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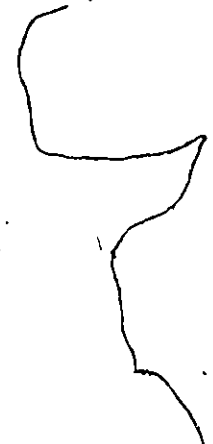
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ENCOUNTERS IN AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA  
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

## ABSTRACT

In my thesis I investigate two main types of aesthetic theories: "Subjectivism" as represented by Edward Bullough, Monroe Beardsley, Virgil Aldrich and Jerome Stolnitz, and "Institutionalism" as represented by George Dickie and Arthur Danto. The subjectivists assume that aesthetic experience is essentially inner or private while the institutionalists assume that it is outer or public. In various ways both accounts have contributed immensely to an understanding of what goes on in aesthetic appreciation. But in each case the presupposed account of experience misconceives and distorts what counts as aesthetic appreciation. My main contention is that both accounts are based on an understanding of experience that treats the inner/mental realm as though it could be isolated from the outer/social realm. This privacy view of aesthetic experience can be rectified by recognizing that what is relevant to aesthetic appreciation is not the experiences that one has but one's ability to demonstrate an understanding of the artistic properties of the presented artwork.

For the subjectivists, experience is defined by reference to a person's inner experiences of the phenomenal qualities of an artwork and ignoring the way in which it is shaped by artistic and cultural traditions. The difficulty with this view is not just that it overemphasizes individuals and their mental states, but also that it mistakenly treats aesthetic experience as divorced from outer/social influences. A background artistic tradition is presupposed but the important sense in which it informs a person's understanding of the artistic significance of the artwork is assumed to be of secondary importance. This prevents proponents of the view from fully recognizing how aesthetic appreciation comes about through the exercise of one's ability in understanding putative artistic qualities of an artwork. On my view, by contrast, it is crucial that aesthet-

ic experience be considered in relation to the contextual tradition of the artwork in question. Explanations of the character of aesthetic appreciation must take into account the manner in which formal qualities of an artwork are informed and shaped by contextual features.

The institutionalists, however, explain aesthetic experience by reference to the conventions of the art practice, yet their account of aesthetic appreciation remains unsatisfactory. They limit aesthetic experience to an understanding of the rules and theories of the artworld and ignore the way the interests and preferences that people bring to appreciation determine what they appreciate. This approach treats aesthetic experience as a phenomenon that is regulated by rules and theories, and in doing so construes aesthetic appreciation as the response that comes from following the relevant regulations of the art practice. The defect of the approach is that it treats aesthetic appreciation as disengaged from people's interests and objectives, as something that merely happens to them once they adhere to appropriate rules and theories. The underlying picture of experience prevents the institutionalists from recognizing that the notion of aesthetic appreciation allows for the possibility that one may *not* appreciate even after informed understanding of contextual features. By contrast, I contend that explanation of aesthetic appreciation must take into account the way the motives and interests people bring to aesthetic experience shape aesthetic appreciation.

The alternative I defend starts from the assumption that how people respond to works of art is deeply influenced by the prevailing artistic tradition of the works in question. Relying mainly on examples from traditional African art, I argue that aesthetic experience cannot be explained just in terms of the perceiver's receptivity to perceptual stimuli and the object's capacity to generate aesthetic responses. The perceiver's ability to discriminate and respond to the artistic qualities of these works depends

his or her understanding of the contextual features of the artwork. In turn, the contextual features that are adduced are specified by the formal qualities of the artwork in question. Thus, aesthetic appreciation calls on one's ability to determine the relevant contextual features and to see the special artistic quality of the artwork. The main merit of the view I defend is that it takes aesthetic appreciation to be what people do. Also, in recognizing the interrelationship of formal qualities and contextual features in aesthetic experience, the approach demystifies this experience and provides a more satisfactory explanation of artistic appreciation.

A further strength of my approach is that it provides a way of dealing decisively with aesthetic problems. In relegating aesthetic experience to the inner realm, standard aesthetic theories are subject to many epistemological difficulties. They leave the question of how we identify works of art unanswered; they fail to explain the distinction between art and non-art; and they obscure the differences among peoples with regard to artistic preferences. By contrast, my approach provides a better way of understanding aesthetic appreciation and of recognizing the diversity of artistic standards without lapsing either into universalism or relativism.

In chapter one I consider the subjectivist and the institutionalist views on how we understand and appreciate works of art. In chapter two I examine the strengths and weaknesses of the two competing views *vis-à-vis* their account of how aesthetic appreciation comes about. In chapter three, I expose the underlying inner/outer dichotomy that sets up the conceptual framework of the debate between subjectivism and institutionalism, and I examine the effects of that assumption on how aesthetic appreciation is conceived of by subjectivists and institutionalists. In chapter four I discuss the question of how we appreciate works of art when the problem of the inner/outer dichotomy is dissolved. And in the last chapter I examine two aesthetic problems – Universalism

and Cultural Relativism – in the light of the theoretical gains that have been made in the preceding discussion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

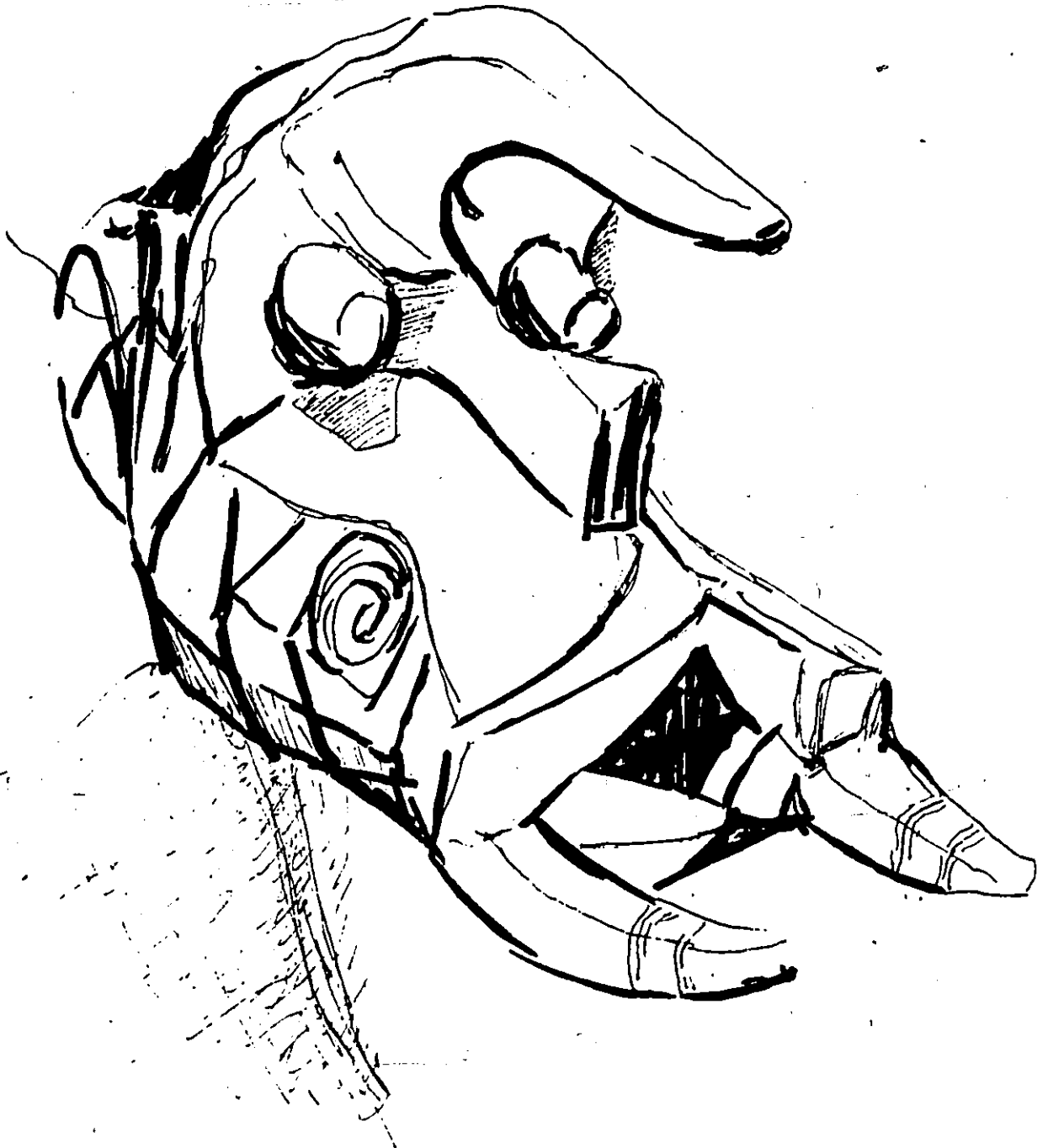
APO	American Philosophical Quarterly
BJA	British Journal of Aesthetics
JAAC	Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism
JP	Journal of Philosophy
SJP	Southern Journal of Philosophy

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*OGBODO ENYI MASK*



"In this composite head, human and animal elements are combined in a multi-planed construction where curved, truncated and cylindrical volumes alternate. Carved on the back is an expressive face with mouth open to show the teeth. Behind the face is a low relief background representing a star. Details of coiffure and scarifications are indicated. The accentuated curve of the overhanging forehead combined with the large triangular open mouth produces a powerful effect. The construction, based on changes of plane, is simpler than in (some) masks, and contrasts large round surfaces with smaller flat ones. The coloured design on the spread ears creates two decorative surfaces. Worn horizontally, these masks rest on a raffia collar from which hangs a net of costume (garb) woven of natural and painted fibers.

The daring and complex modelling of masks of this type appears to revolve around the representations of the elephant (*Enyi*). Thus one finds a hanging trunk, tusks and large ears, although human elements are still present. Such masks are used by the *Izzi* sub-group in the north-eastern part of the Igbo region. The *Ogbodo-Enyi* appear after harvests, during festivals celebrating the new yams and honouring *Ala* the earth deity. The aggressive appearance and power of the elephant mask contrasts with the beauty of the maiden spirit masks."

— Jacqueline Fry, *Visions and Models*, (pp. 62-3)

CHAPTER ONE  
SUBJECTIVISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM:  
UNDERSTANDING WORKS OF ART

In this chapter I examine two important contemporary views about how we understand and appreciate works of art, "subjectivism" and "institutionalism". Subjectivism explains our understanding of works of art in terms of what we experience or feel – its starting point is the individual– while institutionalism explains this in terms of the artistic theories and conventions of the artworld – its starting point is art practice itself. In presenting the central tenets of these two competing views, my objective is to show where they stand on the question of how we appreciate works of art. In particular, I wish to consider what kinds of issues are of concern in understanding what counts as aesthetic appreciation, what basic assumptions underpin the two positions, and what motivates the kind of theoretical moves that are made. In other words, my aim is to give a detailed description of the main features of subjectivism and institutionalism, and to highlight the epistemological issues the two views presuppose and deal with in their account of how we appreciate works of art

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I identify and explicate the notion of aesthetic experience in the views of certain philosophers in aesthetics, philosophers whose accounts of how we appreciate works of art I take to be either subjectivist or institutionalist. In the second section, I examine the areas of overlap of the views of the philosophers that have been discussed. In the third section, I explicate and examine the basic underlying assumption of both views; and in the last section, I determine the kinds of ideas that provide the motivation for some of the theoretical moves that are made.

## THE CENTRAL CLAIMS OF THE TWO VIEWS

### *Subjectivism*

In standard philosophic usage, 'subjectivism' defines an epistemological position that holds that aesthetic and moral claims or judgments merely express the speaker's attitudes, personal opinion or biases. There are two versions of this thesis. The first states that aesthetic claims or judgements are about the speaker's thoughts or feelings, or about the thoughts or feelings of some group of people, or of people in general. The second version, known as emotivism, states that aesthetic claims merely express the speaker's emotion *vis-a-vis* a particular aesthetic object, or moral claim. The emotive theory differs from the first version in the emphasis it lays on individuals' emotional state, and the effect of the speaker's claims in arousing emotional responses towards a particular object in others.

'Subjectivism', as I use the term, is different. It defines a methodological position that takes an individual's mental awareness of his or her environment as the take-off point for aesthetic explanation. It differs from the earlier mentioned epistemological versions in explaining or grounding everyday phenomena such as aesthetic appreciation by reference to individuals' mental biography, rather than merely being about what people feel or think. It explains an individual's awareness of the putative aesthetic properties of an artwork, or a person's understanding of the artistic significance of the object, and the kind of aesthetic responses that follow in terms of the goings-on in the individual's mental life. For instance, it accounts for a person's appreciation of an *enyi* mask just in terms of the person's perceptual experiences of it.

Methodological subjectivism is not concerned with the examination of any specific epistemological doctrines, nor with questions about the validity or truth of the claims

expressed by aesthetic judgments, nor with the issue of whether or not aesthetic descriptions are cognitive and rational, or prescriptive and non-cognitivist. This is not because these issues are unimportant, but as I show, the more basic moves that prompt them derive from the methodological position that explains an individual's awareness of his or her environment by reference to his or her understanding of it. In other words, the focus of this thesis is on the ways in which the epistemological problems of aesthetics arise.

Before going further, I should mention that from now on all subsequent references to 'subjectivism' should be taken to refer to the methodological version of the subjectivism, unless otherwise indicated.

In explaining how we appreciate works of art, subjectivism limits aesthetic experience to an individual's perception of the artistic qualities of artworks. The focus is on the formal and sensuous qualities of an artwork. For instance, the formal qualities of the *enyi* mask are the curved overhanging forehead, its large triangular open mouth, the alternating "mass of curved, truncated and cylindrical volumes," the Janus-like (two faces looking in opposing directions) design, and the unique combination of human and animal elements. The sensuous qualities include such tactile and visual qualities as the texture of the coiffure and scarifications that give a tactile feel, and the brilliantly striking colours that imbue the mask with a forceful presence. Because the emphasis is on formal and sensuous qualities, subjectivism takes contextual features like the subject-matter, the style of the work, its period, and such cultural concerns that spurred the creation of the work, as irrelevant to aesthetic experience. As a result, subjectivism ignores such contextual information – that the *enyi* mask belongs to the Igbos of the *Izzi* sub-group, that it is an aggressively masculine mask used in harnessing the violent force of nature and in directing it into productive ends, that it is linked to the earth deity *Ala* and that it mainly appears during new yam festivals.

Subjectivism holds that contextual features do not matter in aesthetic appreciation because it takes the primary aim of aesthetic experience to be the perceptual enjoyment of an artwork. By defining aesthetic attitude in opposition to a cognitive attitude (that is, one that is concerned with increasing a viewer's knowledge), it construes contextual information about Igbo ideas on art, the artistic tradition of the object, and the artist's intention, as distracting from *the* aesthetic point of view. The reason it is distracting is not because the information is unimportant, but because aesthetic experience is construed as limited to the awareness of phenomenal objects or the sensuously presented qualities of an object.<sup>1</sup> Contextual features, being non-perceptible, are regarded as irrelevant to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is construed as having to do with perceptual qualities, so contextual features are regarded as distorting.

The view that contextual features disengage attention from aesthetic concerns underpins the central idea of subjectivism, that aesthetic experience is limited to phenomenal qualities or to the sensuously presented qualities of an object. Subjectivism holds that in order to perceive an artwork aesthetically, attention must be on the perceptible qualities of the object. This concern for aesthetically relevant qualities derives from the underlying objective of subjectivism to distinguish aesthetic experience from all other kinds of experiences. The purpose of the distinction is to provide a yardstick or a standard that would enable people to identify which experience is or is not aesthetic, and to determine whether or not they are having an aesthetic experience. Preoccupied with drawing the limits around aesthetic experience, subjectivism limits attention to the relation between aesthetically relevant qualities of an object and the kind of phenomenal response they evoke in viewers.

Because subjectivism sees aesthetic experience as dealing with the sensuous presentation of phenomenal qualities, and because it is concerned with the relation of artworks to viewers, the direction of investigation understandably leads to consideration of the mind. What matters in this view are the psychological characteristics of aesthetic experience, with the internal mental history of viewers providing the reference point for explaining aesthetic appreciation. The imperceptible contextual features are ignored, and viewers are taken to understand the artistic significance of an artwork by reference to the the character and quality of the phenomenal object in the mind. No reference is made to the artistic and cultural tradition of the artwork as, in the subjectivist account, what counts in aesthetic appreciation is an individual's personal experiences of the perceptual qualities of an artwork.

It would be a mistake to conclude that subjectivism denies the existence of contextual features simply because the relevance of contextual features to aesthetic experience is underemphasized. Proponents of subjectivism claim that they do not deny the importance of contextual features, however, their theoretical objective of limiting the notion of aesthetic experience to perceptual experiences results in treating contextual features as if they do not matter.

There are two main kinds of subjectivist explanation of how we understand and appreciate works of art. The first is the psychologistic accounts of Edward Bullough, Allan Casebier, and Jerome Stolnitz that explain aesthetic appreciation by reference to aesthetic attitude. The second is the phenomenalist accounts of Monroe Beardsley and Virgil Aldrich that explain aesthetic appreciation by reference to the character of the phenomenal object of aesthetic experience.

In spite of serious theoretical flaws, Bullough's explanation of aesthetic experience in terms of the right psychological attitude of "psychical distance" occupies a significant

position in the history of aesthetics. His insight concerning the importance of a detached attitude in aesthetic experience has come to be accepted as an essential requirement in distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences. Bullough isolates a special psychological state of detachment, called psychical distance, that he assumes accompanies all cases of aesthetic experience. For him, it is imperative that aesthetic experience be psychically distanced or detached, since without it, the experience would not be truly aesthetic, with the aesthetic significance of the artwork being ignored.

For Bullough, psychical distance creates the proper environment for apprehending the sensuous and formal qualities of an artwork. It works by means of two aspects: the negative aspect that brings about our disengagement from personal concerns; and the positive aspect that transforms the object into "an end in itself" and causes it to reveal its aesthetic quality to us. Bullough explains that the "insertion of psychical distance" between the viewer and the object of perception "put(s) the (artwork)... out of gear with our practical, actual self; and allows it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends." He maintains that it is only from this vantage point that we can "objectively" perceive the formal and sensuous qualities of the artwork because our "subjective" feelings are reinterpreted "not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon".<sup>2</sup>

On Bullough's view, being psychically distanced means more than preventing one's personal experiences and contextual issues about the object from distracting one's attention while perceiving an artwork. For him, aesthetic appreciation defines a special state that is similar to, but significantly different from, giving one's undivided attention to an artwork.

Although pointing out the defects of Bullough's views, Casebier remains sympathetic to the crucial idea of the role of "distancing" in aesthetic experience. Like Bullough, Casebier believes that that aesthetic experience is a mental phenomenon, and that an individual's recognition of the aesthetic significance of an artwork comes by route of his or her state of mind. He treats the detached attitude as critical to aesthetic experience, for he sees it as providing the proper environment for the appreciation of the artistic properties of an artwork. Casebier disagrees with the inhibitory aspect of distancing — that it brings about disengagement by suppressing our personal concerns — and does not consider it to be a special state like Bullough. Nevertheless, he agrees with the view that it is by some sort of dissociation from personal concerns that the putative aesthetic significance of a work is "revealed". For example, on his view, an emotional distance from the *enyi* mask would be required in order for its true artistic significance to be perceived. It follows on this interpretation that aesthetic appreciation is the feeling generated by the phenomenal qualities that are given in experience.<sup>3</sup>

Stolnitz advocates yet another version of this general approach. He distances his theory from Bullough's account of psychological distance by employing the term "disinterested attention". Taking this to be crucial to aesthetic experience, he thinks of individuals bringing it about by conscious effort quite different from that involved in producing the trance-like state associated with psychological distancing. But despite this technical difference regarding the inhibitory force, disinterested attention functions in a substantially similar way to Bullough's psychological distance. Stolnitz would insist that art critics should not attend to the *enyi* mask with professional concerns in mind or allow his or her mind to wander in free association or speculate about the use or social role of the work. In particular, they should not consider what the carver of the mask is striving to achieve nor worry about the meaning of the symbols and imagery. On Stolnitz's view they should, as it were, disengage attention from their personal concerns and attend

with undivided attention to the formal and sensuous qualities of the artwork. For only in this way do they become aware of the aesthetically relevant features of the artwork.

The basic premise of the psychologistic accounts is that we have to get into a special state of attention to contemplate the pure aesthetic qualities of an artwork. The ideas that aesthetic experience is to be explained by reference to the goings-on in the mind, and that aesthetic appreciation is the feeling that follows from the occurrences in the mind, are also evident in this view. In particular, the central point of agreement is that artistic understanding comes from grasping the artistic significance of objects that are revealed in experience.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenalist accounts of Aldrich and Beardsley likewise treat matters subjectivistically, their main focus being on the phenomenal character of the object of aesthetic experience. Aldrich focuses on the relation of phenomenal objects to perceptual experiences to isolate the "aesthetic object" of experience, while Beardsley provides a detailed analysis of the internal relations of this phenomenal object and isolates aesthetic experience. As we shall see, the central point of agreement between the attitudinal and phenomenalist theorists is the idea that aesthetic experience is a mental phenomenon, and that aesthetic appreciation is the feeling generated by this occurrence in the mind.

Aldrich's account of aesthetic experience turns on the idea of "the phenomenon of categorical aspection". This phenomenon is made up of two types of perception — observation and prehension. Observation is the ordinary type of seeing, and prehension is the perception that transforms what is seen into an aesthetic object. The difference between the two modes of aspection is strictly perspectival in that it is the way the object is perceived rather than the object itself which determines how it is represented. Thus, Aldrich claims that when the neutral entity like a "material thing" is observed, it

is realized in physical space as a physical object and the characteristics that "qualify it" are realized as "qualities". However, when this same material thing is prehended, it is realized in aesthetic space as an aesthetic object and its characteristics are realized as "aspects (objective impressions)" that "animate" it. Suppose we treat an *enyi* mask like a material thing. When the mask is merely observed rather than prehended: it is realized in physical space and would not be regarded as an artwork. But when it is prehended, it is realized in aesthetic space and its aesthetic properties are perceivable.

