Spinoza's Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

In the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that he will show how "prejudices have arisen concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind" (E1app/G II 78/10). He goes on to say that we are misled in our use of these concepts due to our assumption of divine teleology. Once properly disabused of this notion, we will see that these concepts are "only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination" (Ibid.). As imagination is the source of inadequate ideas for Spinoza, we can take him to be indicating here that our use of these concepts arises from the inadequate ideas that we have of things and that, consequently, we are mistaken in application of these concepts to the world around us. In other words, Spinoza seems to be saying that we cannot be realists with regard to value, at least while retaining our conventional understanding of these terms. In this chapter, I will be primarily concerned with Spinoza's understanding of aesthetic value, but will also touch on his views regarding morality and value theory more broadly.

There is a relatively persistent interpretation of Spinoza on which he has no aesthetics that goes back to Leibniz. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (Leibniz 1991), he tells us that all God's works must bear the mark of divine perfection and that "the contrary opinion seems to me extremely dangerous and very near to the opinion of the recent innovators who hold that the beauty of the universe and the goodness that we attribute to the works of God are but the chimeras of those who conceive of God in terms of themselves" (Leibniz, *DM*:2). Leibniz seems to be referring to the passage from E1app cited above. He takes Spinoza to be saying there that beauty, harmony, and perfection are not to be found in the universe, but are merely confused ideas in the mind. Others have interpreted Spinoza as having no objective or realist aesthetic theory, but maintaining a relativist account of aesthetic value. In this chapter, I will consider the various interpretations that have been offered of Spinoza's views on aesthetics. Following this, I will examine the possibility that Spinoza might be amenable to some kind of realist account of aesthetic value and

argue that he would, provided we are careful about the kind of metric we use for determining 'aesthetic value.' I have largely confined my discussion here to aesthetic perception and Spinoza's remarks in the *Ethics*, for reasons of space (for an interesting discussion of Spinoza's views on aesthetic creation and his discussion of the prophets in the *TTP*, see Gatens 2015).

2. Anti-Realist Interpretations

2.1 Error Theory

The strongest anti-realist interpretation that can be offered on Spinoza's behalf is a kind of error theory. According to this interpretation, Spinoza thinks that all of our assertions that attribute aesthetic properties to objects in the world (e.g. 'Bach's Mass in B Minor is stunning' or 'Your sister's vase is hideous') are systematically untrue and, further, that there is nothing that can make them true. This is because properties like 'being stunning' or 'being hideous' are not properly instantiated in these objects. Rather, these statements capture imaginative beliefs that do not track anything in the world.

To flesh this out a bit more, on this view Spinoza is claiming that aesthetic terms have no referent. Rather, we mistakenly attribute aesthetic properties to objects on the basis of our feeling that we are affected in a certain way by them. For example, I attribute the property of 'being stunning' to Bach's B Minor Mass. This claim is false because 'being stunning' is not a property of anything in the world. What motivates us to make this false claim is our perception of the object as being conducive to our health or well-being. It is important at this point to note that the error-theoretic interpretation does not merely posit that we mis-identify the object of our aesthetic judgment (i.e. we assert an aesthetic property to be true of an object but we mean that we are perceiving it in a certain way relative to ourselves). Rather, on this interpretation, Spinoza holds that our aesthetic beliefs really cannot be true of anything, but they are motivated by a certain effect some object has on us. This is important because it distinguishes an error theoretic interpretation from the other anti-realist interpretation I will consider below.

There are relatively few people that think that Spinoza was a strict error theorist with regard to aesthetic value, for a couple of reasons (for someone who can be interpreted as having an error-theoretic reading of Spinoza's views on aesthetics, see Morrison 1989). First, his explanation of

error in general seems to give us reason to doubt it. This is because Spinoza tells us that, "there is nothing positive in ideas, which causes them to be called false" (E2p33) and, more specifically, "falsity consists in the privation of knowledge" (E2p35). This means that, for Spinoza, the falsity of ideas is not due some property they have that would need to be removed in order for them to become true. Rather, falsity is a privation of an idea – it arises when ideas are incomplete. Given this understanding of falsity, it seems unlikely that Spinoza could be a true error theorist because error theory involves an individual entertaining an idea that has no true content whatsoever. As we have seen, Spinoza thinks that all ideas have at least some true content, even if they are woefully incomplete (i.e. inadequate).

