

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Teaching the Art of Judgment

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As a teacher, I have no right to tell my students how to vote or what religion to practice. I don't see that telling them to prefer *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Da Vinci Code* is any different. My job is to enhance my students' abilities to judge, not present authoritative judgments to them.¹ Any student, even one in kindergarten, has already developed preferences, even if the reasons for those preferences are mostly inchoate. Articulating those reasons—submitting them to scrutiny through public conversation—should be one aim of aesthetic education. In this essay, I consider what teaching the art of judgment entails. Working from and through the example of an aesthetic object is particularly effective in leading students to understand the processes of judgment formation and to consider the bases of their own judgments.

Traditionally, *judgment* names the ability to recognize the full nature and import of something encountered in experience. Thus, the teacher is aiming to enhance powers of apprehension. But apprehension bleeds inevitably into selection. One chooses to spend time with this object, experience, or person, not that one. Criticism, the articulated response to the encounter with an aesthetic object, is often thought to invariably involve a judgment about whether that object is any good. Statements like “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is better than *Moby-Dick*” litter works of aesthetic theory from David Hume on despite being just about meaningless absent the specification of criteria. Particular qualities, contexts of use, and purposes must underwrite any judgments of worth—and those criteria simply are assumed to be held in common with others when blanket statements of value are offered. That readers in 1856 would have preferred Stowe's novel to Melville's, while “settled opinion” by 1956 gave the palm to *Moby-Dick*, tells us about revaluations of sentimentalism, of direct versus indirect political rhetorics, and of melodrama, not

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about something eternally true. So it is not a question of reaching the right judgments of value, but of understanding what underwrites particular judgments of value.

Crucial to any evaluation of an object is the ability to discern its features and its relation to me and others who encounter it. Just what is this thing and how does it move its potential audiences? *Judgment* thus names both the power of discernment, the capacity to apprehend the thing in all its multitudinous variety and complexity, and a similar capacity to discern the complexities of my responses to it—and the responses of others. Following Hannah Arendt's reading of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, I want to emphasize this last bit (hearing and understanding the responses of others)—and take it as the foundation stone for aesthetic education.

Like Kant, Arendt distinguishes between determinative and reflexive judgments. Determinative judgments are noncontroversial and simply involve determining the category to which something belongs. Speakers of the same language rarely dispute whether something is a chair or a sofa. Judging whether this thing I sit on is one or the other is obvious. Reflexive judgments, however, are disputable. What a chair indicates about the personality of its owner is not immediately apparent—and will generate varying judgments. A case will have to be made to my interlocutors about the owner's love of luxury or, alternatively, the owner's austere puritanism. Even more dramatically, my encounter with the chair and my articulation of its relation to personality may lead to my re-forming my understanding of the very category of personality and its entanglements with objects. Kant's primary example of a category that can be re-formed in this way is "beauty." One might argue that a painter like Vincent van Gogh transformed the category of "beauty" in Western art.

That Van Gogh did not live to see that transformation indicates the crucial fact that categories are communal and intersubjective, not personal. Only in the dialogue with others do judgments acquire any stability. This fact underwrites Arendt's distinctive understanding of "the world." Judgment

involves an assertion of what a thing is, of what it can be seen as, but also what its singular characteristics are. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby-Dick* are both novels that revise our sense of what novels can be and do. They are also distinctive individual works that call for detailed descriptions of their singularity. Judgment is much less about seeing one as "better" than the other than about understanding each novel's peculiar characteristics and virtues—and the distinctive ways they have moved some readers and failed to interest other readers at all.

Such categorizations and characterizations become significant, constituting a world of things and situations that transcends the self, only when ratified in conversation with others. We constitute a world that becomes our "common sense" (Kant's *sensus communis*). Arendt writes:

[N]o one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it. If someone wants to see and experience the world as it "really" is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides. Living in a real world and speaking with one another about it are basically one and the same. . . . ("Introduction" 128–29)

It is only through talk with others that anyone can achieve the "enlarged" or "broadened" viewpoint that Kant recommends in his discussion of "*sensus communis*": "a power to judge that in reflecting takes account in our thought of everyone else's way of presenting" something (442). Judgment, Arendt insists, is social through and through. "One judges always as a member of a community" (*Lectures* 75), and the practice of judgment establishes the "sociality" that Kant calls humanity's

“highest end” (73). The key Kantian concept here is “communicability”: “Communicability obviously depends on the enlarged mentality; one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands” (74). *Sensus communis*, our living in a world of shared objects, is constituted through communication.

