

C. Barber, *Musings 2009*

PART III

Aesthetics-R-Us

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*¹ is a particularly rich and easily accessible text for those whose education was lacking in exposure to philosophy in any form (aka every American public school student). I was the product of an excellent K-12 system, but philosophy didn't arrive on my transcript until college. Indeed, I find it interesting to note that the *NASM Handbook* refers to the study of aesthetics as merely recommended, rather than required, as in:

“Additional studies are recommended in such areas as...aesthetics.” (Doctor of Music Education, Doctor of Musicology, Doctor of Pedagogy)

“Study in such areas as...aesthetics is strongly recommended.” (Bachelor of Music in Music Theory)

“Explore areas of individual interest related to music in general or to the major. Examples are...aesthetics.” (All bachelors degree programs, including music education)

Webster's New Universal Dictionary defines aesthetics as “the branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc., as applicable to the fine arts, with a view to establishing the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, and the principles underlying or justifying such judgments.” How in the world can anyone think that the study of the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art is optional to a music major, let alone a music teacher? They can if enjoyable = good = art. If you discredit the notion of valid critical judgment in relation to art, as we have, then aesthetics becomes merely a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore.

In his article regarding aesthetic judgment, Nick Zangwill neatly blocks the lumbering oaf that has stood in the way of meaningful arts education since Tolstoy's time. Notice that his weapon of choice is *logic*.

Before we move on, it may be worth saying something about “relativism”, according to which no judgments of taste are really better than others. It is common for people to say, “There is no right and wrong about matters of taste.” Or people will express the same thought by saying that beauty is “relative” to individual judgment, or even that it is “socially relative.” Such relativism about value of all sorts is part of the *Zeitgeist* of a certain recent Western cultural tradition. It is part of the intellectual air, in certain quarters. And in particular, many intellectuals have expressed a dislike of the idea that judgments of taste really have any normative claim, as if that would be uncouth or

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

oppressive. However, if we are describing our thought as it is, not how some think it ought to be, then it is important that philosophers should be persistent and insist — in the face of this *Zeitgeist* — that normativity is a necessary condition of the judgment of taste. Two points ought to embarrass the relativist. Firstly, people who say this kind of thing are *merely theorizing*. In the case of judgments of beauty, relativist theory is wildly out of step with common practice. As with moral relativism, one can virtually always catch the professed relativist about judgments of beauty making and acting on non-relative judgments of beauty — for example, in their judgments about music, nature and everyday household objects. Relativists do not practice what they preach. Secondly, one thing that *drives* people to this implausible relativism, which is so out of line with their practice, is a perceived connection with tolerance or anti-authoritarianism. This is what they see as attractive in it. But this is upside-down. For if ‘it’s all relative’ and no judgment is better than any other, then relativists put *their* judgments wholly beyond criticism, and they cannot err. Only those who think that there is a right and wrong in judgment can modestly admit that they might be wrong. What looks like an ideology of tolerance is, in fact, the very opposite. Thus relativism is hypocritical and it is intolerant. The time has come when this *Zeitgeist* should give up the ghost. Move over *geist*, your *zeit* is up!²

Leave it to a philosopher to combine deft logic and dense abstraction with the comic stylings of Niles Crane. Nevertheless, he has cleared the board of the debris that has effectively prevented significant forward progress in arts education.

Apropos to the debilitation of arts education is the confusion of artistry with mere creativity. Zangwill describes Kant’s account of the nature of pleasure in beauty as “the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding.” This beautiful turn of phrase distills the definition of artistry to two essential components linked through improvisation (free play). Without understanding, imagination (creativity) is not artistry. Logically, the converse is also true: without imagination, understanding is not artistry. In an effort to blend in with the more assessment friendly core subjects, music education in the U.S. tends to be oriented entirely toward understanding (appreciation/recognition of objective features in consumption, and the measurable aspects of technique in performance) with a complete lack of imagination and barely a hint of the linking element of improvisation/free play.

