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ARNOLD ISENBERG

Analytical Philosophy and The Study of Art

Introduction

THE QUESTION to be explored in this report¹ is whether fruitful relationships can be established among three disciplines: analytical philosophy, aesthetics, and historico-critical art study.

Aesthetics, though not (it seems to me) in a thriving condition at the moment, unquestionably has a vast future before it. The number and range of problems which "ought" to be investigated and solved is boundless. To make some selection from this medley, I propose to confine myself, first, to those questions which I think can be treated successfully *now*, with current methods and information. In short, we are not drawing up a mere list of desiderata but surveying topics which have some concrete promise in them.

A second limitation which I accept is set by contemporary interests in the arts. The best thing that philosophy can do for the art studies is to bring some clarity to those issues with which modern criticism is rife—which have arisen "naturally," as it were, out of recent aesthetic preoccupations. For this reason I avoid those ancient and well-trodden grounds of the aesthetician—The Aesthetic Object, The Nature of the Aesthetic Experience, The Nature of the Creative Act—important as these topics are and large as is the amount of work which remains to be done on them. Another traditional chapter of aesthetics—variously titled the Problem of Taste, the Principles of Criticism, Evaluation, the Verifiability of Aesthetic Judgments—is so very much alive today in all branches of commentary, and is so full of unsolved but soluble predicaments, that we cannot well ignore it.

When the province of this report has been

thus narrowed down, it is still too large to be treated exhaustively. I therefore take the risk of generalizing, in brief compass, about the work being done and the work that might be done in the various departments of art study.

It is a trite saying among students of philosophy that when the right questions have been asked, the battle is won. This much at least is true: it takes hard work and thinking merely to frame questions in such a way that they can be investigated and answered. The formulation of programs like those which appear in the appendix to this report can be carried to any degree of intensiveness. At one end of the scale, one might pose large and vague queries, like "What is the difference between Form and Content?" and give counsels of perfection for their investigation. At the other extreme, one might outline a project so fully as almost to have carried it out. The dilemma has a real pertinence here because, of course, the best evidence for the value of any program of research would be the fact that it had already been done well; and at whatever point one stops short of complete execution, there is that much less assurance of good results.

At every point in this paper I have tried to reach a compromise between sketchiness and outright exposition. If I have been successful, the stated tasks should appear convincing as tasks without assuming any particular views or conclusions.

I. Analytical Philosophy

Philosophical analysis is a method of clarifying ideas by revealing their essential constituents. It has something in common with every other attempt to study a thing by breaking it up into its parts, e.g., chemical analysis, psychoanalysis, the critical analysis of a poem. A

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distinguishing feature of philosophical analysis (though there are others) is that it analyzes *concepts* or *ideas*. I shall hereafter take the liberty of using the short term "analysis" when I mean philosophical analysis.

The ideas which are made the subjects of analysis are taken from common speech or from science, history, morals, jurisprudence, or some other pursuit. These ideas are initially unclear, so that people ask questions about them beginning with "What": What is time? What is truth? What is freedom? What is art? What is education? When they ask these questions, people usually feel confused rather than ignorant: they are not looking for information so much as for an explication of meaning. Analysis is supposed to satisfy their queries by providing acceptable definitions.

Ideas have logical relations with other ideas; hence the analysis of one idea is apt to involve the analysis of others. For example, a good analysis of "knowledge" should fit together with a good analysis of "truth," of "probability," and so on. A really successful analysis of any important concept would result in a whole theory or system of a subject. This point is made in order to suggest both the grand scope and the difficulty, the complexity, of analytical philosophy.

The analytic method was, so far as we know, invented by Socrates; it was practised by Plato in most of his dialogues. It has always had great prestige. I do not know of any philosophy, no matter how firmly committed to a speculative, empirical, or transcendental method, that does not also sometimes employ analysis; and I know of no philosopher who will not admit that analysis is *one* of the necessary and legitimate methods of philosophy. In the present century, however, we have had groups of philosophers much more consciously and exclusively devoted to analysis than any of their predecessors since the time of Hume. The most eminent of these groups are the "Cambridge school" (Russell, Moore, Broad) and the "Vienna Circle" (Schlick, Wittgenstein, Carnap). These men have had a strong influence on the practice of philosophy in recent times.

