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## Review of Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy By Jennifer A. McMahon

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Jennifer A. McMahon, *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy*, London/New York: Routledge, 2013, 250 pp., \$145.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780415504522

In *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy* Jennifer A. McMahon argues for a pragmatist interpretation of Immanuel Kant's work, focusing on the first part of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* – the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. The book draws attention to the importance of community in forming aesthetic judgments and in forming the capacity for moral judgment.

McMahon's project is a metaethical inquiry in the nature of moral reflection. The book is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter explores a concept related to artistic or moral deliberation, appealing to several artistic works to illustrate features of judgment, reason and the understanding necessary for moral agency.

The first chapter – an introduction – lays the groundwork for the text, using a discussion of art to demonstrate a feature of human cognition that is a prerequisite for morality. Chapter 2 explores the processes involved in the creation and reception of art. In Chapter 3, McMahon argues that community membership is a prerequisite for moral deliberation. Chapter 4 examines the role and nature of reason.

The next two chapters lay out the author's foundation for morality, with Chapter 5 exploring the communal nature of morality. Here, McMahon builds upon the work of Jürgen Habermas, itself a furthering of themes of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Chapter 6 explores the role imagination plays in understanding. Chapter 7 discusses the nature of genius. In the concluding chapter, the author compares the theory of morality she has developed in the book to competing theories.

Early on McMahon is clear to distinguish the inherently subjective nature of aesthetic reflective judgments from simple arbitrariness, or indeterminacy. If subjective judgments are arbitrary, then the only alternative is objective, absolute standards; however, the author contends that such standards would be “doomed to failure from the outset” (p. 6). Kant's concept of *sensus communis* offers an alternative. Substantive universal judgments are not arbitrary as they depend upon the tastes of the community.

The book centers on the connections between community, language, aesthetic and moral judgements, concluding that the latter shake out from the former. The

book is divided into roughly two parts, with the first few chapters concerned with outlining a non-arbitrary subjectivist account of aesthetics, and the latter chapters concerned with tying moral and practical analysis to aesthetic analysis. Throughout the work McMahon discusses several pieces of contemporary artwork and people's aesthetic reactions to these pieces, accompanied by a grayscale depiction of the referenced work of art, as a means to illustrate certain positions she takes.

Although it may initially appear a petty criticism, I believe that the choice to depict the referenced art in this way – in black and white and static – is a mistake. Color photographs and videos of this art can be easily found by internet search engines, but the choice to depict this art in black and white undercuts the kind of aesthetic experience the author is concerned with conveying. Furthermore, some cases – for example the discussion surrounding the first figure, Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* exhibition – would be better shown not only in color photograph, but in motion. These pieces of art, and the discussion surrounding them, serve to illustrate central concepts of McMahon's theory, but are presented in a way that gives the audience a different experience than the ones discussed. The subjective, first-hand experience of viewing this art is uncontroversially and inevitably distinct from viewing it in this context, but this strife seems like it could have been mitigated by choosing different artistic works or presenting the material in color.

This illustrates what I think is the work's greatest flaw – for the best understanding of McMahon's project, one must come to the table with a rather unique, robust artistic, philosophical and scientific background. The author has a propensity to 'tell' rather than 'show', the normal reader is told that *The Weather Project* is perceived differently, but lacks the same first-hand experience to compare it to. A reader with the same artistic background would be more familiar with the exhibit and, perhaps, more surprised to find others interpret it so differently.

McMahon has a robust grasp on contemporary philosophical and scientific theories concerning aspects of aesthetics, human communities and human psychology, but has a bad habit of referring to conclusions of works in various fields without explaining how these conclusions were arrived at, or whether they are controversial. There is, it seems, little debate; but rather a single-continuous narrative that supports the author's interpretation of character and role of aesthetic judgment as the subjective, culturally dependent foundation of our moral capacity.

For example, early in Chapter 5, McMahon dispassionately, and without citation, contends that "There are certain dispositions hardwired into developmental stages, where, for example, at around age ten to twelve, the child switches allegiance from caregivers to peers" (p. 104). As we mature, she claims, we have some choice in with whom we choose to cooperate. She goes on to argue that our aesthetic reflective judgments and our moral judgments presuppose community and are partially determined by that community.

Freedom and determinism are two highly contentious topics in the free will debate; since Aristotle, moral philosophers have contended that moral agency and responsibility requires control, but disagreed about what kind of control is necessary. Yet the lack of control children are said to have about this intimate, character-setting aspect of their development is striking. If McMahon is right, then our allegiance – what we find morally compelling – is, at least in some situations, completely outside our control, and in the best of situations, partially determined by the beliefs and attitudes of others.

For McMahon, community plays a vital role in determining morality; she contends that Kant “acknowledges the role of endorsement by a community”, in achieving a normatively valid judgment (p. 106). One way is to treat community endorsement as a litmus test for a proposition – if a moral, aesthetic, or empirical position is endorsed by the community, setting aside the possibility of radical error, this is evidence of its truth (or, at least, practicality). Alternatively, McMahon might be opting for a cultural relativist interpretation of Kant, such that morality is – at least in part – determined by the approval or disapproval of one’s community. This interpretation seems at odds with Kant’s notion of morality as giving one’s self moral rules; such rules would not only need to be internally consistent, but satisfy the community one identifies with, such that the categorical imperative might yield different results depending upon to what community one chooses allegiance.

McMahon shines an important light on the connection between rationality and morality and the inherently subjective nature of our aesthetic judgments for Kant, and how this relates to several notable philosophers that have followed. The work tackles numerous controversial and important topics in ethics and aesthetics in a thorough, but somewhat inaccessible way. In this respect, it is an important work source for academics working in aesthetics and moral philosophy, but one that is largely – and regrettably – inaccessible to those of different backgrounds.

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