We are going to assume that the most profitable approach to theorizing about art is a normative one. That is to say, for the next three chapters we will treat aesthetics as the attempt to formulate a theory of art that will explain its value, rather than one which, say, seeks to define what art is, or to determine its social function. One way of beginning to formulate a normative theory of art is to ask this question: 'What is it that we expect to get from art?' A spontaneous answer, even to the point of being commonplace, is pleasure or enjoyment. Most people wishing to pass favourable judgment on a book or a film will say that they 'enjoyed it'.

Hume and the standard of taste

Some philosophers have thought that the value of art is necessarily connected with pleasure or enjoyment, because, they argue, to say that a work is good is just the same as saying that it is pleasant or agreeable. The best known philosopher to hold this view was the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. In a famous essay entitled 'Of the standard of taste' he argues that the important thing about art is its 'agreeableness', the pleasure we derive from it, and that this is a matter of our sentiments, not its intrinsic nature. 'Judgments' about good and bad in art, according to Hume, are not really judgments at all, 'because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it' (Hume 1975: 238). 'To seek the real beauty, or the real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to seek the real sweet or real bitter' (ibid.: 239). That is to say, aesthetic preferences are expressions of the taste of the observer, not statements about the object, and Hume thinks the wide diversity of opinions about art that we find in the world is confirmation of this fact.

At the same time, Hume recognizes, while it is true that opinions differ widely, it is no less widely believed that at least some artistic sentiments can be so wide of the mark as to be discountable. He considers the example of a minor writer being compared with John Milton, the great poetic genius who wrote Paradise Lost. Though, says Hume, 'there may be found persons who give the preference to the former ... no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous'. What this implies is that, even though taste is a matter of feeling things to be agreeable or disagreeable, there is still a standard of taste, and the question is how these two ideas can be made consistent.

Hume's answer is that the standard of taste arises from the nature of human beings. Since they share a common nature, broadly speaking they like the same things. When it comes to art, he thinks, 'Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric [of the human mind], are calculated to please, and others to displease' (ibid.: 271). There are of course aberrant reactions and opinions; people can favour the oddest things. But Hume believes that the test of time will eventually tell, and that only those things which truly are aesthetically pleasing will go on calling forth approbation as the years pass.

On the face of it, Hume's theory does seem to fit attitudes to art. Artistic tastes differ greatly, but at the same time there is something to be said for the idea that by and large the same features of art find favour with most people; broadly speaking, most people like and admire the same great masterpieces in music, painting, literature, or architecture. Despite this and contrary to Hume, we cannot move from patterns of common taste to a standard of taste. The fact that a belief or feeling is shared by many people does not of itself mean that everyone is rationally obliged to adhere to it. If someone does have extremely peculiar musical tastes, say, we may regard them as odd, but if Hume is right that aesthetics is all a matter of feeling, we have no good reason to call them 'absurd and ridiculous'; they are merely different. If we want to say that some views about art are mistaken, we cannot make the mistake rest on human feeling about art - it just is what it is - but on something about the art itself.

It follows that the connection between art and pleasure is not a necessary one; to say that a work of art is good or valuable is not the same as saying that we find it enjoyable. Nevertheless it can still be argued that art is to be valued chiefly because of the pleasure or enjoyment it gives, and this is, I think, what most people who connect art and enjoyment mean to say.

Mill and pleasure

It is worth recording, however, that it is not altogether natural to speak of enjoyment uniformly for all the arts. People quite naturally speak of enjoying novels, plays, films, and pieces of music. But it is odd to speak of enjoying paintings, sculptures, and buildings, as opposed to liking or loving them. It follows that even if we were to agree that 'enjoyment' were the principal
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value of art, some further explanation would still be needed to show just what this might mean in the case of some of the principal art forms.

But the main problem with 'enjoyment' is not this. It is rather that in asserting that art offers enjoyment, we have said almost nothing. People who enjoy their work can be asked to explain what it is they find enjoyable, and in their answers they reveal what they find of value in it. 'Enjoyment' merely signals that they do find it so. Similarly, with art the initial claim that art is a source of enjoyment is little more than that it is worth attending to; what we need to know is, makes it worth attending to.

People who offer the explanation 'enjoyment' often have something more precise in mind, namely, pleasure. The notion of 'pleasure' also requires examination and clarification, because it too can be used in such a general fashion as to mean nothing more than 'enjoyment' in the sense just described. Moreover, mistaken notions of pleasure abound: those which treat pleasure and happiness as synonymous for instance, or which define pleasure as the psychological opposite of pain, as in the writings of the nineteenth-century British philosophers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, classically representative authors of philosophical utilitarianism. These misconceptions are understandable because most thinking about pleasure and happiness is caught up from the outset in a network of ideas which includes the contrasts between 'work and leisure', 'toil and rest', 'anxiety and contentment'. The sense of 'pleasure' we want to examine here is something like 'entertainment value' which, following R. G. Collingwood in The Principles of Art, we might call 'amusement'.