The other reason we might hesitate to attribute an aesthetic error theory to Spinoza is that the passages that support this kind of reading, like the one taken from E1app above, do not just deal with aesthetic value, but with value more generally. When Spinoza condemns our use of concepts like 'beautiful' and 'ugly' in this particular passage, he also condemns the use of concepts like 'good' and 'evil.' However, while Spinoza does not dedicate much more discussion to aesthetic values, he does have a lot more to say about moral values. In Part IV, which is dedicated to an account of human bondage to the passions, Spinoza defines 'good' as 'what we certainly know to be useful to us' and 'evil' as 'what we know prevents us from being masters of our own good' (E4d1–2). We should pay special attention to Spinoza's use of 'certainly' in E4d1. This indicates that he thinks that there is something that our evaluative judgments track. In other words, this definition seems to indicate that our evaluative judgments are truth-evaluable (see Steinberg 2016 and Youpa 2010). So, while this discussion of evaluative concepts like good and evil remains consistent with the relativist flavor of his earlier remarks in E1app, Spinoza no longer seems to be asserting that all judgments regarding good and evil, in virtue of being morally evaluative, are completely misguided. Rather, he seems to be asserting that which is good for an individual at a given time, understood as what is useful according to this definition, is a matter of fact. Accordingly, our judgments about what is 'good' or 'bad' can be true or false depending on whether they are directed toward objects that genuinely fit this description or not.

If Spinoza thinks this is true of concepts like 'good' and 'evil,' then it seems like we have reason to think that it might be true of concepts like 'beautiful' or 'ugly.' This is because, as you will remember from above, the attribution of an aesthetic error theory to Spinoza was based on passages like the one in E1app that discuss both morally and aesthetically evaluative concepts. If

Spinoza's comments elsewhere indicate that he is not an error theorist about moral value, then this gives us at least some reason not to attribute such an extreme stance to him when it comes to aesthetic value. Instead, we might think that he is still an anti-realist about aesthetic value, but that he holds something like a relativist stance, which I will discuss in the following section.

2.2 Relativism

A more popular interpretation of Spinoza's discussion of aesthetic evaluation is one that understands him as a relativist (see Davidson 2017). This interpretation states that Spinozistic aesthetic judgments capture how one is affected by objects in one's environment. Proponents of this view often focus, again, on passages in E1app and, in particular, the passage where Spinoza writes, "for example, if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly… all this goes to show that everyone's judgment is a function of the disposition of his brain; or rather, has accepted affectations of the imagination as things" (E1app/GII 82). This passage is taken to indicate that, while Spinoza thinks that there is something that our aesthetic judgments track, the thing that underlies them is something that is specific to the mind of each individual. This is what makes this an anti-realist stance as opposed to an objectivist relativism. The anti-realist holds that aesthetic evaluations are mind-dependent. An objectivist relativist would hold that the property underlying our evaluative judgments is relative, but mind-independent. For instance, 'tallness' is an objective property that is nevertheless relative to individuals. On this view, then, Spinoza holds that aesthetic value is relative to how the subject imaginatively perceives the world interacting with her.

There are a number of reasons to favor this interpretation. First, it seems to be supported by the textual evidence. Second, it seems capable, at least in principle, of avoiding the pitfalls of interpreting Spinoza as an aesthetic error theorist. It fits with Spinoza's general account of falsity in that it attributes to aesthetic judgments some true content, despite this content being incomplete or confused. In keeping with this, it also allows for aesthetic judgments to be truth-evaluable in that it can be true or false whether something is being perceived as good or bad with regard to the subject. Finally, it aligns with at least a number of anti-realist interpretations of Spinoza's views on moral evaluation (for instance, Curley 1988; Kisner 2010; and Nadler 2006). As discussed in Section 2.1 above, given that Spinoza's discussions of aesthetic value are almost always performed

alongside discussions of moral value, it seems like it would be good for our interpretation of his aesthetic theory to have something in common with his moral theory.

However, there are some reasons that we might want to oppose the anti-realist relativist interpretation. The most notable of these again has to do with our interpretation of Spinoza's theory of moral evaluation. While there are many commentators who take Spinoza to hold an anti-realist view with regard to moral values, this is not uncontested (for instance, Miller 2005 and Youpa 2010). There is some textual evidence that might suggest that we should think that Spinoza holds a species of realism regarding moral value, for instance when he introduces the 'ideal' of human nature in the Preface to Part 4. If there is supposed to be some ethical ideal of perfection that we can approach, then this seems to make room for a realist interpretation of moral evaluation. If this is so, then we might also think that there is room for a realist interpretation of aesthetic evaluation. I turn to this question in the next section.

