

# Ethics, Aesthetics and Practical Philosophy

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## Abstract

The development of interest among academic philosophers in the aesthetics of everyday life is somewhat analogous to the broader development in moral philosophy of ‘applied’ or practical ethics. This fact is sometimes mentioned but rarely examined and it may be useful, therefore, to explore something of the course and causes of these two developments, in part better to understand them, but also to note blindspots and limitations in certain ways of thinking. In each case (though in different ways) these limitations are related to ignorance of past theory and practice. Exploring the parallels will also serve as a basis for suggesting how the two lines may now be brought together in a form of practical philosophy.

## I

English-language moral philosophy in the broadly analytic mode might be said to have had two beginnings: both in Cambridge and in close succession. The first was with Sidgwick’s *Method of Ethics* which John Rawls praised as

the first truly academic work in moral philosophy (in English), modern both in its methods and in the spirit of its approach. ... It undertakes to provide a systematic comparative study of moral conceptions ... <sup>1</sup>

For Sidgwick, Ethics was moral theory, i.e., the attempt to find a systematic account of the justification of first order moral judgements, what Kant and Mill had both termed the foundations of morality. Within two years of the posthumous publication of its 6th edition, however, moral philosophy began a second new phase with the appearance of G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in which attention was shifted from justification to semantic analysis:

the question, how good is to be defined, is the most fundamental question in all Ethics ... the main object of Ethics, as a systematic science, is to give correct reasons for thinking that this or that is good; [but] unless this question be answered, such reasons cannot be given <sup>2</sup>

While Sidgwick has since been recovered by Rawls, Derek Parfit, Peter Singer and others, he, and moral theory, were eclipsed for over half a century by the rapid rise and expansion of metaethics deriving from Moore's enquiry into the meaning of the predicate 'good'. Insofar as moral theorizing continued to be done it also tended to be abstract, considering the merits of rival accounts of moral justification by reference to general principles of one kind or another, and its use of first order examples was limited and unimaginative. It was also unreflective of the possibility that its appeal to them was naïve in failing to consider that how they were to be described might itself raise philosophical questions about, on the one hand contextual significance and on the other theory-ladenness. Both issues came to be pressed by Alasdair MacIntyre, the first in his *Short History of Ethics*:

Moral philosophy is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. This attitude seems to be the outcome of a belief that moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept, necessarily having the same features throughout their history ... In fact, of course, moral concepts change as social life changes. I deliberately do not write 'because social life changes,' for this might suggest that social life is one thing, morality another, and that there is merely an external, contingent causal relationship between them. This is obviously false. Moral concepts are embodied in and are partially constitutive of forms of social life.<sup>3</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the way in which moral philosophy was proceeding, disengaged from complex ethical, social and cultural issues of sorts that by the 1960s were challenging Western societies' conventional values, principles and practices, led some to begin to think about how philosophical ethics could help address questions that had become urgent in everyday life. Thus, began the practical turn.

Here it is important, however, to distinguish two factors. First, awareness of, and often personal (non-academic) engagement with ethical controversies, and the feeling that philosophy ought to have something to contribute to these; and second, views about the ways in which it could and should do so. The latter is more than a matter of methodology for it bears on the nature of philosophy itself. The favoured move involved the idea of applied philosophy understood in terms of preexisting distinctions in other fields. This is clearly expressed in an essay by Leslie

Stevenson, contemporaneous with the practical turn in moral philosophy which may also have been one of the first occurrences, certainly as a title, of the expression ‘Applied Philosophy’. He writes:

I want to suggest that, although the popular demand for quick or simple answers is misconceived, there is a clear and important sense in which philosophy can be relevant to “the important questions of everyday life”. I also want to suggest how, in these days [1970] of burgeoning universities, the vital need for the application of philosophy can be better met.

That phrase, “the application of philosophy”, already suggests the basis of my approach, namely a distinction between pure philosophy and applied philosophy, analogous in some ways to that between pure and applied mathematics, and in other ways to that between science and technology. . . . why should there not be a somewhat loosely defined discipline of applied philosophy, with a fuzzy borderline with pure philosophy on one side, and branching out into multifarious everyday problems on the other? <sup>4</sup>

Two related points should be noted: First, the suggestion is presented as if there were not already a history of philosophical engagement with everyday issues, when in fact this was common from antiquity through until the nineteenth century: from Socrates to Mill. Indeed, it was the rise in the early twentieth century of a certain view of philosophy as disengaged conceptual and logical analysis, to which Moore’s *Principia* gave encouragement, which broke that tradition, thereby leading to feelings mentioned above and to the complaint which Stevenson is addressing.

Second, the response presupposes a conception of the relation of philosophical reflection to everyday issues that retains, in the contrast between the pure and the applied, a notion of what philosophy primarily is that is questionable, arguably problematic and which constrains the understanding of how it might relate to everyday issues.