Collingwood is partly engaged in the traditional task of philosophical aesthetics - that is, defining what art is - but the way he approaches it embodies a normative or evaluative theory of art as well, an explanation of what is to count as 'true art'. Collingwood wants to show that art as amusement (along with art as craft and art as magic) falls short of art 'proper' and that those who turn to the arts for their amusement have made a certain sort of mistake. It may indeed be the case that they find their amusement in plays, novels, and so on. This is an important point to stress. No one need deny that there is indeed recreational amusement to be obtained from the arts. But Collingwood's contention is that if this is all we find there, we have missed the thing most worth finding. His stricture on art as amusement will be examined more closely in the next chapter. Here we need only register a doubt he raises about the facts of the case. The thesis that art is valuable for the pleasure or amusement we derive from it depends, among other things, on its being the case that we do indeed derive pleasure from it.

Is this in fact true? What is undoubtedly true is that people profess to enjoy works of art and many will expand upon this by recording the pleasure they get from them. Whether if we asked them to substitute the word 'amusement' for pleasure they would happily do so is much less certain. This is because the pursuit of pleasure in the sense of amusement does not explain the social estimation of art in a wider context. People generally think that great art is more important than as a mere source of amusement. Nor does it accord with the distinction that is commonly made between art and non-art, or the discriminations that are made between better and less good works (and forms) of art, between, say, pantomime and Shakespearean tragedy.

These points need to be considered one by one. It is widely accepted that art is a respectable object for the devotion of large amounts of time and considerable quantities of financial and other resources. Few people find it improper for schools and universities to encourage their students to devote themselves to intensive study of the arts (though some may query the content of the curriculum), nor do they call for special justification when governments, companies, and foundations spend large sums of money on galleries and orchestras. But they might well object if they were told that in teaching art, schools aimed to amuse their pupils, and would probably have serious doubts if similar sums were spent on extravagant parties or other occasions, whose much more obvious purpose is pleasure or amusement. Similarly it is acceptable, even admirable, for artists and critics to make a lifetime commitment to their work. By contrast any talk of commitment to a life of amusement would inevitably carry the same kind of jocular overtones as the phrase 'serious drinking'.

These estimations may be erroneous of course. This is a possibility that we ought not to rule out. It would prejudice many of the questions pertinent to normative philosophy of art if we were to assume that art has a value other and greater than amusement value. The point here, however, is that, if we identify pleasure with amusement, it is far from clear that the pleasure theory of art is as commonplace as it may have seemed at the start. It may be generally acceptable to say that people turn to Beethoven largely for pleasure, but less acceptable to suggest that they find his music amusing.

It might be said that this only shows that pleasure is not the same as amusement. However, once we shift our attention from what people are inclined to say, to the beliefs reflected in their social practices, it is not at all clear that most people do find most of what we call art pleasurable in any straightforward sense. Those in pursuit of pleasure who are faced with a choice between a detective story by Rex Stout or a novel by William Faulkner are almost certain to choose the former, just as they will prefer a Marx Brothers film to film noir or the work of Jean Luc Godard, though Faulkner and Godard are evidently artistically more significant. This need not be the case universally for the general point to hold; great novels can also be diverting and amusing. But the fact that pleasure and significance in art can be divorced in this way gives us reason to observe, along with Collingwood, that the prevalence of the belief that art is pleasurable may itself distort people's ability to ask honestly whether anybody is much
amused by it. Indeed, Collingwood thinks there is often a measure of self-deception in people's attitudes, and if we are honest we will have to agree that the entertainment value of high art is for most people quite low compared to other amusements.

The masses of cinema goers and magazine readers cannot be elevated by offering them...the aristocratic amusements of a past age. This is called bringing art to the people, but that is clap-trap; what is brought is still amusement, very cleverly designed by a Shakespeare or a Purcell to please an Elizabethan or a Restoration audience, but now, for all its genius, far less amusing than Mickey Mouse or jazz, except to people laboriously trained to enjoy it.

(Collingwood 1938: 103)

These social facts about art and the status it is usually accorded raise doubts about the depth of allegiance to the commonplace pleasure theory of art. There is thus a serious question whether it is true that art is for most people a source of pleasure, and it seems the answer is, 'probably not'.

If simple pleasure is what is at issue, on the surface at least, it is hard to see how any such distinction could be drawn other than in the way we suggest. There appear to be two possibilities only. Either we say that higher pleasures hold out the possibility of a greater quality of pleasure, or we say that a higher pleasure is of a different quantity.