Aesthetic objects offer an almost perfect laboratory for experimenting with communicating one’s opinions and discernments with others who are doing the same. Sociological phenomena, historical events, and philosophical arguments can also serve to develop powers of judgment through practice. The advantage of using the aesthetic object as an example to teach judgment is its materiality (it can be physically present to all participants in the dialogue) and its relative boundedness compared with other possible examined objects. Most importantly, the aesthetic object (almost invariably) is itself a communicative act. It is already trying to get its audience to see things in a certain way, to direct the audience’s attention in a particular direction. Thus, students all have their eyes turned toward an object that confronts each of them—and that is directly aiming to elicit a response from them. The students can be immediately set the task of describing what this thing *is*—and learn together just how differently an object can be viewed and just how detailed a comprehensive description (of an object and of responses to it) can be. In this way, the encounter with aesthetic objects dramatizes the whole process of judgment. Students have a particular response (intense or not) to an object—and then test that response in dialogue with others’ responses to the same object. Examples get the whole operation moving; they are, Arendt translates Kant as saying, “the go-carts of judgment” (*Lectures* 84).

The teacher, familiar with the history of responses to particular works and knowledgeable about the kinds of questions that get asked about aesthetic objects, guides the dialogue, pushing students to become more aware of and more articulate about their somewhat inchoate responses. Students are being led on the “taste journeys” that Mark

Wollaeger describes as part of his classroom practice.

The student is called upon “to give an account”—not to prove, but to be able to say how one came to an opinion and for what reasons one formed it” (Arendt, *Lectures* 41). In this give-and-take of asking for responses and reasons or grounds for those responses, one cannot compel agreement. As Arendt puts it, “one can only ‘woo’ or ‘court’ the agreement” of others (72). Reciprocally, others’ comments may lead one to see aspects of the object or experience that had been missed. Superb critics light up something, make us apprehend it in new ways that feel enlarging, enriching, and enlightening. The world emerges, moves from black and white into color, through these dialogic exchanges.

Arendt’s link between the dialogic practices of judgment and a robust democratic polity has been most fully explored by Linda M. G. Zerilli. She presents judging “as a democratic world-building practice that creates and sustains . . . the common space in which shared objects of judgment can appear in the first place” (xiii). Following Arendt, Zerilli adopts a language of “loss” to describe our contemporary predicament. We are witnessing “the radical shrinkage of a public space in which various perspectives can attest to the existence of a common object” (36). I subscribe to the notion that the dialogic classroom provides a model for the kinds of exchanges essential for a vibrant democracy. But our current inability to create a common world—exemplified by the drastically different perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 US presidential election—seems less the result of a shrunken public sphere than the consequence of more voices being included. It is easy to have a common world emerge when all the communicants are mostly cut from the same cloth.

It would be naive to believe that developing powers of judgment through dialogue could close the rifts in a deeply divided society. The question of how much members of a society must agree on to avoid civil war has an empirical answer. But a peaceful transition of power (to take just one charged example) relies on some consensus about the legitimacy of the rules of the game. Zerilli is, I

think, right when she says that “to bring someone to share my judgment . . . must be a matter of getting the person to see what I see, to share, that is, my affective response” (54). Arendt’s gambit is that participation in processes of judgment will foster a particular sensibility—one that recognizes that I live with others and that both my individuality and the world itself emerge and flourish through association and communication with those others. Absent that sensibility, democracy is in peril. Linking aesthetic education to democracy means hoping that the practice of judgments fosters such a sensibility. Hope comes with no guarantees, but the absence of dialogic habits spells trouble.

The dialogic classroom stands as an example of a democratic way of being in the world, and the aesthetic object provides an occasion for practicing judgment. It is worth considering why working through examples is a useful way to teach the art of judgment.

First, examples avoid the abstraction and generality of giving reasons for judgment. The example gets us into the territory of affective response, of detailed engagement with the object. It is fairly common to link the aesthetic to the particular; aesthetic objects (at least since 1750 in the West, an important qualification) aspire to originality, to uniqueness. To discern the features of an aesthetic object—and the qualities of my response to it—means paying attention to the fine-grained details of *this* experience in all its dimensions. When my experience of the object shifts because of hearing others’ responses to it or under the pressure of articulating my own responses, the holism that a word like *sensibility* evokes comes into play. How the object “moves” me is the question, not simply how to describe its defining features. It is that holism that advocates of aesthetic education often think justifies its place in the curriculum.

The second reason to resort to examples leads to difficult issues about the relation of autonomy to sociality in democratic polities. The route to one’s formed sensibility (of course never fully formed, but still more solidly established and resistant to change at thirty than at sixteen) is, as Arendt’s account of judgment would suggest, through one’s

relation to others. Humans are imitative creatures. Especially at first, we adopt the attitudes, tastes, habits, and beliefs of those we admire, of those who seem to be the beings we would like to be ourselves. Other humans stand as examples to us of ways of being in the world. The teacher (or peers) probably influences us more by the persona they project than by any reasons offered up in dialogue. I came (at least at first) to love classical music less through its intrinsic qualities and virtues than because certain people I admired clearly thought there was something to it. Reasons are not utterly negligible, but we risk missing the full dynamic of judgments of taste if we neglect questions of charisma, of admiration, of a desire to be more like someone else. Perhaps judgment is clouded when influenced by others one admires, but any account of judgment is deficient if it doesn’t take such influences into account.

