Must Good Art Be Liked? Discussion on Deontic Axiology

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Summary

Abstract: The reply to the question 'must good art be liked?' depends on axiological, psychological and deontic factors. An affirmative response assumes that decisions of goodness are logically independent of decisions of liking (the 'independence thesis' (IT)), and that liking is subject to deontic operations (e.g. obligation). An analysis of the fulfilment of these two conditions shows that the supporters of IT erroneously presume that the question could be solved without determining the type of value and the cause of liking. Robust subjectivism logically overturns IT. IT mistakenly presumes that category shifts maintain value criteria. Liking is subjected to deontic operations in the psychological, but not in the dispositional meaning of liking.

Keywords: work of art, evaluation, goodness, likeness

Art criticism often ambitiously presupposes that good art must be liked, thus indicating a certain duty of liking. An unambiguous reply to the question 'must good art be liked?' is problematic because it contains various axiological, psychological and deontic variables. People's views in this differ mainly because they understand these variables differently. This is only natural, as the question does not carry a possible straightforward interpretation gamma with it.

Variables

Firstly, there is an axiological problem connected with the phrase 'good art'. Although the usage of this pair of words is diverse, we can distinguish two chief meanings. The 'non-personal' meaning denotes a class of relatively fixed artworks (e.g. generally recognised masterpieces) or a single work that belongs there. The other, 'personal meaning' of 'good art' represents the positive evaluation 'this is good art' by the evaluator himself.

The phrase 'good art' is also undetermined regarding the type of value (goodness). That meaning relies on the value-philosophical triviality that objects can be evaluated from different bases. If someone talks of 'good art', it is sensible to ask whether he or she has in mind moral, aesthetic, political or, for example, specific *artistic* goodness.

The chief difficulty of the question 'must good art be liked?' arises from the *psychological* verbal thicket into which the word 'like' threatens to drag us. This is proved by the habit of aestheticians of moving from 'liking,' to 'pleasure', 'satisfaction', 'delight', 'enjoyment' and other such terms.

The ambiguous connection of these terms with 'liking' could prove fatal in analysing the *deontic* aspect of the issue, which derives from the possible meaning of the word 'must'. And lastly, the question can hardly be tackled in full without considering the ideological twists of art life.

Responding to the question in the affirmative presupposes fulfilling at least two conditions. First, decisions on goodness are logically independent of decisions on liking; and that liking is the legitimate object of deontic operations (committing, obligation etc.). The fulfilling of these conditions are analysed in the current article.

Thesis of logical independence

For the term 'must' to fulfil its prescribing role, *goodness* and *liking* have to be logically independent of each other: prescribing inevitable things is meaningless. Prescribing lik-

ing would be equally meaningless, if goodness and liking are logically tied. According to many aestheticians (R. G. Collingwood, John Fisher, Noël Carroll and Theodore Gracyk), evaluation is indeed logically independent of the evaluator's psychological states (including liking). The main starting point of the independence thesis is overturning the meta-aesthetic subjectivism. After all, it is the latter that constitutes the theory of the meanings of goodness decisions, analysing goodness in the terms of liking: '*W* is good' *means* 'I like *W*' – value and liking are logically connected *par excellence*. Such subjectivist treatments are supposedly contrary to sensible belief that bad art might be liked and good art not.

Two factors speak in favour of the independence thesis. If we regard evaluation as exercising the standard for the evaluated objects, there is reason to believe that the psychological characteristics of the evaluator (feelings, moods etc.) do not have to be considered.

The thesis of independence also considers the plight of those who try to define a kind of asset (goodness) psychologically – via pleasure, desire, liking or something similar. Such definitions frequently clash with the admission that our psychological reactions are rather irregular.

Robust subjectivism

However, in the light of some factors, announcements of the demise of meta-aesthetic subjectivism seem premature. Although they seem to be a protest against equating liking and value, in practice they turn out to be nothing more than empty words. Contrary to declarations in theory, art critics always tend to like what they previously considered good – there is no sign of a factual difference between liking and evaluation.

Secondly, the supporters of the independence thesis assume, without any justification, that the separation of liking and evaluation can be proved without determining the type of goodness. Works of art, after all, can be good (or bad) in more than one aspect. Distinguishing the type of goodness is important because various types of goodness claims do not necessarily have identical liking conditions.

As standards are created and not discovered, it is possible to create standards that are based on *liking*. Let us for example imagine a (robust) subjectivist favouring the doctrine that the value of a work of art lies in its instrumental power to evoke liking. As the reference to the possibility of a robust subjectivist is essentially logical, the empirical existence of this view in reality is not significant. If liking is the standard of goodness, it is *ex definitio* impossible to find a good, but a non-likeable work of art.

Shifts of category

The argument of the independence thesis contains the fact that, while proving the independence of evaluation and liking, the example of goodness ('good but not likeable') is taken from one sub-category of art, but the example of not-goodness ('bad but likeable') is taken from another category; this shift is not properly explained. In the example of badness and liking, Carroll referred to a Stephen King horror story but, in the case of goodness and not-liking, to Golding's work! A critic of the thesis of independence would be justified in claiming that had Carroll chosen the examples from the same sub-category of art, Carroll would have had to admit to the correlation of (positive) evaluation with liking. However, this would not be a case of independence, but of dependence of goodness and liking. Still, Carroll denies that an

analysis inside a category would make the liking and evaluations correlate. The reason: he might not like the particular category (e.g. genre) under discussion.