Aldrich cautions that the distinction between "physical object" and "aesthetic object" does not line up with the material/mental distinction. While any physical object can be an "aesthetic object" by being seen as or prehended as such, the same relation does not hold between material and mental objects. Using the substantially different relation between the material and the mental as a foil, Aldrich brings out the fact that the perception of an object as aesthetic or an artwork is dependent on what the individual has in mind at the time of the experience. On this construal, artistic understanding becomes a matter of seeing the "aspects" that "animate" the aesthetic object, a matter that depends on the perceptual lens through which one is looking. This explanation allows us to explain why people may differ with respect to their choice of objects they consider to be works of art, but its relevance for this investigation is that it portrays aesthetic appreciation as a feeling that comes from seeing the aspects that animate the object.<sup>5</sup>

Beardsley goes much further than others in presenting and painstakingly defending his account of aesthetic experience. Of the various accounts of aesthetic experience, his is the least problematic, notwithstanding the fact that his ideas are markedly similar to those of other phenomenological accounts of aesthetic experience. His tenacious and down-to-earth defence of a special phenomenological state have paid off in rehabilitating the once discredited notion of a special aesthetic experience.

The notion of aesthetic experience is important to Beardsley because it is central to his aesthetic theory. He wants to establish a way by which we can unequivocally tell that our experience is aesthetic. In other words, his objective is to establish criteria for distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic experience. Beardsley insists that the criteria of identification for aesthetic experience can be arrived at by a thorough investigation of our mental state. He believes that there are distinctive traits of aesthetic experience that can be appealed to in determining whether an experience is aesthetic or unaesthetic. Conversely, he thinks that if we cannot isolate the features of this experience, we lack criteria of identification and will experience difficulties – especially when the object in question is unfamiliar – in deciding whether our responses are aesthetic. So firmly convinced of the legitimacy of the role of a special phenomenal state in informing us of what counts as aesthetic experience is he, that Beardsley devotes considerable attention to the investigation of the phenomenological occurrences of aesthetic experience.

As a useful aid to others, he marks out the landscape by means of five properties or symptoms to guide people in discriminating their aesthetic experience. Of these, he claims that the first is necessary, and at least three of the remaining four must obtain for there to be aesthetic experience. These symptoms are: object directness, a felt sense of freedom, a sense of detached affect, a sense of active discovery, and a sense of personal integration, or wholeness.<sup>6</sup>

Beardsley describes "object directness" as a state of mind we have to be in to get at the symbolic significance of an artwork. This mental state of intense and serious thought makes it possible for us to follow the instructions the artwork embodies for its apprehension. Beardsley claims that this happens if we willingly surrender our minds to the object's control. The object will gradually will reveal its nature to us.<sup>7</sup>

The second symptom he calls "felt-freedom". He claims that in this state we experience a sudden dropping away of unpleasant and problematic thoughts and feelings. The "lift of spirits" that follows creates a relaxed sense of harmony that is similar to that induced by certain drugs.

The third feature or "detachment" is akin to Bullough's psychical distance and Stolz's disinterested attention. Beardsley describes it as "a sense that the object on which interest is concentrated is set a little at a distance emotionally".<sup>8</sup> He compares it to the kind of feeling we have in which we remain unperturbed, even when what is perceived is dark and terrible, because we are aware of our power to rise over the foreboding difficulties.

Beardsley calls the fourth symptom "active discovery". For him, it is a feeling analogous to being challenged by a variety of competing things, which we have to make cohere. Beardsley sees this challenge as being transformed into a state of exhilaration as we see the connection between the sensuously presented qualities and their artistic significance or meaning.

The last symptom is marked by what Beardsley calls "unity in the dimension of coherence". This unity consists of two aspects. The first is "the coherence (or internal relatedness) of the elements of the experience itself" that consists of diverse mental acts and events going on over time. The second is "the coherence of the self," which he describes as "the mind's healing sense of being all together and able to encompass its perceptions, feelings, emotions, ideas in a single integrated personhood".<sup>9</sup> When united, this last property fuses a viewer's personal feeling with the phenomenological elements of the experience.

The importance of Beardsley's five symptoms cannot be overemphasized especially since they are – on his view – our only means of identifying or distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences, and for telling that our experience is aesthetic. As he thinks of aesthetic experience, appreciation is the feeling or phenomenological event that is isolated by these five symptoms, and that accompanies a person's aesthetic appreciation of an object.

### *Institutionalism*

Institutionalism is basically a reaction to the view of aesthetic experience that "sees an artwork as something given, standing alone, or icon like, to be understood largely without reference to such factors as context, what has gone on previously, or what may happen in the future".<sup>10</sup> The term 'institutionalism' will be used to refer to accounts that stress the primacy of the art practice, context, institution or artwork in explaining our appreciation of artworks.

Opposed to the central position given to individuals' mental experiences, institutionalism holds that we understand a work of art by situating it to its artistic tradition and conventions. It contends that we cannot grasp the artistic significance of an artwork if aesthetic appreciation is limited to the relation between an individual and an object. For instance, institutionalism would hold that to grasp the artistic properties of the *enyi* mask one must understand the Igbo artistic principle of design, the role of the mask in the culture, and the meaning of the imagery and symbols that distinguishes it from other types of masks. The central idea of institutionalism is that we cannot possibly grasp the artistic significance of an artwork without attending to such contextual features as the artistic and cultural tradition of the object. For we need the conventions of the art practice to recognize what constitutes artistic qualities of excellence in particular artworks, to distinguish between the inconsequential and the important artistic features, and to determine what is meant by the "unity of formal elements".

Because institutionalism takes aesthetic appreciation to come from an understanding of contextual features, it insists that explanatory accounts of the phenomenon must start with the given institution or context to which the artwork belongs. By construing aesthetic appreciation as a response that comes from understanding the intended significance of an artwork, institutionalism treats formal qualities as subsidiary to the context. On this view, aesthetic experience depends primarily on an understanding of what counts as the formal qualities of an artwork, since it is only within the framework of an art practice that aesthetic appreciation is possible.

The reason institutionalism takes informed understanding to be necessary to aesthetic experience is not simply because it enriches aesthetic appreciation, but because it contends that without the context in place we cannot grasp nor see the artistic significance of formal qualities. Its point is that divorced from the context in which they derive their meaningfulness, formal qualities lose their putative aesthetic significance and become indistinguishable in character from the formal qualities of non-artistic functional objects. Thus, the basic idea of institutionalism is that we need the context in place to distinguish the aesthetic character of our appreciation, and to have a satisfying aesthetic encounter with the object.

The idea that real aesthetic appreciation is impossible without the appropriate information locating the artwork within its art practice underpins the institutionalist view that aesthetic experience is a social or contextual phenomenon. This construal of the art practice as defining artistic significance comes from seeing its role in marking out the limits of the aesthetic field of relevance. Institutionalism takes context to be primary, not just because an artwork becomes meaningful when viewed in relation to its surrounding contextual features, but more because of the special theoretical concerns of institutionalists. Because the objective of institutionalism is to establish the

relevant ground on which aesthetic appreciation occurs rather than to illuminate the character of the experience, institutionalism limits attention to the relationship of the object to its proper artistic tradition, and to what bestows artistic status on artworks like the *enyi* mask. As a result, the question of whether or not appreciation is meaningful, or enriched, follows from rather than defines the limits of the investigation.

Since the emphasis is on the context, institutionalism investigates artistic activities and relationships in various systems of art practice. In the process, advocates of the position see that aesthetic appreciation is shaped and structured by clearly defined theories, and by rules and regulations of art practice. On this view, aesthetic appreciation is a social phenomenon, if only because it is a learned response and follows conventionally defined standards of meaningfulness.

With regard to the question of how we understand works of art, two institutionalist approaches can be identified. They are what I call the conventionalist account – as represented by George Dickie – and the theoretical-hypothesis – defended most notably by Arthur Danto. The conventionalist account focuses on the role of the rules and regulations of the art practice in bringing about aesthetic appreciation, while the theoretical-hypothesis account stresses the role of relevant theories in explaining appreciation of works of art. It is worth noting that because institutionalists are not engaged in the examination of the notion of aesthetic appreciation, nothing much is written on the subject. Thus, much of what is attributed to them must be gleaned either from their critiques of the subjectivist position, or from the basic tenets of their position.

Dickie explains the phenomena and activities in the artworld as governed by rules or conventional norms of behaviour within the particular art system. For him, the art institution consists of diverse systems (theatre, galleries) and sub-systems (dance, drama, opera, and so on) that are performed in accordance with the constitutive rules

of the system or sub-system. Dickie believes that people function in each environment by having an understanding of the appropriate norms of behaviour and of the artistic expectations that govern in each setting. On his view, we come to understand and see the artistic significance of, say, the *enyi* mask first, by knowing that it is an artifact that has been conferred with the candidacy of appreciation by a duly recognized agent of the artworld; second by situating it in its artistic tradition; and third by applying the rule of appreciation applicable to the convention in attending to it. Dickie takes it that aesthetic appreciation is in the final analysis simply a matter of following these steps.

Although Dickie does not examine or say why aesthetic appreciation should follow, he seems to believe that it will because conventional rules of appreciation are devised to regulate our aesthetic responses and actions. Thus a correct application of them will engender aesthetic appreciation if only because these rules effectively define the significance of the artwork in question. For example, one comes to an appreciation of *enyi* masks by following the relevant rules for appreciating such masks. In construing rules and regulations to be what brings about the aesthetic experience of an artwork, Dickie frees the notion of appreciation from a mentalistic frame of understanding. Aesthetic appreciation becomes the institutional act or phenomenon that occurs from understanding and following the formal rules of the convention or artworld.<sup>11</sup>

While Dickie explains aesthetic appreciation by reference to rules, Danto explains it by reference to artistic theory. His theoretical-hypothesis account highlights the role of artistic theories in shaping aesthetic appreciation. Theories, for him, function in the same way as the conventionalist's notion of rules except that for Danto, theories "enfranchise" or transform an object into a work of art, whilst for Dickie that function is performed by a recognized agent of the artworld.

It must be pointed out that Danto's notion of "theory" is somewhat confusing as he fails to indicate what exactly he means by it. Sometimes he talks about "theory" as if he means ordinary artistic theories, while at other times he talks about it as if he intends it to stand for convention in the artworld. Nevertheless, despite the unclarity of his notion, he clearly takes aesthetic appreciation to be logically dependent on artistic theory, sometimes in the ordinary sense of a theory and sometimes in the sense of a convention.<sup>12</sup>

According to Danto, aesthetic appreciation is shaped by the artworld. He contends that "theories furnish a whole new mode of looking at painting, old and new, (and) it is in terms of (them) that we must understand (the) artworks around us." In fact, he believes it is theory that tells us that an object is an artwork rather than a functional object, and that without theory the necessary distinction between art and non-art cannot be made.<sup>13</sup> From the high premium placed on the art-making property of artistic theories, we see that Danto construes aesthetic appreciation as depending on, or following from, theories. Theories not only control what we see as art, they also determine how we respond to them.

#### COMMON GROUND OF THE TWO VIEWS

Having presented the works of philosophers who employ the subjectivist and the institutionalist approaches in explaining how we appreciate works of art, I now turn to look at the shared features of the notion of aesthetic experience underpinning the views of theorists of these philosophical positions. The basic ideas of subjectivism or institutionalism are not limited to the views of any one philosopher, nor are there any precise formulations of them. For this reason, the specific theories of the earlier mentioned philosophers are not being considered in detail, and I will refer to their work only for the purposes of illustration.

### *Common Ground of the Two Subjectivist's Approaches*

The two subjectivist accounts – the psychologistic and the phenomenalist – overlap in three main areas. The first relates to their notion of aesthetic experience, the second to their construal of aesthetic data as devoid of social content, and the third to their assumption that individuals operate with an internal criteria of understanding.

#### *The Notion of Aesthetic Experience*

Three common features can be identified in the subjectivist's notion of aesthetic experience: namely, the phenomenological character of the experience; its private and privileged nature; and the transcultural quality of the mental phenomenon.

With regard to the phenomenological distinctness of aesthetic experience, subjectivists share the view that there is a special event or feeling that underpins or accompanies a person's aesthetic experience of an artwork. This phenomenon, which is rather mysterious, informs our understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience. In particular, subjectivists take phenomenological events to differ from such experiences as concentrating, attending with interest, or giving one's undivided attention to an artwork. They think of the relevant experience as some sort of a trance-like state during which the full significance of an artwork is revealed to the percipient. While acknowledging that we can express our feelings of appreciation for an object, they insist that there is no way that another can know for sure what we *truly* and *actually* feel. For them aesthetic experience is privileged.

The privileged nature of aesthetic experience comes from the fact that the experience takes place in the inner recesses of a person's mind. The idea that aesthetic experience is a personal experience that is private to the individual is one that is shared by both accounts of subjectivism. Being an inner experience or an event in con-

sciousness, aesthetic experience is hidden from view by the facade of the physical body, and hence is totally inaccessible to others. Only the person involved can know whether he or she appreciates; others can only infer or surmise it from his or her actions and linguistic expressions. To see that this privacy view underpins subjectivism, we need only consider the point of the attempt to solve the problem of how we can possibly know that a person's aesthetic claims are genuine. The attempt to provide a means for distinguishing aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences stems from the idea that aesthetic experience is private, and hence from the idea that there has to be a clearly defined criterion for its identification.

The third shared feature of the subjectivist notion of aesthetic experience is the transcultural nature of the phenomenon. For subjectivists, the question of what counts as aesthetic experience is a question of what property is common to all cases of appreciation. Because they construe aesthetic experiences to be essentially the same, they search for basic unifying features that serve to characterize a mental event as aesthetic. In doing this, they construe aesthetic experience as transcending the spatio-temporal limits of its particular case and context of occurrence.

#### *Aesthetic Data As Natural*

In limiting aesthetic experience just to the artwork, both approaches take aesthetic data or perceptual stimuli from an artwork as natural and as devoid of social content. This idea about the socially neutral character of aesthetic data finds expression in the view that formal and sensuous qualities alone can give the significance of the an artwork. The subjectivist's attempt to divorce aesthetic experience from its contextual initiating conditions assumes that the artistic significance of an artwork is not informed by contextual features. The fact that subjectivists treat contextual features as distracting from the aesthetic point of view show them to believe that the artistic significance of an

artwork can be grasped without an understanding of the principle of design, and the meaning of the symbols and imagery represented in the work. The assumption that the artistic significance of, say, the *enyi* mask is meaningful without the relevant contextual features that would otherwise have informed a viewer's understanding, is tantamount to the assumption that aesthetic data figure as they really are. This de-contextualized view of aesthetic experience portrays the artistic significance of an artwork as natural, as something that stands "out there" to be privately apprehended by individuals.

### *Internal Criteria of Understanding*

In presenting an account of aesthetic experience that divorces the artistic significance of an object from its contextual features, both subjectivist approaches treat artistic understanding as solely dependent on an individual's cognitive faculty. On this view, aesthetic experience is achieved by means of an artistic standard which an individual has somehow internalized. His or her understanding of the visual messages of an artwork is taken to involve reference to this internal standard. Because both approaches take artistic understanding to come by route of a mental event, they share an introspective view of understanding. They treat understanding as an inward-looking process in which the individual apprehends the content of an artwork by reference to his or her mental history. The basic idea here is that we fix the significance of artworks and understand the activities in the art practice by reference to the mind. In other words, the art practice is organized and regulated in terms of what people want.

### *Common Grounds of the Two Institutional Approaches*

As we shall see, the common grounds of the institutionalist approaches are the mirror images of the common grounds for subjectivism. The three areas of overlap

that what is artistically significant is determined by reference to the special features of the particular system or sub-system of the practice. For instance, institutionalists hold that without a knowledge of the artistic ideals of the Izzi-Igbos, one would have no way of evaluating the artistic strengths and weaknesses of the *enyi* mask since one is unaware of what to look for in making the necessary discriminations. They see the dependency of what is aesthetically meaningful on the formal features of the context as establishing that aesthetic data is not conventionally neutral. The institutionalist's view is that perceptual recognition of the formal qualities of an artwork is not possible without consideration of the relevant contextual features. The reason for this is that to discriminate the artistic qualities of an object one has to have an understanding of what counts as art or an artwork, as well as know whether the object in question warrants being construed as such. Arguing that artistic attributions require an understanding of both the object and its contextual feature, institutionalists hold the view that aesthetic data are inherently social at least in part. They believe that aesthetic data are shaped by the specific social environment.

*External Criteria of Understanding:*

The outward looking perspective of institutionalism shifts cognitive focus from an investigation of the inner recesses of the mind, to an observation of the formal rules regulating the activity in the artworld. The observer approach enables institutionalists to see the important features that enter into appreciation of artworks such as the *enyi* mask. They contend that artworks become aesthetically meaningful when they are viewed in relation to the larger surrounding of the Igbo masking tradition. And they conclude that formal and sensuous qualities are better appreciated when the principle of design and mode of representation are understood. The information yielded by this perspective reveals to them the strong relationship that exists between the artwork and

its specific contextual tradition. As a consequence of their examinations, both approaches define aesthetic experience in terms of an understanding of the relation of the artwork to its contextual tradition. Since they see the interrelationship between the institution and the artwork to be what makes the object aesthetically meaningful, institutionalists hold that the framework for understanding is an external social one. Thus, their grounding of aesthetic appreciation on the rules and theories of the art practice, rather than on intuitive insight, reflects the shared view that the external social regularities fix the meaning and significance of phenomena in the mind.

## THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Subjectivism and institutionalism differ in their conceptualization of what the problems of aesthetics are and what the possible solutions are. The differences of the two theories derive from the kind of assumptions underlying their position.

### *Subjectivism*

#### *Essences*

The search for an essential property that is common to all instances of aesthetic experience is of major concern to subjectivists. Motivated by the desire to provide an accurate description of aesthetic experience that is valid for all times and all contexts, subjectivists isolated a special phenomenological event. The identification of this mental phenomenon as the feature that defines aesthetic experience derives from the assumption that there must be some elements that are common or shared by all aesthetic experiences. It is assumed that this feature must transcend social and contextual influences if it is to be of value as a criterion for distinguishing an aesthetic from a non-aesthetic experience. The subjectivist's search for an essential item is not concerned

with setting out the minimal conditions for identifying and characterizing aesthetic objects, but with finding some definite feature that underlies and unites all instances of the experience.

### *Individualism*

Subjectivism construes introspectible happenings in the minds of people as the proper subject of investigation for aesthetics. It is assumed that we cannot properly claim to explain aesthetic responses except in terms of people's conscious behaviour. The nature of these responses are mental since the mind is the theatre where aesthetic experiences occur. Consequently, aesthetic experience is treated as a mental phenomenon that is generated by perceptual stimuli and that accompanies an individual's appreciation of artworks. The assumption that aesthetic appreciation of artworks should be treated as the phenomenological occurrences or feelings that occurred during aesthetic perception has its basis in the individualistic supposition that aesthetic experience is mental. Since artistic activity is dependent on people, it is argued, a satisfactory explanation must be in terms of the psychological and perceptual dispositions of individuals.

### *Dichotomy between the Inner and the Outer:*

The supposition that individuals have cognitive primacy in explanations of how we understand works of art presupposes two things: firstly, the inner life of a person provides the arena for seeing the artistic point of works of art; and secondly, artworks such as *enyi* masks are properly appreciated in terms of personal inner experiences and feelings. In particular, the artistic understanding is held to come by route of personal observation of one's inner mental states, in a manner divorced and separated from the contextual features associated with the outer public environment. This pic-

ture presupposes a dichotomy between the 'inner/mental realm and the outer/conventional world, with aesthetic understanding being understood as occurring in an inner world separate from the outer public world.

### *Institutionalism*

#### *Non-essences*

The institutionalist construal of art as an essentially institutional activity and the artistic significance of artworks as basically theoretical constructions, set out the minimal conditions for deciding what counts as an artwork. In no way is it concerned with the search for some common essential property or set of properties. In fact, institutionalists are of the view that the search for an essential item is misplaced since there is no special intrinsic element that makes an object an artwork. Their position is that the status of an object as art is achieved either by having the status conferred on an object by proper agents of the artworld, or by having the object transformed by means of an applicable artistic theory. The institutionalist position, that a work of art is an artifact that has been singled out by conventional means for public appreciation, is based on the assumption that the artistic significance of an object derives from the tradition and should not be confused with the nature of the objects in question. Institutionalism holds that since any object can be a work of art under the proper conditions (as Duchamp's *Fountain* shows), there is no inherent property in the object that is picked out by its artistic significance. Aesthetic appreciation comes rather from situating the artwork to its relevant artistic tradition.

#### *Holism*

The stable conventional features of the artworld (such as the artistic theories, the actions of agents, the rules and regulations of the different systems, and the tradition)

are construed as the proper starting point for aesthetic understanding. Such a construal derives not only from the idea that the artistic significance of an artworld is conventionally or publicly defined, but also from the view that since the art practice is an institutionalized practice, it must be understood in terms of its own constitutive rules and regulations. This implies that the explanation of how we understand artworks, what artists do, what the carvers of *enyi* masks are striving after, what modes of behaviour are expected in each sub-system, must all be in terms of the general rules defining the actions and activities of participants in the artworld. In short, a basic assumption underpinning the institutionalist account is the holistic idea that formal rules and regularities, or the stable features of a practice, constitute the appropriate framework for understanding a conventional response like aesthetic appreciation.

#### *Dichotomy between the Outer and the Inner*

The institutionalist's refusal to accord much importance to the phenomenological goings-on in a viewer's mind derives from the belief that the artistic significance of an artwork is conventionally assigned. This belief is underpinned by the assumption that a contrast can be made between the mental and the social, and that only the activities in the social are of relevance to understanding what counts as appreciation. Institutionalism accords cognitive primacy to "established ways of behaving" in the artworld and seeks to eliminate introspectible events as what explains aesthetic appreciation. Yet, by assuming that only the social is of relevance to aesthetic understanding, institutionalism accepts the underlying dichotomy between the mental life and the social life. It presupposes the same picture of an inner/outer contrast as subjectivism, except that it differs from subjectivism by moving to the opposite pole.