The first of these alternatives is plainly inadequate because it makes the value of art strictly commensurable with that of other pleasures. If the only difference is that pleasure in art is more concentrated, it can be substituted without loss by more items affording a lower pleasure. Thus, if what Tolstoy's Anna Karenina has over Melrose Place or Neighbours is quantity of pleasure, we can make up the difference simply by watching more episodes of Melrose Place. The implication of this line of thought is that people who have never acquired any familiarity with any of the things that pass for serious art, including the serious elements in folk art, are in no way impoverished, provided only that they have had a sufficient quantity of more mundane pleasures. Most of us would want to dissent from such a judgment, but whether we do or not, the fact of this implication is enough to show that the pleasure theory of art understood in this way is inadequate, since it cannot show art to have any special value at all.

Mill thinks that 'it is absurd that...the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone' (Mill 1985: 12). Instead he appeals to the respective quality of different pleasures.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any
feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it ... we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality ... On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures ... the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final.

(ibid.: 14-15)

According to Mill, this higher quality of pleasure more than compensates for any diminution in quantity and will in fact offset a good deal of pain and discontent. In a famous passage he concludes:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the pig, or the fool, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.

Whether Mill's account of higher and lower pleasures is adequate for his purposes in Utilitarianism is not the question here. Rather we want to ask whether the same strategy can be used to explain the difference in value that is attached to light and serious art. And the answer plainly seems to be that it does not. This is chiefly because, as we know, tastes differ in art, and consequently the test he proposes cannot be used to adjudicate between competing responses to works of art. Suppose for instance that a dispute arises about the relative quality of pleasure to be obtained from The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly and King Lear. Mill is obviously correct in his assertion that someone who has seen only the former is not qualified to give judgment. Consequently it is his majority test that must do the work. Assuming, almost certainly without foundation, that majority opinion among those who have seen both favours Shakespeare, we have no reason to infer from this that Shakespearean tragedy generates a higher quality of pleasure than a good western. The judgment that it does may signal no more than a difference of taste between the majority and the minority. We cannot show that beer is better than wine simply by showing that more people prefer it. Since it is possible for an individual to prefer a worse thing to a better thing, it is also possible that the majority of people will do so.

It might be said that construing Mill's test in terms of taste ignores an important suggestion: higher pleasures involve the higher faculties; this is what makes them of a higher quality. Such seems certainly to be Mill's view, and it is what justifies him in discounting the opinions of the fool and the pig. Their experience is of a lower order and hence their pleasures are too. Applied to the subject of art what this implies is that serious art engages aspects of mind that lighter art does not address. Now this may, in general, be true, but it is unclear whether this would make a difference to the relative value of the two in terms of pleasure. Most people will accept Mill's claim that there is more to human life than eating, sleeping, and procreating. We might also agree that human beings can expect to enjoy pleasures which are closed to pigs because of innate endowments of mind and emotional capacity. But these evident differences give us no reason to think that the engagement of a higher capacity brings a higher pleasure. Pigs cannot do crossword and fools cannot while away the time with mathematical 'brain teasers'. Such activities undoubtedly engage higher faculties, but this of itself does not give us reason to think that the pleasure we derive from them is of a more valuable kind than the pleasure to be found in more simple pastimes. We can stipulatively define 'higher' pleasures as those which involve the higher faculties if we choose, but this will not give us reason to rank crosswords and the like as more significant or important than any other pleasurable pastime.

More importantly still, even if, despite this point, majority judgments of the sort Mill describes could be consistently aligned with 'serious' art (which is doubtful), his account assumes that the explanation of this lies in the pleasure that is generated by different experiences. But why should artistic preference be based upon pleasure rather than some other value, yet to be fully disclosed? It is logically consistent (whether true or not) to maintain the following three propositions.

1 Over the ages majority opinion has found there to be greater value in serious than in light art.
2 People customarily speak of this value in the language of enjoyment.
3 This greater value is not adequately explained in terms of pleasure or enjoyment.

But if these three propositions are consistent, this shows that nothing has yet been said to substantiate the pleasure theory of art, and the objections we have considered imply that the value of art does indeed lie elsewhere.

Kant and beauty

So far we have been working with a uniform notion of pleasure as just one kind of experience. But it has sometimes been argued that what we find in art is not a higher grade of everyday pleasure but a distinctive kind of 'aesthetic pleasure'. The Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden, for instance, urges us to recognize that aesthetic pleasures 'have a special character of their own and exist in a different manner from the pleasures deriving from a good meal or fresh air or a good bath' (Ingarden 1972: 43). It should be added that Ingarden thinks this recognition to be just a small first step in arriving at a
proper understanding of aesthetic value.) Whether there is such a thing as a
distinctively aesthetic pleasure is obviously an important question in itself.
But still more important for present purposes is another question. Can it give
a satisfactory explanation of the value of art? An appeal to ‘aesthetic’ plea-
sure will accomplish very little if we mean by this nothing more than ‘the
special kind of pleasure art gives’. To avoid this sort of emptiness what
is needed is another term for aesthetic pleasure. Then we need to
establish a relation between this new term and some value other than everyday pleasure or
amusement.