Would he then enjoy the works more if the category (genre) was in general more agreeable? According to Carroll, it is not contradictory to think that he likes horror stories generally (as a category), and likes a particular horror story more than some other horror story, although on the horror story value scale the order would be the opposite! Unfortunately, Carroll does not present any specific examples here.

Evaluations are category and standard relative and a change of category does not necessarily maintain the evaluation (Passmore, Walton). It is thus possible to claim that horror stories that Carroll presents as examples of 'bad art', could still be 'good' horror stories. In that key Carroll should admit that he liked King's 'good' horror story – a nice example of how goodness and liking go hand in hand.

Fisher's argument

To demonstrate that liking and aesthetic evaluation are not identical, John Fisher presents a clever thought experiment. Let us imagine three persons who have to evaluate, respectively, bagpipe music, religious painting and poetry, whereas none of them actually like those types of art. Let us suppose that the person evaluating bagpipe music generally likes music, just as the evaluator of a religious painting likes painting in general, but the evaluator of poetry does not like poetry at all. Fisher asks whether any of them is able to evaluate a non-likeable work in the relevant category? Fisher explains the negative reply as follows: the evaluators of bagpipe music and religious painting can evaluate the works without actually liking the object of evaluation – their ability to evaluate rests on the general ability of liking regarding painting and music as a whole. The evaluator of poetry, however, lacks such an ability. According to Fisher, the evaluator of poetry is not able to evaluate a poem, because he lacks the liking for both the specific poem (type of work) and poetry as a whole.

On the one hand, Fisher's analysis seems to deny the independence thesis, while, on the other, it rather supports it. The main aim of showing that a work of art is not necessarily among the likeable supports the independence thesis. However, the belief that non-liking can be allowed on *condition* of liking the type or kind shows that something still depends on liking – an art (type) hostile person cannot evaluate particular art. Hence a significant conclusion: the reply to the question 'must good art be liked?' seems to depend not only on the evaluation category, but also on the object of liking (art category, single work or an aspect of the single work).

It could be argued that Fisher examined the evaluation of art as a whole, but my question was only focused on *good* art. This objection could be avoided by arguing that it seems intuitively clear that if liking is not necessary for evaluation, it is also not necessary in evaluating as good.

Fisher mixes liking claims and enjoyment claims. Because even if an art type-relevant *ability to enjoy* is the precondition for knowledgeable evaluation, it does not mean that good works of art must be *liked*.

Moreover, aestheticians generally assume that enjoyment must correspond to certain normative conditions – aesthetic pleasure should have 'correct' reasons. It is thus surprising that the supporters of the independence thesis are trying to manage without an analysis of the reasons for liking.

Deontics of evaluation

There is a significant factor to demonstrate that presenting the demand of liking in connection with good art is not possible. 'Must' can have a prescribing role only when liking can be among the prescribed phenomena. The prescription is either written or oral expression that is intended by the speaker to determine voluntary action. In that sense, liking does not seem to be voluntary - liking is not something that I plan to do; liking is nothing that I do**;** instead, liking happens to me. Therefore, the question 'must good art be liked?' cannot be answered in the affirmative for the obvious reason that liking is simply not one of the prescribed entities.

In addition, analysing ordinary situations more closely, it appears that the prescribing aim of the must-claim in them is only apparent. Must-claims do not function in them as prescriptions and requests, but instead as hopes, expectations and predictions, *à la* 'if you do not like this (good) work of art, then I don't know what you like at all!'

If liking does not belong in the class of prescribing phenomena (i.e. activities), there is no reason to accuse people who do not like good art of artistic weakness of willpower (acrasia). The acratic opposes alternative *deeds,* but liking is not an activity.

Types of liking

Some aestheticians (Patricia Herzog and Monroe Beardsley) have criticised the belief that liking (or non-liking) is a phenomenon not subjected to normative arguments. Herzog questions the claim of many aestheticians (Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams) that evaluation and preference stand logically apart, i.e. if *W* is good in its type, it does not force anyone to like *W*, want *W* or choose *W*.

A very simplistic example is often presented, namely that a person prefers (Johann) Strauss to Beethoven, thus indicating that in the sense of artistic (aesthetic) value, he prefers bad music to *better*. However, according to Herzog, this is not the case of preferring bad art to good (better) art. Strauss belongs to a completely different category, therefore another standard should be used in evaluating him. Nothing can force anyone to prefer Beethoven to Strauss, but it is possible to forcefully prefer Beethoven to Hummel, because these two belong to the same category (style). A person who considers Beethoven better than Hummel, but who consistently prefers Hummel to Beethoven, should in his opinion be considered irrational.

The drawback of Herzog's argument lies in the fact that it treats 'liking' in the same way as such notions as 'wanting' and 'choosing' – an error that comes from his main opponent, Williams. This kind of inclusion should be proved, because as we saw in the previous part, 'liking' is deontically resistant.

It is true that, whereas most aestheticians tackle liking psychologically, some aestheticians (e.g. Herzog) veer to the other extreme, regarding liking similarly to preferring. Although both approaches use 'liking' in its normal sense, neither treatment is exhaustive: in the fashion of Wittgenstein, we could say that both absolutise one linguistic usage of 'liking' ('to like'), neglecting the other shades of the word. Linguists (e.g. Duffley) indeed support the differentiation between two types of 'liking'. On the one hand, 'I like *x*' indicates the currently occurring state of mind. On the other hand, this denotes disposition, i.e. a tendency to select and prefer *x*. Unlike psychological liking, dispositional liking is a deontic object. Prescribing this kind of liking is logically possible.

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