To return balance to the music curriculum, we must domesticate the beast of artistic judgment that we’ve kept at the entrance to the music education landfill all these years. He’s not something we want the kids to play with, but he keeps the general public from looking too closely at what’s behind the fence. Our dog whisperer will be Nick Zangwill, aided by the granddaddy of all modern philosophers Immanuel Kant. It is Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that serves as the basis for Zangwill’s thesis.

According to Zangwill, Kant isolated two fundamental necessary conditions for a judgment to be a judgment of taste — subjectivity and universality. Before you get excited about the subjective condition and declare anarchy, in philosophical terms a subject is a being which has a relationship with another entity – an object. The subjective condition simply means that there

² Zangwill, Nick, "Aesthetic Judgment", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>>.

must be an observer, and that observer will respond to the object. It neither refers to nor relies on the quality of the observer's opinions about the object. In Zangwill's article, "what this means is that the judgment of taste is based on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. It is this that distinguishes a judgment of taste from an empirical judgment." Universality refers to normativity, and this gets a little tricky. To Zangwill,

Kant's idea is that in a judgment of taste, we demand or require agreement from others in a way we do not in our judgments...of individual preference. In matters of taste and beauty, we think that others ought to share our judgment. That's why we blame them if they don't. It is because the judgment of taste has such an aspiration to universal validity that it seems "as if [beauty] were a property of things." [...]

The most primitive expression of this normativity is this: some are correct, others incorrect. Or perhaps, even more cautiously: some judgments are better than others. We do not think that something is beautiful merely to me, in the way that we might say that some things just happen to give me sensuous pleasure. Of course, we might well say "I think X is beautiful," because we wish to express uncertainty; but where we judge confidently, we think of our judgment as being correct. And that means that we think that the opposite judgment would be incorrect. We assume that not all judgments of beauty are equally appropriate. "Each to their own taste" only applies to judgments of niceness and nastiness, which Kant calls "judgments of agreeableness"

You read it here, folks: correct and incorrect in the same sentence as judgment. In the 21st century that's as exotic as something P.T. Barnum would have put on display, the Chang and Eng of modern discourse. To help us cope, Zangwill invokes the master. "Kant thinks that although we sometimes speak as if our judgments of the agreeable are universally valid ("Lamb tastes better with garlic"), in fact they are not: judgments of the agreeable appeal only to most but not to all men." We're back to the peanut butter sandwich and the legume allergy.

Rest assured that both Zangwill and Kant recognized the chary glances passing between these uncommonly united terms. Zangwill steps in to moderate:

We can sum things up like this: judgments of taste occupy a mid-point between judgments of niceness and nastiness, and empirical judgments about the external world. Judgments of taste are like empirical judgments in that they have universal validity; but, they are unlike empirical judgment in that they are made on the basis of an inner response. Conversely, judgments of taste are like judgments of niceness or nastiness in that they are made on the basis of an inner subjective response or experience; but they are unlike judgments of niceness and nastiness, which makes no claim to universal validity. To cut the distinctions the other way: in respect of normativity, judgments of taste are like empirical judgments and unlike judgments of niceness or nastiness; but in respect of subjectivity, judgments of taste are unlike empirical judgments and like judgments of niceness or nastiness. So we have three-fold division: empirical judgments, judgments of taste, and judgments of niceness or nastiness.

This brings us to what Zangwill calls "The Big Question in aesthetics,"

On the face of it, the two characteristics are in tension with each other. Our puzzle is this: what must be the nature of pleasure in beauty if the judgments we base on it can make claim to correctness?

Let's all go to the lobby

This is a good place to take a breather, refresh the mug of coffee, maybe watch an episode of *Big Brother* to give your brain a rest.

With all your mental spark plugs firing again, we'll see if we can find the answer to Zangwill's big question. He begins the quest by tossing in some additional elements. Truth, mind-independence, nonaesthetic dependence, and laws are added to subjectivity and normativity as ingredients of aesthetic judgment.

