ARTIGOS

OUTRO PENSAR
REVISTA INTERNACIONAL DE PSICOLOGIA FENOMENOLÓGICA E HERMENÊUTICA

ARTIGO

The Ethical Relevance of Simple Things:

Art, Crafts, Design, and Modern Life

Günter Figal[1]
Universidade de Heidelberg, Baden-Württemberg – Alemanha
guenter.figal@philosophie.uni-freiburg.de
Recebido em: 10/08/2021
Aceito em: 30/11/2021

1.Likely no one would seriously deny the importance of things for human life. As middle-sized stable entities, things can easily be referred to, and thus they are the most

1. Günter Figal spent his years as a student at the University of Heidelberg. Among his teachers were Hans-Georg Gadamer, Dieter Henrich, Michael Theunissen, and Ernst Tugendhat. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg in 1976, and in 1987, after his *Habilitation*, his appointment as *Privatdozent*. From 1989 till 2001 he was professor of philosophy at the University of Tübingen. Since 2001 he has been professor of philosophy (chair) at the university of Freiburg. Since 1995 he is a regular member of the Collegium Phaenomenologicum. He is the editor of the International Yearbook for Hermeneutics (*Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik)* and, since 2003, the president of the Martin-Heidegger-Society. Figal held distinguished visiting professor positions in Berlin (Humboldt University), Nishinomiya (Kwansei Gakuin University), Rome (University La Sapienza), Aarhus (Aarhus University), Leuven (*Kardinal Mercier Chair*), and Boston (*Gadamer Distinguished Visiting Professor,* Boston College). In 2009 / 2010 he was Internal Senior Fellow of FRIAS. Since 2013 he is the second speaker the Freiburg research center SFB 2015 (*Muße. Konzepte, Räume, Figuren)*. In the same year he was elected as member of the board of trustees of the foundation *Humanismus Heute*. Email address: guenter.figal@philosophie.uni-freiburg.de

distinctive correlates of perception and cognition.[2] Moreover, many human activities cannot be performed without things. For production and for action in general, very often utensils or tools are needed, and some activities and customs even would not exist without particular things. One could not ride a bicycle without bicycles and would even have no idea what bicycling is; sitting on chairs is by no means natural to human beings, but enabled by the production of chairs. And finally, there are things that effect particular pleasure and insight as objects of contemplation. Such things, artworks, stand separate among things, and often are regarded as unapproachable for use and handling. In any case, artworks are not defined as related to something else - like utensils that are defined by their relation to use. Artworks just are what they are: they are things in themselves. Not being relational, their determinateness is not twofold, but simple. Artworks are simple things.

Very likely because of their specific character, artworks normally are treated with esteem and special care. Accordingly, people mostly are shocked whenever artworks are wantonly destroyed or damaged, like the Buddha statues of Bamiyan by Taliban fighters or like Barnett Newman's painting *Cathedra* in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam by a person with a mental illness. If the Taliban fighters had blown up an aircraft without thereby killing someone, or if the person who damaged Newman's painting instead had damaged a luxury car, this would very likely have appeared strange or reprehensible, but not deeply shocking. Harming or killing human individuals absolutely is worse than damaging or destroying an artwork. In the latter case, however, one may also feel a distressing loss, because a true artwork is irreplaceable.

In line with such considerations one could suppose a kind of moral commitment to artworks and, if artworks as mere things somehow would represent things in general, also to things as such. However, examined more closely this supposition proves to be problematic. There is good reason to regard moral commitment as basically confined to living beings that are in principle "like us". These are beings we can share a space with and thus "live together" with, in such a way that whenever such beings are present, we do not feel "alone", either in a positive or in a negative way.[3] Not being alone, we have to coordinate our intentions and activities with those of other living beings, to recognize their needs, desires and expectations, and to decide how to react to them. In this context the basic moral or ethical question would arise: what, in consideration of other living beings, "should" we do or are we even obligated to do in order to live together as well as possible? Such morally determined living together includes primarily all human beings, regardless of their age and physical or psychical state, but also some other living beings like domestic animals. As to animals it may be difficult to decide which can or even should be included and which not. However, morally determined life definitely does not include things, because things, despite their importance for human life, make no difference as to being alone or not.

