16: Aesthetic Experience

THOUGH some members of each opposing party would im- pugn so balanced a judgment, it is in my opinion still an open question whether it is possible—or, if possible, worthwhile—to distinguish a peculiarly aesthetic sort of experience. The question of possibility involves the debatability of the claim that there is a common character that is (1) discernible in a wide range of our encounters with the world and (2) justifiably called "aesthetic." The question of worthwhileness involves the debatability of the further claim that, once distinguished, this character is sufficiently substantial and noteworthy to serve as the ground for important theoretical constructions such as we shall come to in subsequent essays.

Before we begin our own search for this character, or inquire whether it has already been found, we ought to consider carefully what it is we are searching for, and how we shall know that we have found it. Our hope is to end up justified in saying that some experiences are marked by aesthetic character and some are not; and of those that have it, that some have it more markedly than others. Experiences with such character need not be universally associated with objects that belong to familiar artistic categories. (It is convenient to have the term "artkind instance" to cover poems, paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, dances, and so on, without—at this stage—raising or begging questions about the definition of art in general.) But to deserve the epithet "aesthetic," such experiences ought (1) to be obtainable commonly through, or in, the cognition of artkind instances, (2) to be obtainable in their most pronounced character from artkind instances that have been judged to be outstanding examples of their kind, and (3) to be obtainable in some degree from other objects or situations (especially natural objects) that are often grouped with artkind instances in respect to an interest we take in them.
It is not surprising that it has proved very difficult to distinguish and articulate an aesthetic character of experience. Accurate phenomenological description, especially of common strains in so richly varied a class of phenomena, requires more care and effort than (I am afraid) many of us have been willing to make, and perhaps were too easily discouraged because we often had unreasonable expectations of exactness in our results. It is also, and consequently, not surprising that there has been a good deal of honest difference of opinion about what the aesthetic character is, even among those who agree that there is such a thing. But here we must not follow those who have magnified and emphasized these differences in order to cast doubt on the whole inquiry. Some features very widely and frequently found in experiences of artkind instances have been noted by perceptive aestheticians, and very often their divergent descriptions, when carefully analyzed in relation to the examples offered, turn out to be quite close in meaning. Moreover, if we do not insist a priori that the aesthetic character must be a single and simple one, but look instead for a set of central criteria, we may find that we can accommodate and reconcile insights and discoveries from several quarters.

This last conclusion, I must confess, is one that I have come to only over a long period of intermittent reflection on the problem and after a gradual recognition that my earlier attempts to capture the aesthetic character were defective and incomplete in ways that either became apparent to me as I tried to apply them and work out their consequences or were thoughtfully called to my attention. My struggles with the problem have taken two forms, which are not utterly hopeless, but which have not managed to satisfy me fully.

For some time I tried working with the concept of aesthetic experience, trying to make the most of Dewey’s inspiring ideas (as they have always struck me) by sharpening them and seeing how they can actually be applied to concrete artkind instances. In my Aesthetics, 1 I made a somewhat sketchy attempt to fix this concept usably, and ten years later, in Essay 5, I tried to revive and renew it, after it had wilted somewhat in the intervening climate of opinion. I must say that I am still a partisan of aesthetic experi-

Aesthetic Experience

I don't fully understand how anyone could deny that there are clear and exemplary cases of such experience, described in Dewey's words (at least as supplemented and qualified by mine!). And if there are such experiences, I do not understand how anyone could reasonably refuse to call them "aesthetic." But I have come to see that, even so, only a very limited account of our aesthetic life can be given in such terms. Aesthetic experiences—one of Dewey's most insistent and most eloquently made points—have an unusually high degree of unity in the dimension of completeness, and when you listen, for example, to an entire string quartet, the experience has this character to a very marked degree. But even if you tune in the quartet in the middle, and listen for a minute or two before you are torn away, there is no doubt that something aesthetic has happened to you—without completeness or consummation. During that stretch of time, your experience has taken on a character (and not just the property of being a music-hearing experience) that is strongly different from what was present before you tuned in or after you tune out—though some of it, of course, may linger even as you turn to the jangling telephone or the inopportune (even if welcome) television repairman at the door. So it seems important, indeed essential, to introduce a broader concept of the aesthetic in experience, while reserving the term "aesthetic experience," as a count noun, for rather special occasions.