One possible term which is to be found frequently in writing about art, is
‘beauty’. The idea that the reward for the art lover is ‘delight in the contempla-
ition of the beautiful’ is an old and familiar theme, an idea probably given
its fullest expression by the great eighteenth-century German philosopher
Immanuel Kant. The introduction of beauty allows us to say that the impov-
erishment of the pig or the fool, whose pleasure is of rather an earthy kind, is
not to be explained in terms of ordinary pleasure at all but in terms of the
absence of beauty.

The idea of the beautiful is a recurrent topic in the philosophy of art. Its
merits have usually been discussed as a defining characteristic of art and, as
we shall see in Chapter 8, definitions of art encounter serious difficulties.
However, it is not difficult to construe the connection with art and beauty as
a normative thesis, that is, beauty is something valuable and art is valuable
because it consists primarily in the creation and contemplation of beauty.
Something of this thesis is to be found in Kant, and his ideas can usefully be
considered in this context.

Kant locates aesthetic judgment halfway between the logically necessary
(an example would be mathematical theorems) and the purely subjective
(expressions of personal taste). Though the proposition ‘this is beautiful’ has
the appearance of a cognitive judgment, that is, a judgment about how
things are, in the Critique of Judgment, his great work on aesthetics, Kant
says expressing such a judgment ‘cannot be other than subjective’, that is,
ithis arising from a feeling of approval (§1). On the other hand, it is not merely subjective since like a
judgment about fact or necessity, the person who makes it
can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his
own subjective self might alone be party ... and therefore ... must
believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from every
one. Accordingly he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a
quality of the object and the judgment logical ... although it is only
aesthetic and contains merely a reference of the representation of the
object to the subject.

In plainer language the idea is this: beauty needs to be appreciated, sub-
jectively. It is not just a property of an object that we might dispassionately
record, such as being fifty years old. To call something beautiful is not just to
describe it but to react to it. On the other hand, our reaction is not merely
personal, as it might be when we refer to something of which we happen to
be especially fond. In declaring an object to be beautiful, we also mean to say
that there is something about it which will make other people like it as well.

But can the special delight that is here located in the aesthetic offer an
explanation of the value that is usually attributed to art? Kant has more to
say about this. He contrasts the sort of approval which expresses a delight in
the beautiful with that which declares something to be agreeable and that
which declares it to be good. The mark of the agreeable is that it is purely
a matter of personal taste (Kant gives the example of a preference for Canary-
wine), and those who make such appraisals have no reason to expect others
to share their preference. By ‘the good’ Kant here means what is useful and
accordingly holds that judgments of this sort arise from the concept of
the end that is to be served; given an end in view, whether something is good
(i.e., useful to that end) is not a matter of taste but a matter of fact. It follows
that the peculiar value of aesthetic delight lies in this: it is composed of a
judgment that is disinterestedly free, free that is to say, from both practical
and cognitive determination. It is not a judgment of either personal liking or
general usefulness but a judgment arising from the ‘free play of the
imagination’.

How is such a judgment possible? If it really is to be free and yet a judg-
ment, it must command universal assent just as a claim to knowledge does,
while at the same time, if it is not to be determined by objective properties, it
must arise from subjective feeling. To explain this curious double nature,
Kant postulates a sensus communis or ‘shared sense’ among humans, which
is invoked when a judgment of taste is made (§§22 and 40). If this shared
sense is not to be converted into objective common agreement about classes
of things and thereby lose what is distinctive to the judgment of taste, judg-
ments of taste must be ‘invariably laid down as a singular judgment upon the
Object’. This is why ‘delight’ in the beautiful is fixed upon an object; it takes
the form not of an intellectual classification but contemplation of the object
itself.

Kant’s aesthetics is notoriously difficult to understand. For present pur-
poses however we can make the following relevant observations. Suppose
that Kant is correct in thinking that a peculiar delight arises from the free
play of the imagination on some object: a picture, a poem, or a piece of
music for instance. The connection between this and the activity of art
remains somewhat obscure. Kant has a philosophy of art as well as an
account of the aesthetic judgment. That is to say, he is concerned both with
the artifacts of art and the attitudes we bring to them. But on the strength of
what he says in the third Critique, the relation between the two is very hard
to determine. If judgments of taste are as he says they are, then presumably
they may freely play where they choose, provided only that they express themselves as singular judgments upon an object. If finding something beautiful is a subjective matter, though one which commits us to believing that others will also find the object in question beautiful, there is no obvious restriction on what we can find beautiful. One acknowledged result of this is that natural beauty seems as fitting an object for aesthetic delight as anything an artist might create, but so too are scientific theories and geometrical proofs.