2. Günter Figal, Unscheinbarkeit. Der Raum der Phänomenologie, Tübingen 2015, 89-138.

3. Figal, Unscheinbarkeit, 170-190.

On the other hand, however, esteeming artworks in the way exemplified undoubtedly is a normative attitude. Though different from ethical commitments, this attitude is similar to ethical normativity, and perhaps even in some decisive respects. Like ethical normativity, the normative attitude to artworks cannot be reduced to hedonistic or profit-oriented motives. Understanding the very character of artworks, we would not exclusively esteem artworks we personally like and would even less deny the artistic character of works because we do not like them, but rather admit that, irrespective of our preferences all artworks deserve the same esteem and care. Also identifying the artistic significance of a work with its market value would be inadequate and implausible; true artworks may be reasonably priced, whereas extremely high-priced works are not necessarily artworks, but can also be a kind of ephemeral luxury kitsch.

If the normative attitude to artworks thus cannot be reduced to extrinsic reasons, such attitude must be founded in the artistic character of artworks as such. Artworks, then, would be esteemed just because they are artworks; recognizing something as an artwork would go along with esteem, and accordingly someone voluntarily damaging or destroying an artwork would more or less explicitly oppose the esteem appropriate to artworks. However, what precisely makes artworks estimable? What it is that makes a thing to be an artwork? And, if artworks adequately are regarded as simple things, how precisely is the simplicity of an artwork to be understood?

2. In order to respond to these questions, it may be helpful to examine more in detail the attitude characteristic of the experience of artworks. This attitude, as already mentioned, is contemplation, which, again, can be described as an attentive, more or less continuous and more or less reflective perceptional experience. Such experience is without any aim. Contemplating a picture or a sculpture, one has no intention to effectuate something, and not even to investigate the object referred to. Contemplation is not motivated by any result, and thus it is without inherent temporal limitation. One may contemplate something for a longer or shorter time, but contemplation as such would not cease in an end. Therefore contemplation could infinitely be continued, and also begin again and again.

However, contemplation would not be continued or repeated if the objects contemplated did not encourage this by appearing newly again and again. Though for instance a painting is something of limited size and stable in its qualities, firmly fixed once painted, one will never assume to have seen the painting once and for all, presupposing the painting is an artwork. In this case, whenever contemplated, its compositional elements would correspond to each other in ways not seen before, and the picture's color very likely each time would show new tones, nuances and surface effects. Admittedly such variety is dependent on different situations of light, and to some degree also on a contemplator's particular disposition. However,

a picture can only be experienced differently if it has – or is – a potential of appearing differently. Its composition must be "open" instead of being strictly and schematically organized, and its color, instead of being just plain, must have ambiguity and depth.

Compositions of the kind just sketched can be called "decentered".[4] They are not organized by a central meaning determining the significance and function of all details so that the whole structure could be decoded and reconstructed. Decentered orders cannot be decoded at all; they are combinations of elements more or less irregular, ordered without any commensurability. This is so not least because the decentered order of an artwork cannot be abstracted from a work's material character. A pictorial composition for instance is embedded in painted color, so that its appearance and the color's appearance form the same incommensurable appearance, an appearance not "of something", but simply appearance, reducible to nothing, evident as what it is – thus simple and it its simplicity beautiful. It is beauty as appearing simplicity that makes something be an artwork.

Since artworks thus are primarily material appearances they are made for perception; contemplating a picture means looking at it, for instance. Not by chance the experience of artworks is commonly called "aesthetical", based on the Greek word for perception, *aisthesis*. This signification indicates that perception is not just an aspect of such experience, but its essential character. Accordingly an experience of artworks is truly aesthetical only if reflections and interpretations do not presuppose how to look at a picture. Rather, reflection and interpretation should be led by perception. Interpretations not based on what is perceived could not be convincing.

Due to this priority of perception, aesthetic experience is devoted to a perceptible individual thing that is just what it is. If taken as "a case of …" or as "an example for…" artworks are not regarded as artworks. Their aesthetic character, their beauty, is incommensurable with conceptual knowledge, practical or theoretical. Because the beauty of artworks does fit into conceptual contexts, neither practical nor scientific, technological nor historical, and it cannot fulfill or relieve practical or theoretical expectations. Being beautiful, artworks are of an irreducible and thus simple objectivity.