Analysis, then, is nowadays something of a "movement"; but this is of less interest to us than the inherent potentialities of the analytic method.

A good many analysts are known for the advocacy of certain theses, among them the thesis that analysis is the only proper method of philosophizing. More important than this or any other controversial doctrine of theirs is their persistent *use* of analysis in their regular work. We may reasonably assume that those who believe in a certain method can be trusted, better than others, to employ that method with skill and caution; to be aware of its possibilities, its obligations, its risks and pitfalls. It is the contribution that accomplished analysts can make to aesthetic studies that I wish presently to consider.

There can be no doubt that the revival of analysis in this century has had valuable effects upon some of the main branches of philosophy. Many problems in epistemology, logic, and ethics have been treated with an almost unexampled rigor. New lines of inquiry have been opened up and pursued with patience and care. A good deal of light has been shed on some philosophical ideas that have been obscure for centuries. And conservative philosophers, who resist some of the more comprehensive claims made by the logical analysts, have been forced to examine and restate their positions.

Against this record of accomplishment must be set the fact that analytic philosophers have often a restricted range of interests and apply themselves only to matters which have already a high technical status. Many rich and fruitful problems of psychology, ethics, social and religious philosophy which are eminently susceptible of analytic treatment are handled today by phenomenologists, existentialists, Marxists, and schools of theology. There exists something of a cleavage in philosophy between the practitioners of exact method and the students of humane subjects. Aesthetics (see next section) is one field which has so far not benefited by the contemporary development of analysis.

I believe this to be an accident and a repairable one. There is nothing about the subject that makes it hostile to analytic treatment; there is much in the subject that demands analytic treatment. To illustrate this point, we have only to discover ideas, essential to the various art studies, that seem to be in need of clarification. But the truth is that one would find it hard to mention any concept of aesthetics or art criticism that does *not* stand in need of clarification.

At the present moment and for some time past analysis has been the subject of spirited discussion in philosophy. Every feature of the method has become controversial. What is it that we analyze ("words"? "thoughts"? "meanings"? "sentences"? "judgments"? "propositions"?)? How can the *analyzandum* and the *analyzans* have the same meaning and yet be different (the "paradox of analysis")? What is the decisive criterion for the acceptability of an analysis? Is it "truth," or "correctness": does an analysis terminate in the formulation of a "real definition"? Is it "convenience," the watch-word of nominalism? Is it "fruitfulness"—the pragmatic or heuristic test? Granted that one of these criteria, or some combination of them, is the right one, can we apply it to specific analyses in such a manner as to know with finality whether they are sound? The last question is obviously of some interest to anyone who wishes to judge the merits of philosophical approaches to the arts.

An observer of the philosophic scene might conclude, from the prevalence of disagreement and dissatisfaction, that nobody has a clear idea of what an analysis is; more, that the analytic method itself is a sort of quagmire where it is impossible to reach solid ground. One could not expect much, in aesthetics, from the application of a method the definition of which was uncertain and the results of which, in practice, were treacherous and confusing.

But this conclusion would be very superficial. For, in the first place, contemporary arguments about analysis are no mere repetition of ancient and insoluble disputes. They occur at a much more advanced level of complexity and incorporate within themselves the fruits of previous enlightenments. At their best, they begin where older students of analysis left off. The amount of disagreement may be as great as ever; but the plane of disagreement is higher in the dimension of technicality, intensiveness, and circumspection. There are fundamental questions about the nature of analysis which have still to receive a definitive formulation; but this does not mean that philosophers have no common sense of the character of the analytic method.

In the second place, I believe we may deny that the profitable analysis of problems in philosophy waits upon a successful analysis of

analysis. There is a fair consensus of opinion about the merits of certain analyses even among philosophers who have different views about analysis: I should think there was no analytical philosopher who would deny that certain passages in Plato, Hume's analysis of cause, Russell's theory of number, were good (though not final) analyses of their respective topics. In fact, a common mode of discussing analysis is to assume, on the basis of the ordinary analytic intelligence, that such-and-such is a good *example* of analytic procedure, and to generalize from such examples. It is possible that the development of explicit criteria of analysis would help us to discriminate good analyses (say, of aesthetic concepts) from bad ones; but to believe that we are helpless until we have such criteria is to be involved in hopeless difficulties. For, of course, we reach criteria of analysis by analyzing analysis; and this presupposes that we can attain some degree of clarification without those instruments which are being forged in the process.

