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Aesthetics as a human science.

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In their call for papers for this congress the organisers asked in particular for contributions highlighting the past twenty years of the History of Human Sciences. I apprehend that a paper on aesthetics and its history will probably not fulfil this requirement. This is, on the one hand, due to the fact that with respect to the general activities of the history of sciences, the history of aesthetic was not actually a favourite topic during the past two decades. On the other hand, it seems not even evident that aesthetics is a “human science” at all. When I looked through the list of “human sciences in the broadest sense” as they are indicated among the “Aims and Purposes” of this society in its website, I supposed that aesthetic might have been included in the category “relevant specializations within philosophy”. Of course we might include aesthetics also within the range of anthropology which is explicitly quoted in this list as a human science, since aesthetic behaviour certainly represents a crucial aspect of human behaviour. However, although art, literature and music represent an essential characteristic of human culture and therewith of the particularity of mankind, the sciences dealing with these human activities are generally omitted from enumerations of human sciences. Although this exclusion has its origin in the historical classification of scientific disciplines, it may be questioned with good reasons and this is the intention of my paper.

I think that the separation of literary studies, musicology and other art related disciplines of that kind from the realm of human sciences may be explained by their inherent tendency to define themselves rather from their particular relation to a certain genre of works of art than by their particular significance for and relation to man and his aesthetic experience. Musicology, in the course of its historic development was to a much larger amount a science of musical forms, of musical styles and types of notation and interpretation of music than a science of man as musician. The same is true for literary studies, and most of you, I suppose, have heard much more about biographies of poets and literary epochs in your education at school than about the significance of verbal expression for man and the formation of his culture.

I would not like to deny the necessity of sciences that deal with the formal aspects of man’s cultural behaviour and with the results of his cultural activity like works of arts. But I would like to suggest that looking more to the cultural activity itself and to the processes connected with producing and experiencing a cultural - and that means: artificial - environment could lead us to the conviction that the disciplines related to art and beauty (as well as to aesthetic aspects of everyday life) cannot be excluded from the realm of human sciences but form an essential part of it.

I will try to demonstrate this by taking aesthetics as an example, which is in some way a covering discipline of these art related sciences and shares the particularities of their historical development.

Aesthetics was traditionally defined as the science of beauty and the fine arts but this definition was never unanimously accepted in the past. Its conception as a distinct discipline goes back to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1767) who, in his book *Aesthetica*, in 1750 proclaimed “aesthetics” to be the science dealing with the lower faculties of experience, *gnoseologia inferior*, as he defined it, separating it in that way from logics as *gnoseologia superior*, the science of the higher faculties of human experience. This reflects the division of the Aristotelian tradition between *aisthesis* (sensuous

experience) and noesis (intellectual experience) as well as the neo-platonistic devaluation of sensuous experience which had impeded the development of empirical methods and sciences in the European tradition until the beginning of modern times. It is curious enough to read how Baumgarten, who later was celebrated as the founder of aesthetics, in the first sentences of his *Aesthetica* explicitly apologises to the scientific audience for dealing with such a suspicious and unworthy subject like the fictions of human senses, for which he could state nothing else in his defence but the sentence that a philosopher, as a human being among human beings, should not reject any aspect of human life.

However, as Benedetto Croce rightly stated, Baumgarten had just christened aesthetics but not invented. We may follow up a long tradition of disputes in Western philosophy about beauty and the value of sensuous experience going back at least to the Greek antiquity. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, a prominent historian of aesthetics of the 20th century, outlined some outstanding features of these disputes in his book *A history of six ideas*, where the polarity of objectivity and subjectivity of aesthetic experience is depicted as the most prominent one. It was a crucial matter of these disputes at any time whether beauty was a property of the aesthetic object (or, even more, a metaphysic quality just expressed or represented by the aesthetic object) or a particular way of the subject to view the world and its objects. In other words: does beauty lie in the essence of things or “in the eye of the beholder”, as a traditional formula worded it.

