

Chapter 11

Aesthetics as a Branch of Epistemology

Abstract Goodman’s system of notation explicates the distinctions between notational and discursive, and it also distinguishes between aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Not, of course, expecting an essentialist definition that could distinguish between the two, Goodman rather looks for the differing ways that the symbol processes might reveal themselves. The “symptoms” of the aesthetic are: syntactic density, semantic density, syntactic repleteness, and exemplification. The first is characteristic of nonlinguistic systems and visual art in general and is distinguished from disjointness and differentiation of characters. Semantic density is seen in the function of expression in the visual arts, as what is being exemplified is not obviously excluded from belonging to other characters or exemplifying symbols. Syntactic repleteness distinguishes those instances that are more diagrammatic from those that are more representational. This account gives an analysis of the ways that words refer to objects in the world and in this account, all understanding is accomplished by tracing a symbol back to that to which it is referring, and once the circumscriptive correlation is complete so is the understanding. Symbols function as samples, which in turn refer to labels, but nothing comes already labeled. In this Goodman is also arguing for aesthetics as part of epistemology.

11.1 The Distinction Between Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic

As we have seen in the previous section, Goodman’s system of notation explicates the distinctions between notational and discursive, but it also distinguishes between aesthetic and non-aesthetic. Not, of course, expecting an essentialist definition that could distinguish between the two, Goodman rather looks for the differing ways that the symbol processes might reveal themselves. Correspondingly, the differences are “neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for, but merely tend in conjunction with other such symptoms to be present in, aesthetic experience.”¹ The “symptoms” are: syntactic density, semantic density, syntactic repleteness, and exemplification. The first is characteristic of nonlinguistic systems and visual art in general and is

¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* 2nd ed. (Hackett, 1976), 252.

distinguished from disjointness and differentiation of characters, as density implies a lack of articulation. Semantic density is seen in the function of expression in the visual arts, as what is being exemplified is not obviously excluded from belonging to other characters or exemplifying symbols. Syntactic repleteness distinguishes those instances that are more diagrammatic from those that are more representational, such that the diagram's lines are not interpreted with the fine granularity with which a drawing is interpreted i.e., the thickness or color of the drawing's lines are relevant to the meaning whereas the diagram's line quality is unimportant to the symbolic referencing. Instantiation distinguishes showing from saying.

What constitutes the symptoms of the non-aesthetic? Goodman lists them as follows: "Density, repleteness, and exemplification, then, are earmarks of the aesthetic; articulateness, attenuation, and denotation, earmarks of the nonaesthetic."² Ambiguity, then, is more easily tolerated in the aesthetic than in the non-aesthetic, wherein the latter depends upon the clear symbolic meaning associated with the denotation of an articulate character. Understanding the aesthetic, on the other hand, requires "maximum sensitivity of discrimination", and the claim is not that the aesthetic is essentially mysterious and unknowable but that the aesthetic requires a precision of perceptual faculties and a careful attention to subtle details. Because the syntactic and semantic density of the system makes it difficult to determine the referent for any given character, the aesthetic is understood with greater difficulty than is the non-aesthetic.

But Goodman argues that the four symptoms are "severally neither sufficient nor necessary for aesthetic experience, they may be conjunctively sufficient and disjunctively necessary; perhaps, that is, an experience is aesthetic if it has all these attributes and only if it has at least one of them."³ And, Goodman notes, this definition is independent of quality assessments; what makes a "good" opera is left up to others.

11.2 The Similarity Between Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic

Now that a complete explication has been given of both Goodman's epistemology and of his aesthetics, it is easily possible to see the close affiliation one has with the other. As is well known, Goodman continually emphasizes that aesthetics is a part of epistemology, thus separating aesthetics from its more frequent associations with moral theory and value judgment, and also divorcing it from an affiliation with non-cognitive activities. As Goodman states,

The naïve notion that science seeks truth, while art seeks beauty, is wrong on many counts. Science seeks relevant, significant, illuminating principles, often setting aside trivial or overcomplicated truth in favor of powerful unifying approximations. And art, like science,

² Ibid., 254.

³ Ibid.

provides a grasp of new affinities and contrasts, cuts across worn categories to yield new organizations, new vision of the worlds we live in.⁴

As I have shown, Goodman's aesthetics is based on a referential and semantic account; an account that gives an analysis of the ways that words refer to objects in the world. In this account, all understanding is accomplished by tracing a symbol back to that to which it is referring, and once the circumscriptive correlation is complete so is the understanding. Symbols function as samples, which in turn refer to labels, but nothing comes already labeled. As Goodman states, there is no given and there is no innocent eye. In both science and art, we construct what we see, since each object has many different yet equally accurate descriptions, and the problem is to identify which of those descriptions is appropriate to the endeavor in which we are engaged. Given any instance, the inductive problem is to determine which of the labels exemplified by that particular object are to be projected i.e., which are important. Knowledge acquisition is accomplished through the implementation and use of symbol systems, the mechanics of which are revealed in the analysis of referencing functions and the inductive practice of the projection of predicates. As Goodman states toward the end of *Languages of Art*:

More to the immediate point of our inquiry, though, is the disclosure of certain special features of the functioning of symbols not only in overt induction but also in such kindred processes as category detection and pattern perception: first, that evidence takes effect only through application of a general symbol (label or term or hypothesis) having extension that properly includes the data; second, that the alternatives are primarily such general symbols, divergent in extension, rather than isolated particulars; and third, that pertinent time-and-trouble-saving habits can develop only through use of such symbols. Perhaps, indeed, these are earmarks of cognitive behavior in general.⁵