We've bumped up against truth in earlier chapters; remember the Grecian urn? Philosophers have spent millennia arguing about truth, so if you're a fan there is plenty for you to read. For aesthetic purposes, Zangwill offers this:

If we deploy the notion of truth, we can express the normative idea by saying if a judgment is true then its opposite is false. Or we can say that the law of non-contradiction applies to aesthetic judgments: there are some aesthetic judgments such that they and their negations cannot both be true. [...]

Such a normative conception of truth is stronger than a notion of truth which is merely a device for 'semantic assent'; that is, normative truth is more than thin 'disquotational' truth.... We can say "'Canary-wine is nice' is true if and only if Canary-wine is nice" without raising the metaphysical temperature. However, judgments about the niceness of Canary-wine do not aspire to a normative conception of truth. There are no right and wrong answers to the question of whether Canary-wine really is nice. And so of neither the judgment that it is nice nor the judgment that it is not nice can it be said that if it is true then its opposite is false. But this is what we do say of some aesthetic judgments.

The end of that will make your head explode, but the basic idea is this: when it comes to agreeableness, something can be both nice and nasty at the same time. I think cilantro is nasty even as you ask for more. But when it comes to aesthetic judgment, something cannot be simultaneously beautiful and ugly because of the concept of universality. This will make more sense as we progress to the next element.

Mind-independence is best expressed as a negative thesis: whether something is beautiful does not depend on my judgment. Thinking it so doesn't make it so. This can be re-expressed in counterfactual terms: it is not the case that if I think something is beautiful then it is beautiful. This is common sense. For example, we tend to think that our judgments have improved since we were younger. We think that some of our past judgments were in error. So thinking it so, at that time, didn't make it so.

That is to say, although beauty only exists in the eye of the beholder, it is not the beholder who determines what is beautiful.

No doubt you're starting to see why most folks avoid philosophical inquiry. It's a workout. But artists can't afford to abandon ship and musicians have to stay on deck if they're going to fulfill their responsibility to society. Someone has to understand this or no one will, and then Miley Cyrus really will beat Igor Stravinsky in *Celebrity Deathmatch*.

Moving on to nonaesthetic dependence:

This claim is enormously intuitive, but let us try to say something more in support of it. It seems to be a deep fact about beauty and other aesthetic properties that they are inherently 'sociable'; beauty cannot be lonely. Something cannot be barely beautiful; if something is beautiful then it must be in virtue of its nonaesthetic properties. Furthermore, realizing this is a constraint on our judgments of beauty and other aesthetic properties. We cannot just judge that something is beautiful; we must judge that it is beautiful in virtue of its nonaesthetic properties. In fact, we pretty much always do so, and not to do so would be bizarre. Of course, we might not have in mind every single nonaesthetic property of the thing, nor exactly how the nonaesthetic properties produced their aesthetic effect. But we think that certain nonaesthetic properties are *responsible* for the aesthetic properties and that without those nonaesthetic properties, the aesthetic properties would not have been instantiated. Beauty does not float free, and recognizing this is constitutive of aesthetic thought. Our aesthetic thought, therefore, is fundamentally different from our thought about colors, with which they are too often compared. Perhaps colors are tied in some intimate way to intrinsic or extrinsic physical properties of the surfaces of things, such as reflectance properties. But color thought does not presuppose this. One might think that colors are bare properties of things. But one cannot think that beauty is bare; it is essential to aesthetic thought to realize that the aesthetic properties of a thing arise from its nonaesthetic properties.

Got it? If you were to say "Look at the red apple," you'd be identifying a nonaesthetic property of the apple (its color, which is empirically provable). You can then think of the color red independently of the apple – to use Zangwill's terms, color is a free-floating quality. You can think of red without thinking of any specific object, and you can transfer redness to other objects. If you were to say "Look at the delicious red apple," you'd be making a judgment of agreeableness. You may enjoy the taste of red apples, whereas someone else may find them entirely unpalatable. Deliciousness is an example of an aesthetic property that is dependent upon a nonaesthetic property. If the apple were not red, it would not be delicious (it would be unripe, or rotten). Redness is at least partly responsible for the taste of the apple, whether you like that taste or not.