That was not just a theoretical quarrel but had its consequences also in practical and social life. Tatarkiewicz points to the fact that already the architects of the Greek antiquity were aware of the difference between objective proportions and perceived proportionality. They knew that they had to deviate from the exact “canonical” proportion if they wanted to bring about the impression of proportionality as seen from a certain perspective, as the tourists on the Akropolis are taught by the guides when they look at the columns of the Parthenon. This leads again to the theoretical question whether this is an evidence for the insufficiency of human perception which is not capable to correctly reproduce the eternal laws of beauty and truth or an evidence for the subjectivity of aesthetic experience pointing to the fact that the “objective” laws of harmony are just idealising constructs which don’t have a “fundamentum in re”, but can be reached in real life just by approximation or in the sense of a statistical mean.

Another historical instance for the contradiction between a subjectivist and an objectivist approach to aesthetics may be seen in the medieval controversy over image-worship. This was, superficially, a religious controversy over the legitimacy of image-worship but the argumentations of the two parties in this controversy again point to different paradigms concerning the validity of human experience: The one party thought the sacred images to be just material objects which however could be transformed by the human mind to symbols of an eternal reality, thus defining imagination as the decisive factor of this process and not the material object. The other party suggested that any spiritual impact of the sacred images was only possible by the communion of the sacred image with the eternal reality that it expressed, supposing thereby that any aesthetic quality could only be understood as a real quality of the aesthetic object.

I stick to these historical examples because I want to show that whenever we are confronted with aesthetical theories we come upon questions of the “human condition”, of the role and validity of human experience and of the essence of imagination. This is the reason why I think that aesthetics, in its essence, is a human science in the very sense of this concept and not just a science of artistic objects.

Let me give another example going back to the same historical period, namely to 12th century, when the marvellous Gothic cathedrals were built. These impressive buildings

pursued of course a psychological intention, namely to remind their visitors of the eternal glory and splendour of God. The abbot Suger of St. Denis, who was the promoter of the building of the cathedral of St. Denis, has formulated this psychagogical intention in an inscription at the portal of the cathedral reading "... *opus quod nobile claret / Clarificet mentes, ut eant per lumina vera / Ad verum lumen*" (this work nobly shining / shall illuminate the minds / so that they proceed by true lights / to the true light).

This intention was opposed by the purist fraction, mainly represented by Bernard of Clairvaux and his Cistercian community, who condemned the pleasure of lustre and decoration as a symptom of a sinful craving for splendour that actually distracted people from the eternal truth instead of leading them to it. Also this is not just a religious dispute as it superficially might look, but again a dispute on the sovereignty of human experience where we meet the same factions we may trace through the history of aesthetics in general: On the one hand you find the interpretation of the aesthetic as a transcendent value which may be more or less clearly perceived by the individual who, however, cannot contribute any essential content to the beauty perceived, and on the other hand you find the interpretation of the aesthetic as the product of "sensuality" in that ambivalent sense of the word which does not only point to the function of the senses but also to that sensual kind of experience which, at all times, forced the moralistic institutions towards anxious defence against the – rightly so-called – liberal arts.

As, in particular, the development of theoretical discussion in modern times shows, theorising in aesthetics involves an eminent political component; it immediately relates to *weltanschauung* and the topics of individual and society and the tension between societal norms and individual productivity and creativity. I would like to point out some features of this topic in order to underline my suggestion that aesthetics is a human science in its essence and not a formal science of the arts. It is a most interesting feature of the historical development of aesthetics that the dispute about objectivity and subjectivity of aesthetic experience and aesthetic norms resulted in a truly scientific quarrel when the subjectivist point of view was backed up by a new and self-confident discipline which favoured and supported the individual-related character of aesthetic experience and aesthetic norms, namely empirical psychology as it sprang up in the 19th century.