## BASIC MOTIVATIONS FOR THE TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS: THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION

The character of the two philosophical theories, subjectivism and institutionalism, derive from certain problems to which the philosophers are responding. These problems provide both the motivation and rationale for the various moves that are made. In identifying what the problems are, I shall show how they arise for each theory, and what sorts of problem they pose for subjectivism and institutionalism.

### *Subjectivism*

#### *Problem of Interpersonal Understanding*

The subjectivist view of understanding presupposes that the artistic significance of an artwork is to be explained by reference to a viewer's mental biography, and that one learns from one's own inner experiences what counts as aesthetic experience or appreciation. The underlying inner/outer dichotomy presupposed by subjectivism creates a break between the mental and the social spheres of a person's life. On this view, we are privy just to our own mental states and have no direct access to that of others. Since aesthetic appreciation is by route of inner experiences, the main question that arises for subjectivists is: How does that which applies to me apply also to others? In particular, how do we know that others have similar experiences or that their inner experiences correspond to ours, and how do we establish a common understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience from a multitude of private inner experiences? The problem of intersubjective validation raised by these questions derives from the fact that if the inner mental realm is distinct and separate from the outer social realm, and if our understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience is by reference to inner mental occurrences, then we do not share a common notion of aesthetic experience:

To counter this problem that comes from employing an inner mentalistic framework of understanding, subjectivists appeal to the idea that the psychological lives of individuals are basically the same and unaffected by external social influences. The appeal to the sameness of psychological life rests in turn on the common nature of all human beings, the idea being that at the basic level, the inner life of everyone is *unaffected by existing differences* in the cultural environment. The subjectivist's view that what holds for one's perceptual experiences holds for others, rests on the assumption that our understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience will be the same, for the simple reason that everyone necessarily cognizes by means of the same fundamental mental categories. So when subjectivists explain aesthetic experience by reference to introspectible events in the mind, (that is, when they attempt to ground artistic significance in the individual's mental biography), they assume that we share a common understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience, and that everyone has similar inner experiences.

#### *Problem of Objectivity*

In traditional aesthetics, the distinction between the creative and the logical lines up with the distinction between the subjective and the objective. The creative process and artistic activity which aesthetics deals with are construed as being the exclusive provinces of the subjective, while logic and science are construed to be in the realm of the objective. When objectivity is defined in terms of the rational and the cognitive, subjectivity is by contrast taken to define the irrational and the non-cognitive. Since the contrast between the objective and the subjective has historically been accepted as correct, and since the subject-matter of aesthetics falls within the domain of the subjective, the following questions arise for subjectivists: How is the subjective-emotional to be explained and rationally understood? In particular, how can our aesthetic state-

ments and judgements be given an objective and rational basis? How can a private inner experience provide independent grounds for rational aesthetic discourse? And how can the truth or falsity of aesthetic claims be determined?

Some of the moves made by subjectivists are a direct response to this call for objectivity. Since an internal criterion of understanding undermines the possibility of objectivity by destroying the necessary public grounds that is required for validation, subjectivists are forced either to accept the view of aesthetics as emotional and irrational, or to devise ways to establish that aesthetic claims and judgments are objective and rational. The intuitionist moves employed by subjectivists to get out of their difficulty lead them to contend that the truth of what is asserted by aesthetic claims or judgments can somehow be grasped, either by further introspection of one's mental biography as Beardsley suggests, or intuitively without the process of ratiocination as Bullough would have us believe.

#### *Problem of Universalism*

Artistic activity is a practice in which individuals in a socio-cultural setting engage. Changes in styles and cultural differences in artistic practice show that an artwork is somehow dependent on the artistic conditions that obtain in specific cultural environments. In making universal claims about the aesthetic appeal of works of art, subjectivists encounter the problem of how an artwork that is specific to a particular culture or context can have transcultural appeal. The problem concerns the relationship of the particular to the universal. It raises the question of how an artistic property or artwork that is specific to a definite cultural environment can be universal.

Subjectivists deal with this problem by distilling out the contextual features of the artwork in perceptual stimuli so that aesthetic experience becomes the natural response

of individuals when the culturally unique features that give it its specificity are removed. Further, a set of artistic qualities is extracted and defined as essential and hence universal. The message we are meant to receive is that this set of fixed qualities are not peculiar to this or that particular artwork but are present in all works of art in some varying degree or other. Subjectivism holds that we get at these features by keen insight, that we pierce through the superficial layers of social, stylistic, and periodic peculiarities to get at these more basic shared features. Thus, at this level, works of art have universal appeal and anyone can appreciate them.

### *Institutionalism*

The following problems are the mirror images of the problems for subjectivism. Like their counterparts, they provide the rationale for some of the moves made by institutionalists.

### *Problem of Intra-Personal Understanding*

The observationist view of understanding explains the artistic significance of an artwork in terms of the cultural and contextual features of an artwork. It holds that aesthetic appreciation comes from following the relevant rules and theories. But underlying institutionalism is the assumption that the inner/mental is distinct and separate from the outer/social. Giving cognitive primacy to the outer/social life, we refashion the relationship between the inner/mental life and the outer social life so that the mental is underemphasized while the art practice or rules acquires explanatory dominance. Since the mental is left out of the picture, institutionalism needs to come to terms with how individuals with underdeveloped artistic interest, motives, and preferences are capable of the sophisticated response required in understanding and following the rules of the art practice.

The problem of intra-personal understanding concerns the role of individuals' personal preferences, artistic interests, motives, and other attitudinal states in appreciation. What needs to be determined is not *how* individuals apply and follow the conventional rules and theories of appreciation, but *why* they do so. To settle this problem which derives from employing a social framework of understanding, institutionalists construe rules as some inexplicable force that propel people to appreciation. Preoccupied with the problem of mentalism, they depict rules and theories as generating appreciation by causing people to adhere to their internal logic regardless of artistic interest, preferences, and motives.

#### *Problem of Subjectivity*

As has already been mentioned, aesthetics has for long been defined as having to do with matters that are in the realm of individuals' subjective states. People value and respond to artworks in terms of what they feel or like about the work, the process by which their decisions are made has nothing to do with clearly defined objective standards of evaluation. The central questions which this subjective approach to aesthetics raise are: How can the subject-matter of attitudes or feelings of persons escape subjectivity? And how can the subjective element of art be accommodated within the institutionalist's framework?

To solve this problem, institutionalists reinterpret subjective states like interests so that they become "objective" institutional acts or phenomena. This objectification of the subjective element on which mentalism thrives institutionalizes it by having it built into the artworld. An object acquires the status of art not necessarily because it merits it or because it exhibits features of formal excellence, but because it has been conferred with that status in accordance with the correct procedure. This decoupling of art from the emotional provides institutionalists with a basis to construe aesthetic judgements as non-arbitrary, objective and cognitive.

## *Problem of Relativism*

Throughout the history of philosophy, the ideas that artistic activity is necessarily universal and that works of art have universal appeal have largely remained unchallenged. The underlying idea is that cultural differences in theme and subject-matter do not affect the universal nature of such works. For instance, it is suggested that Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase*, the *Ogbodo Enyi* mask or Van Gogh's *Iris-eyes* have universally shared qualities. Because institutionalists contend that contextual features inform and shape the artistic significance of works of art, the question they face is: How do we reconcile the contextual nature of an artwork with the idea of art as universal? The problem arises with the construal of art as essentially institutional if only because the grounding of artistic activity on conventions makes institutionalism read like relativism. For if art is basically institutional, institutions reflect societal values, and societal values are relative to cultures, what counts as a work of art cannot but be relative to cultures. This would imply that what is artistically good or aesthetically appealing in one culture would not necessarily be acceptable in another.

To counter the relativistic strains of the thesis, institutionalists contend that despite their differences, the formal structures of each culture's practice are shared.

## Conclusion

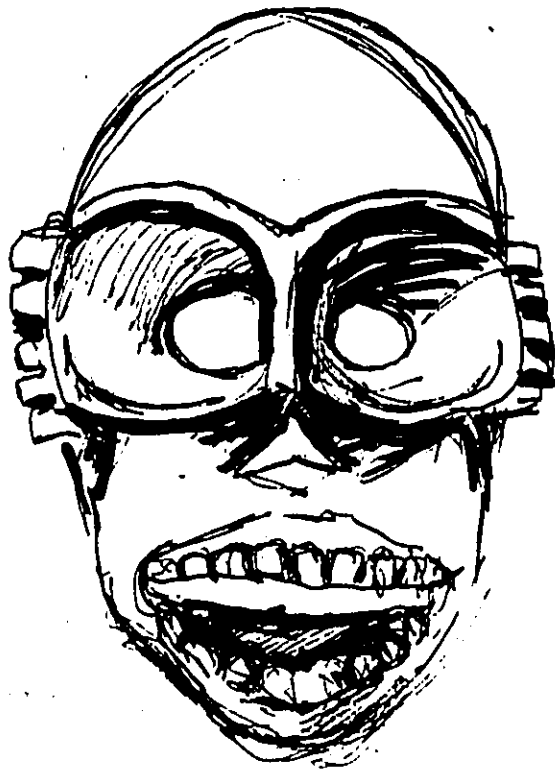
Two different pictures of appreciation result from the competing subjectivist and institutionalist accounts of how we appreciate works of art. On the subjectivist account, aesthetic appreciation is an inner private experience, while on the institutionalist account, it is outer public experience. The competing nature of the two approaches come about as a result of the kind of underlying objectives of each position. Since

the objective of institutionalism is to determine the relevant grounds on which works of art are aesthetically meaningful, it focuses on the relation of the artwork to art practice. Building on this insight, institutionalists play up the institutional nature of artworks and defines aesthetic experience in terms of it. The objective of subjectivism, on the other hand, is to isolate the character of aesthetic experience. So proponents of this view minimize the importance of the art practice and highlight the phenomenological features of aesthetic experience. What is important to subjectivism is the relation of the phenomenal qualities of a work of art to the psychological state of appreciation, not the cultural context in which it is situated.

ISO EKPO







The *Iso ekpo* or the *ekpo* mask is a wooden face mask of the powerful secret society known as the *Ekpo*. This exclusively male cult for the veneration of ancestors exercises immense political influence among the Ibibios of southeastern Nigeria. Political power is wielded by the use of masquerades which are seen as invoking ancestral spirits. The mask itself has no "power", but manifests it through the masquerader who, after invocatory rites, becomes a medium for an incarnate spirit.

There is great diversity in shapes, sizes, and expressiveness of *ekpo* masks. Despite the variety, two different types are recognizable: a fierce grotesque type and an artistically sensitive one. The fierce gruesome masks are used in acts of social and

political control, while the aesthetically pleasing masks are used on festive occasions. The fearsome expressions of the political masks are achieved by means of gross facial distortions such as exaggerated eyeholes, leering mouths, depressions on the cheeks, or other protrusions. The pleasant features of the masks used for festive occasions come from the great attention carvers devote to the symmetrical balance of the facial features of the masks. The overall design pattern of *ekpo* masks is basically geometric with an interesting juxtaposing of planes and rounded and angular surfaces. Physical tension is created by two competing styles – naturalism and abstractionism. The creative way in which both are blended in human and animal forms gives the mask a strong presence. The dramatic effect of *ekpo* masks is heightened by the the colour and texture of the masquerader's garb and the appendages used to embellish the figure's appearance. Black, which is believed to be the original colour at creation, is the dominant colour of *ekpo* masks.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EVALUATION OF THE TWO THEORIES

In seeking to increase our understanding of how we appreciate works of art, subjectivism defends the view that aesthetic understanding depends on a direct and personal experience of an artwork. On this view, aesthetic experience is essentially private and the framework for understanding artworks is an inner/mentalistic one. By contrast, institutionalism contends that our framework for understanding is an outer/public one, and that one's understanding of the putative aesthetic properties of an artwork requires a knowledge of the artistic tradition to which the object belongs. According to this theory, aesthetic experience is an institutional phenomenon that is brought about by following the rules and regulations of the artworld. The purpose of this chapter is to assess the adequacy of these two theories *vis-a-vis* their account of how we understand works of art.

The chapter is divided into four main parts. In the first part, I examine the main strengths of subjectivism, while in the second part, I do the same for institutionalism. In the third part, I discuss some crucial weaknesses of certain key ideas of subjectivism; and in the last section, I bring out some equally important shortcomings of institutionalism.

#### *The Strengths of Subjectivism*

Three important features are normally identified as being the main strengths of a subjectivist account. These are: the humanistic nature of the account; its incisive

description of the actual processes and character of aesthetic experience; and the success of the theory in bypassing the constraining effects of relativism.

### *A Humanist Account*

Subjectivism can plausibly be called a humanist account of aesthetics. It treats people as central to its explanation of how we understand works of art. The focus is on people because aesthetic appreciation is properly construed to be what people do, and artistic understanding as something that is applicable to human beings alone. Consequently, subjectivism gives cognitive prominence to artistic interests, motives and the attitudinal states of people. In doing so, it portrays and gives a strong account of individuals' expectations and objective in appreciating an artwork. For instance, the theory correctly recognises that artistic taste and preferences are at play in what people understand and choose to appreciate as works of art. In particular, people do not merely value a work like Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, or Oldenburg's *Invisible Sculpture* simply because it is publicly acclaimed to be art by artists, art critics, museum officials and other agents of the artworld. If what is presented as art is not to their liking, they fail to appreciate it even if they adopt the recommended perspective in viewing it. Thus by showing that aesthetic appreciation is impossible if people's interest is not engaged, subjectivism draws attention to the role and primacy of human interests and aims in setting the agenda of aesthetic experience.

In addition to highlighting the roles of personal interest and taste in aesthetic appreciation, subjectivism also gives a good account of the kind of concerns that are of interest to participants in the art practice. Since participants have a prior knowledge of the rules and regulations of the art practice, their informed understanding creates a need for a greater understanding of the relationship between the art object and the viewer. On the one hand, they seek answers to such technical questions as: How do

Ibibio carvers obtain the lustrous finish? What visual effect does the mask project? Do the exaggerated eye holes skew the symmetry of the mask? On the other hand, they want to know how the formal qualities of artworks evoke artistic interest, what sorts of reactions to expect, and what distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic experience. In focusing on participants' concerns, subjectivism accords a higher epistemic position to individuals over the art institution, and rightly locates the rationale of artistic activity where it belongs.

The strength of the humanist approach is that it shows the production of artworks to be tied to individuals' interest in artistic quality. The interest people evince for formal excellence defines the objectives of the art practice. By drawing attention to the interrelationship between interest in artistic issues and the conventions within an art practice, subjectivism establishes that formal qualities are needed to set the agenda for aesthetic appreciation and to fix the experience within an aesthetic framework.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Internal Character of Aesthetic Experience*

In providing a detailed psychological explanation of the inner mechanisms and processes of aesthetic appreciation, subjectivism goes much further than any account in enriching our understanding of aesthetic experience. Because the account is based on the relationship between the artwork and the happenings in the inner mental life of the viewer, subjectivism presupposes a first person perspective and the introspective method of analysis regarding what goes on in the spectator's mind while he or she is attending to or appreciating an artwork. This perspective illuminates the intermediary stages involved in the act of apprehending, cognizing and interpreting along with the character of phenomenological responses that are evoked by the formal qualities of artworks. The resultant subjectivist characterization of the inner mechanisms of aesthetic experience tells us how aesthetic experience is generated, and informs us of the type of features that characterize aesthetic responses.

Because subjectivism deals with the perceptual aspect of aesthetic experience, appreciation is construed as a mental event, an inner experience that results from a viewer's sensitivity to aesthetic stimuli from the external environment. Beardsley informs us that this phenomenological response or feeling is characterized by the qualities of intensity, symmetry, unity and coherence. This feeling, we are told, accompanies or underpins aesthetic experience, and informs our understanding of what counts as aesthetic appreciation. A spectator must have this *feeling* to aesthetically appreciate, say, the *ekpo* mask.

Moreover, the subjectivist's explanation provides us with the opportunity to see what features are and what features are not relevant in aesthetic experience, what features mark and characterize aesthetic experience and what attitude to adopt to attain maximum aesthetic response. We are able to inwardly check the character of phenomenological responses and to eliminate such features that do not enhance aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, since the introspective method is appropriate given the concerns of subjectivism, we get a well-articulated view of what to expect during aesthetic experience, and we are able to prepare ourselves better for it.

#### *Overcoming Relativism:*

Aware of the autobiographical nature of claims to aesthetic appreciation, subjectivists start out with the co-ordinate objective of overcoming the constraining effects of relativism. Proponents of the theory want to distance themselves from the idea that people's aesthetic experiences, or their artistic tastes are relative to their cultures. By making a distinction between artistic and non-artistic objects in terms of some common property shared by all artworks irrespective of cultural differences, they are able to bypass the relativist suggestion that aesthetic appreciation is limited to the art practice to which the artwork belongs, and that a person's aesthetic experience of an artwork is

constrained by the special features of his or her own culture. Subjectivism takes it that the existence of universally shared features means that aesthetic appreciation need not be relative. The following is the basic substance of the argument.

Subjectivism makes a claim for aesthetic unity between peoples of differing cultural settings by highlighting just those formal features that are universal in the artistic works of each culture. These universal formal and sensuous qualities of style, form, symmetry and design are construed as properties that are common to all aesthetic objects regardless of their differences. By maintaining that this basic set of formal and sensuous qualities cuts across stylistic and cultural differences, subjectivists suggest that the diversity between artistic styles, practices and artworks, and the differences in nature of the artistic practices of other cultures are superficial. Thus for instance, the differences between an *ekpo* mask, Henry Moore's *Obelisk*, and Duchamp's *Fountain* are held to exist only at the surface level.

Because the formal and sensuous qualities apply universally, that is, cross-culturally, subjectivism insists that artistic practices are not relative to, or causally dependent on any given culture, style or period. This implies that an artwork can be appreciated independently of the specific features of its artistic practice. An *ekpo* mask may be appreciated from a standpoint other than that of its artistic tradition. The underlying idea here is that since the formal elements of artworks are universally shared, then one cannot plausibly contend that the appeal of an artwork is relative to a culture, or that it must be appreciated only from the standpoint of its cultural and contextual tradition.

## *The Strengths of Institutionalism*

There are also three widely recognized strengths of institutionalism: its contextualist account of aesthetic experience; the external or social character of understanding; and its success in bypassing an absolutist account of aesthetics.

### *A Contextualist Account:*

Institutionalism is a contextualist account of aesthetics. The theory recognizes the diversity in artistic forms, styles and modes of representation that exist among different cultures, since it recognizes the importance of the immediate context or practice to which the artwork belongs. Because it recognizes the role of contextual and cultural issues in appreciation, institutionalism is able to account for such things as the colour of *ekpo* masks, and why certain *ekpo* masks are ugly. It favours an approach to appreciation that will enable the viewer to see the intended artistic significance of the artwork. Dickie makes this point – albeit in a polemical way. He draws attention to Duchamp's *Fountain* and points out that we shall not be able to understand the presence of a urinal in the artworld unless we appreciate the special historical and cultural circumstances surrounding the bestowal of art status on a urinal. By highlighting the enriched aesthetic appreciation that comes from knowing the artistic scheme to which the artwork belongs, institutionalism calls attention to the role of contextual features in aesthetic appreciation.

No doubt the contextual perspective gives an especially rich account of art appreciation because it recognizes the interrelationship between an artwork and its contextual background. It recognizes that aesthetic appreciation is difficult when one is ignorant of the relevant cultural ideas. For instance, lacking an understanding of the Ibibio art practice, one cannot see the artistic point of the gruesome *ekpo* mask, nor

understand what to look for in appraising its artistic merit. But when one learns about the cultural ideas that call for ugly fierce looking masks and understands the mode of representation typical of the *ekpo* masking tradition, one can see the point of the exaggerated facial distortions of some *ekpo* masks. Drawing insight from a person's inability to appreciate artworks they are unfamiliar with, institutionalists hold that the viewer's difficulty highlights the interrelationship of the object to its artistic tradition. The fact that aesthetic awareness comes only after an understanding of the specific mode of representation means that the artistic significance of the mask is dependent on its contextual tradition. Thus the strength of institutionalism is that it calls attention to the interconnectedness of an artwork to its artistic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

#### *The Public Character of Aesthetic Experience:*

Concerned about the use to which subjectivists put such notions as "artistic merit" or "artistic excellence", institutionalism adopts the third-person perspective or the observer approach to determine the relevant ground for artistic understanding. What is observed from this perspective is the role of contextual features in fixing the content of formal qualities and in defining what constitutes artistic merit. For example, the seemingly inscrutable *ekpo* mask becomes meaningful when its principle of design and style are understood. Because aesthetic comprehension depends on an understanding of the relevant artistic convention, institutionalists contend that our framework for understanding artworks is a public social one.

We should remember that institutionalism is not overly concerned with the question of what is the nature of aesthetic experience since it is concerned to eliminate ideas that may give rise to mentalistic difficulties. Nonetheless, the central claims of the theory about the interrelationship of the artwork to its context, and about how we appreciate works of art have important implications for an institutionalist view of aesthetic experience.

The institutionalist definition of the artworld "as an established way of doing and behaving" places great emphasis on conventional behaviour and responses.<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on conventional norms of behaviour in relating to an artwork highlights how aesthetic responses are socially regulated to conform to the behavioural requirements of different systems in the artworld. On this view, what counts as aesthetic appreciation is the socialized response that follows when a person abides by the conventional behaviour of attending with interest to the artwork. In calling attention to the socializing process by which aesthetic response is institutionalized, institutionalism reveals that aesthetic experience and appreciation of artworks are learned behavioural responses. The strength of the theory is that it reveals the social or public character of aesthetic appreciation.