To find an alternative we need only look to the earlier history of engagement and to the distinction drawn there between speculative or theoretical, and practical philosophy. That has its first conscious application in the work of Aristotle and it is in relation to this that the earliest uses of the expression ‘practical philosophy’ occur. In the preface to his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* (c. 1270) Aquinas writes

Since the whole that is the political community is subject to the judgment of reason, it was necessary for a complete philosophy to give instruction about the political community, instruction called politics or political science [*civilis scientia*]. We can understand what kind of science this is. For we distinguish practical from theoretical sciences in that the latter are directed only to the knowledge of truth, while the former are directed to action. Therefore, politics is necessarily included in practical philosophy [*sub practica philosophia*] since the political community is a whole, and human reason both knows it and acts regarding it.<sup>5</sup>

The theoretical/practical distinction is not merely an alternative classification to the pure/applied one; rather it involves a different way of thinking about how thought and practice are related. For the latter, philosophy’s essential (‘pure’) work is complete in the formulation of theories, and the

task of application is that of showing the implications of these theories for specific issues. An analogy might be that of a scientist relaying his theoretical discoveries to a suitably trained technician (the counterpart of the applied philosopher) to have him demonstrate their application to real life situations. By contrast, for the proponent of the distinction with which Aristotle and Aquinas were concerned, practical philosophy begins with and remains close to when not embodied in practice. Such concepts and principles as may emerge are not instantiations of theoretical ones but ineliminably practical and formulated in terms drawn from descriptions of the practices themselves.

## II

Returning to the field of philosophical aesthetics, the history of its recent turn towards the everyday is somewhat different. First of all, the subject only began to separate itself from descriptive psychology in the twentieth century. Second, it did not attract much interest among mainstream philosophers up to 1950. Third, its absorption into analytic philosophy had an uncertain beginning with the publication in 1954 of the anthology *Aesthetics and Language* which contained several essays that damned it with faint praise, and which in general took a somewhat condescending view of earlier writings. This attitude is expressed on its first page where the editor, William Elton, writes that the purpose of the collection is:

to diagnose and clarify some aesthetic confusions, which it holds to be mainly linguistic in origin' and 'to provide philosophers and their students with a number of pieces that may serve as models of analytical procedure in aesthetics'<sup>6</sup>

Within a couple of years, however, a few writings of the recommended sort had begun to establish it as a small field, in particular Morris Weitz's 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'<sup>7</sup> and Frank Sibley's 'Aesthetic Concepts'<sup>8</sup>; and within a decade Arthur Danto, Nelson Goodman and Monroe Beardsley had opened sub-fields relating to the definition of art, its relation to reality, and the principles of aesthetic criticism.<sup>9</sup> As this indicates, however, while ramifying, the focus of analytic aesthetics was for the most on art and it was only later that an interest in the aesthetics of nature developed. In saying this, however, it is proper to note that Ronald Hepburn's essay on 'The Neglect of Natural Beauty'<sup>10</sup>, often cited as initiating that movement, was published in 1966 within a decade of Weitz's and Sibley's papers.

It is sometimes said that the focus in analytic aesthetics on art is the result in an earlier period of the influence of Hegel who thought that the sole interest for philosophy of aesthetics is that it revealed the development of successive forms of consciousness in the production of different kinds of artistic work. The contraction of the field is certainly evident in the opening sentence of his main work on aesthetics: 'These lectures are devoted to Aesthetics. Their topic is the spacious *realm of the beautiful*; more precisely, their province is *art*, or, rather, *fine art*.'<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the distance from the aesthetic as it might be encountered in everyday experience has been attributed to the prevalence in modern writers of attitudinal accounts of aesthetic experience. Initially, this might seem puzzling, since if what determines an aesthetic experience is a kind of attitude that governs it, rather than a special class of objects upon which it is directed, it is unclear why art should be thought to be the main preserve of the aesthetic. The puzzle is diminished, however, if one considers that the requirement of disengagement from practical interests tends to favour objects designed to be experienced for their own sake. Relatedly, the

attitude view tended to focus on refinement of taste and connoisseurship, which again orients it away from the everyday towards high art.