3. Realist Interpretations

3.1 An Aesthetic Exemplar

As mentioned above, one way of giving a realist interpretation of Spinoza's theory of moral value is to think of our moral evaluations as relative not ultimately to us but to some moral exemplar, most often identified with Spinoza's 'free man' (cf. Garrett 1995, Nadler 2015, and Soyarslan 2019). One passage that is taken to support this reading of Spinoza's moral philosophy comes from the Preface to Part 4:

> For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. (E4Pref/GII 208)

This passage seems to indicate that we can interpret Spinoza's definitions of good and evil as "what we certainly know to be useful to us" and "what we know prevents us from being masters

of our own good," respectively (E4d1–2), and apply these to how something will aid us in approaching some ideal of human perfection.

Now, how would we apply this to the case of aesthetic value? Rice notes that moral evaluations deal with the power of reason, while aesthetic ones presumably would deal with imagination, sensation being the traditional sphere of aesthetics (Rice 1996, pp. 483). So we would have to come up with a Spinozistic exemplar that would serve in this aesthetic capacity. Since Spinoza links his moral exemplar to an individual that expresses the highest manifestation of power of action (assuming his moral exemplar to be the 'free man'), we might think that our aesthetic exemplar is one who is sensitized to their action upon and power over their environment (Rice 1996, pp. 484–485). I understand this view to be saying that this individual enjoys a sensory awareness of the way that her interaction with people and objects around her is a manifestation of activity and an increase in her power.

There is some textual support for this view, at least as regards Spinoza's view of the passions and our representations of our interaction with our environment. We have already seen some of his remarks on beauty and how it amounts to the perception of how some object is conducive to our well-being. In addition, he tells us that "the affect of joy which is related to the mind and body at once I call pleasure or cheerfulness, and that of sadness, pain or melancholy" (E3p11s). He also tells us later:

> It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind… For the human body is composed of a great many parts which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once. (E4p45c2s)

These passages indicate that Spinoza not only holds that the imagination represents an increase in our power or activity of our mind and body together as pleasure and, in addition, that it is appropriate or wise to indulge in these pleasures in moderation. So we might think that the aesthetic exemplar is an individual who always avoids those things that would in fact cause harm or a decrease in power and seeks out and enjoys those things (in the proper amount) that cause strength or an increase in power.

There are a few problems with this view, however. First, while we have passages like those cited above where Spinoza acknowledges that sensory pleasures can be good, there is no indication that he thinks there is a separate 'aesthetic exemplar' that complements his moral exemplar. In addition, we should be wary of any kind of 'exemplar' that would guide us to power and activity through the imagination. This is because, without the guidance of reason, the faculty of the imagination is apt to mislead as often as not. So, for instance, while the imagination represents an increase in power and activity as pleasure, Spinoza also tells us that, "it should be noted [NS: here] that pleasure and pain are ascribed to a man when one part of him is affected more than the rest" (E3p11s). Later on, he warns of these kinds of passions, "pleasure can be excessive and evil, whereas pain can be good insofar as the pleasure, or joy, is evil" (E4p43). This is because sometimes one part of an individual can be excessively active, which will be represented as pleasure, but will not in fact be good for us.

The central problem here is this. If what distinguishes the aesthetic exemplar from the moral one is that it is primarily concerned with imagination or sensation, then it seems like it will not be able to guide us toward real aesthetic good solely on the basis of this faculty. However, if we stipulate that it must be led to aesthetic good through reason, then it seems like our aesthetic exemplar is not really distinct from the moral exemplar. One way to avoid this is to accept that there are not in fact two separate exemplars, but just the moral one that is guided by reason. This moral exemplar might always follow the dictates of reason but, if we agree with some interpretations, might nevertheless experience passions (cf. Nadler 2015 and Soyarslan 2019). If this is the case, then our exemplar might have an aesthetic dimension, enjoying imaginative or sensory pleasures in moderation and in a way guided by reason. While this seems to be plausible (at least if we accept the plausibility of an impassioned 'free man'), there is one final interpretation I would like to consider.