Second, at best Kant has shown that judgments of taste constitute a distinctive activity of mind, namely, the free play of imagination. Allowing that there is the common sense of which he speaks, we may add that this is an activity of mind in which human beings characteristically engage. But its being distinctive and its being engaged in, taken together, do not imply that it has any special value, even though Kant's way of speaking continually suggests it does. Why should it not be that here we have something wholly idle, however widely engaged in? There is a parallel in humour. When I say a joke is funny, I do not simply mean that I am amused by it, but imply that others will also find the object in question beautiful, there is no obvious restriction on what we can find beautiful. If finding something beautiful is a subjective matter, though one which commits us to believing that others will also find the object in question beautiful, there is no obvious restriction on what we can find beautiful. One acknowledged result of this is that natural beauty seems as fitting an object for aesthetic delight as anything an artist might create, but so too are scientific theories and geometrical proofs.

Of course it might be asserted that beauty's value lies in nothing but itself. This, leaving aside Kantian aesthetics, reflects a simpler and more widespread claim, that beauty is to be valued for its own sake. 'Beauty for beauty's sake' is a familiar artistic slogan, similar in spirit to Oscar Wilde's celebrated remark that all art is quite useless. Yet to accept, as most people probably would, that the value of beauty is not to be reduced to or explained in terms of something else such as usefulness, still leaves a gap in the argument. We cannot make the jump from the value of beauty to the value of art without some additional explanation. Kant does have something to say about the 'genius' of the artist and its relation to the beautiful, but the fact is that aesthetic taste is not a purely subjective matter but something which claims universal assent; second, that it arises not from any concept of the understanding but from the free play of the imagination; and third, that the ability to play freely is the peculiarity of artistic 'genius'. This is where Kant's philosophy of art joins his aesthetic. Taste, according to Kant, is merely a critical, not a productive faculty. While 'a natural beauty is a beautiful thing; artistic beauty is a beautiful representation of a thing' (§48, emphasis original) and it is the special task of genius to make beautiful representations. The problem is that on Kant's account there seems no more than a contingent, one might almost say accidental, connection between the exercise of taste and the production of beauty.

In contrast, Gadamer thinks that we can make a much closer connection than Kant does if we attend more carefully to the idea of genius. As Kant explains it, the mark of genius lies in productive activity which does not subserve some purpose that makes it useful, and which cannot be captured in set rules or formulas. Even the genius does not know the rules by which his free creative activity is determined. What Gadamer observes is that 'the creation of genius can never really be divorced from the con-geniality of the one who experiences it' (Gadamer 1986: 21), which is to say that appreciating a work of art requires imaginative activity on the part of the observer no less than the maker. The mind of the artist and the mind of the audience, we might say, must be mutually engaged in creative activity.

A work of art . . . demands to be constructed by the viewer to whom it is presented. It is . . . not something we can simply use for a particular purpose, not a material thing from which we might fabricate some other thing. On the contrary, it is something that only manifests and displays itself when it is constituted by the viewer. (ibid.: 126)

This is why aesthetic judgment and artistic production go hand in hand. The artist's creativity needs its audience, and for the audience, creative art provides 'the experiences that best fulfil the ideal of "free" and disinterested delight' (ibid.: 20). An artist who cannot capture the attention of an audience is a failure, whatever merits may be thought to lie in the work, but a
great work of art stimulates and directs the perceptions of the audience, and is not only passively subject to appreciation.

Granted all this, we may nevertheless ask why experiences of this kind are to be valued. Gadamer thinks we must look at what he calls 'the anthropological basis of our experience of art', and this turns out to be play. It is a fact about human beings (and some other animals) that they engage in play. In thinking about play we readily contrast it with work and are thus disposed to accept its characterization as purposeless activity. But in Gadamer's view it is a deep mistake to suppose that this is a contrast between 'serious activity' and 'mere diversion'. What is significant about play is that, although in an important sense it is indeed activity without a purpose, it is not aimless but structured. In play we can discern rules and goals which are established within the play itself, and this is true even in the simple games of small children. So for instance the aim in soccer is to put the ball in the net. Viewed extrinsically, such an accomplishment is valueless and accomplishes nothing. What is there to value about a leather ball crossing a line? This is the sense in which the game is purposeless. But viewed intrinsically, that is, within the terms of the game itself, the achievement is not to be described in these terms, but as a goal. And a goal is an accomplishment, something that lends focus and point to the rules of play and to the skill that may be exhibited in it.