Following these considerations, the normative attitude to artworks, which we can call "aesthetic normativity", should no longer be difficult to determine. Contemplation of an artwork in the way described is not possible without recognizing the artwork's perceptible objectivity – its beauty. Such recognition is not additional to aesthetic contemplation; it neither precedes, and thus enables, nor complements the contem-

4. Günter Figal, Erscheinungsdinge. Ästhetik als Phänomenologie, Tübingen 2010, 72-76; 95-98. English Translation: Aesthetics as Phenomenology, translated by Jerome Veith, Bloomington, Indiana, 56-60;75-78.

plative experience of an artwork, but belongs essentially to it. For instance, viewing a picture as an irreducible and incommensurable appearance and thus in its beauty, is independent from any epistemic or practical presuppositions; one immediately recognizes the picture as objective or, what is the same, as a thing in itself. Aesthetic recognition has consequences. Recognizing artworks aesthetically one would not exploit them in favor of personal advantage or gain. However, one should not only see to an artwork's safety and conservation and avoid everything that could impair or destroy it, but also foster cultural conditions that favor artworks and their appearing objectivity.

Aesthetic normativity has some analogy to ethical normativity. In both cases we would not make decisions and act exclusively on our personal interests or desires, but instead regard the existence of someone respectively something with respect, as something that binds us. Bound by ethical or aesthetical normativity, we would consider what would be adequate to someone or something for their sake. Thus, ethical and aesthetical normativity could be regarded as complementary. Both impede or even avert a merely self-centered life and support a sense of the exterior as irreducible to one's own ideas, beliefs and intentions.

Despite such complementarity ethical and aesthetical normativity are not symmetrical; whereas ethical normativity, as an essential condition of human life and even more so of a good life, is as such binding for everyone, the general obligatory character of aesthetic normativity is confined to recognizing artworks as objects destined *for the very possibility* of contemplation. Accordingly, damaging or destroying an artwork is clearly reprehensible and thus not incidentally defined in some countries as a crime. However, no one is committed to taking a positive attitude to artworks, recognizing artworks from the perspective of a contemplator, whereas at least some positive attitudes to other human beings like considerateness, helpfulness or solidarity are ethically obligatory. One can only argue in favor of aesthetic contemplation; possibly the most convincing argument would be ethical in character, saying that aesthetical contemplation essentially contributes to a better life and thus is of ethical relevance.

3. Considering the previous discussion on its own, one could perhaps take this argument for an exaggeration. So far one could regard artworks as exceptions among things and suspect the normative attitude they demand as irrelevant for reference to things in general. However, one should not prematurely restrict the scope of aesthetical objects. Thinking of aesthetical objects, one first of all should not limit oneself to examples typical for what could be called "the Western canon" and thus, as to visual art, only consider pictures and sculptures. Moreover, one should not draw the line

between artworks and other things too rigidly. There are many things experienced and designated as beautiful that are not artworks and accordingly do not demand contemplation in the same way as artworks. However, if we take the meaning of "beautiful" as it refers to artworks and apply it to other things, we do find that there are aesthetical objects besides artworks – things that appear as how they are with aesthetical experience only. As a consequence, aesthetical experience would be of a much broader range than commonly supposed.

As to restrictions going along with the "Western canon" of art, one may mainly recall that in East Asian cultures ceramic vessels are recognized as artworks, and, as such, much more important than in the West. In Japanese tea culture artworks—such as masterly made tea bowls (*chawan*)—even exceed pictures in significance.[5] The artistic character of vessels may become evident in comparison to things more familiar as artworks, even if it is not immediately noticed. Such a correspondence is that of bowls and a vase made by Young-Jae Lee with a painting by Rudolf de Crignis as it was to be seen at the *Paul Ege Art Collection (PEAC),* Freiburg, in 2019. Lee's vessels and de Crignis' painting correspond to each other so harmoniously that they must be the same kind of things, namely artworks. Both vessels and painting have no message. They do not express anything, but are simply what they are – the vessels individually changing in form between elegance and solidity, with glazes in delicate variations and shades; the painting, though "monochrome", of indescribable depth in color, deep blue as well as bright blue. These works are as self-evident as they are wondrous, intense in their quiet appearance, converging in beauty, and to be contemplated timelessly, again and again.