Finally, if you were to say "Look at the beautiful red apple," you'd be making an aesthetic judgment. Its beauty depends on a host of nonaesthetic properties – its shape, its size, its color, its texture – all of which are empirically provable. However, it's not beautiful simply because it is red (or round, or smooth...). If that were true, then all red things would be beautiful. Odds are you could not describe precisely why the apple is beautiful. If you could, you could then accurately recreate or transfer it. You could use the formula to "beautify" other things. But beauty isn't transferable; it is intrinsic. You can't think of beauty without thinking of something that is beautiful.

If a tree falls and no one is there to hear it, it still produces sound waves through vibration. Unlike sound waves that exist without the presence of ears, beauty doesn't exist without perception. Beauty is a condition, not a fact. In order to perceive it, it must have nonaesthetic properties. Sound waves are a fact, whether we perceive them or not – whether they are beautiful or not.

The last element, laws, is knotty because it takes us into the territory of correctness. The relativist position debunked earlier is seductive largely because nobody has been able to codify what makes an object beautiful. There are rules of proportion, balance, perspective, etc. that artists study, but obeying those rules does not necessarily result in beauty. In fact, some of the most beautiful works of art (e.g. Michelangelo's *David*) are strikingly disproportionate. Seriously – just look at the size of his head and hands. As usual, Zangwill weighs in on the anomaly of the existence of aesthetic truths without the existence of aesthetic laws to govern them.

The problem of the source of correctness in aesthetic thought is independent of the question of whether there are laws, rules or principles of taste. There is no reason to think that the possibility of correct or true judgments depends on the existence of laws, rules or principles from which we can deduce our correct or true judgments. [...]

Nevertheless the anomalousness of aesthetics is worth thinking about in its own right. Many aestheticians agree that the aesthetic is anomalous in the above sense. But they are not agreed on the *explanation* of anomalousness.

A notable exception is Monroe Beardsley, who claims — heroically and extraordinarily — that there are exactly three aesthetic principles: things are aesthetically excellent either by being unified or intense or complex. However, Beardsley's trinitarian position faces a difficulty similar to that faced by moral philosophers who appeal to 'thick' concepts. If Beardsley insists on a law-like connection between his three thick substantive aesthetic properties (unity, intensity and complexity) and aesthetic value, he can only do so at the cost of conceding anomalousness between the three thick substantive aesthetic properties and nonaesthetic properties. There are three layers: and one can only hold onto laws between the top and middle layers only by losing laws between the middle and bottom layers. Maybe intensity is always aesthetically good; but there are no laws about what makes things intense.

Before we throw up our hands and declare that a lack of objective criteria prevents valid judgment, remember that we're dealing with multiple properties in any single object.

Even though aesthetic properties are anomalous, they depend and supervene on nonaesthetic properties. Many find such a combination of relations uncomfortable outside aesthetics, such as in moral philosophy and the philosophy of mind. Yet there seem to be good reasons to embrace both principles in aesthetics. Both are firmly rooted in ordinary aesthetic thought.

Ordinary aesthetic thought – what a comforting notion. Sprinkle in a little logic and the formerly obtuse prose gets downright readable.

Aesthetic judgments have certain essential features, and corresponding to those features are certain principles. We can group correctness, mind-independence, and nonaesthetic dependence together. However, it does no harm to focus on the feature of correctness or universal validity. For this is the most basic of the features. If aesthetic judgments did not claim correctness or universal validity, they could not claim the other features.

Congratulations! You've made it through the toughest part and are headed into the home stretch. One more Red Bull should do it.

Beauty and the Beast

Now Zangwill has to bridge the gap between the 18th century and the 21st. It's not as wide a breach as one might at first anticipate. Philosophy is like chess; the pieces remain the same even as generations of players deploy them according to different strategies. Kant is as much a grand master today as he was in 1790, but challengers have helped the game evolve.