For these reasons I assume, in the sequel, that the merits of analyses can be judged by men practised in analysis and will not attempt to state abstract criteria for telling the good analyses from the bad.

We may conclude this section by observing that the analytic method has been applied with particularly good effect to the study of other *methods*, e.g., the methods of the natural and the social sciences. It is probably true that few among even the most brilliant scientists have as good an understanding of the nature, methods, limits, and aims of science as the average well-trained instructor in logic; and one is often surprised at the blunders committed by eminent scientists when they discuss these topics. But the essential point is rather this: that a physicist or a biologist who has confused ideas of what "science" and "scientific method" are is not the less competent in his own field for that; whereas a logician with the same confused ideas *is* incompetent in *his* field. In other words, the analysis of scientific method belongs to philosophy rather than to science itself.

We could draw a similar distinction between the practising moralist (Swift, Voltaire, Emerson) and the analytic moral philosopher, who may be a moralist too but is professionally concerned with the clarification of moral ideas.²

II. Aesthetics

Philosophical aesthetics is *an analysis of the concepts and principles of criticism and other aesthetic studies, such as the psychology of art*. I could take up many pages, to no very good purpose, trying to explain and justify this definition. It is not intended to be restrictive. "Aesthetics" is sometimes taken as a name for general art knowledge (*Kunstwissenschaft*). Again, it is sometimes identified with the higher and more theoretical types of art criticism; for instance, Coleridge is regarded as an aesthetician when he gives a definition of poetry though not when he examines passages from Shakespeare. Again, the American Psychological Association has a Division of Aesthetics, the members of which are not concerned with anything that we would call analysis but, for the most part, with finding empirical correlations among different factors in the creative or the appreciative process. Finally, we may notice that *philosophical* works on aesthetics are themselves seldom purely analytical; they are mixtures of metaphysical speculation, critical appreciation, psychological theorizing, and so on.

Analytical aesthetics has a preliminary, critical, and reflective role in relation to these other activities. It concerns itself with the clarity of their premises, the meaning of their statements, and the character of their methods—of which they are themselves frequently not aware.

The study of aesthetics, in the hands of professional philosophers, has always been *to some degree* analytical. The question that I consider worth serious attention is whether a more single-minded and rigorous application of analysis to aesthetic problems, by its conscious and avowed devotees, can make an important contribution. If we answer this question in the affirmative, it is not to disparage traditional and current approaches. I may cite as an example a book like Dewey's *Art as Experience*. This book is a hodgepodge of conflicting methods and undisciplined speculations. Yet it is full of profound and stimulating suggestions. One cannot help being grateful that it was written; but one may also see the need for something else. The chief reason for an emphasis upon *analytic* method in aesthetics is simply that every other system and method of philosophy has had its chance; anal-

ysis, in the proficient modern sense, has not.

I may now describe the situation in contemporary aesthetics. There are six salient points to be made.

i. Few among those persons who are known for their abilities as analysts are at all interested in the problems of aesthetics. This holds true of older men of outstanding reputation, with a few exceptions such as C.J. Ducasse and C.I. Lewis. (It is astonishing to think that none of the leaders of the analytic movement, such as Moore and Russell, have ventured into a field that was not shunned by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, or Kant.) And it is true, by and large, of younger men now teaching in departments of philosophy. It is much less unusual to meet a philosopher who is a good violinist or an amateur photographer than to meet one who is familiar with critical terminology or the issues in the philosophy of art.

ii. Conversely, as I have suggested above, few aestheticians practice any sort of strict analytic method. It is also curious to observe how many of those analysts who do occasionally write on aesthetic topics throw their analytic scruples and equipment to the winds as soon as they get into this strange territory.

iii. Among those who have brought analytic techniques to bear upon aesthetic subjects there is a tendency to keep to limited or abstract problems which are closely connected with those they are studying in logic or epistemology. Thus, there will be a brief and generalized account of "poetic language" in a book concerned with the philosophy of language³ or an account of aesthetic valuation in a book on knowledge and valuation;⁴ and there are essays on "Poetry and Truth," "Art and Knowledge," "The Validation of Aesthetic Judgments." We have had, in recent times, grandiose nonanalytic treatments of aesthetic experience; but we have no comprehensive analysis of art or poetry of a distinction equal to an older work like Ducasse's *Philosophy of Art*.