Play can be serious, not in the sense that it is professionalized, but in the sense that it demands, solely for its own purposes, the best temperaments and the finest skills of which human beings are capable. Now Gadamer thinks that art is a kind of play, in which together artist and audience join. What is distinctive about great art is the challenge it presents to the viewer to discern a meaning within it. This is not a meaning which can be conceptualized or explicated in language (to this extent Gadamer follows Kant closely) but is rather symbolic, that is, a work of art is something which (in words of Austin Farrer) aims to be that which it represents. The artist's challenge to the audience is to engage in a creative free play of images whereby a self-representation is realized.

This is a communal activity. Since the realization of symbol requires cooperative activity, this same activity is something in which all and any may engage. (This is Gadamer's interpretation of Kant's sensus communis.) His explanation of the value that attaches to the cooperative activity is novel and interesting. We discover in art, according to Gadamer, the same kind of universality we discover in festivals. The important thing about festivals in Gadamer's analysis, is that they punctuate the flow of time, so to speak.

We do not describe a festival as a recurring one because we can assign a specific place in time to it, but rather the reverse: the time in which it occurs only arises through the recurrence of the festival itself.

(ibid.: 41).

Thus, everyday events are located before or after Christmas, for instance, not the other way around. Christmas is the 'marker' relative to which other days take their significance. One consequence is that festivals are 'not subject to the abstract calculation of temporal duration'(ibid.) Gadamer thinks that we have two fundamental ways of experiencing time and in festival time we get, as it were, a taste of eternity. In an elegant summary he says this:

[In the experience of art we must learn how to dwell upon the work in a specific way. When we dwell upon the work, there is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us. The essence of our temporal experience is learning how to tarry in this way. And perhaps it is the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity.

(ibid.; 45)

This compelling final sentence reveals where the value of great art ultimately lies. The observation has however a certain vagueness, for we have not been told what the nature of this form of 'relating' is. As I hope to show, despite the many merits of Gadamer's analysis, this is a crucial omission.

Plainly Gadamer is correct to resist the correlation between 'play' and pleasurable diversion and to stress that 'play' can be as serious as anything else in human experience. For this reason, it seems to me, in identifying art as a form of play, he endorses a view of art importantly different from the commonplace pleasure view, whatever superficial similarities there may be. Moreover, in stressing the creative participation of audience as well as artist, and hence the necessary unity of what Kant would call the estimation and production of the work, he has bridged the gap that appears to exist in Kant's aesthetic. Nor is his account of art as symbol to be treated as yet another attempt at 'necessary and sufficient conditions'. Since his principal interest is in showing the importance of art, we can reasonably construe him to be giving an account of the value that resides in art at its best, even if his manner of speaking does not always bear this interpretation. Finally, by attempting to show art to be 'perhaps the only way' of relating to eternity, he has, I think, given the right sort of answer. That is to say, he has shown how art contributes to the human pursuit of significance.

There are of course important questions about the meaning of 'eternity'. Is there such a dimension? Philosophers have often argued that eternity is an incoherent idea, that we can attach no sense to it, and a theory which relies on it is to that degree weakened. We might however preserve the major elements of Gadamer's theory of art as play with something less ambitious. Another philosopher who has pursued the idea of art as play is the American Kendall Walton. In his book Mimesis as Make-Believe, he develops and applies the idea that many art works are what he calls 'props' in a game of make-believe, and he finds the value of art rests in the value of playing this game.
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Make-believe – the use of (external) props in imaginative activities – is a truly remarkable invention. ... We can make people turn into pumpkins, or make sure the good guys win, or see what it is like for the bad guys to win. ... There is a price to pay in real life when the bad guys win, even if we learn from experience. Make-believe provides the experience – something like it anyway – for free. The divergence between fictional and truth spares us pain and suffering we would have to expect in the real world. We realize some of the benefits of hard experience without having to undergo it.

(Walton 1990: 68)

Walton’s theory, which will be mentioned again in a later chapter, rests its case for the value of art on an idea that is less elusive (if also more pedestrian) than that of ‘relating to eternity’. Works of art provide benefits without the cost that would normally attach to them. But he shares Gadamer’s basic contention, that art is a kind of play, a suggestion we have seen has important virtues. Still, to refer to art as a game is to employ a metaphor, and one way of asking whether the metaphor is adequate is to look at a literal use of ‘game’, namely sport.

Art and sport

Sport is a variety of play, and for this reason it is wrong to think of sport as mere diversion or entertainment. Some sport is lighthearted, some is serious, and what creates the possibility of serious sport is the fact that sport can provide a structured but self-contained activity in which human virtues and vices can display themselves. Moreover this display is not for the sake of something else but for its own sake. Thus sporting contests require prowess and stamina, intelligence and ingenuity, courage, integrity, forbearance, determination, and so on. Different games require different skills and mentalities, but all provide, not merely occasions for, but vehicles for, the realization of these distinctly human capacities.