While there is something to be said in favour of these points they also overdraw and mislocate the contrast between analytic and premodern aesthetics. For one thing, while it is correct that the idea of the ‘fine’, in contrast to the ‘applied’ arts is modern, it is as true of the pre-moderns that discussions of the aesthetically pleasing were more generally applied to artifacts than to nature. Indeed, characterisations of beauty in natural objects often take the form of treating the latter as if they were works of art. Additionally, there is in some premodern writers an aversion to taking aesthetic pleasure in nature. In a letter written c. 1350 the Italian poet Petrarch describes his ascent on Mont Ventoux claiming to be the first person since the ancients to have ascended a mountain for the sake of the view, and then confessing to feeling shame at his pleasure as he read a passage from Augustine castigating the spiritual wantonness of being moved to wonder by nature.<sup>12</sup> As for the issue of aesthetic experience being related to certain attitudes, in another influential essay from the early period of analytic aesthetics Jerome Stolnitz writes:

[I]f any one belief is the common property of modern thought it is that a certain mode of attention is indispensable to and distinctive of the perception of beautiful things ... Either it does not occur at all in the thought of antiquity, the medieval period and the renaissance, or if it does ... the allusion is cursory and undeveloped<sup>13</sup>



Two observations are relevant: first, the idea of a mode of attention being proper to the perception of beauty *does* occur in pre-modern thought. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Eriugena writes that “The sense of sight is abused by those who approach the beauty of visible forms with appetite or desire.”<sup>14</sup> Second, however, it is not restrictive of the aesthetically pleasing more generally, and in that respect avoids the narrowing of the range of objects and experiences that only came to be challenged in more recent philosophical aesthetics.

Those challenges were motivated by different considerations. Even when only concerned with art, philosophers began to explore the specificities of different art forms and in doing so noted the wide range of differences in kinds of objects and experiences associated with these. Also, having turned from art to environment it was apt to look to the built as well as to the natural world, and in considering the former to note the diversity of ways in which it was engaged with aesthetically. Then there was the explicit adoption of the applied turn within philosophical aesthetics, and it is often according to this model that the aesthetics of the everyday has been developed. Given what I claimed in relation to moral philosophy, however, this model may be needlessly restrictive, and ill-suited to appreciating the diversity of kinds of aesthetic factors, and the non-systematicity of the ways in which they feature in experience and practice.

### III

Thinking about moral philosophy and aesthetics, those familiar with the latter will be aware of the interest in recent years in the question of the relationship between the two kinds of evaluation so far as concerns works of art. A short, but significant early study of the issue was Richard Beardsmore’s *Art and Morality*, first published in 1971 but recently republished together with related essays.<sup>15</sup> Where Beardsmore led others have followed, most notably Noel Carrol and

Berys Gaut; <sup>16</sup> but notwithstanding that Beardsmore's book was published in a series entitled 'Studies in Practical Philosophy' it, and to a greater degree later work, tend to fall within the familiar categories of moral and aesthetic theory with reference to examples serving the purpose of illustrating theoretical claims rather than being originating sources of philosophical reflection. Two questions then arise: first, what would it be for (part of) aesthetics to follow the analogy of practical rather than applied philosophy? and second, what scope might there be for fusing moral philosophy and aesthetics conducted in this mode?

So far as the first is concerned it would involve letting experience and practice take the lead, beginning with the variety of ways in which people are pleased or repelled by the experience of features of their lived environments, and the ways in which they arrange and shape them visually, aurally, kinaesthetically, and otherwise, for aesthetic effect and pleasure. It would also involve an openness to the concepts deployed at that first-order level, not presuming to subsume them within prior abstract theoretical conceptions. Moreover, following MacIntyre's argument with regard to moral concepts it would be alert to the possibility that aesthetic concepts are constitutively tied to forms of social life and cannot be treated as timeless and unchanging. All three of these considerations tell against thinking of the aesthetics of everyday life on the model of applied philosophy.

With regard to the question of fusing the moral and the aesthetic within an enlarged conception of practical philosophy one might think in terms of social aesthetics, for example analysing, critiquing and shaping public policy on the basis of both kinds of concerns, or of developing a philosophical approach to urban planning, or to library and museum provision including both content and the presentation of it. This in turn raises issues about the accountability of those involved, which only serves to remind us that this kind of fusion will at

times need to attend to political dimension also. Having recommended attention to historical precedents, however, specifically pre-modern ones I will end by mentioning an example that is of interest because of the way in which it combines the moral and the aesthetic, and other categories besides, and because of the unquestionable beauty of many of its products.

Through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a differentiation of forms of care and provision led to a fairly clear distinction between hospitals, hostels, poor houses, nursing homes and orphanages. But historically these have a common source. While there is a somewhat analogous history in parts of Asia, in the west this is related to Christian charitable provision. Drawing partly on prior Jewish traditions of hospitality it became a common feature of the early Church to establish houses of care, a practice that contrasted with the prevailing pagan culture. So much so, that in the middle of the 4th century Julian the Apostate (the last non-Christian Roman Emperor) wrote to the High Priest of Galatia:

Erect many hostels, one in each city, in order that strangers may enjoy my kindness, not only those of our own faith but also of others whosoever is in want of money. ... For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us.<sup>17</sup>