*Bypassing Universals and Absolutes:*

The starting point of institutionalism is the artistic tradition and conventional practices of a given artwork. The theory aims to give a satisfactory explanation of works of art that does not sacrifice meaningfulness for sharedness. Institutionalism achieves meaningfulness by relating an artwork to its sub-system in the artworld, and by locating that sub-system with respect to the larger artistic practice of the culture. For instance, an *ekpo* mask would first be situated within the Ibibio masking tradition, and then within the general Ibibio art practice. The resulting explanation gives a satisfying account as it says something significant about the place of the artwork in the relevant artistic tradition. From the institutionalist's perspective, glossing over these differences is misguided if only because it fails to recognize the cultural diversity in forms of art. The strength of institutionalism is that it grasps the salient fact that artistic differences cannot be ignored if the artwork is to be understood.

## WEAKNESSES OF SUBJECTIVISM

Closely allied to the strengths of subjectivism are two key ideas that undermine the satisfactoriness of the theory. The first is the idea of a phenomenologically distinct experience, and the second is the de-contextualized account of aesthetic experience. These two problems have their roots in the subjectivist conception of a mental event as what explains our appreciation of an artwork.

### *The Idea of Phenomenologically Distinct Experience*

The idea that aesthetic experience is limited to the relationship between the individual and the artwork raises three kinds of problems. The first concerns the notion of asocial aesthetic experience required by the view, the second is the mechanical process of experience that it presupposes, and the third is the implicit circularity in the idea of an internal psychological criteria of understanding.

### *Asocial Experience*

Subjectivists' descriptions of aesthetic experience as a distinctive type of experience presuppose a picture of a mental event that is logically distinct from other types of experiences, and from both the physical object that is artwork and the object's contextual tradition. Consider Beardsley's definition of an aesthetic experience. He describes it as the experience a person has "during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his (or her) mental activity during that time is unified and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his (or her) primary attention is concentrated".<sup>4</sup> Beardsley's definition limits itself to internal character of the phenomenal object in the mind. It says nothing about the physical object on which attention is concentrated nor

about the viewer who is appraising the work. This definition portrays aesthetic experience as a sensation like toothache that is definite, temporally localizable and isolatable, and that one is aware of regardless of the special features of one's social environment. Just as one's culture is irrelevant to the character of the pain we feel from the toothache, in the same way the subjectivist's conception of aesthetic experience treats the cultural features of both the artwork and the viewer as irrelevant to aesthetic experience.

This notion of aesthetic experience as divorced from — albeit causally connected to — the art object, characterizes aesthetic experience as a natural response of individuals to the putative aesthetic properties of an artwork. On this view, aesthetic experience no longer requires an understanding of such contextual features as the artwork's artistic tradition, style, period, and the intention of the artist. The stage-setting activities that a viewer requires to see the point of an artwork are not mentioned at all: all a viewer needs to appreciate an artwork is to fix his or her attention on the object. But as a number of critics have pointed out, it is far from clear that people can grasp the artistic significance of an artwork simply by perceptual acquaintance.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in ignoring the relevance of contextual features, subjectivists end up with an untenable notion of aesthetic experience that is independent of social and cultural influences.

But even if we agree to the general idea of an aesthetic experience, that does not imply the existence of a unique and distinct phenomenological experience. Dickie and Tilghman convincingly argue against the idea that there is a special kind of experience that is peculiarly aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> For his part, Dickie shows that the subjectivist's use of the notion does not differ from the quite ordinary mental state of attending to or concentrating on something. He argues that concentrating on an art object is no different from the other states of concentration and certainly does not involve the use of a spe-

cial kind of attention over and above the ordinary mode of concentration. According to him, it is both unnecessary and misleading for subjectivists to multiply mental processes since this merely mystifies rather than explains aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Tilghman directs his attack at the idea that phenomenal objects possess the qualities of unity, coherence and completeness, which subjectivists like Beardsley take to characterize aesthetic experience. He contends that these qualities are in fact properties of the external environment and not of the phenomenal world as subjectivists suppose. The view is that phenomenal qualities cannot instantiate such properties independently of the external world, because they are perceptual objects. For Tilghman, the fact that the perceived qualities of unity, coherence and symmetry are parasitic on the physical properties of an artwork shows them to be features of the artwork in question.<sup>7</sup> In which case, aesthetic experience is to be explained by reference to the external contextual features, the same features subjectivists say are irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation.

#### *The Mental Mechanism:*

Subjectivism turns to such factors as perceptual stimuli, attitudes and various psychological reactions such as prehension, distance and felt-freedom to account for our understanding and appreciation of the putative aesthetic properties of artworks. The view here is that if we attend with interest to the formal and sensuous qualities of an artwork we should have an aesthetic experience of it. Appreciation is taken to be a mental process, a kind of mental mechanism that is activated once a viewer attends with interest to an artwork.

The mental machinery is highly sophisticated and is revealed only when the intermediate gaps in subjectivists' analysis are filled in. Consider the fuller mechanical picture. Stimuli from the artwork in the external world approaches the mind via the per-

ceptual organs and activate the neural receptors. Certain impulses are initiated in the neural systems and impinge upon the brain. The brain refers the impulses to the mind which then sorts through its data bank or storehouse of knowledge for the meaning of the signal. The mind decodes the signal and makes the correct match between meaning and impulse. Only then does the mind infuse the individual's consciousness with the interpretation of the perceptual stimuli. The infusion results in an experience that is both pleasurable and united, coherent and complete.

The construal of experience as a mechanical process is implicit in the scientific explanation of aesthetic experience that subjectivism presupposes. The whole process of aesthetic experience occurs swiftly in a causal push-pull manner, the causal nature of the process fixing the content of the artwork and the mind discerning or picking it out. The retrieval and interpreting processes are so contrived that no margin of error is permitted.

The underlying assumption that funds this view is the idea that the mind is *en rapport* with the external stimuli and so can never get them wrong. The picture of aesthetic experience that emerges is of an inexplicable phenomenon that happens under appropriate conditions. We cannot explain why people see the point of one artwork but not that of another, nor why they see the artistic significance of an artwork but are not pleasantly disposed towards it.

#### *Circularity in the Psychological View of Understanding*

Subjectivism contends that the perceptual stimuli, the viewer's psychological state and attitude are able to account for our understanding of works of art. The idea of a mental event as a criterion of identification raises the problem of how a psychological criterion could possibly provide the basis for determining what counts as aesthetic

experience, and how aesthetic claims and judgment can possibly be justified. As Douglas Dempster argues, the difficulty does not lie as much in the inaccessibility of mental states as in the privileged relation that an internal criterion of understanding confers on the individual having the experiences. The knower-object relation defined by an internal criterion undermines the possibility of learning what counts as aesthetic appreciation as we would never be in a position to know what others aesthetic experiences are like.<sup>8</sup>

For example, if one learns what counts as aesthetic experience by reference to our psychological experiences, one needs to know what counts as aesthetic experience in order to distinguish between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences. Here lies the inherent circularity: since one needs to know what aesthetic experience is like in order to identify the experiences, and since one cannot make the discriminations unless one knows what the experience is like, then one cannot possibly learn what aesthetic experience is like. However, since subjectivists assume that we can learn what counts as aesthetic experience, then either we already know what aesthetic experience is, or subjectivists are merely presupposing that we know. Either suggestion is circular as it presupposes what subjectivism claims to substantiate.

The problem with an internal criterion of understanding is that we need a prior knowledge of what to look for in order to understand what counts as aesthetic experience. A psychological criterion of understanding makes knowledge of what counts as aesthetic experience as a precondition for its knowledge. The weakness in subjectivism is that it compounds the problem by illegitimately presupposing an understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience to get discussions going.

### *De-Contextualization and Free Floating Natural Worlds*

The view that aesthetic experience is central to our understanding of the artistic significance of artworks ignores the conventional character of artistic practice. The idea that the context can be ignored in explaining what aesthetic experience is distorts what we eventually come to consider as aesthetic appreciation. There are two central difficulties that vitiate theoretical accounts of aesthetic experience that fail to take cognizance of the interconnectedness between artwork and the art practice. One is the intuitionistic assumptions theorists make to bypass the internal inconsistencies of their theories; and the other is the naturalistic picture of aesthetic experience that underpins subjectivism. The theoretical adequacy of their account is further weakened by fact that the two difficulties are in strong opposition.

#### *Intuitionistic Leaps:*

Subjectivism limits attention to the relation between the viewer and the artwork and ignores the surrounding contextual features. No mention is made about the place of stage-setting activities in learning to understand or see the aesthetic features of an artwork. Rather the theory treats the artwork as "given", and nothing about its context is thought of as relevant. This approach of limiting epistemic focus to just the relation between an individual and an artwork divorces the work from its natural artistic practice from which it derives its meaningfulness. Stripped of its contextual significance, subjectivism takes the artistic significance of, say, the *ekpo* mask as something introspectible and directly apprehensible to the viewer. The supposition that we can see the artistic significance of the mask by direct experience treats the artistic significance of the mask as standing "out there".

In assuming that we intuitively grasp the artistic point of an artwork independently of its contextual features, subjectivism suggests we have intuitive understanding of the artistic ideas that the artwork represents. The first difficulty with this intuitionistic view concerns how we understand the significance of the aesthetic data without reference to the contextual tradition of the artwork. If the relevant context and practice that fix the content of the artwork are eliminated from the explanatory account, how do we ensure that what we intuit is the artistic significance of the *ekpo* mask? We need to remember that we do not have a description of what it is we must apprehend to ensure that what we intuitively grasp correlates to the *ekpo* rather than to the *enyi* mask or some other object. The problem with this view is that, lacking a context to fix the meaning of an artwork like the *ekpo* mask, anything the individual claims as the artistic significance of the object is not even subject to rational discourse or justification.<sup>9</sup>

The second difficulty of the intuitionistic moves concerns the underlying picture of individuals as omniscient. To assume that people learn about the world and about aesthetic objects through examining the character of ideas in their minds is to picture them as fully rational solitary thinkers. As introspective beings, they do not require the stable features of social practice to appreciate and understand works of art. So the rules and conventions of the art institution are irrelevant to understanding. But numerous examples could be cited to show that individuals are not rational in the required sense. Consider the case of Westerners who are understandably bewildered by the artistic mode of representation of a traditional African artform. Viewers want to know the contextual features that institutionalists claim to be central but which subjectivists claim to be irrelevant. If the underlying assumption about the rational faculty of individuals is correct, these Western viewers should have no difficulty with seeing the artistic significance of *ekpo* masks.

*Naturalistic Slides:*

By focusing exclusively on the inner mechanism of aesthetic experience, subjectivism accords the same status to all perceptual stimuli deriving from the external world. These data are construed as designating some object, qualities or set of qualities that are situated in the external environment. The formal and sensuous qualities of an artwork are taken as inhering in an object "out there". We also think of such objects as natural in the sense that the artwork is a property of a mind-independent reality, and to construe aesthetic data as natural in that they are part of the nature of the world rather than social constructions. That we perceive an object as a work of art is, on this view, dependent primarily on such things as the possession of perceptual faculties and good perceptual conditions rather than on special features of the cultural environment.

When subjectivism conceives aesthetic data as analogous with natural objects, the artistic significance of an artwork is portrayed as independent of its cultural artistic tradition. Just as the meaning of natural objects like stone, trees, and so on remain the same through time, the meaning of the artwork is thought to be basically constant as well. This means that the artistic significance of the *enyi* mask is treated as enduring through time regardless of changes in the cultural environment. On this conception, artistic significance of artworks is much like the meaning of natural objects. They are "out there" in the world and are accessible to anyone in full possession of their faculties and in good perceptual conditions.

It is also worth noting that this naturalistic view of aesthetic data conflicts sharply with the intuitionistic assumption that the artistic significance of an artwork can be directly apprehended. The internal inconsistencies created by the conflict provide fertile grounds for theoretical problems.

The central problem of the naturalistic assumption, however, is not that it fails to acknowledge the social nature of aesthetic data but that it illicitly exploits our everyday world. Subjectivism takes explanatory materials from our everyday reality and elevates them to epistemic importance, and then deceptively reads out from this inverted picture as if from a natural world. The error in the subjectivist's picture is that it fails to see that, unlike natural objects, artworks require a social context to derive its significance.

To see that the naturalistic picture of the world that generates this foundationalist problem is false, suppose we switch the environment while the mental life of the individual is left the same. A first-time viewer responds with bewilderment at the preponderance of ugly *ekpo* masks. But subsequently, the same ugly mask evokes different responses, an indication that the meaning of the same object varies in different contextual situations. An artwork is unlike natural objects in that its significance is not an intrinsic property of the art object, but depends on the special features of its context.

#### WEAKNESSES OF INSTITUTIONALISM

The two main weaknesses on institutionalism are the mirror images of the main weaknesses of subjectivism. The first relates to the idea of a conventionally defined experience that underpins the institutionalist's account of aesthetic appreciation; the second relates to the problem of "sentient institutions" that follows from the elimination of mental predicates. These two weaknesses derive from the institutionalist conception that activities of the the art practice are to be explained by the conventions within the artworld.

### *The Idea of Conventionally Defined Experience*

The idea that aesthetic experience is explained by rules, theories and related conventional features of the art practice contains three major difficulties. These are: the idea of a contextual experience; the mechanical nature of the experience; and the implicit circularity in such accounts of aesthetic appreciation. Although these three difficulties are in opposition to those of the subjectivist's idea of a phenomenologically distinct experience, they are strangely similar to them in the role they play in the explanatory framework.

#### *The idea of contextual experience*

Institutionalism defines aesthetic experience in terms of people's compliance with the rules and theories of the artworld. For institutionalists like Danto, artworks are to be understood and appreciated in terms of the relevant theory (such as the Imitation Theory or the Realist Theory of Art) that provide a whole new mode of seeing the artistic significance of artworks.<sup>10</sup> Institutionalism takes rules and theories as explaining a great many phenomena connected with the evaluation and appreciation of works of art. For instance, the audience at a musical concert has an aesthetic experience because the listeners employ the proper rules and theories of appreciation while following the musical performance. On this view, aesthetic experience is the response that occurs at the end of adhering to the rules and regulations of the convention. This institutionalist picture of aesthetic appreciation treats it as causally dependent on the application of appropriate rules and theories, as something that logically follows once individuals abide by the stipulation of the regulations.

Because institutionalism is concerned with eliminating mentalistic predicates from its account of aesthetic experience, it portrays aesthetic experience as an institutional-

ized response that takes place in the artworld setting. This construal of appreciation is thought of as locating aesthetic experience in the physical world rather than in the mental sphere. So the accordance of epistemic pre-eminence to rules and theories derives from the view that they are what explain the nature, activities and events in the artworld. Rules and theories are treated as more important than the interest a person brings to appreciation since it is assumed that they kindle the interest that people have. Since the occurrence of aesthetic appreciation is taken to depend on rules and theories, institutionalism holds that to appreciate the putative aesthetic properties on an artwork, one must have the relevant theory or rule of appreciation. The central idea of institutionalism is that without rules and theories to guide individuals to appreciation, we would lack the relevant means to appreciate the aesthetic properties of artworks.

The difficulties of contextual experience lie in the assumption that aesthetic appreciation comes about simply by following the relevant rules and theories in appraising an artwork. The view is that the artworld has been arranged in such a way as to produce the necessary response when one applies the relevant rules or theories. The underlying suggestion is that rules and theories possess a certain force to bring people to aesthetic appreciation. That once the relevant theory is applied, aesthetic appreciation follows regardless of what a person thinks.

But it is clear that Dickie and Danto do not intend the rules and theories to function as a force that compel people to action. They are aware that people may apply the rules incorrectly or might even refuse to follow them, in which case appreciation will not occur. However, since they maintain that relevant rules and theories must be followed to have an aesthetic experience, two sorts of problems arise for their views: the first concerns the relevance of people's interest in appreciating an artwork, and the second concerns our criteria for grasping the putative aesthetic properties of artworks.

By ignoring the role of artistic interest in aesthetic appreciation, institutionalism ignores that our tastes play an important role in whether or not we appreciate an artwork. Institutionalists forget that artistic creation generally precedes the formulation of rules and theories. If we look at how people fared prior to the formulation of rules and theories, we would find the institutionalist assumption about the role of rules and theories to be false. Consider that the post impressionist art movement was well under way before the rules and theories that are appropriate to the style were devised. Nevertheless, people recognized the artistic quality of these works, they saw what the artists were striving to do, and they were able to appreciate the putative aesthetic properties of these works without the aid of theories. That people are able to appreciate an artwork prior to the introduction of rules of appreciation indicates that the institutionalist's assumption that appreciation depends on following rules and theories is misconceived.

Moreover, the institutionalist assumption that following relevant rules and theories will bring about appreciation ignores the possibility that one might comply with the stipulations of the rules and theories and still not see the point of the object. Consider that there are people who are sufficiently informed about the fine points of surrealism, yet are unable to get over their intense dislike for what they see as "creepy weird" paintings. Indeed, if the claims of institutionalism are correct, these people should have come to an appreciation of surrealist paintings. The institutionalist view that aesthetic appreciation is dependent on rules and theories involves ignoring the interests and motives people bring with them to appreciation. Had institutionalists given more attention to human aims and interest, they would have seen that people are able to appreciate works of art even without being aware of any relevant theory or rule of appreciation. Thus the fact that a person appreciates an artwork can easily be explained by reference to rules or theories of the artworld.

With regards to the criteria for grasping the putative aesthetic features of an artwork, the institutionalist assumption that applying relevant rules and theories would result in aesthetic appreciation rests on an illegitimate conflation of the distinction between following rules and appreciating the artistic features of an artwork. This conflation permits proponents of the view to locate what brings about appreciation in rules and theories and to suggest that appreciation is causally dependent on rules and theories. (We should note that Danto goes much further by saying that it is logically dependent). The basic difficulty in construing aesthetic experience as a contextual phenomenon is this illicit conflation of the difference between appreciation of artworks and applying the relevant rules and theories of appreciation. This conflation illegitimately locates such features as the appeal of the object, individual's interests and preferences, in compliance with rules and excludes the possibility that following a rule or the stipulations of a theory need not result in appreciation.

*The Institutional Mechanism:*

Institutionalism employs formal features of the artworld like rules and theories to account for our understanding of artistic objects. This dependence on rules and theories of appreciation, which is the result of avoiding the difficulties of a mentalistic account, ignores the relevance of our interests to appreciation and of the meaning which these objects have for us personally. The assumption here is that the appeal an artwork has is taken to be identical to the significance assigned to it by theoretical interpretation. This view of meaning treats conventional norms of behaviour as a precondition for appreciation, as something that compels people to appreciate an object once the norms are adhered to. In other words, people are being regarded as passive beings who necessarily have an aesthetic response as required by the institutional mechanism.

The mechanism is revealed when institutionalism attempts to account for things like stylistic changes and novelty that cannot be accommodated on the institutionalist's explanatory framework. Change is explained away either as something that is a logical continuation of preceding events, that is, it is normalized, or it is explained as something which the institution initiate. In conflict situations when viewers are overwhelmed by an unfamiliar style, the theory is silent. Given its underlying picture of individuals, it is incapable of accounting for actions that deviate from the conventions and tradition. Individuals necessarily follow whatever the institution has established; they do not contribute anything to the purposiveness of the institution. The institutions are simply there and self-generating.

This passive picture of humans is implicit in Dickie's account; it underlies his account of how objects acquire the status of art. Dickie focuses exclusively on the conventional act of conferring an object with the status of art, and neglects to mention the rationale or the motivation for choosing, say, the urinal rather than some other object as fit for bestowal of the status of art. He ignores the whole decision making process that went into treating the *The Fountain* as an artwork (such as Duchamp's motives and the subterfuge that accompanied the first exhibition of the work) before the *The Fountain* finally made it into an art gallery. Dickie's starting point overemphasizes the act of bestowing the status of art on the object so that the bestowal appears as something that happened naturally, as something pre-ordained by the convention of the institution. On this view, the individual is construed as acting in conformity with institutional regulation and as lacking in personal initiative and ability. Likewise, Danto adheres to this model of mechanical explanation by vesting theories with the power and responsibility of creating art objects. The central theme of his thesis that art is a theoretical construction, makes people subservient to theories.

The emergence of a picture of submissive beings who are incapable of deliberation and decision damages the adequacy of institutionalism. That individuals think and act only in terms of pre-established rules and conventions or in terms of legitimate alternatives provided by the institution radically misconceives the nature of art appreciation and is a false picture of what goes on in the artworld.

*Circularity in Institutional View of Understanding:*

Institutionalism explains every action, pattern, event and artistic activity by reference to the convention of the artworld. It contends that aesthetic understanding depends on the contextual conditions of the artworld. Artistic practices, styles, movements and trends are the way that they are because of the way the artworld is structured. Institutionalism aims at explaining all the happenings in the artworld in terms of preceding events or antecedent factors. Rational explanation is possible only through reliance on the appropriate background. The problem here is the implicit circularity that this form of explanation entails; every pattern, action, event and phenomenon is counted as institutional whatever the case may be. The inflexibility of the relation undermines the basis for explaining the uniqueness of each event, and for articulating the meaningfulness of a work of art.

In explaining aesthetic phenomena such as the meaning of art works, the significance of styles, or the direction of artistic movements and change, institutionalism treats theories, roles, rules, and regulations as constants and searches for the variables that give them their stability. The theory attempts to explain non-contextual features (that do not belong to the basic structure of the institution) —like motives, artistic interests and preferences — in terms of the stable features of artistic practice.

This is evident in institutionalist explanation of stylistic shifts. The tension and conflicts that mark the breaks between impressionism and romanticism, readymades and conceptual art, minimal and post-impressionist art, are resolved in such a way that no stylistic break occurs. Meaning, significance and change are assimilated to the institutional structure. The result is that their nature is distorted and the phenomena in question is obscured. The attempt to provide non-mentalist explanations that bypass the difficulties of subjectivism leads to the elimination of significant components of the art practice from the picture. The institutionalists' employment of behavioural criteria not only behaviourizes artistic appreciation, they also fail to explain the more crucial important features. The circularity in the institutional view is that it explains action, event and phenomena as institutional whatever it may be.