It is because of its connection with this sort of achievement and expression that sport has a value greater than the pleasure which arises from amusing diversion. As with art, this feature of sport justifies expenditure of time and money on a scale which, if devoted to more mundane pleasures, would be regarded as indulgence. Of course people can overestimate the importance of sport, and perhaps they often do, but someone who tries to remind us that ‘it’s only a game’ has, on at least some occasions, failed to see just what role sport can have in the realization of human excellence. In short, sport is free play of the sort that Gadamer isolates and analyses. What then is the relevant difference between sport and art?

Following Gadamer’s analysis, we might be inclined to argue that,

whereas art involves a cooperative act of creation on the part of both artists and audience, sport is participant-centred, and the audience mere spectators. But, as Gadamer himself implies, this is not so. The significance of a sporting occasion is often determined by spectator participation as much as by sporting endeavour. What makes a win into a victory or a loss into a defeat is a function of spectator expectation and involvement. Moreover, sporting occasions have that character of festival that Gadamer finds in art, and hence the underlying universality that Kant’s common sense possesses. It is precisely because the individual can get swept up in a communal involvement which cannot be articulated in words that the appeal of sport crosses almost every boundary. It is for this reason too that sporting events can have the character of national contests, triumphs, and defeats.

The self-contained and universal character of sport allows it to provide the experience of ‘eternity in time’ that Gadamer attributes to art, though ‘eternity in time’ is an expression not of Gadamer’s but of the Danish religious thinker Kierkegaard. Wimbledon, the Superbowl, or the Cup Final, provide occasions similar to Christmas and Easter in just this respect that ordinary events can be related in terms of them and not the other way about.

But if all this is true, if sport no less than art can allow us to ‘tarry’ and thereby taste eternity, why is art to be valued distinctly from sport, or even as better than sport? One answer would be that we have so far ignored the symbolic character of art. The importance of symbol is that it is a form, perhaps the highest form, of self-representation. A symbol, although it represents, does not direct us beyond itself, as do other forms of representation. It contains all that is needed to structure the free play of imagination and understanding. Because it is self-representative, it is self-contained.

Now it is true that as far as common speech goes, the symbolic is to be associated with art rather than sport. What is not so clear is whether this makes any significant difference to their respective values. It is not clear that the presence of symbol in art and its absence in sport gives us any reason, following Gadamer’s analysis, to value art more highly than sport. The value of art seems to arise through the self-containment of symbol: the free play of creative activity is invoked and directed entirely within the work of art and we need not look beyond the work. Surely the same is true of sport. The game itself provides for the engagement of all our faculties; we need not look beyond it.

It is clear that Gadamer means us to regard art as an especially valuable form of play, but we have found nothing in his analysis that gives us reason to discriminate between art and sport in this regard. If both Gadamer’s analysis and the subsequent argument are convincing, there is a conflict here with the widespread belief that art is of higher value than sport. That this belief is indeed widespread can hardly be doubted. Though sportsmen
and women are often fêted as much as artists and performers, in the longer term the great figures of sport are not ranked alongside the great figures of art. Although there are sports equivalents of Maria Callas and David Hockney - Jesse Owens or Sugar Ray Robinson perhaps - there are no sporting equivalents of Shakespeare or Mozart. Great creative artists such as these take their place beside historically significant philosophers, scientists, religious figures, and political heroes; great sportsmen and women do not. We could dismiss this and conclude that there is no difference in value between art and sport, and that any general belief to the contrary is a cultural prejudice. Or we can endorse this evaluation and seek some explanatory justification of it. This is just what Gadamer's theory of art does not supply, because by his account the two come out on a par. The same is true of Kendall Walton. He believes that art is literally a game, but if so it enjoys no special advantages over other games, except possibly in terms of quantitative rather than qualitative involvement, which raises again the problems we found in Mill.

We ought not to suppose, however, that this is a conclusive objection to the theory (though Gadamer's way of speaking suggests that he himself might regard it as such). The relative estimation of art and sport could indeed be erroneous, and arguably some widely held estimations of this sort are erroneous. One of the attractions of normative theory of art is that it can generate social criticism of just this sort. Since how we value art and the relative importance attributed to different kinds and forms of art are distinguishing features of our cultural life, a critical investigation of the true value of art is at the same time an examination of the rationality of our culture. Collingwood regards philosophy of art as having this social dimension also, and he is not sparing in his social criticism.

The cliques of artists and writers consist for the most part of a racket selling amusement to people who at all costs must be prevented from thinking themselves vulgar, and a conspiracy to call it not amusement but art.