So, when compared with de Crignis' painting Lee's vessels undoubtedly appear as true artworks; they are in principle not different from paintings and other "canonical" works of visual arts. However, Young-Jae Lee has not only created what she calls her "masterworks", but she also designed a collection of tableware – plates, bowls, jars, pitchers, mugs, cups and teapots – resembling her masterworks in style. These works also are handcrafted, though not by herself, and standardized in form and color. However, Lee's tableware is also worth looking at. Though standardized, the glaze is not uniform. It is lively, spotted with irregularities caused by mineral inclusions in the used clay, and the forms are clear and harmonious, simple forms that are reminiscent of traditional Korean ceramics, but also of the reduced, geometrical forms developed in the *Bauhaus* workshops.

Though meant for everyday use and thus commensurable with practical knowledge, one very likely would not use these pieces without particular attention. They are beau-

5. Günter Figal, Gefäße als Kunst. Erfahrungen mit japanischer Keramik, Freiburg i.Br. 2019, 8-15.

tiful – not wondrous like the masterworks, but evidently beautiful in their appearing simplicity. Though one very likely would not repeatedly and intensely contemplate a tableware piece, one nevertheless would recognize it as an object that is beautiful in itself, and look at it with particular approval. As distinguished from contemplation of artworks, such recognition and approval normally would be more incidental, more implicit and thus seldom reflective. Nevertheless, it would be a contemplative attitude, like the contemplation of artworks relating to the perceptible appearance of something objective. Admittedly Young-Jae Lee's tableware pieces are not as individual as her masterworks. Looking at for instance a bowl from the tableware collection, and knowing that it is from this collection, one would understand the bowl as "an example of" a certain type of bowl. However, a bowl, recognized aesthetically while looked at, would not be reduced to being just one example among many of the same kind. Though one would know that many other examples of the same shape and color exist, one would aesthetically recognize the bowl as a particular thing that is beautiful in itself. Accordingly, one would handle it carefully in order to conserve it as an individual piece and also in practical recognition of its beauty.

Young-Jae Lee's tableware is a good example for illustrating how beautiful things that are different from artworks nevertheless can be akin to them. As products of craft, ceramic artworks are produced in basically the same way as such vessels, and necessarily so, because no ceramic artist could make artistic vessels without craftsmanship. Ceramic art is a modification of craft; it is a craft more attentive to the appearance character of its works and thus more reflective. However, works of craft can also have an aesthetical quality that is not inferior to that of artworks, but rather, is able to attain what artistic production can reach. Sōetsu Yanagi, philosopher and founder of the Japanese "folk art" movement (*mingei*), has argued to this effect. He holds that a traditional Korean or Japanese potter throwing the same type of vessel again and again, without reflection and rational control, could produce vessels of great beauty without ever having intended this.[6] Even if one is convinced by this, one can nevertheless reasonably doubt that ceramic artisans really have no sense of the beauty they produce, and also that such beauty of involuntariness is out of reach for artists. Ceramic artists are quite able to produce true, incommensurable artworks without involuntariness; they can even develop "strategies of involuntariness" and thus confirm the reflective character of art without subordinating art to conceptual rationality.[7]

---

6. Soetsu Yanagi, The Beauty of Miscellaneous Things, in: Yanagi, The Beauty of Everyday Things, 2018, 27-57.

7. Figal Unwillkürlichkeit. Essays über Kunst und Leben, Freiburg i.Br. 216, 64-69. Gefäße als Kunst, 51-56.

However, not all beautiful things are of the kind just discussed. There also are beautiful things the beauty of which is not an immediate result of manual production, but of a conception that predetermines production either manual or mechanical. Such things are, to introduce the term common for this procedure, products of design: for instance, many pieces of furniture, cars, technical devices like laptops and smartphones, and also tableware pieces not thrown on a potter's wheel, but produced in a factory.

The term "design" is not restricted to, but especially significant for the period of modernity. For the sake of liberation from 19th century historicism, attempts were made to establish new criteria for the quality and appearance of things necessary for human life and to create such things from a new point of departure. Though many—if not most—representatives of modern design have stressed functionality as a criterion, an understanding of beauty has been established that has brought simplicity to special prominence. Speaking not only for himself, but also for the *Bauhaus* tradition he represents, the designer Dieter Rams has claimed going "back to purity, back to simplicity" by making design products "honest", "unobtrusive", with "as little design as possible" and, not least of all "aesthetic". Explaining the latter, Rams adds that "aesthetic quality deals with nuanced and precise shades, with the harmony and subtle equilibrium of a whole variety of visual elements" or,[8] to put it differently, with the specific quality of simple, decentered orders. As curators of an exhibition entitled "Super Normal", designers Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison were completely in line with Rams' criteria. For their exhibition they chose everyday simple objects the character of which cannot be reduced to functionality, but which have a beauty of their own – as Morrison says, a "beauty which takes time to be noticed",[9] the beauty of the simple, which is just what it is, far from what Dieter Rams calls "'purchase stimulation' aesthetic.[10]