The assumption that aesthetic meaning depends on having a contextual experience, and that a contextual experience depends on knowing an aesthetically significant action or event, suggests that we are able to distinguish between the significant and the non-significant acts or events of the practice. But the possibility of a distinction depends on knowing what it is we are looking for, or on what counts as aesthetic experience. Since institutionalism aims at eliminating all mentalistic descriptions, non-behavioural answers are ruled out, leaving no conceivable means of deciding on what is significant. And even if we agree with the institutionalist that the aesthetically significant is implicit in the rules of the institution, it still has to be shown how we can discriminate or distinguish it, and especially so since we do not as yet have a clear notion of what the rules are.

### *De-Personalization and The Idea of "Sentient Institutions"*

The thesis that aesthetic experience is central to understanding attempts to anchor artistic activity within its appropriate context in this way mentalism is solved by eliminating allusions to mental predicates in accounts of aesthetic appreciation. Two central difficulties, the mirror images of those in subjectivism, vitiate this explanatory account. They have to do with the doctrine of conventionalism that theorists invoke to ground all aesthetic practice, and with the social realist's view of artistic activity.

#### *Conventionalism:*

Conventionalism fails to take account of the relationship between individuals and their artistic practice, an inadequacy which is further compounded by the opposition that exists between the two difficulties. For, institutionism – that is, the idea of a constructed reality is in opposition with naturalism – that is, the idea that art objects are natural.

Conventionalism emphasizes the relation between objects and the artistic environment of the institution and ignores the experiences of members in that constructed reality. The procedure divorces meaning from its normal setting and relocates it in institutional structures. It becomes something that people observe in the institutions and adhere to, while understanding is conceived as people's ability to manifest appropriate behaviour in the right situations. Indeed conventionalism presupposes that artistic activity and the practices of members are conditioned and determined by the institution. The critical spirit and individual preferences which people bring to aesthetic understanding are taken not to matter. In other words, because conventionalism over-emphasizes the artworld at the expense of individuals, the artworld becomes a sentient institution that sets and specifies the course of events.

The first difficulty in conventionalism concerns the sentient nature of institutions' while the second difficulty focuses on the problem of how the artworld can explain human actions. The idea of sentience has its basis in the construal of the artworld as a self-propelling entity that dictates the course of events in the institution. But this idea is misconceived for the simple reason that the only moving agents in the artworld are humans. The artworld in itself cannot do anything, let alone compel the actions of participants in the art practice. The choice to act or not to, and the decision to do something or follow a particular course of actions rests with people. And even if we admit the institutionality of art, or agree that some environmental conditioning takes place, it neither follows that the artworld is cognitively prior nor that the institution is sentient. Individuals as creators of institutions can deviate from the rules, change or regulate them or even opt out. They are not hapless victims of their creations as institutionism would have us believe.

The second difficulty has its basis in the institutionalist's accordance of cognitive primacy to the artworld. The suggestion is that institutional events can be understood independently of the attitudes and dispositions of community members. But as noted by Ted Cohen, a full understanding of the rules, actions, events and conventions of the artworld requires that we articulate the rationale of the convention. Doing so involves an appeal to the objectives, dispositions and attitudes of their creators – the very features institutionalism wants to eliminate.<sup>11</sup> The ultimacy and finality of this appeal indicates that people rather than institutions take much of the decisions of what goes on in the artworld. Moreover, there is no direct access to the rules and regulations except through individuals. So since the character of the rules are identified only through the actions and thoughts of people, aesthetic understanding depends ultimately on people. Hence the idea of a self-generating artworld is misconceived.

### *Social Realism:*

By focusing on the public aspect of aesthetic objects, institutionalism emphasizes the socially approved features, that is, properties or qualities that have wide social appeal. The procedure construes meaning and artistic features as social constructions so that the meaning of works of art are their socially agreed or socially assigned meanings. This definition of meaning as social rests squarely on social preferences and social consensus rather than on artistic excellence or aesthetic merit. On this view, an artistic object can have as many descriptions or meanings as possible, except that at any given time, only the socially dominant meaning prevails. When institutionalism construes artistic qualities as socially approved properties, the meaning of a work of art becomes the set of descriptions that the socially approved properties pick out.

The social realist view of meaning fixes the meaning of any art object and compels uniformity in artistic interpretations, and makes a statement about the artistic conformity of people in a given social environment. The view presupposes either that all individuals in a social environment have the same artistic preferences, or that the conditions in the social environment determine conformity.

The basic problem of social realism is not that it makes false assumption about the activities of people in the social setting and about the condition of the social environment, but that it presents a distorted picture of the social practice of our everyday world. Institutionalism conceives the social world abstractly, that is, in terms of whole systems of objects or practices and of the relations between such systems or practices. This grouping of objects and practices into wholes or systems compartmentalizes practices into units. Once the division is complete, systems and sub-system generate their own special laws. The problem with institutionalism is that it takes these systems as points of departure and neglects to ask the general question of how these systems and

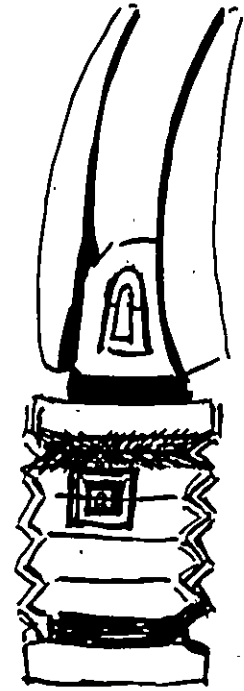
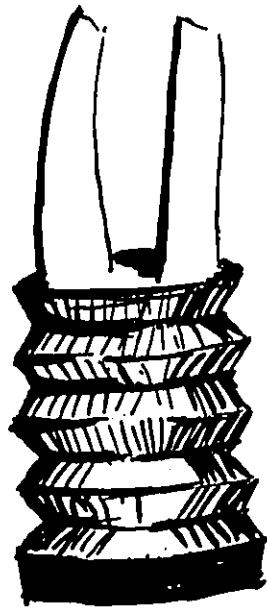
practices come about, or are possible. Institutionalism ignores both the unnoticed but expected background features that give the "fix" to our practices and the unattended to, but known way things actually happen in practice, it settles the nature of the social world theoretically. Hence, the theory's conception fails to fit.

This examination makes it seem as though the basic tenets of subjectivism and institutionalism merely emphasize what the other ignores. It would appear that the differences between them are superficial and can easily be reconciled without great theoretical difficulty. One simply removes the dichotomy and resolves the insights of institutionalism with that of subjectivism. However the issue is not this simple.

IKENGA







The *ikenga* is a wooden carved statuary of which the most famous type is the '...warrior', depicting a well-developed human figure with horns and a fierce expression ... The figure sits on a double-disk stool in which only the back leg of the stool is carved, while the front support is provided by the figure's legs. (In) the right hand (the warrior) holds a knife with a pronounced handle and a slightly curved blade, (in) the left hand a tusk or, more often a severed human head (...). The head of the warrior is somewhat elongated, resting on a thick neck. Emerging from a broad base atop the head is a pair of flattened, tapering horns that make more than a full twist and often end in an upward curve. The faces of many of these figures resemble the *agbogo mmuo*, the maiden-spirit ... Only a few of this warrior type bear the status-related facial scarification pattern known as *ichi*.

- Eli Bantor, "Life as an Artistic Process: Igbo *Ikenga* and *Ofo*", *African Arts*, 21 (1988): 66-71.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE INNER/OUTER DICHOTOMY

In this chapter, I argue that subjectivism and institutionalism are moulded by a common assumption, namely that there is a dichotomy between the outer and the inner spheres of an individual's life. This assumption raises perplexing questions concerning the relation between the experiences of individuals and the artwork. As I shall strive to show, the weaknesses of subjectivism and institutionalism cannot be overcome simply by extracting and combining the strengths of each view. The obfuscating nature of the underlying assumption of the inner/outer dichotomy needs to be attended to. In fact, what is needed is neither a reorganization of the central points of the theories nor a modification of their basic assumptions, but rather a replacement of the dichotomy that underpins and nurtures the two opposed theoretical positions. Its removal shifts the problematic and dissolves the theoretical framework within which the traditional problems of aesthetics in general, and debates about subjectivism and institutionalism in particular, arise.

The chapter is divided into four parts. In the first part I identify the sharp inner/outer dichotomy that defines the framework for the debate between subjectivists and institutionalists. This dichotomy exists as the unnoticed background presupposed by the basic claims of both theories. It comes to view only when we adopt a critical attitude towards the basic premises of these theories. I argue that despite the broad differences of subjectivism and institutionalism, each are underpinned by the same presuppositions and their proponents are engaged in basically the same enterprise. In the second part, I examine how the accordance of theoretical importance to the assump-

tion that the inner-mental life of a person is distinct and separate from the outer social life leads to a private view of experience, one according to which only the person having the experience can be acquainted with it. This view, I argue, entices subjectivists and institutionalists into assuming that one knows or learns what counts as aesthetic appreciation from one's own experiences. In the third part, I examine the implication of the privacy view of experience on our shared common notion of appreciation. I argue that the idea that we understand what counts as aesthetic appreciation by reference to our own individual experiences undermines the possibility of a shared understanding of appreciation and of common aesthetic practice. In the fourth part, I establish that the fundamental mistake of subjectivism and institutionalism derives from the employment of the criteria and relations of the outer realm to understand the events of the inner realm. This transference of the conditions of the outer to the inner realm radically misconceives the nature of aesthetic appreciation.

#### *Understanding the Inner/Outer Gap*

In their attempt to provide a suitable response to the question of how we appreciate works of art, subjectivists and institutionalists begin their inquiry by presupposing a sharp distinction between the inner-mental and the outer-social life of individuals. This distinction is taken to capture the special characteristics of the two realms, namely the internal (or invisible) goings-on in psychological-life and the external social activities in the external environment. But the distinction is potentially misleading for by drawing a parallel between the mental and external reality and suggesting that the two realms stand in a relation of correspondence to each other, it entices the unwary to construe the goings-on in the inner mental life on analogy with the outer realm. The attempt to pattern and understand the inner on analogy with the outer, I shall argue, leads to a confused and distorted picture of aesthetic appreciation.

At face value, the presupposition that there is an inner and an outer realm to the lives of individuals is unproblematic and unobjectionable. After all, we know as a fact that people have an inner psychological life, that they engage in mental activities – such as thinking, believing, reflecting, remembering, appreciating – and that these actions are neither physical, nor observable by other people or even by those having them. Also, we know for sure that there is an outer social life whose character is substantially different from the mental, and that activities in this sphere are physical and are open to public inspection. Being aware of the significant difference in character of the activities of these two realms, and coupled with the fact that they occur in seemingly different spheres, it seems reasonable to assume that there are two distinct aspects to the lives of individuals.

However, it is worthwhile to note that this commonplace assumption about the dual nature of human life is subject to two kinds of interpretations: one which I shall call the commonsense view and the other the philosophical interpretation. In the everyday commonsense understanding of the assumption, no special cognitive importance is attached to the bifurcation between the inner and the outer lives other than the mundane suggestion that there are different dimensions of human activity and that people have the capacity to engage in different sorts of apparently unrelated activities. This is not to say that people do not occasionally speculate about the relation between the two realms, or ponder about the goings-on in the mind. But it is important to realize that their everyday activities are not affected by any epistemological consequences that result from knowing about the dual aspect of human life. In fact, the very lack of concern exhibited for any practical or epistemic implications of the inner/outer distinction on human activities shows that people do not ascribe much cognitive importance to the distinction however much they acknowledge its existence.

For instance, in their daily lives people do not act as if a gap exists between the inner and the outer mental lives. Nor do they act as if the inner lives of others are truly private and inaccessible as would be the case if the inner/outer separation had epistemic and ontological status. People are miffed if close friends fail to discern their feelings, they know when someone appreciates a joke, and they are often able to detect when someone fakes an emotion. Moreover, consider how children come to learn what counts as appreciation. The learning proceeds with no special aids. Parents or teachers do not begin by worrying how to reach into the inner realm of their children or students. They do not try to get the child to identify or describe the psychological occurrences in his or her mental realm. Nor do they give the child a description of what to look for "in there". On the contrary, they act *as if* there is no difference between the inner and the outer life. The fact that appreciation requires a conscious mind and that the mind is the inner realm is not seen to present any special problem to children in understanding what counts as appreciation. More remarkably, children behave *as if* their inner lives are completely accessible and open to view.

But the philosophical view of the commonplace assumption reflects no such understanding, and this is because philosophers accord great theoretical importance to the distinction between the inner-mental and the outer-social aspects of human life. Philosophers take the distinction as tracing a real and fixed separation between the inner-mental and the outer-social life. They see the differences in the character of each realm as incontrovertible evidence that the two states are indeed distinct and divorced from each other. This philosophical construal of the assumption sets up the framework for the debate by raising the need for an explanation of the relationship between the two separate spheres. Subjectivists worry about how the goings-on in the inner mental life could be isolated and identified without serious mistakes while institutionalists worry about how to understand mentalistic notions like aesthetic appreciation without

employing a mentalistic framework. Advocates of each view speculate about how we understand what counts as aesthetic appreciation, how we decisively tell that our response to, say, an *ikenga* statuette is aesthetic. Also, they ponder about how we are to discriminate and guard against false aesthetic claims, and how we know that others have the same aesthetic experiences as us.<sup>1</sup>

The type of questions asked shows that philosophers are reading the assumption about the dual aspect of human nature not only as stating a home truth about human life but as having ontological and epistemological consequences as well. Their perplexing questions indicate that they are construing the inner/outer distinction as picking out a fixed and permanent divide between the mental and the social side of an individual's life. The jump from the trivial to the philosophical level of discourse is achieved by placing an immense epistemic weight on a simple and commonplace observation about the duality of human aspects. This epistemic weight makes more out of an ordinary distinction by illegitimately twisting it out of its normal context to raise philosophical riddles.

When this shift from the commonplace to the philosophical occurs, philosophers treat the inner realm as completely severed from the outer realm. The picture that this divorce invokes is of an inner mysterious mental realm that lies behind and parallel to the outer social realm that shields it like a façade. The relationship between the two realms is one in which the inner accompanies the outer. In explaining the nature of the relationship between the two realms, subjectivists contend that the inner has epistemic priority and that it underpins and explains the activities of the outer social realm. Institutionalists, on the other hand, confer epistemic primacy to the outer realm and claim that psychological occurrences in the inner realm lack content until fixed by externally specified conditions. Thus, the philosophical construal of the commonplace

assumption sets up the conceptual framework for the debate on the nature of aesthetic experience by injecting a conceptual schism between the inner mental and the outer social realms.

Notwithstanding the disagreement between subjectivists and institutionalists on which realm explains the activities of the other, both sides assume a causal relationship between the activities of the outer realm and the processes of the inner realm. In this sense the theoretical positions of subjectivism and institutionalism are not as divergent or as fundamentally different as they might initially seem. They both presuppose a picture of human nature and the relationship between the mental and the outer social environment that treats a person's inner life as isolatable from influences of the social life. As a consequence of these presuppositions, human and aesthetic experience are presumed to occur in the inner mental realm. By assuming this, advocates of both views must regard these inner experiences as essentially private and personal to the person having the experience. On this view, aesthetic appreciation is construed as an inner private experience that is localizable in the mind.

When subjectivists and institutionalists characterize aesthetic experience as a specific event in the mind that supports our understanding of aesthetic appreciation, they subscribe to the view that we arrive at what counts as aesthetic appreciation by a completely private process. This explains much of Beardsley's concern over whether what one understands as aesthetic experience corresponds to what others understand it to be. It also underpins his preoccupation with the question of how one can conclusively tell (especially in borderline cases) that what one experiences is truly aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> Institutionalists claim not to presuppose a mentalistic view of aesthetic experience but their picture of how aesthetic appreciation comes about, (which I shall examine in the next section), shows that they do.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that in sharing this view of aesthetic

experience as private, both subjectivists and institutionalists assume that aesthetic appreciation is to be explained by reference to the individual's mental biography.

Before proceeding to investigate the idea that appreciation is an inner experience, it is worth noting that the sceptical problem of whether or not our notion of aesthetic experience is shared has its basis in the subjectivist and institutionalist conception of aesthetic experience as an essentially private experience. In turn, the construal of aesthetic experience as a private phenomenon follows from the assumption that the mind is situated in the inner realm coupled with the assumption that the inner realm is divorced from the outer social realm. As we earlier noted, this separation of the inner from the outer realm traces its roots, not to commonsense, but to the philosophical reinterpretation of a commonplace observation. The accordance of epistemic importance to the inner/outer distinction that lines up with the mental/social distinction brings about the separation of the inner mental from the outer social life of individuals. But as we also noted that the injection of a dichotomy between the inner and the outer is a consequence of investing an unproblematic distinction with a meaning that it does not ordinarily have. This illegitimate act twists the distinction out of its normal context and sets up the conceptual framework in which the sceptical pseudo-problems about the nature of aesthetic experience arise. Finally, it is also important to note that since subjectivism and institutionalism are underpinned by the same underlying picture of aesthetic experience, their proponents are, in fact, engaged in the same enterprise.

### *The Problem of the Privacy View*

The inner/outer dichotomy moulds the central lines of the debate between subjectivists and institutionalists by tempting them to conceive of aesthetic appreciation as an inner private experience. Subjectivists construe aesthetic experience as the awareness

of "aesthetic objects" in "aesthetic space" (Aldrich) and of "phenomenal objects" in consciousness (Beardsley). For their own part, institutionalists deny the presence of a special phenomenological event but nonetheless believe that aesthetic experience is a private perceptual process of attending to an object in the external social environment. It might seem from the institutionalist's objection to the view that aesthetic experience is a special phenomenological event that it is illegitimate to take them as holding a view of experience as private. But it is not the contention here that aesthetic experience is a feeling or a special phenomenological occurrence that defines the privacy of experience. What marks a view of experience as private is the idea that it is by awareness of one's own perceptual experiences that one knows that he or she appreciates an artwork. Thus, in this sense of private, it does not matter that one accepts or denies the existence of a special aesthetic experience since the privacy view lies in the epistemological approach that one adopts in dealing with experiences that involve self-awareness.

It is understandable why subjectivists and institutionalists treat aesthetic experience as a private inner experience. Buoyed by the commonsense belief of appreciation as an experience, of experience as something that a conscious person has, and of consciousness as localized in the mind, one naturally assumes that aesthetic experience is something that is inner and private. Thinking about appreciation makes the assumption all the more plausible. For when we *think* about appreciation, there is a tendency to focus just on the impressions and feelings we had. This act of recollecting reinforces the view of appreciation as a mental event if only because the direction of focus is in the mind. The private nature of this experience is sharply brought home to us via this route. Obviously no one other than myself has *this* experience or feeling, and there is no doubt that it is by reference to *this* personal experience that I come by my understanding that I appreciate the artwork in question. Others may surmise what I feel.

They may have their own experiences but these will differ from *this* experience of mine. Thus, the view that aesthetic appreciation is an inner event finds justification not only in the underlying conceptual framework defined by the inner/outer dichotomy, but is also reinforced by how we think and talk about appreciation.

The reason we are misled concerning the privacy of experience is not just that we are seduced into ransacking the mental to look for what counts as aesthetic experience, but that we take it to be locked up in the inner realm where others cannot get at it. Armed with this underlying view of experience as private, philosophers face the daunting task of explaining how viewers can possibly understand what counts as aesthetic experience, how they are able to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences, and how they come by their shared common notion of appreciation. Before investigating how they deal with the problem, however, I shall first attempt to tease out this privacy view of experience as it is contained in the subjectivist and institutionalist accounts. This is done by taking a beginner's difficulties in discerning what counts as appreciation as a take-off point of explanation.

The subjectivist's response to a beginner's concern is to contend that appreciation of an artwork, say, the *ikenga*, comes about if we focus exclusively on the unity of the statuette's formal elements, these being the features that make them works of art rather than exclusively functional objects. Because subjectivists are primarily concerned with the aesthetic, they treat the context to which the object belongs with little interest. Subjectivists believe it is quite wrong to allow considerations of role and cultural significance to intrude not only because they detract from the aesthetic point of view, but also because they add nothing to the formal quality of the aesthetic design. Thus, they advise the novice to attend exclusively to such features as the upward sweeping symmetry of the design, the tight coils, or the skyward aggressive thrust of horns, and to the

contrast between the volume of the body and the sharp intersecting plane of the sword.

For subjectivists, we acquire an understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience by examining the phenomenological occurrences in our inner mental life. On this picture, the novice receives some visual impressions of the phenomenally objective qualities of the artwork that generate some definite feelings or phenomenological occurrences. The subjectivist believes that by attending to these inner experiences that are characterized by the qualities of unity, completeness and coherence, the novice determines whether or not his or her perceptual experience is aesthetic. He or she does this by discerning whether the feeling generated is "made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of (the) sensuously presented...object".<sup>4</sup> In other words, the novice appreciates the *ikenga* statuette when he or she has certain inner experiences, and he or she knows what counts as aesthetic appreciation by having a definite feeling. The picture this approach invokes is of individuals looking into their private mental realms, avidly watching the inner show in their stream of consciousness with their backs turned squarely on the outer world.

What comes out clearly in the subjectivist's picture is that the viewer or novice comes to an understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience by reference to inner mental processes, that is, to his or her own inner experiences alone. It would be misleading to think of subjectivists as denying that people are taught how to appreciate. Subjectivists are as aware as anyone that there are stage-setting activities by which a person is prepared or learns how to appreciate works of art, such as knowledge about the contextual features of the object, the rules and methods of appreciation, what to look for and how to go about looking for it. These stage-setting activities imply that a novice's understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience presupposes knowledge

of the outer social world and, hence, that the novice's experience is not limited to his or her own inner experience. Interestingly, if subjectivists truly believed that our understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience is as public as is being suggested, then there should be no cause to worry about identifying false aesthetic claims since there would be public means for doing so.

