

AESTHETIC THINKING AS A COMMON HUMANIST CONCERN

The Symposium “The Humanities in a New Era: Surviving or Setting the Agenda?”

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This paper was written in the light of my book “Aglaia’s Dance: Towards an Aesthetic Thinking”, Aarhus University Press 2008).

The humanities are in lack of intrinsic cohesion and humanist self-conception. Consequently, we need to consider *what* constitutes the humanities. It is not enough to be interested in *how* humanist scholarship is performed. So we have to reintroduce philosophical thinking into the humanities. As things stand today, there is too much theorizing and too little philosophizing. This does not mean that we are in need of more philosophy, considered as a discipline. What is needed is reflection that is free, open, and questioning. Thinking which is not conditioned by outward circumstances, but has its purpose in itself and is reflecting upon what this means. Without this thinking, we shall not be able to understand what is human about human beings and preserve the humanities by way of being humanities. It is necessary in order to avoid narrow-mindedness and to practise enlightenment, which is the task of the humanities. It is a prerequisite for the humanities in order to help the surrounding world to understand the complexity of different matters, of e.g. a global, political and ecological nature.

This free, open, and questioning reflection has got a name. It is not only called philosophical thinking, but *aesthetic thinking*. Here, I am not aiming at the philosophy of art or theories about the aestheticization of everything from politics to consumption. On the contrary, it is all about the special way of thinking which is connected to judgement and to the specific, aesthetic experience. The experience of beauty is the experience that something has a value of its own and of being part

of something larger. It conveys the feeling of belonging to the world, and, consequently, it is an existentially important experience of cohesion and meaningfulness. The experience of beauty throws an unaccustomed light upon what is already given, it is hard to comprehend, and it is thought-provoking. However, it may be communicated to others, and although it is always manifested individually, it is not a private, but a common, human experience. Likewise, the way of thinking appertaining to judgement is characterized by being expanded, i.e. marked by sympathetic insight, and, consequently, it has moral significance. It adheres to the principle of being able to identify oneself with others and take many views into consideration, without being subjected to any one of these. By way of the expanded way of thinking, it is possible to elevate oneself above particular, singular interests and reconsider the common weal. This way of thinking is, according to Kant, a prerequisite for effectualizing the principle of reason: Never to be willing to do something which you do not want to see elevated into being a general rule. Without judgement, it would not be possible to act in a moral way, and, consequently, ethics is based on aesthetics.

However, this expanded way of thinking is also the prerequisite for thinking philosophically in the free, open, and questioning way which is crucial to the humanities. As Cassirer has put it, philosophical thinking is aiming at the cognition of unity in diversity. This does not mean that it will obliterate all the empirical differences to replace them with a single, common denominator. It does not aspire to simplification, but, on the contrary, to finding something which unites. Philosophical thinking is aiming at a harmony between items which are different from one another – and not similar to one another. However, as modern human beings controlled by intellectualism, we are thinking in a non-philosophical way. We are liable to view unity and variety as contrasts. Often, we end up in either-or and not both-and. Due to the expanded way of thinking, aesthetic judgement may help us to reflect in a less theoretical, but more philosophical way. Then, in our thoughts, we may be in several places at the same time, thinking what is not, otherwise, to be reflected upon, e.g. the connection between what is historical and what is super-historical, between continuity and discontinuity, between tradition and what is new, between transcendence and immanence, or between what is local and what is global. Today, we are in sore need of a kind of thinking which can dissolve rigid contrasts. The humanities can satisfy this need, but only in so far as aesthetic thinking will become a common humanist concern.

So what the humanities need is to recall the ability to see things in their interrelationship. Consequently, we are in need of making aesthetic thinking a common humanist concern, and this is the reason why philosophical aesthetics can contribute substantially to the future development of the philosophy of science. *In this way*, the humanities will find themselves in a stronger position when confronted with the surrounding world, without cutting the latter off. *In this way*, we can preserve the link to tradition without losing sight of our own age. Or in a summary of ten points:

1. Concepts must be clarified in such a way that they are clearly comprehensible, and this requires philosophical thinking. Scholarship, as well as communication, will gain by the clarification, and this will not result in a kind of essentialism, as often feared. When you are trying to define concepts, they are put in motion. On the other hand, essentialism occurs when you refuse to consider the meaning of the concepts.
2. When conceived of as the free, open, and questioning reflection, which philosophy, originally, was, aesthetic thinking can change philosophy into something different from and more than just a tool or an alien superstructure. Instead, philosophy may be constitutive of an experiential basis of what we are saying and doing by way of being humanists. In this way, an intrinsic cohesion may be established within the humanities, without removing the differences among the individual disciplines.
3. The lucidity of aesthetic thinking may promote an understanding from the surrounding world as to the necessity of the freedom of scholarship and research and as to the importance of not reducing knowledge into being a means to an end of growth, but seeing it as an end, in itself. Aesthetic thinking is, in itself, a creative practice, by its own way of working demonstrating that the demands of applicability from the surrounding world are really needless.
4. If humanist scholarship is to exert an influence, it must seem relevant to others, apart from the experts. It will not do so by paying lip service to the *Zeitgeist* or by becoming more mechanized, but by interpreting human experiences in ways which are meaningful to human beings, themselves. Such initiatives will hardly convince any technocrats. However, the humanities will also be of

greater service to themselves and to society, as a whole, by focusing on their alliances in the population rather than by being hypnotized by their enemies.

5. By reflecting aesthetically, i.e. freely – phenomenologically and hermeneutically, and in other ways – philosophical aesthetics will provide a world of experience which is of crucial existential significance with systematic insight and a philosophical language. By doing so, aesthetics will promote a central task of the humanities – the free, interpretative aspiration towards cognitive, constitutive meaning – and fulfil the most essential criterion of relevance: To give human beings something they need.

6. It is dangerous to society if we should forget that something is of value, in itself; if so, everything will be instrumental, even the relation to the other. The experience of beauty reminds us as to where the limit goes, philosophical aesthetics provides this reminder with a language, and aesthetic thinking converts it into practice. The general educational potential is enormous. Here, the intrinsic cohesion does not only apply to the humanities, but to society, as a whole.

7. Philosophical aesthetics is e.g. of great importance to pedagogy as well as politics, which both have or ought to have the good life as their purpose. Aesthetics explores the moments when life *is* already good, mind you, in a radical and not just comfortable sense. This calls for reflection upon what is, actually, the meaning of the pedagogical and political efforts.

8. The expansion in the aesthetic way of thinking consists in the ability, in your thoughts, to be at several places at the same time, i.e. simultaneously to reflect upon something at different levels without contrasting what has been thought. It is all concerned with thinking about what is universal without losing your sense of what is unique in what is singular. This art of aesthetic reflection is the best safeguard against barren and prejudiced polemics, and it ought to be common know-how, not only within the humanities, but within society, as a whole.

9. Thanks to its expanded way, aesthetic thinking will gather, without reducing what is different to being the same. That is what we need in a society, marked by fragmentation and globalization. It is through this expanded way of thinking that, as human beings, we may elevate ourselves above our

private needs and desires to pay regard to the common weal. This is what is needed at a time characterized by individualism.

10. Aesthetic thinking is, e.g., a prerequisite for effectualizing the ideal of cosmopolitan citizenship. If this expanded way of thinking is lacking, the local and the global, the national and the cosmopolitan will be contrasted, as so often happens in e.g. sociology. Aesthetics is the road to the cosmopolitan city; general education in expanded thinking is a prerequisite for the cosmopolitan citizen to be made real.

Translated by Henrik Mossin (2008), revised by Dorthe Jørgensen (2015).