According to Zangwill, the contemporary notion of an aesthetic judgment includes:

- judgments of beauty and ugliness as paradigms, and
- a class of judgments involving daintiness, dumpiness, delicacy and elegance.

Meanwhile, the modern notion excludes:

- judgments about physical properties, such as shape and size,
- judgments about sensory properties, such as colors and sounds,
- judgments of the agreeable, and
- judgments about pictorial and semantic content.

Zangwill offers the following example and caveat: "although the judgment that a painting represents a flower might be 'relevant' to an aesthetic judgment about it, it is not itself an aesthetic judgment.... Incidentally, it may be worth mentioning that the notion of an aesthetic judgment should obviously not be elucidated in terms of the idea of a work of art: we make aesthetic judgments about nature and we make nonaesthetic judgments about works of art."

Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment included both judgments of beauty (which he called, confusingly, "judgments of taste") *and* judgments of the agreeable (which in modern terms are called, confusingly, "judgments of taste"). It's a wonder more philosophers aren't raging alcoholics. Nevertheless, it simply means that there are two kinds of aesthetic judgment and they are interdependent. Zangwill tries to sort this out.

Let us call judgments of taste, or judgments of beauty and ugliness, "verdictive aesthetic judgments," and let us call the other aesthetic judgments (of daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, delicacy etc) "substantive aesthetic judgments." The idea is that these substantive judgments are aesthetic in virtue of a special close relation to verdictive judgments of taste, which are subjectively universal. (We can assume that judgments of beauty and ugliness coincide with judgments of aesthetic merit and demerit. However,

even if beauty were taken to be a substantive aesthetic notion, like elegance, delicacy or daintiness, there would remain some other overarching notion of aesthetic merit or excellence, and we could take that notion as central.)

On this approach — which is unashamedly traditional — judgments of daintiness, dumpiness, delicacy and elegance stand in a special and intimate relation to judgments of beauty and ugliness (or aesthetic merit and demerit), and it is only in virtue of this intimate relation that we can think of all these judgments as belonging to the same category.

Finally, we get down to the nitty gritty.

Consider an abstract pattern of curving lines, which is elegant. It might be *necessary* that that pattern is beautiful. This is because the beauty *depends on* or *is determined by* that specific pattern. But it is not part of what it is to *be* that pattern that it is beautiful. That is, the pattern is necessarily beautiful but it is not essentially beautiful. Furthermore, we can think of that pattern without thinking of it as beautiful.

By contrast, it is *both necessary and essential* that something that is elegant is beautiful. And this is reflected in our concepts and judgments. We can think of the pattern without thereby thinking of it as beautiful, but to think of the pattern as elegant is to think of it as beautiful, at least in certain respects. Hence elegance is an aesthetic concept.

Are representational properties aesthetic properties? Suppose that a painting represents a tree and is a beautiful representation of a tree. It is not merely beautiful *and* a tree representation but beautiful *as* a tree representation (Zangwill 1999). Of course, that the painting represents a tree is “relevant” to whether it is beautiful because it is part of what determines its beauty. But being beautiful is not part of what it is to be a representation of a tree. Moreover, to think that the painting represents a tree is not thereby to think that it is beautiful. Being beautiful is not an essential property of the representation, and thinking of the representation does not mean thinking of it as beautiful, even though it is may be necessary that it is beautiful. Hence representational properties are not aesthetic properties.

The hierarchical proposal thus seems to characterize a non-arbitrary and useful notion of the aesthetic. The contemporary notion can be vindicated.

Hooray for us! Bring it home, Dr. Zangwill –

Substantive aesthetic judgments have attracted much attention in the latter half of the twentieth century. But to some extent this may have been a mistake, since the role of such judgments is to serve verdictive aesthetic judgments of beauty and ugliness. Beauty and ugliness are the primary aesthetic notions, which give sense to the wider class that contemporary aestheticians include as “aesthetic”. We need a hierarchical rather than an egalitarian conception of aesthetic notions.

