

Interpersonal communion and aesthetic appreciation

- Main claim** Communion necessarily involves the possibility of interpersonal aesthetic valuing.
- IAV** Forming aesthetic judgements or impressions about a person as a whole, which license interpersonal valuing-attitudes, such as liking.
- One motivation for this line of enquiry: to articulate the value that interpersonal aesthetic valuing contributes to our lives, so as better to grasp the predicament of the *beauty problematic*.
- Communion** Time spent self-consciously in the company of another person.ⁱ
- Second motivation: to further our understanding of human sociality. Is the aesthetic perspective fundamentally important?

Preliminary conjectures on aesthetic self-conceptions and ‘holding one’s head up’

In communion, one is conscious not only of the other’s presence, but of one’s own presence before the other, and thus of oneself as an object of the other’s experience.

A positive aesthetic self-conception is a prerequisite for the kind of communion that involves interpersonal aesthetic appreciation.

In presenting oneself to another in communion, by meeting their gaze, so to speak, one represents oneself as having a positive self-conception and thereby one takes a reflective stance on one’s aesthetic qualities, endorsing at least some, possibly disavowing others.

The synthesising of one’s aesthetic qualities into a unified whole for which one can be judged, and liked or disliked, is an activity of one’s aesthetic worldview.

Phenomenological argument

1. There is something that it is like to be in the company of another person (call it the feeling of communion).
2. The feeling of communion is necessary for communion.
3. If interpersonal aesthetic valuing is foreclosed, then so is the feeling of communion.ⁱⁱ
4. Therefore, if interpersonal aesthetic valuing is foreclosed, then so is communion (from 2 and 3).
5. Therefore, communion necessarily involves the possibility of interpersonal aesthetic valuing (from 4).

Conceptual argument

1. Interpersonal valuing-attitudes consist in appreciation of the other person.
2. The kind of appreciation in which interpersonal valuing-attitudes consist is interpersonal aesthetic valuing.ⁱⁱⁱ
3. Communion is the basic constituent of relationships which sustain interpersonal valuing-attitudes.
4. Therefore, communion necessarily involves the possibility of interpersonal aesthetic valuing.

Supporting passages

- i. “Two people might be in the same place, be simultaneously aware of and responding to the same things, be simultaneously aware that each is responding as he or she is, and these responses might be as similar as we please, without it yet being true that they are sharing the moment or these experiences *together* and so without their being *with* one another in the sense I have in mind.”¹

“[I]f someone is completely unwilling to be open or accessible, you cannot really be together with that person.”²

- ii. Communion without IAV? An example.

Suppose that X and Y have spent some significant amount of time alone together and afterwards Y finds themselves unable to make any judgement about X, aesthetically. Y cannot say with any confidence whether X strikes them as lovely, or unlovely, whether X embodies charms of virtues of character, of style, that render their company interesting or pleasant, or not.

Perceptual sparsity variation: Y did not perceive X sufficiently to form aesthetic impression.

Preoccupations variation: Y was too preoccupied with self-oriented concerns.

Disjunctive fits both variations: either the interaction does provide sufficient standing for interpersonal aesthetic valuing, or the interaction is not really communion.

- iii. Example of aesthetic mediation of interpersonal valuing

Bronwen represents herself to her friend as worthy of the friend’s attention and company. She does this by meeting her friend’s eyes, by participating in their relaxed stroll side by side, and generally by cooperating, rather than pursuing any sort of socially aversive behaviour. In that context, as they interact, the friend’s attention to Bronwen is mediated by Bronwen’s self-conception in the sense that as the friend is struck by various of Bronwen’s qualities – those that detract from as well as those that contribute to her overall stock of virtues of sociality – the friend is struck by these qualities as qualities over which Bronwen has taken a reflective stance. That stance says something like, ‘this is who I am, and I am not ashamed’. The taking of this reflexive stance over her own perceptible qualities, is an exercise of Bronwen’s aesthetic worldview, and ought to be thought of as a distinctly aesthetic self-conception, because the qualities at issue license aesthetic appraisal of Bronwen as a person.

¹ Darwall, S. ‘Being With,’ *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49 (2011): 5-6

² *ibid.*: 7