(Collingwood 1938: 90)

Just as the relative estimation of so-called high art and folk art may be based on nothing more than custom and prejudice, so the relative standing accorded to art and to sport may not reflect real differences in value. This and similar possibilities must for the moment remain open.

Most people will object to the analysis of art as play because it cannot attribute to Shakespeare or Mozart any greater significance than to the leading sporting figures of the day. We may strengthen the objection by adding the observation of a striking difference between art and sport which the 'play' theory does not seem able to accommodate. Art can have content whereas sport cannot. That is to say, a play or a book or a painting can be about something, but it would be senseless to speak of a game of tennis or football's being about anything. Moreover, it is in the meaning or content of a work of art, what it communicates, that the value is often supposed to lie, a meaning which may be examined again and again.

Having content and having meaning are not synonymous. There are important differences between them. The point here however is that to draw a parallel between art and sport is to omit an important ingredient of art. Just what this missing ingredient is has to be explained further, but for the moment I shall refer to that ingredient as the 'content' of art and observe that this element of 'content' is not to be explained by the contingent fact that most artistic activity results in an abiding work of art, while games do not. Even in the age of video recorders, when games can be recorded for posterity, there is relatively little to be gained from repeated viewing of them, leaving aside external gains like acquiring a better mastery of the techniques of the game. Nor could a game be played again in the way that a drama can. The difference is that the drama has a meaning that can be explored; the game, however compelling to watch, has none.

Walton, in the omitted parts of the passage quoted previously, speaks of exploration and of insight.

The excitement of exploring the unknown will be lost to the extent that we construct the worlds ourselves. But if we let others (artists) construct them for us, we can enjoy not only the excitement but also the benefits of any special talent and insight they may bring to the task.

(Walton 1990: 67-8)

Exploration and insight are not terms that naturally apply to games, just as it would be odd to speak of games as profound, shallow, or sentimental, descriptions which are readily applied to works of art. The more apposite use of all these terms is in contexts where it makes sense to speak of content or subject matter, and this implies once more that art, unlike sport, has communicative import. Whether this important fact can be made to justify the differing estimates of each depends upon the content of the communication. Here we encounter another important area of debate in the philosophy of art, namely the communicative nature of art. Of the rival theories on this point, one has dominated thinking about the arts for over a hundred years. This is the view that art communicates emotion or has emotional impact. It is to this theory that the next chapter is devoted. Before that, it is useful to retrace our steps by way of summary.

Summary

The commonplace view that the value of art lies in the pleasure we get from it has been found to be deficient on a number of grounds. First, it is not clear that what is commonly regarded as the finest in art is, except for those
'laboriously trained to enjoy it', a real source of amusement. Second, if art's value is pleasure, this makes it nearly impossible to explain the various discriminations that are made within and between forms and works of art. Third, it is hard to see how the pleasure theory could sustain the sorts of evaluative distinctions that are made between art and non-art in the cultural and educational institutions of our society. We might try to amend the pleasure theory by speaking of higher or distinctively aesthetic pleasures. But in fact no such distinction seems to be sustainable. Even if we replace aesthetic pleasure with a Kantian conception of beauty, we are pulled in the wrong direction, namely, towards the mental state of the audience, and we thus appear to lose any possibility of explaining the peculiar value of art works themselves.

It should be noted that nothing in the argument against the pleasure theory implies that art cannot be entertaining, or that people are never entertained by it, or that some things that are commonly regarded as works of art are not valued chiefly because of the pleasure they give. Nor does the argument deny that paintings and pieces of music are beautiful and are partly valued for this reason. All that the argument so far has shown is that if the chief value of art were to reside in the pleasure that is to be derived from it, or in its being an occasion for judgments of beauty, art cannot be given the high estimation we commonly give it.

Gadamer, building upon Kant's aesthetic, offers us a more sophisticated version of a similar theory according to which art is to be valued as play. The advantage of 'play' over amusement reveals a mistake in regarding play as mere diversion. Play is a serious and important part of human life, and in Gadamer's analysis may even be shown to have a semi-religious significance. By Walton's account it is a game which has the benefits of experience without the usual costs.

But for all this it remains play, and this means that we cannot, as we customarily do, draw a distinction between the importance of art and the importance of sport. Sport can be no less 'serious' than art in Gadamer's theory. In itself this is no refutation, but combined with the further observation that art, unlike sport, can communicate something, that it can mean something, there does seem to be reason to look further and to ask whether this element of communication might not justify the attribution of greater value to art. One familiar suggestion is that art communicates emotion, and this is the idea we examine next.

Suggestions for further reading

As far as possible, suggestions for further reading are taking from Neil and Ridley (eds), The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern, hereafter referred to as N&R.

David Hume, 'Of the standard of taste', N&R p. 254.
Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the beautiful' N&R p. 269.