Let me emphasize that last line: we need a hierarchical rather than an egalitarian conception of aesthetic notions. (Sorry for the interruption).

The broad notion of the aesthetic can be fixed by what it is to judge that something is beautiful or ugly, or that it has aesthetic merit or demerit. Only by seeing beauty and ugliness as the pre-eminent aesthetic notions can we make sense of a unitary category of the aesthetic, which includes the dainty and the dumpy, and which excludes physical, sensory and representational properties of things, as well as their agreeableness. The hierarchical proposal allows us to make the aesthetic/nonaesthetic distinction in a useful way and answer Beardsley and Sibley's critics. Thus the notion of the aesthetic can be defended.³

In summary, aesthetic judgments are not all created equal. There is a hierarchy, and notions of what is agreeable are low on the totem pole because they are not universally valid – they can be both true and false simultaneously, as in: I think bunnies are nice and you don't. Liking bunnies is not an aesthetic judgment.

Busted

Let's apply our newly acquired assessment tools to a real-world scenario. Recently, I was assigned a score to analyze for the purpose of writing a chapter in an encyclopedia dedicated to band literature. A groundbreaking achievement, the set of texts is represented to the consumer in superlative terms. "This best-selling series of books and CDs has quickly become the indispensable resource for music educators searching for the best possible music at all levels." Allow me to repeat: *the best possible music*. First, we need to lay the foundation.

Step 1: What is music?

Fortunately we need delve no further into this Pandora's Box than to acknowledge that music is a form of art. Therefore, a piece of music is subject to the same principles of aesthetic judgment as any work of art. We've spent the last eight pages exploring that territory.

Step 2: What is best?

Here's where most folks wander off the path. Many music educators would suggest that "best" refers to music that is most appropriate in an educational setting. That is to say, music that includes the most teachable elements. In this case, "best" would be a practical rather than an aesthetic judgment. But music can't be both an art, and not an art. If it is an art, any judgment that links quality to practicality is specious. The best art is not necessarily the most useful. Taking Kant as our guidepost, the best art is that which most effectively demonstrates "the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding."

³ Just a quick reminder that all of Dr. Zangwill's material can be found online: Zangwill, Nick, "Aesthetic Judgment", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2007 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>>.

Step 3: What is possible?

Now that's the \$64,000 question! In music, the most efficient answer is a simple reminder that we live in a world where the masterworks of Beethoven, Mozart, and Stravinsky were possible. That sets the bar very high indeed.

Next, we set the assigned score on that foundation. It is a musical composition, therefore it is a work of art. As a work of art it is subject to aesthetic judgment, rather than practical judgment or judgment of agreeableness, to determine its status as better or worse. The best art is that which most effectively demonstrates "the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding" on a scale from zero to Mozart.

Through the process of analysis I discovered that the assigned score showed a considerable degree of skill. In their design and arrangement, the work's nonaesthetic properties (these would be the elements of music, including melody, harmony, rhythm, form, dynamics, articulations, etc.) proved that the composer had mastered the craft of composition. However, the piece lacked artistry. Using Kant's terms, there was great understanding but little imagination, and the free play was constricted by practical concerns, including the instrumentation of the premiering ensemble and what the performers could be expected to learn in three days.

Continuing along the path of aesthetic judgment, let's explore each of the five criteria as they relate to our scenario.

