

Beauty as a Science: An Exegesis of Ayer's View on Aesthetics

In his book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, A.J. Ayer seeks to eliminate metaphysics from the discipline of philosophy and in the process dissects many disciplines, including aesthetics, in order to find their empirical bases. According to Ayer, statements of value shrouded in metaphysics either can be reduced to true scientific statements or emotional, unverifiable nonsense (Ayer, 103). This paper will only provide an exegetical account of Ayer's understanding of aesthetic propositions. To do this, Ayer's understanding of ethics will also be deployed, seeing as they are dealt with in the same chapter. This paper will also highlight differences between Ayer's own conception of aesthetics and aesthetics as it is commonly defined within philosophical communities.

To lay the groundwork for this project, it is necessary to define aesthetics as it is typically understood, as "the branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste" (IEP). Aesthetics is not only concerned with the evaluation of art, but the phenomena artists, spectators and even the works themselves may experience.

Ayer's view of aesthetics and the challenges he presents to it will now be examined. Ayer argues that aesthetics as commonly conceived is unverifiable and without meaning. To him, aesthetic propositions are not statements of empirical fact, but rather expressions of feelings and "endeavors to make us share [the critic's] attitude toward the work as a whole" (114). It seems that the aesthetic enterprise is not to convey knowledge empirically, but rather through feeling. This view is antithetical to Ayer's own, which is rooted in verifiability of phenomena through observation. In this case, transmission of knowledge via emotion and aesthetic proposition is

void of both meaning and content. Ayer's own view of what constitutes meaningful aesthetic inquiry is far more narrow than what is presented above. According to him:

A scientific treatment of aesthetics would show us what in general were the causes of aesthetic feeling, why various societies produced and admired the works of art they did, why taste varies as it does within a given society, and so forth. And these are ordinary psychological or sociological questions. (113)

Anything in aesthetics beyond this "scientific treatment" is guilty of the same problems that Ayer raises with ethical propositions. For example, Ayer would argue the ethical statement, "Theft is bad," holds no empirical value, but merely operates as an expression of feeling associated with theft. Likewise, an individual who says, "That O'Keefe painting is beautiful," is merely stating their feelings on the painting. This statement of beauty, to Ayer, only describes the emotional state of the spectator and provides no true assessment or analysis of the work itself. With these types of aesthetic propositions, there is no empirical knowledge to be gained or verified. An aesthetic statement of this nature cannot be true or false, but rather an opinion.

Aesthetics is being juxtaposed with ethics is because, according to Ayer, the two are often deployed in the same manner (113). One seldom, if ever, discusses ethics or aesthetics solely with the purpose of describing their own internal state in relation to a concept or issue. Rather, there is a presupposed mission or ideology in mind when aesthetic or ethical statements are being made. In addition to this motivation, many ethical and aesthetic perspectives are scaffolded by metaphysical conceptions of the world. If one friend says to another, "the mountains are heavenly in appearance," there is not only a statement of what the speaker believes to be fact, but there is an invitation presented to the friend to accept that these mountains are aesthetically and ontologically consistent with that statement.

It needs to be clarified that Ayer does not object to aesthetics as a mode of inquiry in its entirety. To say that Ayer finds aesthetics meaningless would be far too oblique. His position is indeed much more mild, only arguing “that there is no sense in attributing *objective validity* to aesthetic judgements” (my emphasis) (113). Again, Ayer is only arguing that aesthetics is in itself not a unique method for acquiring knowledge.

Despite Ayer’s trimming down of what constitutes true aesthetics, there is arguably still room for concepts investigated in the discipline. With the elimination of any metaphysical conception of aesthetics, one definition of beauty that Ayer may endorse would be one defined by brain activity that elicits releasing of chemicals such as dopamine. One could maybe push this further by defining beauty not merely by what is defined as “pleasant,” but rather by the magnitude of emotion elicited from the viewer of an aesthetic object. Furthermore, one could continue to systematize aesthetics and even track relationships between objects and the feelings they elicit, so long as there is empirical evidence.

Ayer seeks to bring aesthetics into the fold of scientific inquiry not only by pruning away lofty metaphysical claims, but also by salvaging and repurposing aesthetic concepts that can be useful in the analysis of things which are considered beautiful and elicit emotion from viewers. In place of speculation and assertions of value, Ayer proposes an aesthetics that can be used as a tool to acquire verifiable information about the self or describe the nature of a work (114).

References:

1. Ayer, Alfred Jules. *Language, Truth and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, 2014.
2. Barry Hartley Slater, “Aesthetics,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/aestheti/#H2>.