my place are not objective, but necessarily 'biased'. My place has aesthetic value simply

because I am existentially tied to it, and through this existential connection I am attached to it emotionally too. It has ethical value because it is at the heart of my existence and a changing of it would affect my existence. Entities in my place are, in a way, part of me, and so I tend to see them as beautiful and worth preserving. Once again I have to stress that this is a tendency, not a general rule. We can each point out things constituting our place that we would rather replace with something else. It might be a building style we do not like, or it might be something more abstract, like an institution or a custom that goes against our nature.

Let me finally draw some conclusions regarding judgments about the environment. If my existential analysis is on the right track, there seem to be two very different sorts of value judgments. When I am talking about my closest environment, about something that constitutes my place, my judgments are derived from my very own existential constituents, and accordingly they are very much about myself. They do not say much about the environment as such, but rather about a possible way of life. For a New Yorker the city of New York is the familiar surrounding which exemplifies numerous positive qualities: it is rich and exciting, maybe sometimes even cosy and homely. For an outsider New York may appear as threatening and hostile. These judgments stem from very different grounds, different ways of life constituting different horizons. They are both genuine and in their own contexts acceptable verdicts. But because of their incompatible points of departure, they cannot be placed on the same scale. They address different places. This is Margolis's appreciative judgment: taking pleasure from matching one's way of life with the surroundings or displeasure from the lack of such matching.

But our value judgments about the environment are not always subjective in this sense. There are culturally accepted values the validity of which is not dependent on any individual preferences. Classics are paradigmatic examples of this, and there are classics in all fields of culture. Also, many natural scenes have gained the status of a classic, for example Niagara Falls or the Rocky Mountains. Classics exemplify certain values and they maintain these values. Value judgments in this sense are in a cultural sphere. Cultural entities exist within a culture, and this goes for cultural values too. Someone may not like Bach's music, but this does not deny its cultural value. To do the latter would only show ignorance of our music culture.

Both cultural values and our personal preferences, both world and place, are rooted in our existence. They determine what we are and how we view things around. This also means that goodness and beauty go hand in hand: the way I am in the world is both an ethical and aesthetic issue.

The determining grounds and character of my place are of utmost importance for me in every sense of the word because these are matters that constitute what, as a human being, I finally am. Place is not an imperative, it is rather an exemplification of certain choices and decisions that a particular human being has made, and that further constitute this particular individual as a human being. These are the origins of human existence as a cultural entity and as an individual with distinctive features distinguishing him or her from other humans.