

Book Review:

Jennifer A. McMahon's *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy*

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In this book, McMahon aims to bring to light Kant's pragmatist legacy by showing how pragmatist moral and aesthetic theories (e.g., those defended by Dewey, Habermas, Putnam, Shusterman, among others) are properly understood as developments of Kant's account of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique*. Taking aim at both formalist interpretations of Kant and pragmatists who distance their views from Kant's, McMahon argues that Kant's aesthetics prefigures core pragmatist commitments regarding the way in which our community shapes our feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, as well as the way in which our community evolves through discourse, reflection, and criticism. However, McMahon does not just advance a historical argument; she uses this revised understanding of Kant and the pragmatists as the basis for defending her own theory of art, morality, and community. She employs this theory, in turn, to analyze works of contemporary art, particularly installation art.

McMahon orients her discussion around a neo-Kantian, pragmatist conception of art that emphasizes, in particular, its ethical dimension. Her account of the ethical dimension of art is twofold. To begin, she claims that art is ethically significant because an analysis of aesthetic judgment sheds light on moral judgment. On her view, aesthetic and moral judgment are grounded in the same capacity, a capacity that Kant identifies as the *sensus communis* and that allows us to intersubjectively calibrate our feelings to others in our community. However, though the same capacity is exercised in both cases, McMahon argues that there are certain features of this capacity, specifically, its connection to feeling, pleasure, imagination, and genius, that we tend to be attentive to in the aesthetic context, but overlook in the moral one. Thus by clarifying how these features shape aesthetic judgment, she hopes to expose their role in moral judgment as well.

To this end, in Chapter Three McMahon presents an account of feeling as something that can be rationally grounded in the sense that it can be cultivated and calibrated to one's community. Meanwhile, in Chapter Four she argues that pleasure is something that can be cognitively mediated through this cultivation and calibration. Approaching these issues from a slightly different angle in Chapters Six and Seven, McMahon draws on contemporary theories of imagination (Langland-Hassan, Grush) and situates imagination and genius within a broader conception of rationality, according to which reasoning processes are guided not just by determinate concepts, but also by models, e.g., images, metaphors, and analogies, which are developed through imagination and genius. In each case, she analyzes how these phenomena shape aesthetic judgment and uses this, in turn, to elucidate the structure of moral judgment, evaluation, and motivation.

In a second vein, McMahon claims that art is ethically significant because it invites us to reflect on the content of the concepts and norms that normally motivate our action and behavior. In order to bring this feature of art out, McMahon draws on two notions she sees at work in Kant's aesthetics: aesthetic autonomy and indeterminacy. According to McMahon, although aesthetic autonomy is often associated with the idea that art is independent from morality or politics, what it, in fact, means is that art is not constrained by any determinate concepts, but instead involves indeterminate content that invites reflection within a community.

McMahon derives several consequences from this aspect of art's ethical import. In the first place, in Chapters Two and Eight, drawing on contemporary philosophers of perception (Siegel, O'Callaghan, Matthen, McDowell), she suggests that we should endorse a conceptualist understanding of the perception of art. More specifically, she claims that our perception of art does not involve cognitively unmediated sensation, but rather it is cognitively mediated not only by concepts from our community, but also by our ascription to the artist of an intention to provoke reflection. Furthermore, in Chapter Two McMahon argues that it is only because art is autonomous

that it can serve as an instrument of critique of the sort envisioned by Adorno and that it can lead to the evolution of concepts in the way described by Habermas in his Discourse Ethics. Her idea is that insofar as art involves indeterminate content and provokes reflection, it encourages us to critically reflect on the existing norms and concepts that shape our culture and this, in turn, stimulates the evolution of those norms and concepts. Building on this picture of reflection, discourse, and criticism, in Chapters Five and Eight McMahon proposes a corresponding conception of community.

Although McMahon offers extended philosophical arguments to clarify the moral significance of art, throughout her book, she lends support to her view by exploring how this conception of art sheds light on the practice of contemporary artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Bill Henson, Daniel von Sturmer, Mischa Kuball, Doris Salcedo, Sean Cordeiro, and Claire Healy.

McMahon's efforts in this book are thus wide-ranging: in addition to offering a pragmatist reading of Kant and a Kantian reading of pragmatism, she presents a community-oriented account of not just art and morality, but of perception, rationality, and creativity as well, and she uses these concepts to elucidate contemporary art. As a result, McMahon's book is dense and her discussion may not always be sustained enough to satisfy readers interested in a particular figure or theory. To take but one example, those interested in Kant might need more extended argument to be convinced that it is only in the third *Critique* that he comes to fully appreciate the significance of intersubjectivity for judgement, given his emphasis on the notion of universal validity, i.e., validity for everyone, in his account of cognitive and moral judgements in the first and second *Critiques*; that it is only after the second *Critique* that he comes to recognize that feeling plays a central role in moral motivation, even though the feeling of respect is pivotal for his account of moral incentive in the second *Critique*; that moral judgement involves indeterminacy, in spite of being restricted by the categorical imperative; that Kant thinks that the purposive form of a beautiful object is 'steeped in

intentionality', despite the fact that he says it is without purpose; or that the feelings involved in aesthetic and moral judgement are isomorphic, in light of his claim that the former is disinterested, while the latter is interested (p. 181). Though McMahon touches on these topics, her discussion of them given her other aims may not be lengthy enough to persuade those with different interpretations.

However, a broader worry one might have about McMahon's conception of art is that she defends an overly narrow conception of the content of art. According to McMahon, the content of art is something that is, in the first place, indeterminate. Yet though it seems right to say that some art is indeterminate in the sense that it does not communicate a literal or explicit message, some works of art appear to do just that. This by no means precludes our ability to reflect on these pieces; indeed, many of our aesthetic experiences are oriented towards trying to understand why a certain set of formal elements were used to convey a particular narrative, message, or concept.

Moreover, McMahon claims that the content of art is oriented towards making explicit the implicit concepts, norms, attitudes, and feelings in our community that motivate our behavior. While many works of art operate in this way, it seems the content of other works of art are better understood along formalist lines. Many artists use their art not to uncover concepts and norms that motivate behavior, but rather to explore formal structures, and the audience often responds to works of art by appreciating those formal structures. Though neither of these considerations undercuts McMahon's argument that the creation and appreciation of a work of art is shaped by our community, it seems possible to retain this commitment while still being a pluralist about the content of art.

These concerns aside, McMahon's book not only offers us a novel way to understand the potential of Kant's third *Critique* within a pragmatist framework, but also her theory of the ethical

significance of art promises to shed light on, if not all, many works of art, artistic practices, and aesthetic experiences.