Do You Want My Garbage?

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When my oldest son was born, fifteen years ago, one of the gifts we received was a giant clay bowl made in the shape of the artist's pregnant belly. The tag suggested we use it as a bathtub for a newborn, and later, when the baby outgrew it, as a salad bowl. It was painted with earth-tone splotches on the outside, and on the inside it had the texture you would expect from having been cast directly off of someone's body. You could see the impression of little hairs, the outie belly button.

I'm not sure words can capture the depth of my revulsion at this object. Put my baby into something made in the shape of *someone else's* belly—and then, later, eat from the same vessel?! I wanted to throw it away immediately, ideally by first shattering it into many pieces. My then-husband, Ben, wanted to leave it in the entryway of our apartment building with a note saying "free." It was brand-new, and evidently expensive. We argued over this.

Ben: Someone might want it.
Me: Why? It's horrible.
Ben: This artist has a business, so clearly there are people who like these.
Me: I don't usually help people make mistakes.
Ben: Throwing it away is a waste.
Me: There's no such thing as "wasting" garbage.
Ben: Couldn't we leave it out and see if anyone wants it?
Me: That's called littering!

And so on.

In Berlin, people leave empty bottles lying around, and homeless people collect them for the deposit. On my block, people whose extra possessions don't rise to garage-sale value sometimes leave them on the curb with a sign saying "Free." I know a man who habitually discards books as he travels, leaving them behind in public places such as airports and train stations. Is this philanthropy, or is it littering? Is it the friend or the enemy of humanity who gives them his trash?

I grant that what makes a gesture philanthropic is the fact that the item is of use to the recipient, regardless of its value to the giver. And I do fancy myself a philanthropic type—at least I try to be. So why couldn't I leave the bowl out on the entry table, poised to benefit whoever it might happen to appeal to? The answer is a lesson in the fineness of the line between ethics and aesthetics.

We tend to think of aesthetic disputes as reflecting the least substantive differences between people—you like vanilla, I like chocolate, there's no arguing over taste, let's move on. But that point of view may be infected by the wishful thinking of backwards argumentation: given that there is no arguing over taste, those differences had better be unimportant. What if some of them are not?

Consider the fact that the most passionate friendships—those of youth—tend to coalesce around aesthetic passions: movies, music, comics, games. When you meet a stranger and you "click" with them, isn't it very often because you liked the same book, or movie, or fell in love with the same city or language or artist? Consider real gift-giving, which involves pre-selecting the recipient, by contrast with the self-selection of

"whoever might pass by and want it." Meaningful, personalized gifts tend to succeed precisely when there is some shared aesthetic between the giver and recipient.

In ancient Greek, the word "*kalon*" fuses aesthetic appeal and moral value into a single concept. In a Socratic dialogue (and elsewhere), it's common to hear some youth praised, all in the same breath, for his noble (*kalon*) birth, his virtuous (*kalon*) character, and his handsome (*kalon*) body. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates notes that the disagreements between people that lead to anger and hostility are specifically those that have as their subject matter "the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad." People don't fight over how much something weighs, even when they disagree about it, but they do fight over whether it is just or whether it is beautiful. It is striking that Socrates lumps together ethics and aesthetics as the two sources of strife.

The history of ethical thought is a record of the attempt to insert a wedge between those last two kinds of judgments. In both cases, we've worked to turn down the heat, but in the aesthetic case it's by agreeing to disagree, whereas in the moral one it's by way of the conceit that some kind of unified moral theory—be it Kantianism or Consequentialism—can serve as backdrop for adjudicating all disputes. We can just "weigh" the reasons and see who is "objectively" right and who is "objectively" wrong. In aesthetics we don't need objectivity and in morality we can have it: strife solved.

I believe there is no scale that resolves all moral disagreements, and that it is not always possible to agree to disagree about the beautiful and the ugly. These claims are not unrelated to one another, or to the fact that the aesthetic and the moral are not as separate as we would like to believe.

I find guns ugly; the gun enthusiasts I know find them beautiful. I find meat delicious; many vegetarians I know have a distaste for it. Whether the ethics drives the aesthetics or vice versa, once they have fused it is to be expected that some of the recalcitrance of a person's ethical "intuitions" will be due to the fact that they are also visceral aesthetic responses. We pick our friends as much by the contents of their playlists as the contents of their characters—perhaps because we see the contents of their playlists as a not insubstantial part of the contents of their characters.

It is, of course, ridiculous of me to hate the person who gave me that silly bowl, just as it is ridiculous of you to hate the bearded hipster, or the backwoods redneck, or the sleek businessman, or the unwashed hippie, or whichever "type" of person strikes you as having contemptibly bad taste. When political disputes fall along cultural and geographic lines, as they do in our country, it's hard not to suspect that the divide is as much about aesthetics as about ethics.

The fact that at some fundamental level we remain on the same page—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, etc.—is not necessarily cause for much optimism. When it is in the aesthetic dimension that people drift apart from one another, the rift between them is not very amenable to rational persuasion. We Americans have become multiple nations in taste.

An aesthetic divide between two human beings is not trivial; it obstructs their ethical relations. The earth-mother aesthetic encoded in the belly bowl ran counter to my vision of parenting a newborn, which involved no breastfeeding, no cloth-diapering, no co-sleeping. If I leave that bowl in the entryway, I am doing so with the hopes of establishing an ethical connection—benefaction—to someone solely on the grounds of a fundamental aesthetic divide. The person who picks up such a bowl is a "different kind of person" from me. I have no doubt that, were I to meet her, I'd find some common ground, but one thing that can't serve as that common ground is the fact that my trash is her treasure. Or so I saw it.

Ben saw things more amicably. While granting to me the existence of aesthetic divides so profound as to occasion moral offense, he didn't think the tackiness of the bowl qualified. He asked me to take a step back: surely I wouldn't want to live in a world of monolithic aesthetic taste. The plurality of aesthetic points of view is a product of the genuine diversity between human beings, and the fact that they are free to judge for themselves what appeals to them. It should occasion respect, not contempt.

But there is a fine line between respecting others' right to their bad taste, and opting to participate in it. Ben saw that participation from a bird's eye-view, as autonomy-promotion: helping people enjoy whatever they might like. I saw it from the ground-up, in terms of badness-promotion. The question here is the degree to which peoples' inability to see eye-to-eye is itself something they can see eye-to-eye about. Is there a way to adjudicate this disagreement between Ben and me? Or is it a difference in taste?

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