It was such considerations as these that led me, as in Essays 1 and 2, to explore the possibility of treating the aesthetic character as a species of hedonic quality, working with the terms "enjoyment," "satisfaction," and "pleasure." Here I believed myself to have a good deal of support from a number of eighteenth-century thinkers, especially in Great Britain. And again, I am still persuaded that there is important truth in this doctrine: I haven't found any serious and cogent refutation, at least, of the proposition that experiences with aesthetic character are intrinsically enjoyable (which is not to say they are intrinsically valuable, of course; see Essay 3). Examples of unpleasant objects that have been placed in galleries (for example, the famous figures of decaying corpses by Gaetano Zumbo—but choose your own examples; they are not hard to find these days) only go to show that unpleasant objects have been placed in galleries, unless we go on to argue (1) that our experience of them has aesthetic character and (2) that, taken all in all, our experience of them does not involve
an enjoyment that encompasses or assimilates the disgust (the small size of Zumbo’s figures creates a certain detachment). Still, enjoying is taking pleasure in, and a particular kind of enjoyment must in the end be a function of the kind of thing in which pleasure is taken. There is something threateningly reductionistic about taking the defining feature of aesthetically characterized experiences to be a particular kind of pleasure; and there are theoretical problems that arise in relating such a view to the justification of reasons in art criticism (see Essay 2). So I have thought it worthwhile to cast about for a promising alternative.

My present disposition is to work with a set of five criteria of the aesthetic character of experience. I suggest that we apply these criteria as a family, with one exception of a necessary condition: an experience has aesthetic character if and only if it has the first of the following features and at least three of the others. (But I am not wedded to a particular formula, rather trying to open up a line of further inquiry; it may be that the list of criteria should be expanded or that the number of features specified for the application of the term “aesthetic character” should be decreased.)

1. Object directedness. A willingly accepted guidance over the succession of one’s mental states by phenomenally objective properties (qualities and relations) of a perceptual or intentional field on which attention is fixed with a feeling that things are working or have worked themselves out fittingly.

2. Felt freedom. A sense of release from the dominance of some antecedent concerns about past and future, a relaxation and sense of harmony with what is presented or semantically invoked by it or implicitly promised by it, so that what comes has the air of having been freely chosen.

3. Detached affect. A sense that the objects on which interest is concentrated are set a little at a distance emotionally—a certain detachment of affect, so that even when we are confronted with dark and terrible things, and feel them sharply, they do not oppress but make us aware of our power to rise above them.

4. Active discovery. A sense of actively exercising constructive powers of the mind, of being challenged by a variety of potentially conflicting stimuli to try to make them cohere; a keyed-up state

amounting to exhilaration in seeing connections between percepts and between meanings, a sense (which may be illusory) of intelligibility.

5. Wholeness. A sense of integration as a person, of being restored to wholeness from distracting and disruptive influences (but by inclusive synthesis as well as by exclusion), and a corresponding contentment, even through disturbing feelings, that involves self-acceptance and self-expansion.

Each of these features calls for a little commentary; and the last one takes us back to a continuing controversy that I should like to resume briefly.

The first feature, object directedness, is one on which I believe general agreement can be had. It is, of course, framed to apply quite broadly. I have in mind not only the plain and obvious cases where we are intensely absorbed in the contemplation of a painting or paying close and undivided attention to the course of a musical composition, but also other cases where the object or situation in question is merely intentional: we are concerned with what is happening in the world of a novel, we are thinking intensely and seriously of the symbolic significance of a figure in a painting, or, confronted with an instance of conceptual or "idea" art, we consider a proposition or a theme or a possible state of affairs the artist brings to our attention. When the work embodies instructions for apprehending it in a determinate serial order, we follow the way it works itself out, and this is a process of discovery; but even in the case of a painting or a sculpture there is of course the same process of discovery, of gradual revelation of its nature as we explore it probingly; and thus there can be the same controlling or emerging sense that something is worked out and is accepted for what it is. This willing surrender, limited and actively engaged as it is, has often been noted as characteristic of our experience of artkind instances. And, as I suggested above, it seems to me plainly present even when what we are dealing with is a tragedy of horrors or a poignant and (by itself) painful reminder of real evils about us. If we are repelled and turn away, of course there can be no claim that the experience, even while it lasted, had aesthetic character (we looked because we were forced to, or ordered to, or in some other way involuntarily, not because we willingly accepted the object's control over our mental states). If we choose to continue the experience because we must actually
see and feel the working out of what is there, and the rightness of
that working out, then our experience satisfies at least the first—and
necessary—criterion of aesthetic character.