An indication that on the subjectivists' picture one's knowledge of what counts as aesthetic experience is based on one's own inner experiences alone, is seen in their perplexities about how we can correctly discriminate aesthetic from non-aesthetic responses. It is also evident in their worry about how we can possibly determine that others' notion of aesthetic experience corresponds to our own. This type of sceptical doubt arises only when it is believed that we come by our understanding by an essentially private process. Consider the subjectivist's approach to how a novice comes to learn what counts as aesthetic experience. The novice's perceptual experiences are internal and private in the strong sense that nobody except the person having the experiences can know about them nor have access to them. For this reason, the subjectivist is unable to show or point out an example of what these inner experiences feel like. The inaccessibility of these inner experiences means that the subjectivist cannot determine whether the novice is having the appropriate responses or whether the novice is making the right correlation.

It is not necessary to query subjectivists on the legitimacy of the assumption that the novice can go "in there" and do all that is required without making mistakes. What is important for the present discussion is to see that these are things that only the person having the experience can do because he or she has to learn from his or her own inner experiences. Since on this view there is no public means of determining that the viewer is making the right correlations, and since the viewer's understanding of what

counts as aesthetic experience derives from his or her inner experiences, the role of stage-setting to learning what counts as aesthetic experience is irrelevant.

By contrast, institutionalists approach the novice's difficulties by emphasizing the role of publicly defined features to an understanding of what aesthetic experience is. Institutionalists contend that we cannot possibly appreciate the *ikenga* and similar artworks unless we attend closely to their contextual features such as the artistic tradition, their style and period, and the underlying objective of the artist in creating that work. They claim that it is absolutely essential that the novice consider the art ideas of the Igbos, their artistic referents and mode of representation, and the special meaning of the symbols that they employ.<sup>5</sup> Institutionalists maintain that having a satisfying encounter with an *ikenga* statuette is inseparable from the Igbo art practice because we need the practice to recognize what constitutes artistic qualities of excellence in the statuettes, to distinguish between inconsequential and important artistic features, and to determine what "unity of formal elements" and "the visual spirit of the work" amount to. In their view, real appreciation is impossible without the appropriate information locating the *ikenga* within its art practice. In particular, institutionalists argue that it is only within the framework of an art practice that aesthetic experience is meaningful.

The elimination of mental correlates is the institutionalist's response to the perceived mentalism implicit in subjectivism. The institutionalist takes it that by replacing phenomenological events with the artwork in the outer realm, the mentalist problems implicit in conceiving of aesthetic appreciation as an inner experience are effectively undercut. They expect that by looking outward to the object and activities in the outer environment, rather than into the mind, cognitive focus is shifted from an internal mentalistic criteria of understanding to an external social criteria of understanding. However, by pitting themselves in opposition along the lines defined by the inner/outer

dichotomy, institutionalists presuppose the same notion of privacy underpinning the subjectivist view of experience. They fail to get beyond the limits of the inner/outer dichotomy and the privacy view of experience that sets up the individualistic mentalistic framework of understanding within which the question of the nature of aesthetic experience is raised.

Doubtless, institutionalists aim to overcome the theoretical puzzles that come from using phenomenological events as the feature that explains aesthetic experience. It is also true that their substitution of phenomenological events for the artwork and contextual features is designed to invoke an external criteria of understanding to replace the problematic internal criteria of understanding. But they fail in their objective because in treating aesthetic experience as an inner mental process of attending or concentrating, they presuppose the view that we come by our understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience by our own inner experiences. It is worth noting that the institutionalist's rationale for rejecting the subjectivist's picture is not simply because an outsiders' ignorance of what artistic excellence consists in will hamper appreciation, but because he or she believes that the phenomenal world lacks the requisite organizing principles of unity, completeness and coherence. They contend that meaningfulness is imposed on the phenomenal qualities floating, as it were, in the "stream of consciousness" by an external reference frame in the outer realm to which they are tied.<sup>6</sup> However, when institutionalists point out that in the inner realm phenomenal qualities of shape, relation and colour, of an artwork like the *ikenga* are no different from those of our ordinary experiences of tables, banisters and so on, they mean to suggest that the content of these phenomenal qualities are fixed by the outer external environment. We should note that the picture they invoke is of individuals situated in the inner realm and looking out to the outer realm to meaningfully sort out the phenomenal qualities.

By insisting that one understands what counts as an aesthetic experience when one's inner experiences is focused on the artwork and its relation to its artistic tradition, institutionalists suggest that one learns what counts as aesthetic experience by reference to one's own inner understanding or private experiences that are aesthetic in character. This means that one knows only by means of one's own essentially private process what aesthetic experience is about. On this picture, a person's understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience depends solely on his or her inner experiences and not on a publicly shared notion.

Advocates of the two approaches arrive at the same view of experience as private by differing routes – institutionalists by looking outward to the activities in the external social environment, and subjectivists by examining the special character of the inner experience. Notwithstanding the institutionalist and the subjectivist disagreement on which side of the inner/outer divide the frame of reference is situated, their differences are more a matter of detail than of substance. Their construal of aesthetic experience as an essentially private phenomenon show them to be engaged in basically the same enterprise of propagating a erroneous view of experience that distorts what counts as aesthetic appreciation.

### *Deflating the "I" of the Privacy View*

The sceptical force of the privacy view of aesthetic experience is built into the conceptualization of the mind. Concealed behind the facade of the outer social realm, the goings-on in a person's mind are private and inaccessible to others, but more importantly, a person's self-awareness of his or her inner states is treated as something that occurs independently of others and of how the public social domain is organized. In particular, it is assumed that one's awareness of what counts as appreciation comes

about through one's own individual or private understanding; one simply knows because one is in direct contact with one's innermost state. On this picture, the mind is a storehouse of knowledge and we understand our inner states by reference to it. The problem with this picture is that if one's understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience is private, the in-built inaccessibility of inner experiences raises the sceptical challenge of how there can be an essentially shared common notion of aesthetic experience. The weakness of the privacy view derives from a conceptualization of intentional states that depicts the mind as the storehouse of knowledge and the arena in which our understanding of our environment occurs.

In this section, I examine the subjectivist and institutionalist explanation of our shared notion of aesthetic experience in light of their privacy view of experience. The objective is to determine the legitimacy of the subjectivist and institutionalist conceptions of aesthetic appreciation by assessing the consequences of the privacy view of experience on the possibility of a shared notion of aesthetic experience and on aesthetic practice.

Propelled by a desire to show that we share a common understanding of aesthetic appreciation, institutionalists employ the third-person perspective to study the activities, responses and reactions of people in the art practice. Their hope is to isolate the important features that define the inter-subjective ground of shared understanding. The information obtained from this third-person perspective forcefully impresses on institutionalists the role of the artwork as a rallying point of aesthetic interest. They suppose that an artwork like the *ikenga* statuette becomes aesthetically meaningful when it is viewed in relation to the larger surrounding framework of its art tradition and they conclude that the enjoyment of the formal unity of the artistic elements occurs only when the complex inter-connection between the artwork and its artistic tradition is understood.

On this view, the artwork acts as a springboard for a specific kind of inner experience that is *assumed* to be the same for all people. For institutionalists, the assumption that our notion of appreciation is shared comes from inferring from what is observed and projecting one's own private experiences on to others. If spun out, we see that this indirect knowledge of our shared notion of appreciation rests on a set of assumptions to the effect that what is assumed of others corresponds to what is assumed of them and that what others assume of them is as others assume of them. As the participants in the art practice increase, the assumptions multiply: the multiplicity of individuals' separate assumptions about others in terms of what is assumed of them is taken to make up our public shared notion of appreciation. It is not necessary to query institutionalists about how this complex system of assumptions work nor about how we know that others' assumption of what counts as aesthetic experience corresponds to our own notions of it. What is important here is to see that institutionalists are illicitly reading from our everyday shared notion of appreciation to prove that their notion of aesthetic appreciation can, in principle, be shared.

We should remember that the issue here is not whether in ordinary life there is mutual understanding still less a shared notion of appreciation, but whether on the institutionalist's conception it is possible to have a shared notion of aesthetic appreciation. Institutionalists expect that showing the shared notion of aesthetic experience in our everyday world proves their point. But this is misguided, for to prove that the notion of aesthetic appreciation is contingently shared is not to prove that the institutionalist's notion of appreciation as private is essentially shared. We should note that assuming the matter at stake does not constitute proof that people have a common understanding of what counts as aesthetic appreciation. That can be done only if institutionalists can provide a direct means of discerning others' inner experiences, which is impossible since on their conception of the mind a person's inner experiences are pri-

vate and inaccessible. Thus, if — as institutionalists suggest — one comes by an understanding of what counts as aesthetic experience by an essentially private process, if a person's inner life is privileged, and if we know that others appreciate only by inferring from our own case, then we cannot possibly have a shared notion of appreciation.

This is not to say that individuals do not have a private understanding of their inner experiences but that, if they do, we cannot in principle know about them and so we have no way of establishing that we mean the same thing by aesthetic experience. The disastrous effect of this is that we cannot have a public notion of aesthetic experience, and the possibility of a shared aesthetic practice is undermined. True, our actions and comments seem to reveal the fact that we appreciate an object, but nobody should think that because actions reveal appreciation, overt physical manifestations constitute *the* appreciation. The error in the view is that it illegitimately assimilates aesthetic experience to a behavioural act, in other words it behaviourizes it.

If institutionalists' difficulties start from their inability to establish an inter-subjective criterion of understanding inner experiences, subjectivists are determined to resolve the problem. Aware of the importance of establishing that everybody has the same inner experiences, they employ the first-person perspective to examine the internal relations of aesthetic experience and then go on to define a criterion of sameness for all inner experiences. The introspective perspective is ideally suited to the task because it enables the subjectivist to isolate the five features, (as we saw in chapter one), that distinguish aesthetic experience. By noting the internal characteristics of the mental event, the subjectivist fixes the character of the inner experience and believes that that ensures that everybody means the same thing by appreciation.

But despite the valiant attempts to fix the character of aesthetic experience, subjectivists are unable to account for our shared notion of the experience. Even if we

agree with the subjectivist that our inner experience meets with their requirements, how do we determine that others have the same inner experiences and that they are making the right correlations? Indeed, how do we tell that our inner experience are identical? It is simply not sufficient to issue a description of what the mental event looks like. There must also be a means of ensuring that people are identifying the same mental process, in other words, that they are playing by the rules. Thus — for subjectivists — to establish that aesthetic appreciation exemplifies certain character traits is not to prove that people have the same inner experience or a shared common notion of appreciation.<sup>7</sup>

An understanding of the basic tenets of subjectivism shows that there is no conceivable way of sharing our private inner experiences. But subjectivists believe that this can be dealt with by inferring that others have the same inner experience as I do when they *correctly* claim to appreciate, say, an *ikenga* statuette. However, if the inner realm is distinct and separate from the outer, and if access to the inner life of other people is privileged, then we cannot get at their inner experiences to establish whether or not we share a common notion or have a shared understanding of appreciation. For all we know, one person's understanding of aesthetic experience may radically differ from what another understands, and hypothesizing that the inner experiences are the same does not remove the doubt — all the more so since there is no good reason to warrant the belief. Thus, if the subjectivist's conceptualization of the nature of aesthetic experience is correct, then we cannot have a shared common notion of appreciation. And, if there is no publicly shared understanding of what we mean by aesthetic experience, then we cannot have an aesthetic practice.

It is worthwhile to note the fact that in the ordinary everyday world we have a shared common public notion of aesthetic experience. This exposes the fundamental

mistake in the subjectivist and institutionalist accounts of aesthetic experience. The central difficulty in their accounts derives from their construal of the mind as a closed inaccessible realm. This raises the question of how we can possibly move from the private inner realm where understanding takes place to the outer public realm where shared practices occur. If this transition cannot be made, then it is difficult to see how individuals can get together and to organize common practices. This means that if what counts as appreciation is learnt privately without reference to public checks and socially defined processes of validation and justification, then there cannot be a shared aesthetic practice to back up individual's private understanding of aesthetic experience. And if there is no shared aesthetic practice to back up a person's inner experience, then the idea of an aesthetic practice would be an hallucination.

#### *The Peculiar Logic of Psychological Notions*

If the subjectivist and institutionalist construe aesthetic experience incorrectly, what does this say for the idea that aesthetic appreciation is a definite inner event brought about by following specific procedures? Since the two accounts are underpinned by the same basic picture of appreciation as a definite inner event or state of mind that comes from following certain specific rules or guidelines, what applies to one theory applies to the other.

Enticed by the parallel relationship of the inner and the outer, philosophers proceed to understand the mind on analogy with the outer realm. In the same way that we learn about objects and events of the outer world, it is supposed that we understand what counts as appreciation by a similar process. In construing appreciation as a definite event, subjectivists take the criteria of what counts as appreciation to be identical to that by which a definite event is known. This implies that like events in the outer

realm, appreciation is explicable in terms of certain necessary and sufficient conditions. In other words, they can be isolated and picked out in much the same way any definite objects and events can be identified. Following the same line of reasoning, we assume that appreciation comes from following the proper rules or theories of appreciation. The presupposed causal relation is akin to the one that holds between a drug and a state of hallucination, one in which a given effect follows once the necessary and sufficient conditions apply. This move I shall argue misconstrues intentional notions linked to self-awareness and distorts what counts as aesthetic appreciation.<sup>8</sup>

But does the occurrence of a feeling as described by the subjectivists establish appreciation? Is it necessarily true that all cases of appreciation are accompanied by a feeling as subjectivists believe? Do the same relevant conditions for identifying a definite object apply in identifying what counts as aesthetic appreciation? Indeed, can we legitimately specify beforehand what the character of a person's aesthetic response will be?

Consider a situation in which an individual has the type of feeling that corresponds to Beardsley's five symptoms but where there is no instance of appreciation in the ordinary sense in which having an appreciation is understood. Suppose that during clinical trials a neurologist manipulates certain centres of a patient's brain and stimulates in him or her the feeling of aesthetic appreciation. While in this state, the patient has all the symptoms that correspond to the subjectivist's description of appreciation and claims that he or she was actually appreciating an artwork.<sup>9</sup> This is a case of a phenomenological event that satisfies the subjectivist's description but without the relevant contextual conditions being present. Would subjectivists treat this as a genuine case of appreciation since they insist that it is a feeling that identifies and underpins appreciation?

Of course not. They would argue that this example derives from either a misrepresentation or an overly literal understanding of their views. They would correctly point out that the absence of a relevant context of practice means that the patient's feelings cannot appropriately be taken as a genuine case of aesthetic appreciation. In addition, they would contend that the mere occurrence of a phenomenological event, even if it resembles the five symptoms, cannot be taken as establishing an incidence of appreciation. In making this contention, subjectivists would maintain that their discussion about the specific character of appreciation presupposes the normal context in which an artwork is present, and an individual is consciously attending to the artwork, not a clinical experiment.

We should realize that in appealing to the need of a relevant context, subjectivists are importing a feature that was not initially part of their definition of aesthetic experience and which they did not think was a relevant feature in establishing a criteria of identification. This appeal to features other than phenomenological occurrences in explaining aesthetic experience constitutes an abandonment, or at least an important shift from their initial philosophical position according to which appreciation is explained by a feeling. There is no question that subjectivists intend their criteria of identifying aesthetic experiences to function in a relevant context, but in excluding this important variable in their criteria of identification they misconstrue aesthetic experience. They fail to see that appreciation does not have a fixed nature, that it is not something that can be characterized in advance of a context and before the occurrence of a specific case. Contrary to what they suppose, appreciation is not something we can break down into units nor make sense of in isolation to what goes on during the occasion. This shows that it is a different kind of thing from a definite object or event. Thus, the subjectivist's attempt to specify beforehand the character of aesthetic experience misconstrues the peculiar logic of human experience.

But cannot the subjectivist legitimately argue that in a relevant context in which it is appropriate to speak of appreciation, aesthetic experience is underpinned by a feeling, or might even be correctly described as a state of mind? No doubt the move is plausible but it is illegitimate. The need for a relevant context to determine whether or not an experience is aesthetic points to a significant difference in the character of aesthetic appreciation that distinguishes it from definite events or objects that can be isolated or picked out by their distinguishing traits. As we shall see shortly, the same cannot be done for aesthetic experience or appreciation if only because the given criteria for isolating appreciation is too restrictive and needs to be widened. However, widening it involves a radical revision of the main substance of the subjectivist (and the institutionalist) assumption that appreciation is a definite event, or a state of mind, or a feeling.

Nevertheless, suppose we grant subjectivists the point that their discussion deals only with normal cases of aesthetic appreciation. Is it even in its proper context underpinned by a feeling? In other words, is it a feeling that defines appreciation?

Consider a case in which a viewer at an exhibition is attracted to the artistic merits of a particular *ikenga* statue. He or she spends time looking at other exhibits but occasionally keeps back-tracking to examine this particular statuette. Suppose an explanation is solicited from the viewer for his or her behaviour. We learn that what fascinates the viewer is the technical artistry displayed by the artist, the mastery of his medium and the unique compositional balance of the disparate units. He or she marvels at how the carver obtained the spiralling coils of horns with limited resources, how he was able to strike a balance between conformity to tradition and expressing something of himself. Knowing something about the *ikenga* cult, the viewer muses at how, despite the elaborate ornamentation, this particular statuette does not compromise the

aggressiveness which is generic to the *ikenga* cult. Suppose when asked about what he or she felt when in the presence of the statuette the viewer gives a quizzical look and says "Nothing in particular!" but nevertheless, that he or she appreciates the work.

Subjectivists would immediately contend that there *is* a feeling, even if it is not apparent to the viewer. They would insist that from the viewer's behaviour it is obvious that he or she had a special feeling for this object, and that if we examine the viewer's mind at the time of appreciation, we will discover the presence of special phenomenological responses.

Before attending to this subjectivist reply we should note the subtle suggestion that the aesthetic feeling is not necessarily something that one (that is, the viewer) is aware of but something that can be known only through introspection. It would be premature at this stage to ask the subjectivist how such an event can occur without the viewer being aware of it, or what the difference is between having a feeling that the viewer is not aware of and having no feelings at all. After all, it might still be possible, contrary to the viewer's claims, to discover a feeling that eluded his or her attention. Nonetheless, we should note that this philosophical resort to introspection reveals that subjectivists are firmly convinced of the legitimacy of their views and are determined to establish at all costs that there is a specific feeling. Thus, the resort to introspection is more in aid of vindicating their claim that appreciation is a definite event than it is a true description of what goes on in appreciation.

Suppose we are able to introspect the viewer's mind during the time of appreciation. An initial problem arises — where do we start? When the viewer first sees the statuette, in the middle of the viewing, when he or she is shunting back and forth, or when it hits or dawns on the viewer that he or she likes the work? But what is the "it" that hits him or her? A flash of light? A force? How is this "it" to be identified? What

does it take for something to "dawn" on one? Moreover, is this "it" the *feeling*? Does "it" disappear when the viewer is looking at other exhibits and come back when he or she is in front of the statuette? Or maybe it follows him or her around? If so, does it intrude in the observation of the other exhibits? In short, we need to be clear on what this definite state or feeling is like if we are to give it much credence.

Subjectivists may charge that adopting this line of examination is facetious. Still they may be willing to admit that the act of checking our minds while viewing the statuette disengages our attention from aesthetic concentration and inhibits the occurrence of the phenomenological event. But if they take this route they risk undermining their own conception of appreciation as a definite event and of making feeling superfluous in explaining appreciation. For this route involves acknowledging that having a feeling is neither necessary nor sufficient for appreciation. However, if subjectivists insist on retaining their conception of appreciation as a feeling, they face a quixotical situation of treating genuine cases of aesthetic appreciation as un-aesthetic and exposing their position as nonsensical. For if what underpins appreciation is the feeling that one has, if the criteria by which we know this feeling warrants our being aware of the feeling, and if being aware of the feeling disengages one's attention from aesthetic issues, how can one possibly appreciate an artwork? This by no means disproves the occurrence of a feeling in appreciation, but what it does show, however, is the illegitimacy of explaining or defining appreciation in terms of a feeling. What it shows is that if a viewer's appreciation is accompanied by a feeling, then it must be the case that the viewer has already appreciated the object, in which case appreciation cannot be explained by means of a feeling.

The fact that feeling cannot explain appreciation means that it is not only radically misguided to construe aesthetic experience as such, but that taking it to be a definite

event or state distorts what counts as appreciation. Obviously, subjectivists came to their erroneous conception of appreciation by focusing just on those cases in which a feeling accompanies appreciation. But they multiplied the error by using their narrow conception to set in advance of all contexts and particular cases what counts as aesthetic experience.

Much of what has been said so far applies to the institutionalist's conception of appreciation as something that comes about by following the relevant rules and theories of the art practice. The error lies in the idea of regularity presupposed by a causal relationship, namely that aesthetic appreciation is a matter of standing in a certain fixed relation to an artwork which regularly follows the application of the relevant rules and theories. Like subjectivists, it is clear too that institutionalists arrived at their conclusion by limiting their attention to just those cases in which appreciation results from employing the relevant rules. Had they extended the scope of their investigation, they would have come across cases that go against their conception, cases that would have highlighted the fundamental error of their view. I shall quickly consider two cases to show that abiding by the rules and theories does not necessarily explain how viewers appreciate. The first deals with a case in which rules are followed and appreciation does not result, and the second is one in which a viewer appreciates an unfamiliar artwork like the *ikenga* without even knowing the relevant rules or theories for its appreciation.

Victims of racial stereotyping often have difficulties appreciating the putative "artistic" qualities of certain artworks. Despite applying the relevant literary rules of appreciation, many Jews have had their appreciation of *The Merchant of Venice* diminished by the stereotypical role of Shylock, and many Blacks are put off by the social message of *Othello*.<sup>10</sup>

Institutionalists would argue that this supports their view that correctly applying the relevant rules of appreciation brings about appreciation. They would say that the overly sensitive reaction of the Jews and Blacks showed that they had not attended to the artistic quality of the plays but rather were swayed by the social content of the works. The argument would be that had members of this group approached the plays as works of art and correctly employed the rules of appreciation, they would have seen the literary accomplishments of Shakespeare. In other words, they would have appreciated the plays. That they failed, it seems, is only because they did not follow the correct procedure.