1. We have learned that the judgment of taste is based on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. It is this that distinguishes a judgment of taste from an empirical judgment (a judgment based on the observance of fact/phenomena). As the subject in this equation, my feeling upon hearing the piece included a mild sense of pleasure, tempered by displeasure resulting from the perception of cliché elements and a high instance of repetition.
2. The next criterion touches upon universality/normativity (as opposed to agreeableness). You will recall Dr. Zangwill's assertion that "some judgments are better than others. We do not think that something is beautiful merely to me, in the way that we might say that some things just happen to give me sensuous pleasure." Although I initially felt agreeable towards the piece, my feelings changed as I studied the interplay of elements in its structure. Summarizing criteria one and two, we have a work of art that is both pleasant and unpleasant, both agreeable and disagreeable. This is a sure sign of a lack of normativity.
3. Next comes truth. In Zangwill's terms, when we "deploy the notion of truth, we can express the normative idea by saying if a judgment is true then its opposite is false." Given these parameters, the only true statement I can make about the pieces is that it is a mature demonstration of compositional craft. Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but according to criterion four that doesn't matter.
4. We learned that "mind-independence is best expressed as a negative thesis: whether something is beautiful does not depend on my judgment. Thinking it so doesn't make it so." Here we get to the nub of any aesthetic judgment: beauty. All of my thoughts in the

first three criteria point toward “not beautiful.” But without number five we can’t ring the bell just yet.

5. Next we arrive at nonaesthetic dependence. “We cannot just judge that something is beautiful; we must judge that it is beautiful in virtue of its nonaesthetic properties.” The nonaesthetic aspects of the piece in question are as ordinary as the assignments in a workbook devoted to compositional minimalism might be. Objectively, the elements of the piece are frequently derivative and their arrangement is predictable. The piece is self-consciously programmatic, hence one might jump to the conclusion that if the programmatic depiction is successful, then the composition is to some degree beautiful. However, we know that “[b]eing beautiful is not an essential property of the representation, and thinking of the representation does not mean thinking of it as beautiful, even though it may be necessary that it is beautiful. Hence representational properties are not aesthetic properties.”

Following Zangwill’s logic, we can think of this composition as being “not beautiful” because of issues related directly to its nonaesthetic elements. And although some of its elements may be necessarily and essentially beautiful, the composition itself cannot be “almost beautiful,” or partially beautiful. Therefore the aesthetic judgment of the piece as a whole must be: “not beautiful,” which is to say, not the best possible music. Even if the publishers had laid claim to the “best music *available*,” the judgment of what is best must remain aesthetically grounded.

Artistry transcends both craft and enjoyment. So imagine my surprise when the committee’s criteria for selecting works to include in the encyclopedia were described to me.

Regarding the selection of the works for the series, we have a committee of colleagues who make recommendations then the final selection is approved by [the] coordinator. Next, the Board of Directors signs off.... I equate the selection of music process (on the “like-it” scale) with a fine dining experience; not everyone makes the selection on the menu similar to my own selection – thus the need for variety. So, it is possible that you and others may find themselves not liking a particular work or works and we fully understand those opinions.... Only the “merit of each work” is the selection criteria and the merit is based on the opinion of the committee and it is not in any way a popularity process.

If the goal is to select “the best possible music,” merit cannot be based on opinion. The quality of a work of art is not determined by its function, its meaning, or the opinion of those who encounter it. The merit of a work of art can only be discerned through aesthetic judgment. Who gets to judge? Those who are capable of applying established philosophical principles logically and consistently. Everybody else can flex their creative faculties by voting for the next *American Idol*.

Channing v. Tyson

There is an episode of *Family Guy* in which bets are placed on a boxing match that pits Carol Channing against Mike Tyson. In a comic twist typical of the show, Channing wins in three rounds by T.K.O. The sequence is hysterical because it is obviously absurd. The cartoonists

knew the joke would work because Americans understand competition in athletic terms. Sadly, we live in a world where I can use a comparable illustration of Miley Cyrus v. Igor Stravinsky confident that many Americans will find it plausible that Cyrus could win and perhaps should win because she has more fans and earns more money (yes, I know, but imagine that Stravinsky were still alive just for the sake of argument). Note that the judgment would be based on popularity, not the quality of their artworks.