3.2 A Rationalist Aesthetics

One thing that most of the interpretations offered above have in common is that they assume that an aesthetic theory must have to do with sensory perception and, more specifically, the sensory perception of beauty or pleasure (Davidson 2017; Gatens 2015; Mignini 1981; Morrison 1989; and Rice 1996). However, this is a very specific conception of 'aesthetics' that is tied in a particular way to the history of the term. It should be acknowledged that asking if Spinoza had an 'aesthetic'

theory is somewhat anachronistic in that the theorist credited with establishing aesthetics as a discipline, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, lived after Spinoza's lifetime. This is not necessarily a problem unless we assume that Spinoza's views on 'aesthetic' value characterize this kind of value in the post-Baumgartian way. In particular, the problem only arises if we assume that Spinoza's central aesthetic concept will be the post-Baumgartian one of beauty and that Spinoza's aesthetics will be primarily concerned with this property in relation to sensory perception. However, as I have stated, it seems like this is exactly what many interpreters discussing Spinoza's aesthetics do.

Of course, we do talk about pre-Baumgartian theorists having aesthetic theories. There is plenty of discussion of the aesthetic views of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Boethius, Augustine, and others. However, it is usually acknowledged that these authors might not have a conception of 'aesthetic value' that aligns exactly with our contemporary senses of the term – often, this is what makes their views so interesting. My suggestion, then, is to take a similar approach to Spinoza. I think it is appropriate for the historical reasons I have already outlined that apply to pre-Baumgartian theorists generally, but I also think it is especially appropriate in Spinoza's case, since one of the hallmarks of his system is the call to reinterpret and clarify our commonsense use of concepts. As I have indicated, this is definitely the case with his use of moral concepts, and it is arguably true of many of his metaphysical concepts (e.g. 'substance,' 'attribute,' etc.). In this final section, I will suggest that we might think of Spinoza as having a rationalist aesthetics centered on a (properly Spinozistic) notion of perfection, under which we can understand the concepts like 'clarity' and 'distinctness' as aesthetic as well as epistemic.

Let us begin with Spinoza's remarks on 'perfection.' As we saw in the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza thinks that at least our general or commonsense usage of this term is confused. He stresses this again in the Preface to Part 4, writing, "perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking" (E4pref/GII 207). Immediately following this, though, he adds that, "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing" and then, a bit later, "by perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, i.e. the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no regard to its duration" (E4pref/GII 207, 209). So possessing a greater or lesser degree of perfection, for Spinoza, amounts to possessing more or less reality, which, as he discusses later in the passage, corresponds also to possessing more or less power (E4pref/GII 207). Of course, in Spinoza's system the being with the most power, reality, or

perfection is God. God is the only thing whose essence involves existence (E1p11), who is the cause of infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (E1p16), and whose power of being and acting is his essence (E1p34). From these it follows that, in Spinoza's conception of the world, God is the most perfect, powerful, and real being.

If we stipulate, then, that 'perfection' is a better central aesthetic concept for Spinoza's system than sensory beauty, the proper object of aesthetic contemplation and satisfaction will be the most perfect being, i.e. God. That we derive some kind of satisfaction from the contemplation of God is clear from the text. For instance, Spinoza tells us that we can have love for God through reason by our acquisition of adequate ideas of the affections of our bodies' relationship to God (E5p13–14). This is a kind of love because it is an increase in our power or activity (i.e. joy) accompanied by the idea of God as its cause (D5p15s). In addition to this, Spinoza tells us that the intellectual love of God is "the greatest satisfaction of the mind" (E5p27, E5p32c). Given that aesthetic objects are meant to give rise to a particularly refined or special kind of satisfaction (as opposed to, say, something merely agreeable or nice), we can look for nothing in Spinoza's system that would generate a more special or refined satisfaction than the proper contemplation of God.

I have suggested here that, insofar as Spinoza thinks that contemplation and understanding of God generates a special kind of satisfaction that is distinguished from mere sensory pleasure, this model of an aesthetics focused on perfection is not as strange as we might think. I will offer a couple more reasons we might favor this view. First, while it is not something all theorists agree on, the view that beauty can be analyzed as a kind of perfection has had number of supporters historically. For instance, Aquinas (1912–1936) writes that "there are three requirements for beauty … first, integrity or perfection" (*Summa Theologica*, I.39.8). Leibniz also seems to locate a significant connection between beauty and perfection, if we attend to the passage from the *Discourse* discussed in Section 1. Of course, often this was understood as perfection of physical form. However, as I mention above, it is not unusual for Spinoza to require us to reformulate our understanding of certain key concepts. A second, further point of support comes from noting that there is also a long tradition of identifying God as the proper object of aesthetic contemplation and satisfaction, of which Spinoza was likely aware. We see this most notably with St. Augustine (1949). In Book VI of *De Musica*, he contrasts sensual aesthetic pleasure with that derived from contemplation of God: "If we with firm steps draw back from every lascivious thought, in which there must always be a reduction of the soul's full existence, our delight in the Rhythm of Reason

is restored, and our whole life is turned to God…" (Augustine, *De Musica* 6.33). We also see expressed in this quote another somewhat Spinozistic thought that, in attending only to the imagination or sensory perception, we are relatively passive and our power or activity is diminished.

