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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/RF.2025.047>

The end of aestheticism?*

In recent times, mainly through discussions with formalists, I have come to realize something: if beauty turned out to be based on formal structure, I would not consider it a value.

This goes very deep, also in terms of emotions: the thought that formalists might be right is, for me, the ruin of beauty as an ideal: I could no longer love beauty, it would be one of the greatest disappointments in this life full of disappointments.

What does this mean in theory? It appears that I “know” which objects are valuable; I know this on the basis of a certain intuition concerning a certain characteristic that I have conceived (or rather, that guides my mind), a “quality” (which is, incidentally, very complex and whose approximate description is to be the subject of substantive axiology). (The content of this characteristic is not *explicite* exhausted for me, but this does not interfere with its recognition.) If an object now possesses this characteristic, it is valuable; if not, it is not.

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And now: how do we determine that it possesses it? The answer is: we must do so by means of a separate judgement. We must recognize the feature in the object – we must analyse it in terms of its specificity.

* Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, ref. no. 111–181, file 63 (82). It is a 4-page manuscript dated between May 14 and May 18, 1943.

On the other hand, we judge the beauty of an object “without understanding” – based on our perception of it as concrete and individual. We experience an aesthetic ‘impression’ and on this basis we conclude: “this object is beautiful”.

It could be that, based on experience, we would know for certain that judgements of beauty, based on impression, and judgements of value, based on analysis of characteristics, always coincide, i.e. that objects that are “appealing” would always also be “valuable”. However, this is not the case, and even if it were true in all known cases, there would still be a *de iure* possibility that this would not always be the case; judgements about beauty and judgements about value would remain two different judgements based on two different intuitions: the perception of an object with regard to beauty, and the intuition of quality with regard to value.

This means that when using the common expression “beauty”, it does not guarantee “value”; an object can be “beautiful” without being “valuable”, and “valuable” without being beautiful. In other words, beauty is not value, it is not a type of value; it is only its unreliable and uncertain signal.¹

(N.b. For what I am saying to be significant, it must concern a competent aesthetic judgement, i.e., one that has been made in compliance with all the required conditions. Indeed, even a competent judgement can be assumed not to be confirmed by a judgement concerning, *strictly speaking*, the presence of a value-creating feature in the object. In terms of the value of the object, the latter judgement is the final instance, against which no direct “impression” of beauty, no “aesthetic intuition” concerning the object *non valet*. I repeat: I am talking about *de iure* relationships, because it may indeed be the case that the value-creating feature cannot be analysed and that we will be left with the uncertainty and approximation of the “competent judgement” (about the object).

Now, assuming that the above comments are correct, we have two possibilities.

Option one: we call “beauty” a property of an object, perceived by sight, based on the fact of its “likability” (n.b. when the above conditions are met). In that case, I must agree that something beautiful may not

¹ A side note: “If we consider beauty to be a value, then a judgement about beauty made on the basis of viewing an object can always be refuted by a conjunction of judgements about: 1) the value-creating feature; 2) its presence or absence in a given object. The latter conjunction of judgements is absolutely the final authority on the value of an object”.

be valuable, i.e. that beauty is not a kind of value. Therefore, with this understanding, I would completely abandon my previous position.

Option two: I would call “beautiful” only an object that has a value-creating feature found in it and which, moreover, appears in perception (beauty would therefore be a value-perceptibility, or more precisely, the fact of being perceived). With this understanding, we agree that an object that makes a full aesthetic impression, even under the required conditions, is not beautiful. Here again, we break with the concept of beauty as a certain visual property of objects.

This is what a first hasty sketch of this theoretical situation would look like. Now, let us consider further comments.

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The whole issue stems simply from the introduction of the concept of “value-creating characteristics” (i.e., “superior value” characteristics). Once such a feature is accepted, it is clear that only its presence or absence determines the value of an object. And if this presence or absence can be determined, then all “impressions” or “intuitions” of the beauty of an object must give way to such a determination.

However, there is still another possibility: the presence or absence of a feature cannot be determined (directly?). In that case, the situation would be as follows: from the impression of beauty, we infer the probable presence of a feature, and this probability increases with the more perfect fulfilment of the conditions of “competence”. But part of such a concept would be to recognize the view that the presence of the feature cannot be determined. Would the feature itself be *ineffebilis*, or would only the fact of its presence in a given object be undeterminable? (The feature would be *irrecognosceibilis*.) The first possibility is opposed by all my previous thinking about these things. The second would be quite inexplicable: why would something, even approximately known, be unrecognizable?

Let us now consider that, for axiology, the focus shifts entirely to the domain of judgements about characteristics. What is important above all is that a certain characteristic is “value-forming”, “necessary”, and “superior in value”. A “competent value judgement” primarily concerns a characteristic; if such a judgement is possible, all other “judgements” of individual objects fade into insignificance.

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All this, it seems, is not the “end of aestheticism” within the limits in which “aestheticism” was ever discussed in my case before. Super- (or “hyper-”) value takes on a practical-ethical form (“super-good”) as an object of desire, and an aesthetic form as an object of contemplation, and since the main way of experiencing value and living it remains contemplation, then communing with value continues to be mainly communing with beauty (“super-beauty”) – an aesthetic experience. The role of the aesthetic experience of objects is reduced only where we do not explicitly perceive their value-forming characteristics in these objects: for here we can always suspect that we are succumbing to an aesthetic illusion. Besides, the value-forming feature was once abstracted from a series of aesthetic experiences of objects, and in this first phase, the experience of objects was extremely important; it lost this role later, but not only now, rather at the moment when the value-forming feature was made explicit. Except that I did not realize this last state of affairs immediately.

Nb. the value-forming feature can be contemplated 1) in its concept; 2) on objects, and this will always be commonplace and absolutely necessary.²

² A side note to point 4: “It is simple that (but this will always be the case for me) the highest object of ‘worship’ for me is not ‘beauty’ *in abstracto*, but rather a value-forming feature. So if we called this feature ‘symbolism’, I would be more of a ‘symbolist’ than an aesthete, if ‘expressiveness’ more of an ‘expressionist’, etc.”