However, it was not the first time that aesthetics was conceived in a rather inductive and not metaphysical manner. It was in particular the philosophy of the British enlightenment, where the variety of aesthetic experience, of taste and its social character, became a main topic of aesthetic essays and treatises. As an example for the subjectivist view of these philosophers, I would like to quote David Hume who in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste* stated: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty" (Hume 1757/1964, 268). While the German *Schulphilosophie* in the tradition of Leibniz and Wolf stuck to the idea of rationally deducible aesthetical norms and endeavoured to explain the peculiarities of deviating individual judgments by lack of erudition, perceptive illusions or even moral deficiency, the British authors showed a much more relaxed attitude towards the variety of aesthetic experience: They investigated the variety of tastes as a most interesting fact of human life without feeling urged from the first moment to distinguish between good and bad or right and wrong judgements. As Sherburn & Bond in their volume on the literature of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century in England rightly put it, "every important author of the 18th century has his merits displayed in a volume (sometimes two), the title of which begins 'The beauties of...'" which means to pursue psychological and experience-related empirical aesthetics instead of philosophising about the essence of beauty and truth.

Contrary to this, the German authors of that time endeavoured to derive those aesthetic norms that truly represented the metaphysical value of beauty and to describe and to illustrate what had to appear as beautiful to a cultivated and erudite mind. As late as in 1878 a booklet was published with the title *A Catechism of Aesthetics*, and this normative tendency characterises the German literature about aesthetics for the most part. Prominent examples of this genre are Johann Georg Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste in alphabetischer Ordnung* (A general theory of the fine arts in alphabetical order), four huge volumes written in 1773/74, or the six volumes of *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* by Friedrich Theodor Vischer, the most important aesthetician of German Idealism, which were published between 1847 and 1858.

I must omit talking about the crucial role of the Kantian concept of aesthetics which, like that of Baumgarten, had conceived aesthetics as the science of aesthetic experience (*aesthesis*) according to the etymological sense of the term "aesthetics". It was Kant who in his *Critique of pure reason* had opposed the narrowing definition of aesthetics as a "science of beauty and the arts" suggesting to use the term "partly in the transcendental sense, partly in its psychological meaning". (By the way: The first one who tried to implement this Kantian Idea was then Swiss novelist Johann Heinrich Zschokke, who in 1793 published a book *Ideen zu einer psychologischen Aesthetik*).

However, the decisive step towards an empirical foundation was not taken by programmatic writings like those of Kant but by the empirical work of Gustav Theodor Fechner, who in 1871 published the results of his aesthetic experiments in an essay titled *Zur experimentalen Aesthetik* and, five years later at 75, his *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, where he criticised the normative systems of the German Idealism as "giants on clay legs" and claimed for a new empirical foundation of aesthetics, an "aesthetics from below", as he called it, which should support the traditional "aesthetics from above" by a solid empirical and inductive fundament.

Fechner's claim aroused violent contradiction on the part of traditional philosophy which is very significant for our topic because it shows that the quarrel about the conceptualisation of aesthetics did not just concern artistic matters or a particular problem of a philosophy of art. It was the decision between empirical or rational foundation of science that was at stake and, furthermore, the question of the normative role of science in society.

It is interesting to see how clearly the disputes following the writings of Fechner reflect the contradiction between argumentation based on empirical evidence and argumentation based on rational unfolding ideas. It was Eduard von Hartmann, one of the most engaged critics of Fechner's empirical foundation of aesthetics, who argued "that a thinker needs the less wide an empirical base for his induction, the more he has a speculative disposition, and that man takes that more time over collecting empirical facts, the less he trusts the synthetic power of his speculative thinking".

This statement demonstrates that the claim for "aesthetics from below" hit a sensitive point of the self-consciousness of the academic aestheticians. The investigation of aesthetic judgments of ordinary people in everyday life appeared to them like a sacrilege questioning their competence as experts for the truth and the beautiful as well as the hierarchy of aesthetic values linked with the social hierarchy. I want to underline that by quoting a statement of the Swiss philosopher Fritz Medicus who, as late as 1917, sneered at the ridiculous attempt of empirical psychology, to find aesthetical laws by "scouting the aesthetic feelings of young children, Senegal negroes and similar representatives of culture". I think that this quota illustrates how far the dispute about the role and the norms of aesthetic experience extended into crucial problems of culture, society and even politics.