Of course, as with Spinoza's conception of 'perfection,' his understanding of God is very different from this traditional sense of God at play in Augustine. Rather than being a transcendent creator of the universe, Spinoza's God is the immanent cause of all things (E1p18), all of which are in God and conceived through God (E1p15). For Spinoza, then, contemplation of God involves acquiring true or adequate ideas about the world around us. This is because, in understanding these things adequately, we are literally understanding God. So, while I have suggested that God is the proper object of aesthetic satisfaction, this satisfaction can be generated by properly regarding anything in the world around us, ourselves included. One of the ways that adequate ideas are characterized in our perception is via their clarity and distinctness, so these characteristics will also have some aesthetic significance in addition to their epistemic role. Clarity and distinctness not only characterize an idea qua being true, but can also be understood as aesthetic properties of our idea of God when properly viewed. This is not to mention that 'clarity' and 'distinctness' have a similar aesthetic ring to them as other aesthetic properties like 'gracefulness' or 'delicacy.'

Now one might just think that what I have sketched here is a bit of bait-and-switch. After all, other philosophers from this period (e.g. Descartes) rely heavily on an epistemic sense of clarity and distinctness, but we probably would not want to attribute to them the kind of rationalist aesthetic I have discussed here. While I acknowledge this is true about Descartes, it is precisely the other features that distinguish Spinoza's philosophy from Descartes' that makes me believe it is appropriate in this case. First, Descartes does not think that we gain the same kind of satisfaction from contemplating God that Spinoza does. Since I have indicated this satisfaction is part of what makes God convincing as the appropriate object of aesthetic contemplation, this is one feature of Spinoza's philosophy that makes a rationalist aesthetic appropriate in his case. Second, Descartes does not share Spinoza's view that God is the immanent cause of all things, which means that even if Descartes thought that God was somehow the proper object of aesthetic regard, the clear and distinct ideas we would have of things around us would not be proper objects of aesthetic regard. From these contrasts we can begin to see that, rather than precluding him from having an aesthetic

theory as Leibniz believed, Spinoza's metaphysics is what enables him to have the kind of aesthetic theory I have suggested in this section that he has.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an overview of some of the ways that theorists have interpreted Spinoza's aesthetic views. The most popular view historically has been to think of Spinoza as having no aesthetic theory, or at least holding a kind of anti-realist position where aesthetic properties are not real properties of objects, but merely imaginative representations of their effects on us. Those who hold this interpretive stance are supported by Spinoza's numerous remarks that beauty and ugliness, like good and evil or perfection and imperfection, are nothing but imaginative ideas. However, other interpreters have argued that Spinoza can be understood as having a more robust aesthetic theory based on the idea that our imaginative representations of how objects affect us can report on what objects in our vicinity will be good or bad for us. On this view, we can construct an 'aesthetic ideal' whose refined sensibilities will guide her always toward those things that are good for her and allow her to avoid those things that are not. One modification of this view that I suggested would be to think of Spinoza's 'ethical ideal' as having an aesthetic side, where the individual who is led by reason will also take aesthetic pleasure in her encounters with the world.

Following this overview, I have suggested that all of these readings are somewhat anachronistic in that they assume a model of aesthetics that was not available to Spinoza. While I do not think that this is inherently a problem for these views, I believe that we are able to extract an aesthetic theory that is more properly in the spirit of Spinoza's project, in addition to being more historically appropriate. On this view, our aesthetic focus should be 'perfection' rather than 'beauty' and our aesthetic appreciation need not be a matter of imagination or the senses. Since Spinoza understands perfection as power, the proper object of aesthetic satisfaction in a Spinozistic aesthetic is God. When properly attended to, this object generates a unique and particularly refined sort of satisfaction. Aesthetic contemplation of God is something that is achieved by acquiring adequate ideas about the world around us, which are characterized by their clarity and distinctness.

On this view, these properties acquire an aesthetic dimension that complements their epistemic role. While I do not have space to fully defend this view, I aim to have presented an alternative that is attractive both in virtue of its Spinozistic spirit and historical fittingness.

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