4. Widening the scope of beautiful things in the way argued for so far, one has to cope with an issue challenging the traditional Western understanding of art; almost all beautiful things that have been introduced are things to be used. This holds even true for some artworks. Whereas pictures and sculptures, indeed, can only be contemplated, tea bowls, the most precious vessels in Japanese tea culture and undoubtedly artworks, are for use and not only to be looked at. However, use in this case must be different from the everyday use of utensils, tools and furniture as of things that have a

8. Dieter Rams, Weniger, aber besser / Less But Better, Hamburg 1995, 6-7.

9. Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison, Super Normal. Sensations of the Ordinary. Zurich, 2007, 103.

10. Rams, Weniger, aber besser, 149.

particular function, and could easily be replaced by something else serving the same purpose. Everyday use of such things can be called "subjective"; it is centered on users with their particular intentions, and what counts as to things used is nothing except their usefulness. In contrast, the use of something recognized as beautiful like a tea bowl is "objective"; it would allow a thing used to appear as itself, and thus be contemplative or at least have a contemplative dimension.

The idea of contemplation in use could seem paradoxical only as long as one would identify contemplation with mere viewing and thus take objects to be contemplated like pictures. However, for adequately contemplating a ceramic vessel like a tea bowl, one would have to hold it in one's hands and feel its shape and surface. Also preparing tea in such a bowl and drinking from it would be lead by attentively perceiving the bowl, visually as well as by touching the object, and thus be contemplative. Use thus determined by a contemplative attitude primarily would be an experience of the bowl's beauty. Accordingly using such a bowl would by no means impair it as an artwork. Rather, traces of use even may contribute to its beauty and thus improve the pleasure of contemplation. When damaged or broken, precious tea bowls are mostly repaired artificially with lacquer and a thin layer of gold. Such repair, the Japanese word for which is *kintsugi,* is regarded as an augmentation of beauty.

Certainly not every use of something beautiful is of that kind. For instance, one could use a teacup from Young-Jae Lee's tableware collection primarily for having tea. However, if the cup is experienced as a beautiful thing, its use will be determined by the contemplative attitude of recognition and esteem. One will not just fill such a cup with tea and drink, but also view and touch it as a thing in itself. Basically, the same holds true for the use of all beautiful things. Using things that are aesthetically esteemed, one does not just subordinate them to one's own intentions; rather, such use can confirm and augment one's sense of the objective and thus possibly change one's practical life. One will – perhaps gradually – realize that things, even if produced manually or mechanically, and even if showing traces of use, do not owe their appearance and significance to us. Rather, things, simple things without any message or pretention, without "flattery" as Fukasawa says,[11] appear in themselves. Thus they allow us to approach them freely, without presuppositions and ambitions, and thereby, together with a sense of the objective, enhance a sense of freedom. This holds true for all simple things, but admittedly most of all for artworks. Being mainly objects of contemplation – contemplation in use included – they allow experiencing most clearly what contemplation is and thus make explicit the contemplative attitude we would take in reference to other beautiful things.

11. Fukasawa and Morrison, Super Normal, 107.

5. Being things in themselves, beautiful things, besides the aspects mentioned so far, also allow a better understanding of things in general. They represent things as things, and thus can draw attention to properties characteristic of all things. Since beautiful things primarily appear as perceptible, their most significant character of materiality is that in which structural elements are embedded– canvas and paint, paper and the marks of charcoal, pencil and ink, stone and wood, clay, porcelain and the different materials of glaze, metal, glass and others. Being simple, beautiful things do not hide their materiality. Their surface is not concealed by decoration and it is not showy, but moderate, even if bright. It is a plain surface, allowing plain material to appear. So, with simple, beautiful things, the particular materiality of their textures can be discovered, and with materiality also the structures and forms that are embedded in it. With their perceptibility, free from superfluous meaning or expressive gestures, beautiful, simple things show how one could perceive things in general and thereby discover their objectivity. Thus, one may find the whole world of things condensed in beautiful, simple things.