Felt freedom is perhaps the hardest feature to talk about very
definitely. I point to it as a notable ingredient in that experience I
alluded to earlier, of turning on the radio and suddenly hearing,
say, the first-movement second subject of Mozart's String Quartet
in A: that lift of the spirit, sudden dropping away of thoughts and
feelings that were problematic, that were obstacles to be over-
come or hindrances of some kind—a sense of being on top of
things, of having one's real way, even though not having actually
chosen it or won it. Much deeper senses of "freedom"—meta-
physically and epistemologically speaking—have been invoked in
talking about the arts, by Kant and Schiller and others; I am
staying with what I take to be phenomenology here, however,
without moving to transcendental psychology (of course there is a
good deal of valid phenomenology in Kant and Schiller, too). It is,
I take it, this felt freedom that has been so feared and condemned
by the Puritan—religious or political—as a temptation to danger-
ous escapism and failure of nerve amid the actual trials of the
religious or the revolutionary life. And he is right to be con-
cerned. For it is in respect to this second feature that art has
affinities with certain drugs, which can also generate (though of
course not through their mere cognition) intense forms of felt
freedom. It is in this respect that art can be enervating and anti-
social, and many other unfortunate things it has often been ac-
cused of. I am convinced that this second feature is real and
significant. Nevertheless, I do not want to make it a necessary
condition of the aesthetic; in our encounter with artkind instances
that are intricate and puzzling and hard to make out, that offer
resistances and obstacles to understanding or perception, this felt
freedom may be absent or at a low pitch. Yet even such experi-
ences may have the aesthetic character if they meet the other
criteria.

The element of detachment in aesthetic experience, under var-
ious terms, such as "disinterestedness," "psychical distance," and
"will-less contemplation," has very often been remarked, and (at
least before the post–World War II avant-garde) has very often
been considered central to its nature. I do not wish to formulate
this feature so that it becomes enmeshed in the controversies
surrounding the terms in which it has been described, or in such
Aesthetic Experience

a way that it is tied to any particular metaphysical or epistemological or ethical theory. The heart of the matter is that when we view, say, the Gaetano Zumbo sculptures, however strongly or even violently we may respond, it is still true and highly important to add that we do not confuse them with genuine corpses, that we can avoid feeling full emotions as we naturally would do with corpses, that our feelings are therefore somewhat muted, gently screened from direct contact with reality outside the sculptures themselves. In many different typical ways, instances of artkinds are designed to lend some degree of detachment to the affects they produce: giving an air of artifice, of fictionality, of autonomy and reflexiveness, of separation from other things, and so on. But of course this is not always true, and as has also often been pointed out, there is often the attempt at a kind of brinkmanship, coming close to the borders of the seeming-real and risking the disappearance of detachment. Even so, artists generally try not to come as catastrophically close as, say, when the high-wire artist falls to his death, or the realistic life-size imitation of a museum guard is asked for directions to the men’s room. Sergei Eisenstein remarks that when he staged Tretiakov’s play Gas Masks (1923–24), about a gas factory, in an actual gas factory, it was a failure—I take it, from the aesthetic point of view. Now, it might not have been a failure even if the setting proved too realistic to preserve detachment of affect, provided it had something else to offer in the way of aestheticity; so I do not propose to make even this important and extremely common feature of art experience a necessary condition.

It is extraordinarily difficult to capture in words the exact ways in which the practical or technological aspect of an object can and cannot enter into the experience of it if that experience is to have this third feature of detached affect. Even so excellent a phenomenology of aesthetic experience as that presented by M. J. Zenzen—drawing upon Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty—exhibits these difficulties. For example, he remarks that “unlike the case of normal perception where objects are always experienced as systems of instrumentality, in an aesthetic experience the object is stripped of its instrumental ‘values.’” It is true that in detached affect there is a lack of concern about the instrumental values, but

there need not be a lack of awareness of such values—and in the aesthetic experience of architectural works, for example, such awareness ought to be present. Zenzen also holds that in aesthetic experience of a painting the knowledge “that the work at which I am looking can be taken as canvas and paint . . . must be forgotten and transcended to the painting as art-work. . . . [It] must hide itself in order for the art-work to show itself; but in hiding itself the knowledge must not be lost.” Here the paradoxical language, I think, helps to bring us close to a grasp of the subtle difference between the way in which the knowledge is present and the way in which it is absent.