It is certainly true that Jews and Blacks respond the way they do because of the social message of the plays, but the point is that having applied the relevant rules of appreciation the appropriate response should follow. If the relation between rules and appreciation is a causal one, and appreciation is a causally influenced response, then the reader should appreciate the plays after applying the relevant rules. Arguing that the expected effect did not occur because non-aesthetic issues were considered is like arguing that a hallucinogenic drug failed to act because one worried about its side-effects. Regardless of corollary interests of the readers, the fact that aesthetic appreciation failed to occur reveals the error in the idea that the relationship between rules (and theories) and aesthetic appreciation is causal.

Moreover, it is illegitimate to suggest that the reason appreciation fails to follow is because the readers did not correctly apply the relevant rules and theories of appreciation. To make such a move is to locate what brings about appreciation in correct application of rules rather than in the rules themselves. This amounts to defining correct procedure in terms of having an aesthetic appreciation, in other words, it ties the occurrence of aesthetic appreciation to the act of following rules and theories correctly.

Such a view suggests that appreciation sets the rules and galvanizes people to action, and it visualizes rules as the force that marches people off to aesthetic appreciation. Should this happen, not only will rules become redundant, they will also lose their point having been robbed of cognitive content.

But do rules function in the way envisaged? Do they bring about aesthetic appreciation even when correctly applied by those who are well-informed about the relevant artistic rules and theories? Consider some professionals at work. Without intending to downplay or dismiss the relevance of other contributory factors, the basis of the recent dispute in the selection committee of the New York Film Festival centered on reversing the negative vote some members had cast on two films – *The Whales of August* and Federico Fellini's *Interview*. The group that cast the negative vote refused to rescind their decision on the ground that they failed to appreciate the "soft middlebrow" artistic taste of the two films. What the dissenters are saying is that having employed the relevant rules and theories in appraising the two films, they are unable to appreciate the aesthetic quality of what they saw.<sup>11</sup>

If appreciation is causally linked to rules and theories as institutionalists assume, there would be unanimity in the members' response. If playing by the rules or applying the theories is what explains a viewer's appreciation of an artwork, then whenever the relevant rules or theories are invoked the viewer should appreciate the work. But the lack of unanimity throws into relief the error of tying rules to the occurrence of appreciation. If rules are defined in terms of having the actual experience, then simply knowing the relevant rules and theories will initiate aesthetic appreciation. The mistake in the institutionalist's picture is not so much that rules are being portrayed as an immense force that somehow compels people into aesthetic pleasure as much as the fact that it illegitimately rules out as inadmissible instances of where rules and theories

are correctly followed and yet where no appreciation occurs. Institutionalists fail to recognize that appreciation can occur even when one is unaware and uninformed of the relevant rules.

Consider a viewer who is unaware of the relevant rules and theories of appreciating Igbo art works, but nonetheless makes some incisive discriminations of the works on display: He or she finds some of the pieces in an exhibition quite appealing, some tasteless and others of average artistic merit. Since rules or theories are supposed to bring one to an appreciation of artworks, how would the institutionalist explain this viewer's preference for some works, dislike for some, and lukewarm interest for others? To obscure the differences between the responses by contending that they are all forms of appreciation is not only to trivialize and deny these differences, but also to refashion illegitimately the relation between rules and appreciation to suggest that it is causal. The error in this is that it comes full circle in presupposing what needs to be substantiated.

It must be said that while it is true that correct compliance with the rules of appreciation is important, institutionalists fail to note that appreciation need not follow unless interest in the artistic properties is evinced. Viewers need to define an artwork as worthy of aesthetic interest in order to appreciate it. So opponents are right to point out that the act of following the rules of the artworld cannot, by itself, bring about appreciation. By ignoring this point institutionalists miss the way in which notions connected with self-awareness differ from notions that pick out definite objects and states. They fail to see that notions like appreciation that are connected to self-consciousness are different since they do not pattern the causal relation of objects with a fixed and definite state. So in trying to model appreciation on the relation of non-psychological objects, institutionalists distort the nature of appreciation and give a false account of how we appreciate works of art.

What does all this say for the notion of aesthetic experience? If the relationship between appreciation and rules is not causal, then treating aesthetic experience as something that is brought about by rules misconceives and distorts it.

Institutionalists and subjectivists attempt to get out of the internal inconsistencies of their theory by invoking a mechanical process of a push-pull causal relation. Institutionalists expect that correctly following rules and theories generates appreciation of artworks, while subjectivists assume that the phenomenological responses that accompany appreciation back up our understanding of aesthetic experience. However, the problem of using quasi-mechanical relations and criteria to explain aesthetic experience (or psychological notions) is that such mechanical constructions fail to work as devised. The severely weakened artistic interests and preferences fail to couple properly with the immensely inflated rule to the chagrin of institutionalists. Similarly, an under-emphasized social practice hinders the identification of aesthetic appreciation to the discomfort of subjectivists. We should note that the weaknesses of this mechanistic picture cannot simply be solved without addressing the fundamental problems of its underlying assumptions.

### *Conclusion*

The assumption of an inner/outer dichotomy underlying the subjectivist's and the institutionalist's accounts of aesthetic experience traps their advocates into embracing the metaphysics and epistemology of the dichotomy. The tendency to construe the inner on analogy with the outer leads to treating the inner as an extension of the outer. Just as we *inspect* the objects in the outer realm, so we *introspect* the "objects" of the inner realm. We theorize about the happenings in the inner realm in the same way that we construe the nature of events, objects and activities in the outer realm.<sup>12</sup> Pro-

pelled by the power of the contrast, subjectivists and institutionalists commence to talk about what counts as aesthetic experience in the same manner that one normally talks about an art object. When this happens, the notion of aesthetic experience or appreciation is illicitly being construed as something that it is not. In other words, the subjectivist and institutionalist's account of aesthetic experience rests on a misconception of the criteria and conditions by which we come to understand what counts as aesthetic appreciation. The problem can only be solved by removing the inner/outer dichotomy that is the root of the difficulty.

As we shall see in the next chapter, doing this shifts the problematic and dissolves the conceptual framework from which aesthetic difficulties arise.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### APPRECIATION AS ABILITY: SOCIALIZING MIND AND INDIVIDUALIZING CONTEXT

Here I examine what goes on in the actual practice of appreciating artworks when the inner/outer dichotomy is set aside. My objective is to raise some questions about the kinds of things that people generally pay attention to when constructing a framework for appreciating artworks. In particular, what shapes the artistic preferences of individuals, how do they discriminate between good and bad artworks, and what is the point of their questions about the aesthetic properties of artworks? Moreover, how do they decide on these aesthetic properties, and what counts as an explanation of the properties for them? In short, my aim is to determine the relevant conditions that make aesthetic appreciation possible and to see what it means to say that we appreciate an artwork.

Before proceeding with the central objectives of this chapter, there is need to completely dismantle the remains of the philosophical picture of appreciation that derives from the inner/outer dichotomy. It is important to do this if we are to learn from and avoid the errors that vitiate the subjectivist and the institutionalist accounts. With this in mind, I divide the chapter into two main parts. In the first part, I examine the underlying idea of the philosophical assumption that there must be an essential feature to provide an entrance into aesthetic issues or to bring about aesthetic appreciation. I argue that the forced separation of formal qualities and contextual features that comes from isolating an essential feature, distorts the character of aesthetic appreciation and forces philosophers to rely on mysterious forces to activate their mechanistic accounts

of aesthetic experience. In the second part, I examine how people discern and appreciate the aesthetic properties of an artwork. Using the relatively little known *ikenga* statuette as a take off point of explanation, I discuss the criteria by which we know what counts as aesthetic appreciation and what it means to say that we appreciate a work of art. The value of employing a relatively obscure artwork is that its unfamiliarity throws into view the things we are normally concerned with when we claim to appreciate an artwork.

### *Combatting Philosophical Animation*

One of the most prominent issues in aesthetics is the question of the nature or essential character of aesthetic appreciation. The search for such essential features is motivated by the desire to provide a comprehensive description of aesthetic experience that would enable people to determine with certainty whether their response to an artwork is aesthetic. It is believed that the establishment of the basic features of aesthetic experience is necessary if we are to understand what truly counts as appreciation. However, this search for essential features has the unfortunate effect of directing philosophical attention away from an investigation of what appreciation is in ordinary everyday life to an inquiry of what it is in some enduring unchanging state. By asking the type of question they do – What is the nature of appreciation? – rather than more mundane questions – how do we (especially children) come by our understanding of what counts as aesthetic appreciation?; how do we appreciate works of art?; why do people appreciate one artwork rather than another? – philosophers reduce aesthetic appreciation to small component parts.

The philosophical tendency to look for *the* essential feature that provides an entrance into aesthetic issues is the other side of the view that aesthetic appreciation is

a definite event. The assumption that there is an essential feature entices philosophers to construe appreciation on analogy with objects of the outer realm, in a sense forcing the mind to stand up to the conditions of the physical world. The search for the basic item that underpins aesthetic experience leads to the idea of appreciation as something composed of separate units. The motivating factor of the search is that there is a unit that carries the epistemic weight of appreciation which explains what needs to be known about the phenomenon. The picture invoked is of a complex phenomenal structure that is underpinned by and rests on the essential item. We should realize that treating aesthetic appreciation as a complex phenomenal structure suggests that we appreciate an artwork only when the parts are fitted together. The explanatory framework to which this picture belongs is that of the inner/outer dichotomy in which notions of the inner realm are subject to the causal laws of the outer.

The need to animate theoretical accounts arises from the failure of mechanical accounts to function as they are supposed to. For instance, when feeling fails to explain aesthetic appreciation as predicted the theory is simply animated to force the facts to fit the case. And when appreciation fails to follow rules, the deviant case is either ignored or reinterpreted to suit the facts. To combat these illegitimate processes in accounts of aesthetic appreciation, we have to see the error in the separation of formal qualities from contextual features. This separation distorts what counts as appreciation by making the relationship between formal qualities and contextual qualities a causal rather than an internal one. The definition of a causal relationship leads to the employment of an inapplicable criteria of understanding that suggests we learn what counts as appreciation by means of direct acquaintance with some mental event or state of mind. This assumption – that appreciation is a definite event with fixed criteria of identification – funds the false view that there is a basic item that is common to all contexts and instances of aesthetic appreciation.

As a first step towards dismantling the essentialist picture of appreciation, I shall expose the error in elevating either formal qualities or contextual features to the role of explanatory principles and explaining aesthetic appreciation in terms of them. If formal qualities and contextual features do not function as explanatory principles in what counts as appreciation, which is to say that appreciation is not underpinned by or reducible to them, then our understanding of what counts as aesthetic appreciation is by means other than acquaintance with formal qualities or contextual features. I shall begin by challenging the subjectivist's narrow conception of appreciation and showing that since contextual features are needed to provide a framework within which aesthetic appreciation takes place, they shape the character of the experience. Then I do the same for the institutionalist's overly broad conception of appreciation. I argue that adequate recognition of the role of formal qualities is important in setting the agenda for what counts as aesthetic appreciation. Yet despite the relevance of both formal qualities and contextual features to aesthetic experience, still our notion of aesthetic appreciation is not something that can be specified beforehand or exhaustively described.

### *Socializing Mind*

The widespread belief that aesthetic appreciation is limited to formal qualities of artworks underpins the subjectivist's contention that non-formal qualities, like the particular style and period of the work, its artistic tradition, the artist's intention and the cultural concerns that initiate the work, are irrelevant to the aesthetic point of view. Because the subjectivists' sole concern is with the aesthetic, they argue that little interest be taken in the contextual features of an artwork. After all, they contend, it is to the artistic features of an artwork that aesthetic experience is directed. The subjecti-

vist's assumption that appreciation comes from focusing exclusively on the formal elements of an artwork finds justification in the view that this is the feature that makes them works of art rather than exclusively functional objects. Subjectivists believe it is wrong to allow considerations of role and cultural significance to intrude in aesthetic experience not only because it detracts from the aesthetic point of view, but because they think it adds nothing to the character of appreciation. Their reason is that contextual features differ from formal qualities in that they are not perceivable and merely provide an entrance to aesthetic issues. So even though subjectivists readily admit that contextual information may increase aesthetic appreciation, they maintain that it adds nothing to aesthetic appreciation and should not be treated as if it did.<sup>1</sup>

It is thus misleading to think of subjectivists as denying the existence of a background context even though the role of the contextual features in appreciation is underemphasized. It is important to stress that the restriction of aesthetic appreciation to formal qualities is not intended to deny the existence of the contextual features of artworks but rather to establish the relevant grounds for what is to be properly understood as aesthetic appreciation.

Nonetheless, the philosophical separation of formal qualities from the non-formal context in which they are embedded, and from which they derive their meaning, has the effect of eliminating contextual information about the artwork from accounts of aesthetic appreciation. This construal of contextual features as having minimal importance to the appreciation of formal qualities exaggerates the role and significance of formal qualities. Furthermore, the construal sets up an explanatory framework in which aesthetic appreciation is characterized only in terms of the formal qualities that constitute the dominant explanatory feature of the framework. The cognitive illusion created that formal qualities are the features that explain aesthetic appreciation per-

mits philosophers to suggest that we grasp the artistic significance of an artwork without reference to its artistic and cultural tradition. Once the suggestion is put to theoretical use the separation of formal qualities and contextual features takes effect. This separation funds the subjectivist's view that by rapturously listening to the alternating musical cadences of, say, Beethoven's *Concerto in C minor* or by contemplating the upward sweeping design of the *ikenga*, a person may appreciate (or grasp) the artistic significance of the formal qualities of the artwork.

It is not immediately apparent that we draw on contextual features to appreciate a work of art, especially if the artwork belongs to one's own culture. If the artwork meets with conventional expectations of what a work of art is — as the paintings of the Canadian Group of Seven do — one is hardly aware that he or she is drawing on the non-formal aspects of an artwork in appreciating these artworks. However, when an unusual artwork or artistic style is encountered and one lacks the contextual information to establish a rapport with the object, we come to notice the role of contextual features in shaping the character of aesthetic response. To one who is unfamiliar with an *ikenga* statuette, it would seem that the assumption that aesthetic experience or appreciation is limited to the formal qualities of an artwork is plainly misguided. Nonetheless, claims of this sort are often made with regard to appreciating works of art, and some often seriously heed them.<sup>2</sup>

In fact some Westerners publicly claim they are interested just in the formal elements that define the distinctive character of traditional African artforms. Their interest, they say, is limited to such things as the imaginative expressiveness and the schematic character of objects. They see no difficulty in the possibility of fully appreciating these qualities without having an informed understanding of the relevant art tradition of the works in question. Like their philosopher counterparts, these Westerners argue

that an informed understanding of the cultural context adds nothing to the aesthetic point of view, indeed has nothing to do with it. If anything, they contend, it interferes with aesthetic purity and diminishes the intensity of the formal elements by bringing into focus factors that are antithetical to the aesthetic viewpoint. Just as subjectivists contend, these viewers want to restrict their appreciation to the abstract formal qualities of the *ikenga* on the grounds that there is nothing else to be appreciated in the statuette over and above its sensuous qualities, the design, the exhibited frontality, and the compact unity and simplicity of the form.<sup>3</sup>

Of course there is a sense, albeit a commonsensical one, in which it is perfectly acceptable to limit one's aesthetic interest to stylistic features and the effect they have on the expressive character of the work. We can indeed derive aesthetic pleasure when we attend to the formal qualities of an artwork. But this must be distinguished from the philosophical viewpoint that we are discussing. For example, the common-sense view clearly applies when one is interested in recurring or divergent stylistic features and trends, or when one has neither the time nor the inclination to increase one's knowledge of the works on display, as is the case with many visitors at art exhibitions. In this ordinary sense, aesthetic appreciation obviously need not be limited to a consideration of stylistic features of a work of art. It is not being suggested that this is the best perspective or the only way of appreciating artworks, nor is it being argued that contextual features are irrelevant to understanding the meaning of stylistic elements.

The situation with regard to the philosophical view is, however, quite different. Underpinning the philosophical understanding of the claim that aesthetic appreciation is limited to stylistic features is the view that there are in every case certain features of artworks that are aesthetically pleasing and certain features that are not; that there are certain special attitudes that are legitimately brought to appreciation and others that

are not; and that things like contextual features do not fall within the recommended range of qualities that can legitimately be treated as aesthetic. The important prescription that follows is that there is nothing else to appreciate in artworks other than their formal qualities. In other words, the aesthetic appreciation of the *ikenga* must be only of the formal qualities of the statuette.

It is not important to query subjectivists here on the plausibility of the assumption that a neat separation can be made between formal qualities and the contextual features that inform them and shape the character of one's aesthetic response. For the moment, we shall go along with them and suppose that this separation can plausibly be made. As we noted, the subjectivists' attempt to rigidly circumscribe what counts as appreciation independently of particular cases and in advance of all contexts is what distinguishes the philosophical view from the commonsense view. While the commonsense view merely allows for the possibility of limiting aesthetic interest to stylistic features, the philosophical view requires it. In taking this stance, the philosophical view makes the large claim that what counts as aesthetic appreciation is explained by formal qualities, in other words that aesthetic appreciation is reducible to formal qualities. This means that acquaintance with formal qualities amounts to acquaintance with what counts as aesthetic appreciation, which is to say, that we come to appreciate or have an appreciation of an artwork when we perceive its formal qualities.

What is unsatisfactory with the subjectivist prescription about the qualities that are or are not improper for aesthetic appreciation of an artwork is not simply that it fails to accept that aesthetic appreciation might be informed by non-formal or contextual features but that it limits appreciation to it. It fixes the nature of appreciation such that it solely depends on acquaintance with formal qualities. The problem with this construal is that it fails to see that an encounter with formal qualities does not auto-

matically follow from an understanding of the artistic significance of the object or with appreciation. The issue here is not so much about the narrow limits drawn around the notion of appreciation as it is about a notion of aesthetic experience that conceives of appreciation as having a direct experience with the formal qualities of an artwork. The underlying idea of aesthetic appreciation as a phenomenon that follows the perception of formal qualities treats it as being constructed out of something specific located in the formal qualities of an artwork. This idea caters more to the basic assumptions of the inner/outer explanatory framework than to how people appreciate artwork. This characterizes aesthetic appreciation as being a definite event with a criteria of identification that is similar to that of objects, an event that we can isolate and examine its constituent parts to see how they are combined. The problem with this view is that it misguidedly treats the mind as an extension of the outer physical world.<sup>4</sup>

The deep-seated conviction of subjectivists that aesthetic appreciation is limited to formal qualities involves the claim that formal qualities are necessary for the occurrence of appreciation. We should note that in this sense of necessary, aesthetic appreciation is being construed as straightforwardly allied with formal qualities, the suggestion being that they function as the sufficient condition for appreciation. But to see that this construal is false, we need only consider a case in which the formal elements of the artworks are present and the audience fails to see the point of nor appreciate their artistic qualities. For proper cultural balance, I shall consider two historical examples.

In the late 19th to early 20th centuries many Europeans were bewildered when African artifacts first made their debut in Europe. Familiar only with Greek, Roman and Italian Renaissance artistic styles, the idealized and schematic representations of African art were thought to be untutored and childish. Viewers' sensibilities were

offended by diminutive figures with distorted anatomical proportions unabashedly displaying either outsize erect penises, or voluptuous projecting cones for breasts. In addition these figures displayed severely truncated limbs, grossly enlarged heads with inscrutable facial expressions, and were often embellished with dirty rags, raffia or feathers. Finding no obvious similarity to what they understood as art, these works were scorned and derided as lacking artistic merit.

At the other end of the spectrum is the more recent response of a Nigerian audience to the tour of the Bolshoi ballet theater. The languid musical score of classical ballet is in sharp contrast to the sassy, pulsating tempo loved by Nigerians. Expecting a lively engaging performance, the audience was treated to introspective solo passages that they found depressing. They were unable to follow the logic of the *pas de deux* and were unimpressed by the choreographic co-ordination which was seen as jerky. Worse still, the pirouettes were considered potentially dangerous and of no special value to rhythmic movement, while the jumps and kicks were regarded as unnecessarily exhibitionist and lacking in decorum. Catcalls, boos and walkouts were the response to the artistic endeavours of the dancers resulting in the tour's abrupt cancellation.<sup>5</sup>

Now philosophers might want to say that this merely shows that European viewers of a century ago and the Nigerian audience of today are ignorant with regards to these artforms. That might very well be so. But this is just to concede the point that perception of formal qualities does not result in aesthetic appreciation. In other words, aesthetic appreciation is not underpinned by formal qualities alone. That ignorance of contextual features can inhibit aesthetic appreciation shows that contextual features shape the character of appreciation, however much subjectivists dislike the idea. Furthermore, we should realize that the subjectivist's appeal to ignorance to explain the viewers' lack of appreciation is clearly illegitimate. This is because the appeal illicitly

imports external features that are outside the scope of formal qualities to explain the absence of what formal qualities should have produced. The fact that viewers can attend to the formal artistic qualities of artworks and still not see them as such, reveals not only that more weight has been placed on formal qualities than they can possibly bear, but also that the subjectivist's conception of aesthetic appreciation is defective.

If appreciation does not occur when attention is on formal qualities, then appreciation cannot be explained by reference to, nor said to rest squarely on, formal qualities. This does not however imply that formal qualities are irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation only that what counts as aesthetic appreciation is not limited to formal qualities.

But subjectivists might counter that they are not claiming that the mere presence of formal elements automatically institutes aesthetic appreciation, only that they are necessary for it. They would argue that viewers can attend to formal qualities of an artwork and yet not appreciate the artwork. For it does not follow from the fact that something is a necessary condition that what it is a condition of would occur once the minimal conditions exist. Subjectivists might even go so far as to contend that for their view to be discredited, it needs to be established that aesthetic appreciation is possible without it being dependent on, or presupposing the formal qualities of an artwork. In other words, they might argue that it must be shown that there can be an instance of aesthetic appreciation in which formal qualities are absent.