I would like to briefly point to the fact that the paradigmatic turn initiated by Fechner was reinforced in particular by Theodor Lipps, who in his *Grundlegung der Ästhetik* published in 1903 declared aesthetics to be “a psychological discipline”, thereby arousing again a flood of publications quarrelling about the legitimacy of an empirical foundation of aesthetics. There is not enough time to discuss this controversy in detail but we may state as a matter of fact that the “psychological” or empirical paradigm was the dominating approach in aesthetics for some years during the first decade of the 20th century. During the following centuries, however, aesthetics turned more and more to the dominance of philosophy and the art-related disciplines. This is, according to my interpretation, mainly due to the fact that the institutionalisation of aesthetics which started with the foundation of the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* in 1906 and of a society which consequently organised congresses for “Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft” followed the concept of Max Dessoir, the organiser of this institutionalisation, who was rather a critic of psychological aesthetics and favoured the involvement of historic and formal approaches to art and aesthetic topics. Another reason for this turn was that experimental psychology - which since the days of Wilhelm Wundt was very engaged in aesthetic experiments - eventually lost its interest true to the complex nature of aesthetic stimuli which in most cases did not fit the requirements of experimental designs.

Thus the concept of “psychological aesthetics” was not followed any more but was replaced by specialised subdisciplines like “psychology of music” or “psychology of art”. All these subdisciplines have their own institutions, congresses and journals and usually do not importune each other. On the international level, there exist an *International Association of Aesthetics* and an *International Association of Empirical Aesthetics*, which also ignore each other with friendly respect. This is a situation not untypical for the particularisation of sciences in general but it is even more problematic for a scientific discipline which never in its history achieved distinct contours with respect to its subject-matter and its methodological prerequisites.

I am convinced that interpreting aesthetics as a “human science” could be helpful to find these clear contours. This idea is not new but refers back to historical roots, in particular to the tradition of Baumgarten and Kant, where aesthetics was conceptualised as an enquiry of sensory perception according to the original meaning of the Greek term “aisthesis”. However, “aisthesis” is not synonymous with the modern psychological term “perception”. “Aisthesis” refers to a particular form of perceiving a meaningful and symbolic world that we suppose to be a particularity of the *condition humaine*, and this also underlines the character of aesthetics as a human science. Thus, it would be anachronistic just to go back to Kant. We have to reconstruct Kantian aesthetics in the light of modern semiotics and modern biology as, for example, Heinz Paetzold did who is teaching here in the Netherlands. I would also like to point out the musicologist Peter Faltin who came to the same interpretation of aesthetic signs from a semiotic reconstruction of the theory of music, and Ernst Eduard Boesch and his symbolic action theory which aims at a new interpretation of the magic and the beautiful within the framework of cultural psychology. There are a lot of interesting approaches that could be bundled into a new concept of aesthetics.

Finally I want to quote Wolfgang Iser, who, in his keynote address to the International Congress of Aesthetics in Lahti in 1995, claimed for an “aesthetics beyond aesthetics”. Iser, too, complains that the narrowing of aesthetics to “artistics”, to “an explication of art with particular attention to beauty” had lead aesthetics to an objectivistic path where it cannot cover the processes of aesthetic experience brought in by the new media and the process of globalisation. He pleads for a “transdisciplinary design of the discipline”. He imagines “aesthetics being a field of research which comprehends all questions

concerning *aisthesis* - with the inclusion of contributions from philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, anthropology, neurosciences, and so on”, where “*aisthesis* forms the framework of the discipline” and “art is one - but, as important as it might be, only one - of its subjects”. I think that this is a proper way to reconstruct aesthetics as a human science.

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