Nevertheless, the class of people who have made clear-cut though modest analyses of special problems in aesthetics deserves attention. Critics and art historians, teachers, and graduate students of literature, have something to learn from them. In some cases, no doubt, they are capable of larger contributions than those they have so far made.

iv. Some analysts of great ability who have not written upon aesthetics may nevertheless be valuable as critics and consultants.

v. There is nothing fool-proof about analytic method. Philosophers are constantly finding objections to each other's analyses. The merits of an analysis depend upon its author's ability, which includes a factor of talent and originality: nothing is guaranteed by the use of the analytic method as such. I think it desirable to call this somewhat obvious point to the attention of the Foundation, lest I appear to be making exaggerated claims for analysis. One might urge that there has been no dearth of analysis in the field of aesthetics, that what is really needed is not analyses but *good* analyses. Naturally, this raises the difficult question of estimation; but nothing is to be gained by avoiding a recognition of that difficulty.

vi. Finally, I believe we may say that the best work in the field is to be done, if it is done at all, by young and unknown people. These people will appear if and when graduate students become convinced that aesthetics is worth studying. Analytically minded students of philosophy nowadays try to learn something about sciences such as mathematics or psychology. When they believe that criticism and art history also deserve their attention, when students of literature come to feel that they must go far into logic and philosophy, there will be some prospect of advances in aesthetics. Such a catalysis can be brought about only by the appearance of work which, though small in amount, is challenging and distinguished. The subject, analytical aesthetics, remains largely to be created.

III. The Art Studies

The range of current work dealing directly or indirectly with the arts is practically limitless. The following is a list, admittedly incomplete, of types of study dealing with literature alone:

. . . textual criticism and the preparation of standard editions; factual commentaries offering a neutral "objective" digest of historical, biographical, bibliographical data and theories; a comprehensive technic of bibliography, discovery and verification of authorship, of dates, periods, localities of origin and migration of themes, motifs, images, forms, phrases, and so forth; literary sources linguistic, lexicographic, semasiological, grammatical, rhetorical studies. . . .⁵

Mathematics, physics, chemistry, statistics, biology, psychoanalysis—every branch of knowledge has been made to contribute to the aesthetic disciplines.⁶

Multifarious activities like these make up a total picture which is somewhat bewildering. It is not surprising, then, that some students have felt the need for a methodical survey, an attempt to organize the whole field, distinguishing among the various subjects and methods and showing their relationships. Thus we have the classification of literary studies advocated by T. C. Pollock.

Literary *theory* should be distinguished from literary *criticism*, the latter defined as the evaluation and in this sense the interpretation of works of literature, and from the companion of literary criticism, the *theory of criticism*, defined as the formulation of general principles on the basis of which critical evaluations may be made. As distinct from these the theory of literature is . . . the formulation, objectively and with regard for problems of value, of general knowledge of the nature of literature.⁷

Wellek and Warren prefer a different arrangement:

It seems best to draw attention to these distinctions by describing as "literary theory" the study of the principles of literature . . . and by differentiating studies of concrete works of art as either "literary criticism" or "literary history." . . . The term "theory of literature" might well include—as this book does—the necessary "theory of literary criticism" and "theory of literary history."⁸

One could mention other systems and distinctions which have been proposed by various writers.

We need not discuss the comparative merits of these classificatory schemes. I would like to point out, first, that they overlap; second, that they do not agree; third, that they are one and all concerned with the subject matter and methods of *other* disciplines. The line of inquiry is "metalinguistic": it is *about* criticism or art history or stylistics; it does not fall *within* any of these domains. It belongs in fact to philosophy. The most elementary distinctions among art studies—even those which are presupposed by the section headings of this report—sooner or later require the application of refined analytic methods. Let us suppose, for instance, that we began with a fairly acceptable distinction