

Phenomenology and Art: Towards an Enactivist Understanding of Aesthetics

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Abstract

The backward glance of an historian can trace the interest in art and aesthetics to the very beginning of time; yet, the post-Kantian era of philosophy has seen the field of aesthetics devaluated and denigrated to a secondary status in philosophy and science. Kant's mind-body dualism and sharp distinction between thought and feeling, where aesthetics is said to be part of the latter, condemned the field of aesthetics to mere feeling that is cognitively empty and epistemologically inert. In modern philosophy, truth becomes regarded as the "transcendental precondition of the natural sciences" as Kant and Habermas present it; on the other hand, meaning became characteristic of the non-scientific enterprises such as the domain of art. Even today, Mark Johnson notices, in his work *The Meaning of the Body*, that because of its "alleged noncognitive character" the aesthetic is thought of as divorced from the realm of "meaning, conceptualization, and reasoning." This devaluation of the field is also due, in part, to the mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophy in which aesthetics—by virtue of the fact that the aesthetic component of experience is supposedly neither conceptual nor propositional—was no longer considered bound to the study of truth or any serious examination.

Although this view of aesthetics has not gone unchallenged, it is primarily through the work of phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and pragmatists like John Dewey that to "speak of truth and meaning in art is no longer a *contradictio in terminis*". Establishing aesthetics as a domain of truth *and* meaning is inextricably linked to arguing for art as a domain of "scientific" investigation, with valuable insights on human cognition. Thus, against modern philosophy's claim about aesthetics' non-cognitive character, this paper uses seminal works in phenomenology and enactivism that center the dialectic interplay of subject, object, and environment to argue for aesthetics as a variety of cognition—thereby rescuing the field from its devaluated, secondary status as the merely "subjective". Accordingly, this argument will be developed in four stages: stage (i) provides a brief overview of the set of phenomenological and enactivist traditions relevant to the subject at hand: namely, the anti-dualistic stance establishing cognition as embodied perception, dictated by a mutually

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determinative relationship between subject, object, and environment; stage (ii) transports this framework, with an emphasis on cognition as corporeal entanglement, to the field of aesthetics to understand the art of perception as perception of art; stage (iii) explores the ramifications of an embodied approach to aesthetics, as exemplified in the work of Paul Cézanne, on the status of the field; and finally stage (iv) offers final reflections and concluding remarks.

Keywords: phenomenology, enactivism, embodied cognition, art, subjectivism, aesthetics