These processes are true in all fields of inquiry, whether art or science. Symbol recognition is the consequence of pattern perception and a prior projection of predicates, and this symbol recognition is the core of cognition, in all endeavors whether they are scientific or aesthetic. Goodman argues repeatedly against the mistaken notion that the two activities differ because science is cognition and art is emotion, or that they differ because science gives objective and certain facts and art gives only subjective opinion. As we have seen, the world of foundationalist epistemology, which had hoped to claim to give certain facts, has been abandoned by Goodman in favor of a coherentist view within relativistically built worlds, of which there are pluralistically many. Therefore, Goodman's relativism denies firmly established objective facts, as all facts are relative to a particular worldmaking activity, which itself is subject to the constant revisions credited to any inductive activity. In this, science is granted no more a foundational certainty than is art. Therefore, pluralism and relativism reinforce the lack of division between science and art. As he and Elgin state the problem in their co-authored book, *Reconceptions in Philosophy*:

⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Harvard University Press, 1984), 5.

⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* 2nd ed. (Hackett, 1976), 169-170.

Since by now most of us are well aware that mistakes are always possible, the quest for certainty has been abandoned. No sentences are incontrovertible, and no modes of reasoning infallible. Even so, the traditional restrictions on the application of 'knowledge' and on the scope and methods of epistemology have largely been retained. As a result, cognitively significant affinities between verbal and nonverbal symbols, between literal and metaphorical sentences, between descriptive and normative sentences have often been overlooked. Indeed, the exclusion of the evaluative, the figurative, and the nonverbal from epistemology has rendered their cognitive aspects all but invisible.⁶

Thus, since epistemology is the theory of knowledge, it then has to encompass all those aspects of experience that give us knowledge. Therefore, he consistently and repeatedly argues for viewing aesthetics as a sub-division of epistemology, as in the following quote from *Ways of Worldmaking*: "The philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology".⁷ He reiterates this basic point in many, many places, such as in *Of Mind and Other Matters*, when he makes the point slightly differently: "All told. . .[it is] my conception of epistemology as the philosophy of the understanding and thus as embracing the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art."⁸ However he states it, Goodman views aesthetics as part of epistemology.

Of course, this has the obvious consequence of abandoning essentialist questions in art, much as it had in epistemology. Goodman expressed this in many of his writings, including *Languages of Art, Of Mind and Other Matters*, and *Ways of Worldmaking*. In the latter, he stated: "If attempts to answer the question 'What is art?' characteristically end in frustration and confusion, perhaps – as so often in philosophy – the question is the wrong one."⁹ The question ought, he says, to be rephrased as "When is art?". His answer is not what came to be known as the institutional theory i.e., it is art when the artworld deems it so, but instead he articulated the program presented in *Languages of Art* e.g., the semantic account of reference. It is art if it is part of the symbol schema pertinent to the discipline in question i.e., it is music if it conforms to the notational system appropriate to music, or it is visual art if it conforms to the non-notational system appropriate to visual art. If its symbols are able to refer according to the rules established by the relevant schema, then it is art. And the activity of parsing those symbols – of tracing their referential routes – is the activity of understanding.

Goodman also argues for aesthetics as part of epistemology by countering that the position, which claims their separation, is not tenable. Though I have previously pointed to this argument of Goodman's, it bears repetition. Those who maintain that emotion is the central feature of the aesthetic and concomitantly that cognition is the essential feature of science are not able to say, precisely, in what way that is true; and hence, without a persuasive argument, the claim cannot be made. In other words, the

⁶ Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (Hackett, 1988), 4.

⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 4th ed. (Hackett, 1985), 102.

⁸ Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

⁹ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 4th ed. (Hackett, 1985), 57.

claim that emotion is central to art in ways that it is not central to science has not been convincingly argued, but instead, merely definitionally stipulated. Goodman argues, instead, that emotion is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the aesthetic. Therefore, the bifurcation between judging and knowing is denied by Goodman, and, instead, all knowledge acquisition is inductively judging something to be (provisionally) true within a certain world. This puts induction in a central role, and makes revision a continuous necessity. This, in turn, places a premium on new ways of looking at old information, and gives metaphor the role of cognitively reorganizing data. As Catherine Z. Elgin expressed the point:

There seems then to be no important difference in the cognitive roles of literal and metaphorical claims in science. Both are open to intersubjective scrutiny. Both can be contested, confirmed or disconfirmed by evidence, accepted and incorporated into a science or rejected as false, or as trivial, or as lacking in explanatory power. . . . The metaphor then both organizes the phenomena for investigation and provides a vocabulary with which to carry out that investigation. It is implausible, at best, to claim that a metaphor that plays these roles is not functioning cognitively.¹⁰

Clearly, the advantage to making aesthetics part of epistemology is that aesthetics can claim to be a source of genuine knowledge about the world instead of a mere barometric measuring of the viewer's sensate pleasure regarding that world, and for those who take art seriously (as does Goodman) this is a felicitous move. In other words, Goodman's symbol theory makes art a potential source for cognizing data and, therefore, as part of the cognitive process; hence, it is of epistemological importance.

¹⁰ Catherine Z. Elgin, *With Reference to Reference* (Hackett, 1983), 69.