Americans don't accept the notion that one artist can be judged better than another based solely on the art they create. Evidently it's too parochial a scale because they do accept that a baseball team can declare itself champion of the world even though no other nations compete in the tournament, and so far nobody has asked the Miss Universe Pageant to explain itself. It's a strange world we live in. To be fair, it's easy to spot a winner in sports because somebody keeps score. Similarly, *American Idol*-style competitions are based on popularity and ratings; art has nothing to do with it.

To be perfectly blunt, Americans don't know how to make aesthetic judgments so they resort to what they do know: how to count, and how to spot things they enjoy. Counting is taught in elementary school and the concept of score keeping is reinforced throughout life. In addition to 24-hour a day sports coverage, we have credit scores, stock market indexes, and lists of the most affluent citizens and corporations. The habit of ranking things numerically is a thread in our social fabric. Conversely, seeking things we enjoy comes naturally – no education is necessary. Even tiny babies have preferences for certain binkies, or mashed bananas instead of strained peas.

In light of these facts, one wonders why arts educators have chosen to base their curricula on measurable elements of performance (things that can be ranked objectively), and preference (appreciation, or an attempt to broaden the spectrum of things we enjoy) in lieu of the only thing the arts offer that can't be found anywhere else: the chance to make sense of the world in aesthetic terms. As I stated earlier, this ability is not core or basic in the sense that mathematics, science, and reading are. The core subjects grow from the seed of aesthetic understanding.

To illustrate, Google the terms “elegant” and “physics” and note the number of hits. Try it with “math.” Now try “beautiful” and either of those terms. The very best solutions, including the most forward-looking, groundbreaking, innovative work in science and math, are categorized in purely aesthetic terms. That is to say, the best that these core subjects have to offer cannot be adequately judged without recourse to aesthetics. In 2003, NOVA produced a DVD with the title *The Elegant Universe and Beyond*. I can't help but notice that they chose “elegant” – a quintessentially aesthetic term – in favor of any term of agreeableness (*Our Swell Universe*), or preference (*The Universe: What's not to like?*), or measurement (*The Big Vacuum and You*).

"It would be possible to describe everything scientifically, but it would make no sense; it would be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure." -- Albert Einstein

There it is. Without aesthetic understanding, science makes no sense. Without aesthetic judgment, or the ability to discern better from worse, science cannot progress because even Einstein didn't nail the correct answers the first time; he had to guess and rely on aesthetic

judgment to find a path to his goal. "If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?" (another of Einstein's *bons mots*).

Fun with Dick and Jane

Before anybody gets antsy about trying to teach first graders to read using tracts by Kant, Hume, Beardsley, et al. ("See Kant make an aesthetic judgment. Judge, Kant, judge.") we need to recognize that aesthetic judgment is at the opposite end of an educational arc that begins with the manipulation of nonaesthetic objects and a basic grounding in aesthetic concepts. It begins where arts education already is. All that is needed is a recalculation of trajectory to target artistry rather than appreciation and/or technique. The latter have their merits, but they must not sit in the center of the bull's eye. The exercise of artistry – "the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding" – relies on perpetual aesthetic judgment. Even a kindergarten class of macaroni artists engages in a rudimentary form of aesthetic judgment, as do Mom and Dad when they determine whether the result is worthy of display on the refrigerator. Not every noodle montage is a winner.

But if every picture is magnetized to the appliances, if every art student gets an A simply for participation, and the teacher instructs the class that every picture is good merely because it is unique, we're in trouble. If every band member gets an A for showing up and knowing the fingering for B-flat we're doomed. Skills are important, vocabulary and facts are important, but the ability to make sense of it all is critical.

"In order to improve the mind, we ought less to learn, than to contemplate." -- Rene Descartes

The arts really are basic (in every sense) precisely because there are no laws that govern aesthetic judgment. If there were a formula, every composer would be Mozart and every physicist would be Einstein. There aren't rules, but there is a distinction between better and worse. The goal of arts education must be to install in every student the capacity to tell the difference. Whether they like what is better is as irrelevant as whether they choose to devote their lives to the support of it through participation or consumption.