It seems to me that I have always thought of the act of apprehending an artkind instance as basically a cognitive act, though I may have insufficiently stressed this point or failed to grasp its consequences. Certainly I did not adequately understand the importance of this fact until such thinkers as Gombrich, Goodman, and Arnheim taught it to me in recent years. At any rate, I see now more clearly than I ever did before that one of the central components in art experience must be the experience of discovery, of insight into connections and organizations—the elation that comes from the apparent opening up of intelligibility. I call this “active discovery” to draw attention to the excitement of meeting a cognitive challenge, of flexing one’s powers to make intelligible—where this combines making sense of something with making something make sense. In this aspect, experiences with aesthetic character overlap with experiences of empirical scientists and mathematicians; here is the link between them. There is a common thrill—speaking as always phenomenologically, and reminding ourselves that the enjoyment of emerging intelligibility or order or system may be exactly the same, even for the scholar or scientist, whether the order turns out to be empirically real (such as the table of the elements, the taxonomy of animals and plants, and the progression of artistic styles from 1350 to 1650) or an illusion (such as the classification of people according to the signs they were born under, the distinction of autonomous Spenglerian cultures, and the Baconian cypher). In some artkind instances on the minimalist side, the experience is mainly, or at least primarily, one of coming to see how some few things are related, and this by itself doth not an aesthetically characterized experience make.

4. Ibid., p. 477.
In other artkind instances, the intellectual element is too small to attribute this feature of active discovery, though of course there must always be something there to be apprehended, and there is always something going on that can be called, in a broad sense, understanding.

The fifth feature, wholeness, is surely very central to any acceptable account of the aesthetic character—so much so that it may well deserve to be ranked with the first as essential. In trying to clarify this concept for myself as well as others, I have (gratefully) bowed to well-formed criticisms, especially those of George Dickie, and steered away from unity in the dimension of completeness in order to concentrate on unity in the dimension of coherence. And I want to keep in view two levels of this wholeness: the coherence of the elements of the experience itself, of the diverse mental acts and events going on in one mind over a stretch of time; and the coherence of the self, the mind’s healing sense (which, again, may be illusory) of being all together and able to encompass its perceptions, feelings, emotions, ideas, in a single integrated personhood. To a large degree this feature of the usual art experience may be a consequence of other features; but it is, I think, distinct. It is found, of course, in many other regions—in commerce with nature, in certain kinds of religious experience, in the exciting climaxes of games, and even in concentrated intellectual activity, though in these latter cases there is a tendency to achieve unification of experience and of self through narrowness of focus and the pushing away of intrusive elements, rather than through the widening and deepening of a pattern or network of relations to take in contrasting elements.

The legitimacy of this concept of the unity of experience (in a phenomenological rather than a Kantian sense) has been a point of contention between George Dickie and myself through a debate that has continued intermittently and happily for many years—part of a genuine dialogue between us that has been one of my most cherished memories. Since Dickie, at the time of this writing, has had the latest word, ⁴ I think it’s my turn to carry the debate into another round, by responding briefly to a few of the interesting new criticisms he has offered.

My concept of experiential coherence is that of the elements of experience having the appearance of belonging together: some parts of the phenomenally objective (perceptual or intentional) field with other parts, some feelings with other feelings, some thoughts with other thoughts—and each of these sorts of mental element with the others (see Essay 5).

The first difficulty with Beardsley's view is that there are many cases regarded by everyone as aesthetic experiences but having no affective content caused by a work of art. . . . I have in mind, for example, the experience of a certain kind of abstract painting which has a good but simple design and which can be taken in, as it were, at a glance.

This comment is to the point, and helps me to clarify my view, as well as to defend it. First, I should like to formulate my fifth criterion of the aesthetic in experience so as to render it immune to this criticism: if there are experiences with aesthetic character that are affect-free—that include no feelings at all—then whatever elements they do include may still more or less cohere. The criterion can still be applied, only there will be less to apply it to, fewer sorts of element to take into account. But second, and more important, I cannot bring myself to accept the antecedent of the above conditional. If the design of a painting is in fact "taken in at a glance," I agree that there may be no affect, but I don't think there is an aesthetically characterized experience, either—one could do no more than scan and mentally classify, and that doesn't give room for a buildup of the features I have described. If, on the other hand, we stay with the picture—"such paintings frequently repay continued attention," Dickie says—something more could happen, an intensification of interest, an increasingly keen appreciation of the color relationships, a feeling of uneasiness about the violent hard-edge contrasts, a touch of vertigo, or an unanticipated calmness. If Dickie is "inclined to think that many of our aesthetic experiences are without affective content, not just a few ones of abstract paintings,"

Finally, Dickie is still doubtful about the concept of a coherence of emotions, when they vary and succeed each other. Of Hamlet