The common Latin root of the words 'hostel', 'hotel', 'hospice' and 'hospital' is *hospes*: a guest, and the earliest facility bearing the title 'hospital', often termed *domus dei* and *domus pauporum*, served a variety of functions all related to care for the needy. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the term 'almshouse' began to be used (deriving via Old English *ælmesse* and late Latin *eleemosyna* from

the Greek *eleēmosynē* : compassion), and by stages a separation of functions and facilities began to develop. This led in time to a chronological series of building designs derived from monastic and collegiate structures: a great hall (*aula magna*) with chapel attached; a hall with chapel detached; a cruciform structure with courtyards or cultivated land in each quadrant; and an enclosed courtyard or cloister garth, though often with one side open to the world.<sup>18</sup> Within these, provision was made for the needy: first as short-term patients cared for in an infirmary, with a gate service providing daily alms to outsiders; then as long-term residents, usually in numbers provided for by an endowment.

From these monastic beginnings came the many Medieval, Elizabethan, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian almshouses to be seen across England more than four thousand groups of which are still functioning.<sup>19</sup> While these vary in layout, scale, materials and design they are commonly seen and felt to be charming and fitting places for the elderly to live in modest comfort and security. This sense of domestic order and felt attraction is a response to their design which is itself a function in part of a social philosophy of compassion and community. The building styles are typically vernacular, the materials local, the construction horizontal but with periodic upright emphasis, usually marking the boundaries of units. Often the roofs are steeply pitched, and with a succession of gable ends, cloister archways, patterned timber and rendering, or stylized brickwork, there is a sense of rhythmic movement across the internal or external elevations. Additionally, the facades are fenestrated with recessed windows with mullions and mouldings or other features that suggest both faces to the world and manifestations of domestic activity within. All of this speaks of well-ordered life with both common and private components united in a shared social identity. It is, in short, an example of both a morality and an aesthetic of everyday life embodying a distinctive tradition of social philosophy.

I introduced the example as a historical one but, as indicated, many of the almshouses of the past continue to function, and the practice of building them continued through the twentieth century and continues today. Consideration of their moral-cum-aesthetic aspects also serves to mark a contrast with other planning and building practices which work to disassociate people. Gated or walled communities with secure controlled entrances, increasingly also manned by security guards, are not celebrations of extended community or gifts to the needy, rather they serve to protect the affluent but in doing so create the appearance and perhaps the sense of confinement.

A further development of design in the interest of social separation is the inclusion in large urban apartment blocks in London, New York and no doubt in other international cities (planning permission for which required some element of social low(er) cost housing), of 'Poor Doors' i.e., designated entrances which partition residents entering or leaving the buildings, thereby extending the prior separation of living areas. Viewed from the perspective of the kind of practical philosophy I have described, it is both a moral and an aesthetic question, or a moral-cum-aesthetic one, whether designing gated settlements and socio-economically partitioned housing complexes enhances or detracts from the experience and value of everyday life, and whether therefore it is, all things and people considered, a good or a bad thing to do. In either event, these are questions apt for philosophical investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 2007), 377-8.

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* ed. T. Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) Ch. 1. “The Subject-Matter of Ethics”.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1967) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1998, Ch. 1 “The Philosophical Point of a History of Ethics”.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Stevenson “Applied Philosophy” *Metaphilosophy* 1970, 1 (3): 258-267, quoting from 258 & 261.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 2007) “Prologue”, 2.

<sup>6</sup> William Elton ed. *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1956, 15 (1): 27–35.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts” *Philosophical Review* 1959 68 (4): 421-50.

<sup>9</sup> For a masterly short survey of the rise and development of the field, to which I am indebted, see Peter Lamarque, “Analytic Aesthetics” in Michael Beaney ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” in Bernard Williams & Alan Montifiore eds., *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 285–310.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* ed. & trans. James Harvey Robinson (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898), 307-320.

<sup>13</sup> Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1961, 20 (2): 131

<sup>14</sup> Eriugena, *De Divisione Naturae* trans J. J. O'Meara & I.P. Sheldon-Williams, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Vol. 13 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1995). For an account of medieval thinking see John Haldane, "Medieval Aesthetics" in Berys Gaut & Dominic Lopes eds., *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> See *Art, Morality and Human Nature: Writings by Richard W. Beardsmore* eds., J. Haldane & I. Lloyd (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> See Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> "Letter to Arsacius", in *A Few Notes on Julian and a Translation of His Public Letters* trans. & ed., Edward J. Chinnock (London: David Nutt, 1901), 75-78

<sup>18</sup> The first major study of these styles in English is that of F.T. Dolman, *Examples of Ancient Domestic Architecture Illustrating the Hospitals, Bede-houses, Schools, Almshouses of the Middle Ages in England* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1858). For discussion of the social aspects in the post-reformation period see Angela Nicholls, *Almshouses in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> The full number is uncertain, but seventeen hundred almshouse charities are registered with the National Almshouse Association <http://www.almshouses.org>.