In the classroom, I think it prudent to make the effects of charisma explicit—not to purge them (an impossible task) but to highlight the extent to which one’s judgments entail attachments to certain ways of being in the world. Judgments are invariably about value; discernment involves assessments of whether this object, person, desire, ambition is worthy of my sustained attention or is to be left aside in favor of other pursuits. The teacher’s job is to give students the capacity to make such judgments by opening up the terrain on which judgments are made—and providing as detailed a map of that territory as feasible.

Respecting and attempting to foster my students’ autonomy seem to me absolute responsibilities. Democracy rests on the assertion that each person has the right to make judgments on their own. The tricky part is to fully acknowledge (as I have been arguing) that judgment requires participation in a community, where reasons are offered, opinions expressed, and ways of being in the world (living out one’s beliefs and tastes and moral sensibility) displayed. But one’s judgments are not to be dictated by authoritative leaders or some kind of majority rule. Arendt’s entire attempt to work out an account of judgment was a response to her experience of totalitarian society. Arendt had witnessed a

world in which a set of shared moral convictions about murder and decency “collapsed almost overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original sense of the word, as a set of *mores*, customs, and manners, which might be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people” (“Some Questions” 50). The process of forming a judgment cannot become simply an adoption of prevailing beliefs or prejudices, or parroting the views of others. It should aim instead to establish one’s own convictions, one’s own way of living in the world.

But autonomy, Arendt always insists, must be tempered with the recognition that I live in a world also occupied by others. To learn that I am not alone in the world is an important lesson, absolutely necessary, and as such underwrites the requirements to take the viewpoints of others into consideration when forming my own convictions. And the ethics of sociality require communicability, of explaining myself to myself and to others. There remain, however, duties to the self, ones Arendt saw dissolve in front of her eyes in the 1930s. Balancing these two sets of responsibilities is no easy task, with no set formulas or methods for success. But continual engagement in dialogue with others seems essential to any effort to cultivate both. Democratic education (and this essay tries to enlist aesthetic education to that cause) fosters the realization that individual style and opinions develop in association with others, not in opposition to them. This does not take the sting out of various disagreements, but it does provide a basic acknowledgment not only that others have an equal right to be here but that there is no world and no self unless those others are here. We might call this “the democratic demand,” the ethical imperative embedded in efforts to teach the art of judgment.

The example stands as a singular instance even as it also indicates possible ways forward, offering an instantiation of certain choices guided by judgment.² As such it bridges singularity and sociality. Kant’s comments on the use of examples in teaching capture the tricky balancing act in question. In the arts (as contrasted to the sciences), what we want

the student to learn “cannot be couched in a formula and serve as a precept. . . . Rather, the rule must be abstracted from what the artist has done, i.e. from the product, which others may use to test their own talent, letting it serve them as their model, not to be *copied* but to be *imitated*. How that is possible is difficult to explain” (177). No kidding. That’s why aesthetic educators are always on the defensive in a world determined to devise pedagogical methods and measures. In the biology lab, you want students to produce exactly the same results. In the literature classroom, you want students to produce their own distinctive responses to the works they read, not to find their way to exactly the same conclusions. Aesthetic educators are not offering recipes that result in a standardized product, but are (instead) trying to activate the distinctive talents and sensibilities of each of their students. Seeing how others have done it provides a model, an example. But imitating the model (to use Kant’s distinction between copying and imitating) entails grasping the point of the enterprise (an engagement with the materials and situation at hand and a will to communicate the particulars of that engagement to others) and attempting a similar enterprise on one’s own behalf.

I think Kant’s emphasis on “abstracting a rule” from the example is misguided, but it highlights the tensions at play. Not anything goes. “Since nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e. they must be *exemplary*” (175). The example communicates; it is not utterly trapped in idiosyncratic, ineffable singularity, but speaks to others, displays a sensibility and its encounter with the nonself. The aesthetic educator is trying to foster some kind of individual autonomy through the examination of individual responses to what the world offers, responses tested against the ability to communicate them. Autonomy and sociality develop as I see how others respond to my views and also how those others respond to encounters with similar (or even identical) objects or situations.

Aesthetic education, in particular, seems suited to this effort to help students come into their own, to discover their own voices and convictions, while remaining in touch with others. The means are the

public (through dialogue) testing of attitudes and beliefs. The thoroughness and persuasiveness with which students communicate their views are the criteria of assessment—and what the teacher sets out to cultivate—not specific content. Examples can give a sense of what can be accomplished in communication, in a thorough and spirited presentation to others.

NOTES

1. See Clune for a spirited argument that “expert aesthetic judgment” (2) deployed in the classroom can “carve out a space beyond the reach of market valuation” (3) in such a way that “aesthetic education sets up a material barrier to market totalitarianism” (4). My account of judgment in this essay both overlaps and disagrees with Clune’s work in ways too complex to detail in this short space.

2. See Klinger for a detailed account of how judgment works in the production of the individual instance.

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