7. Ibid., p. 189.
8. Ibid., p. 190.
9. Ibid., p. 191.
he says: "During the course of the play I might have felt fear, anger, distrust, irritation, pity, indignation, excitement, pity, and sadness, not to mention the many other feelings the play might produce in a spectator. How does this sequence of affects constitute a unity?" This is a difficulty, but I think not a fatal one—even if we do not invoke the nonnecessity of my fifth criterion. These emotions directed to the events of the play are indeed, I would say, brought into coherence in the playgoing situation far more than they would be in ordinary life. First, they are all muted by a degree of detachment through the fictionality of their objects, and this helps to keep them from flying off in different directions like "real" emotions. Second, to the extent to which the events of the play are tied together by psychological inevitability (and Hamlet is no doubt not the best example of this!), the emotions themselves can be felt to follow naturally upon one another. Third, the emotions, when considered in their specific quality as well as in their intensity (as responses to the developments in the plot), form certain patterns, rhythms of contrast and curves of strength. Fourth, involved in all the different emotions, continuing from one emotional phase to the next, and underlying their differences, there are other important feelings—a gradually growing concern that Hamlet will not extricate himself from his situation without bringing tragedy to himself and others, along with a gradually growing feeling of acceptance of this tragic denouement as a release from torment, and as an inevitable expression both of Hamlet's brilliance and sensitivity and of his fatal limitations. These pervasive feelings give the experience of the play much of the unity that it has.

When we look again at the five criteria, we see, I think—for all their intended tentativeness—that they may well prove to be not unuseful. They are vague, of course; but that is to be expected at this stage, and perhaps to a considerable extent at any stage. They cannot be used in certain convenient ways that would be open if we had a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; but it seems that we must be content with what we can find. They show how, and in what ways, aesthetically characterized experience overlaps with experiences obtained in areas of life quite remote from art; they allow for the evident fact that we even find the aesthetic character in unexpected places. In a recent essay,

10. Ibid., p. 192.
Joel J. Kupperman has commented on my earlier remarks about aesthetic experience, especially in Essay 5, quoting my characterization of aesthetic experience, he writes: "This definition on one hand appears too broad, since it could apply to a sexual experience as well as an aesthetic experience. On the other hand the requirement of unity appears unwarrantedly to legislate a priori that aesthetic experiences have firm boundaries." I am not fully convinced of either of these charges. But if my earlier wording does admit sexual experience, I hope that the new criteria reveal both the ways in which aesthetic experience differs from, and some features it may share with, sexual experience. Moreover, if the earlier formula did insist too much on completeness, that insistence has been properly withdrawn.

In any case, the proposed account of aesthetic character does enable us to admit numerous clear-cut cases of artkind instances to the class of things capable of providing experience with this character (it would be absurd if it turned out that a competent hearing of Mozart's A-major string quartet had no aesthetic character after all). And it shows us how to rule out other phenomena that either have some pretensions to provide aesthetic character or may be expected or mistakenly believed to do so. I cite two examples.

Commenting on an exhibition of "color-field optical paintings" by Wojciech Fangor, David L. Shirley writes:

If Mr. Nangor has masterfully used space and color to create a very special experience, albeit at times unpleasant, the experience is no more than just that. Attempts to dazzle, blind, overwhelm, even in such a spectacular way, are still attempts to dazzle, blind, and overwhelm. Even when the canvasses are generating their own particular environments, they are much closer to artifice than to art. I make no assumptions, of course, either about the paintings, which I have not seen, or the critic, whom I know little about. But if he is right in his account, the experience of viewing these paintings does seem not to be an aesthetic one, by my criteria. (Whether the paintings are art is another question, to be taken up in the following essay.)

11. See p. 81 above.
Somewhat later, commenting on a show by G. E. Moore, the same critic says it contains

a sustained, sinister threat of imminent destruction . . . . The works that pose a threat to the viewer are a pile of rough-hewn bricks stacked up on a glass plate that leans out toward the viewer, a low glass bench that, if sat upon, could splinter into painful pieces, a doorway stretched tight with rubber strips that pinch and press when you try to go through them and two sets of blinding hot lights set up on door jambs so as to cause great discomfort when you pass them . . . . There is nothing visually exciting but the conveyor belt that sweeps through the air with the élan of a trapezist and the bricks that have a kind of power in their potential movement. If the other works happen to threaten us on a physical level, they never challenge us on an esthetic level. 

This is the sort of discrimination that critics are called upon to make—distinguishing as clearly as possible between those works that push aesthetic experience into new directions, expanding the range of qualities it can encompass, and those works that renounce their interest in aesthetic experience and abandon it in favor of something else, something quite different. Such an alternative, for example, is also described by Shirley, recalling, in the same review, a "Destruction in Art Symposium" in 1969 at Finch College, in which a live chicken was beheaded with a pair of scissors and "several artists scratched, beat, and punched one another until their clothes were in shreds and their flesh running with blood"—these "realizations" accompanying an exhibition of "dis-membered mannequins, slit and gouged canvases, gutted furniture, defaced books, plastic dresses burnt full of holes, and new violins that had been shattered into splinters."