It is worth noting that in making this claim, subjectivists have actually shifted their position from the problematic strong sense of their original claim to a more plausible weaker version of it. Nevertheless, traces of the initial problematic of the strong claim remain, namely that there is a set of features on which the notion of appreciation, or what counts as aesthetic appreciation, depends. The idea that, in a weak sense, the isolated essential features or formal qualities can be picked out, or substituted for what counts as appreciation, is similarly misguided.

Consider the case of a group of Western viewers at their first exhibition of African art. Their initial reaction is one of perplexity. They are confused by the strange sculptural forms of the exhibits around them, and they find it difficult to appreciate an artistic vision that construes a human skull as an aesthetic object. Upon reflection, these viewers locate the source of their poor aesthetic response in their limited understanding of the relevant art practice. Suppose in the meantime that some or all of these viewers take lessons and research African art. They learn about the cultural background of most of these works, about their social role, the meaning and significance of their artistic referents, and the principles of design underpinning their creation. Suppose eventually that these viewers come to see and appreciate the formal elements of the artwork.

Now even if the subjectivist claim that appreciation of works of art is limited to formal qualities is construed in the weak sense, a problem still remains. A paradox arises in which both aesthetic perplexity and aesthetic appreciation are being explained by reference to formal qualities of the objects. If in the weak sense aesthetic appreciation can be explained by formal qualities and at the same time they (the formal qualities) explain viewers' initial bewilderment, then they must be or mean the same thing, if only because aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic perplexity are explained by reference to the same set of features. On this interpretation, what counts as aesthetic appreciation would paradoxically be no different from what counts as aesthetic perplexity. However, the fact that the viewers' difficulties were eliminated after their inquiry into the objects' social and artistic traditions establishes that there is a substantial difference between perplexity and appreciation. Thus, even in the weak plausible sense it is misguided to assume that formal qualities are necessary in our understanding of what counts as aesthetic appreciation.

The issue here is not simply that the inability of formal qualities to initiate aesthetic interest establishes that appreciation is not underpinned by formal qualities, but rather that the grounding of appreciation on formal qualities illegitimately implies that there is a sense in which the two are interchangeable. The reason that this is false is that what validates our claim to an aesthetic appreciation of an artwork is not the fact that appreciation corresponds to formal qualities nor that formal qualities are perceived. In fact, that viewers grasped the point of these artworks only after a review of the contextual features of the artworks exposes the error in grounding appreciation on formal qualities and of narrowly defining the limits of the notion of appreciation such that the two are identical. Formal elements can assume the kind of explanatory role suggested by subjectivists only if it is possible to substitute what counts as appreciation without loss of meaning with the formal qualities of an artwork, and this as we have seen has not been done.

However, subjectivists are often quick to support their claims about the nature of aesthetic appreciation by noting that it agrees with what reasonably competent people say goes on during our aesthetic experience of an artwork. That might well be so. But, we should realize that if artistically sophisticated viewers like art critics and theorists give epistemic priority to formal qualities in their explanation, it is only because they have learnt the relevant conventional practices and possess the requisite ability to make aesthetic judgments regarding to the works in question. For them, the role of the rich contextual features is rarely ever at issue. It is so familiar, so pedestrian, that it is normally never considered. If they hardly notice the contextual framework through which they are looking, that cannot be taken as implying that the framework is not there, or that contextual features are not interconnected with their understanding and appreciation of formal issues.

Since competent viewers are well trained in the important aspects of the artistic and cultural framework and possess the requisite skill, their evaluation of the artistic quality of works of art take places against a framework of what is known about the ideas represented in the object, who the artist is, what he or she stands for, and the kind of designs and techniques that are typical of the relevant artistic school. As a result, the character of their aesthetic response is shaped by what they know about the object. Hence they cannot legitimately state, much less, explicate a single feature that explains or grounds their aesthetic appreciation of an artwork. To do so would be to rely on an unconscious or implicit notion of what aesthetic experience is supposed to be and this would not only be speculative – there being no way to decisively tell where contextual influences end and formal qualities begin – it would also reintroduce the hoary errors of the inner/outer dichotomy and falsely suggest that we come by our understanding of what counts as appreciation by investigating the psychological recesses of the mind.

There is no question about the role and relevance of contextual features in constructing a framework for evaluation, and ultimately in shaping the character of a person's appreciation of an artwork. Had subjectivists examined the plausibility of the idea that a neat separation can be made between formal qualities and contextual features they would have come to see the spurious nature of their enterprise. The simple fact of the matter is that a genuinely distinct separation cannot be made.

### *Individualizing Context*

But does that mean that boundaries cannot be drawn to delimit the scope of aesthetic concerns? Seduced by the role of contextual features in explaining the meaning of artistic symbols, imagery and designs and in shaping appreciation, institutionalists have

tended to play down the relevance and role of questions of artistic excellence in appreciation. Focusing more on the role of conventional practices, they argue that aesthetic appreciation is explained by contextual features, in other words that contextual features underpin aesthetic appreciation. For example, Danto suggests that it is only by means of artistic theories that we come to appreciate an artwork, and Dickie believes that it is by situating the objects that have been conferred with the candidacy of appreciation in their relevant artistic tradition that we can see their point.<sup>6</sup> The overly broad limits they have drawn around what counts as artistic practice means that questions of the formal excellence of artworks is pushed aside. On this picture, any artifact can be conferred with the candidacy of appreciation and presented as an artwork.

Consider the claim that one can grasp and better appreciate the aesthetic significance of an artwork the more one understands the artistic tradition and the relevant artistic theories of the art practice. The institutionalist's point is that an informed understanding of the context is necessary for appreciation since it is only against the background provided by contextual features that the artistic merit of an art object is revealed. There is something definitely right here since a greater understanding of the specific features of the Igbo art practice and of the cultural significance of *ikenga* statuettes enhances our appreciation. As any first-time viewer to an African art exhibition would confirm, one needs some idea of the culture and artistic tradition to which the art object belongs in order to have a fuller picture of its artistic merits. For instance, unless one knows that the human skull in the hand of the *ikenga* figure symbolizes courage and prowess and is not a purely decorative motif, one is more than likely to misunderstand its artistic intent.

But in spite of the fact that we need to situate the *ikenga* statuette in its artistic tradition, there is something unsatisfactory in treating knowledge of the Igbo art prac-

tice as the essential item that explains or underpins aesthetic appreciation. Of course, it is clear that institutionalists are not suggesting that knowledge of artistic theories and the artistic convention is sufficient for appreciation, only that it is necessary for it. They are aware that the attitudinal stance like the preferences and motives that one brings to appreciation, as well as the interest which people express for artistic excellence, are all part and parcel of what goes towards shaping the character of a viewer's aesthetic response. In addition, they realize that being a member of Igbo culture or having an informed understanding of its artworld does not necessarily mean that one will appreciate *ikenga* statuettes. Thus, at a more literal reading, the idea that relevant contextual features are required to understand artistic motifs and design elements that derive from a specific cultural environment is unproblematic. It expresses a trivial fact about the sorts of things we draw on to understand and appreciate works of art and about the place of contextual features in aesthetic experience. Also it suggests that it is within the framework of the relevant artistic tradition that questions about the artistic merit of, say, *ikenga* statuettes are appropriately raised and settled.

It is undeniable that the Igbo artistic tradition provides the appropriate framework for making sense of the aesthetic properties of an *ikenga* statuette. The commonplace nature of the observation is seen in the fact that it tells us nothing about the character of appreciation that even the most determined subjectivist would dispute.<sup>7</sup> In no way is it being suggested that aesthetic appreciation is limited to an informed understanding of the Igbo artistic tradition, nor that a person with a superficial understanding of *ikenga* statuettes cannot possibly appreciate them. This commonsense reading of the institutionalist's observation does not attempt to widen the scope of appreciation so that anything can pass for an aesthetic understanding of an artwork, nor does it attempt to set in advance of specific context and particular cases what the character of aesthetic appreciation is.

However, the ordinary unproblematic sense in which it is acceptable to see contextual features as useful in increasing aesthetic pleasure must be distinguished from the institutionalist's construal in which conceptual features underpin appreciation. The institutionalist's claim that art is an essentially institutional activity and that knowledge of contextual features is important to aesthetic appreciation, makes a much stronger claim than is contained in the commonsense recognition of the usefulness of contextual features to assist aesthetic understanding. As in the subjectivist's case, underpinning the institutionalist's position is the view that there are in every case certain things that one must know about an artwork and certain other things that are not relevant, and that a superficial understanding of contextual features does not fall within the recommended range of what counts as appreciation. The philosophical claim that follows is that contextual features set the agenda of what is to be understood as formal qualities. The claim that genuine aesthetic appreciation follows informed understanding of the conventional practice is defended by noting that the objective aspects of the formal elements and their relationship to the sculptural character of the *ikenga* become apparent only after one has attained a measure of understanding.

Despite its commonplace air, the institutionalist claim about the usefulness of contextual features in increasing aesthetic pleasure excludes cases of appreciation that derive solely from a viewers' interest in just the stylistic or formal qualities.<sup>8</sup> As was earlier noted in the subjectivist's case, this attempt to circumscribe rigidly what counts as aesthetic appreciation independently of individual instances of appreciation and in advance of all contexts, is what distinguishes the institutionalist from the commonsense understanding of the usefulness of contextual features. In its philosophical role, institutionalism states what is necessarily true of all instances of appreciation regardless of their special circumstances. This approach shifts the focus of inquiry from questions of artistic merit and excellence to isolating the exact conventional action that transforms an object into a work of art.

The problem with harping on the basic nature of contextual features is that the epistemic importance of the artworld is overemphasized and formal qualities are given short shrift. An immediate result is that the underemphasized features drop out of the institutionalist theoretical account of appreciation if only because they are ignored. Of course, institutionalists do not deny the importance of formal qualities in the artworld, but their lack of interest in these features pushes the concern for the artistic merit of formal qualities into the background.<sup>9</sup> In ignoring the role of formal qualities in setting the agenda of the practice, institutionalists overextend the limits of the notion of aesthetic appreciation. They end up trivializing the distinction between art and non-art and refuse to see a difference between the "objective phenomenal qualities" of a urinal and the objective phenomenal qualities of a sculptural form.

I should point out that much of the critique against the subjectivist's grounding of aesthetic appreciation also applies in this case. The institutionalist's attempt to use conventional practice to anchor or explain aesthetic appreciation is misguided for the reason that was earlier pointed out in the subjectivist's case. I shall not go over the same arguments again except to note that when cognitive focus is on the artworld and it becomes the focus of theorizing, the message put out is that conventional practices or contextual features are the items that conclusively explain appreciation or our ability to appreciate. In its new theoretical role, contextual features function with a prescriptive force that can force appreciation. The notion is refashioned such that viewers' aesthetic responses are fixed to an understanding of conventional practices so that appreciation is brought about or follows from knowing the relevant theories and rules of appreciation. But in doing this, institutionalists miss the concern for artistic excellence that people bring to appreciation. After all, a person who is uninterested in the stylistics of traditional Igbo art would not appreciate the *ikenga* statuette whether or not it is acclaimed to a work of art. This inattentiveness to people's artistic interest invokes a

picture of individuals with underdeveloped artistic sensibilities or inner lives that sharply contrast with the highly sophisticated aesthetic responses they are presumed to make.

What is unsatisfactory with this downgrading of formal qualities is not just that it exaggerates the role of conventional practices and theories and ignores viewers' artistic interests, but that it ends up denying the relevance of formal qualities in defining the aims and objectives of the art practice. In reacting to the subjectivists' narrow conception of the notion of aesthetic appreciation, it might seem strategically wise to deflate the importance of formal qualities. But this should not blind us to the role of formal qualities in defining or setting the agenda for the art practice and inevitably for aesthetic appreciation.

Consider a recent exhibition put up at the Center for African Art in New York by Susan Vogels. The aim of the exhibition was to establish that the art/artifact distinction is largely a creation of the manner in which objects are displayed. The show, entitled "Art/Artifact", consisted of 160 objects in traditional African artistic style that were exhibited in four different environments. The conditions of a "curiosity room", an anthropological museum and an art gallery and museum were simulated. In the "curiosity room" the exotic and mysterious nature of the artworks was emphasized. In the anthropological museum the focus was on the cultural beliefs and practices of the displayed objects while in the art gallery and the art museum the primary focus shifted to the formal artistic elements of the objects. People entered from the "curiosity room", passed through the anthropological and art museums, and came out through the art gallery.<sup>10</sup> Visitors were suitably impressed by what they saw. They remarked on how objects that in the first two environments had been unprepossessing, were uncannily transformed and acquired a new meaning and status in the last two rooms where they had been displayed with an eye for their formal artistic qualities.

One thing that boldly stands out from the illustration is that there are multiple criteria for relating to a given object and that the significance of the object is internally related to the features of the environment that maps it out. When the art gallery environment is simulated, formal qualities define not only the significance of the artifact but also the environment. Thus, in an art environment formal qualities are prominent, and in changing the environment from 'curiosity room' to 'art gallery', the meaning of the artifacts changed even while the artifacts remained the same. What the exhibition succeeded in showing was not only the internal relationship that held between formal qualities and aesthetic concerns, it also showed that formal qualities are needed to define and set the agenda of the art environment, and the art environment provides the context within which the artistic significance of formal qualities are meaningful. Contextual features of the art environment are neither primary nor secondary to formal qualities, and in defining the objectives of the environment formal qualities are neither primary nor secondary to contextual features from which they derive their significance. They all stand on the same level.

Thus, it is a mistake to locate what brings about appreciation in contextual features as we are tempted to think of it as a state we arrive at once informed understanding is achieved. Also, it is a mistake to give just a tacit recognition to formal qualities as it fails to give sufficient recognition of how these qualities set the agenda of the practice. It may be supposed that no philosopher makes such mistakes. However, we can tell they do from the sorts of things they conceive of as important problems in aesthetics and from the moves they make in defending their theoretical position.

Yet the fact that formal qualities are internally related to contextual features does not mean that aesthetic appreciation presupposes an informed understanding of the contextual features, in the sense of underpinning it. Making informed understanding a

precondition of appreciation is to specify in advance of all contexts how a person would respond and what sort of information he or she would require in appreciating an artwork. It is to state in advance what a person should or should not do, and to assume that every spectator has the same concerns and interests. In other words, it is to invoke all the errors of the conceptual picture deriving from the inner/outer dichotomy. True, the presence of contextual features informs and shapes our aesthetic experiences of artworks, but in no way should this be construed as implying that the context is dominant in shaping the character of our experiences, or that aesthetic appreciation is tied to it.

It is important to see that the question of what provides an entrance into appreciation leads us back into the conceptual framework of the inner/outer dichotomy. By assuming that there is some essential item that brings about appreciation, subjectivists take appreciation to be explained by formal qualities and so construe it as a definite object. Institutionalists, however, take it to be underpinned by contextual features and transform it into an institutional object. The problem with the subjectivist account is that it fails to incorporate the role of contextual features in appreciating works of art and instead takes formal qualities to be distinct and divorced from their outer contextual conditions. The idea that aesthetic appreciation is limited to the formal qualities of an artwork draws very narrow boundaries around the experience. The same is also true for institutionalism. As we also saw, the weakness of institutionalism derives from its failure to emphasize the role of formal qualities in explaining how aesthetic appreciation comes about. Because its main preoccupation is with the role of contextual features, institutionalism overlooks the role of artistic qualities in defining the objectives of the practice in which aesthetic appreciation occurs. Consequently, its notion of aesthetic appreciation is lost in the overly generous understanding of what counts in appreciating an artwork.

The implication of all this for a satisfactory understanding of aesthetic appreciation is that we need to widen the constrictive boundaries of the subjectivist's view without ignoring the role of formal qualities in setting the agenda for the aesthetic experience; and we need to narrow the overextended boundaries of the institutionalists without ignoring the importance of contextual issues in fixing the meaning of formal qualities. Now that the conceptual landscape is mapped out, what needs to be addressed is what counts as aesthetic appreciation.

### *Appreciation as Ability*

It has been argued that aesthetic appreciation is not a definite event that we can know by direct experience nor is it a rule-governed act in the sense of being subject to causal influences. Also, we have learnt that it is misguided to ground it either on formal qualities or on contextual features. But we have seen too that contextual features are needed to set up a relevant framework within which aesthetic appreciation occurs and that formal qualities must set the agenda for the practice. If aesthetic appreciation is none of the things we have always assumed it to be, what then is it? What counts as appreciation; what grounds the experience; how do we tell that someone appreciates a work of art; what makes us appreciate an *ikenga* for example? Indeed, how do we explain our appreciation for one artwork rather than another? To ask these sorts of questions is to demand the construction of a ghostly conceptual mechanism that will connect an artwork to our emotional state and somehow bring about an appreciation of the object.

Nothing brings it about that we appreciate an artwork, or that we know a person's claims to appreciating an *ikenga* to be true. No doubt, one can give a set of reasons to show that one appreciates, or to show how to tell that another appreciates an artwork,

or to set out the relevant conditions under which it is appropriate to say that one has grasped the point of an artwork. But none of this explains how we appreciate or ground our aesthetic appreciation. We appreciate an artwork when we have developed the ability to see and understand the significance of the unique way the artist arranged the various elements of his or her medium. We develop that ability by learning the sorts of things that are related to the medium and the kind of technique, style or ideas of representation that are exemplified in the work. We appeal to our understanding of the salient features of the practice to justify our claims to appreciating an artwork; and the grounds we appeal to are evaluated to determine if we have the relevant competence or mastery of the subject-matter to back up our claims to appreciation. (This does not rule out cases of appreciating a certain technique or art style even when they are uninformed). All these things that are involved in appreciation take place in an apparently uncoordinated way in our everyday practice. Nonetheless, they are coordinated because we have acquired or developed the ability to discern and engage in the rules of what it means to appreciate.

We should note that obeisance to the rules of the practice of appreciation comes not from being trained to respond appropriately, but from the internal logic of the practice. The internal relationship between the limits and the objectives of the practice is one in which a shift in the sort of response called for brings about a change in meaning. If we fail to abide by rules as set by the practice of appreciation we change the entire meaning of our responses and end up with a different practice. In this way the logic of the practice calls for skill and understanding from participants and constant evaluation of their actions rather than just trained responses. Because of the association of appreciation with the perceptual experiences of viewers, there is a strong tendency to forget that what is relevant to appreciation is one's ability to understand what is seen, heard or read: does one understand the moral and political statement that

Shakespeare makes in *Macbeth*; does one merely see a hugh polished boulder or a competently executed sculpture; does one understand what ideas are being expressed; can one evaluate similar works and see their strengths and weaknesses?

We should keep in mind that our ability to appreciate a work of art comes from an understanding of the subject-matter, the ideas expressed, and the relevant criteria to employ in evaluating it. This in turn requires that we know the limits and the agenda of the practice, such as what sorts of cultural and contextual features are pertinent in discerning the significance of the formal qualities of an artwork, and where the limits are as defined by the formal qualities in any given culture.

A consideration of how novices learn to appreciate artworks with which they are unfamiliar will enable us to determine what goes on in appreciation, and what it means to say we appreciate an artwork. It might seem distracting and trivial to focus on novices since no one seriously questions how we learn to appreciate works of art. But the starting point is methodologically expedient for it allows us to see clearly how people develop their ability, and the sorts of things to which they pay attention in acquiring a working knowledge of the practice. This will enable us to determine the relevant criteria of what counts as appreciation.

*Ikenga* statuettes are carved wooden statuaries usually between six inches to two feet high. They are one of three types of personal achievement symbols of the Igbos of southeastern Nigeria, the achievement symbol for males. For the egalitarian and fiercely competitive Igbos, the *ikenga* symbolizes the "right hand", that is, the hand by which a man takes charge and achieves his goals. The *ikenga* symbolizes the attributes of courage, strength and ambition that the industrious Igbos highly value. Fortunately for Igbo males, the intense social pressure on them to succeed is well accommodated by a flexible non-centralized socio-political framework that allows and encourages social mobility.

The *ikenga* statuette captures this achievement oriented psychology of the Igbos. In its most basic sculptural form, it depicts a man with a pair of long horns sprouting from his head and sitting on a stool, with a drawn sword in the left hand and either a human skull (symbol of prowess) or an elephant tusk (symbol of wealth) in the right one. The horns connote the type of aggressive strength required in the males. The style of representation is typically an idealized and schematic treatment of the human form.

There are two basic types of *ikenga* statuettes: the anthropomorphic and the abstract cylindrical type. Of the two, the more famous is the anthropomorphic type, while the small type is favoured by the less wealthy and by *dibias* (shamans), who by virtue of their profession travel frequently and so find the small size quite handy. However, depending on who commissions it, an *ikenga* may be monumental and elaborately decorated with status-related symbols like *ichi* linear scarifications running down the length of the face, eagle feathers, coral beads and cloth, or be miniaturist in height with the most modest of decorations.<sup>11</sup>

Today *ikenga* statuettes are found in museums around the world where they are viewed and puzzled over by Western spectators. What, these spectators wonder, is the cultural significance of these objects and what role do they play in Igbo culture? Confused by the strange artistic referents and mode of representation, Westerners are perplexed by how they ought to appreciate the objects now that they have been uprooted from their natural setting.

The difficulties of novices in comprehending the artistic significance of *ikenga* statuettes reveals that aesthetic appreciation refers to the ability to see the artistic significance of an artwork. The novice's inability to grasp the pertinent artistic features of the *ikenga* statuette points to the absence of this capacity. In doing so, a novice's fail-

ing underscores the importance of ability in aesthetic appreciation, for we see that to appreciate an art form fully one needs to understand the peculiar traits of the relevant styles, and the artistic and cultural traditions. For instance, to understand the *ikenga* statuette novices find they need to know what the object is all about, what its role is in Igbo cultural life, and what the symbols and imagery on the statuette represent. In learning that these symbols and imagery are typical of *ikenga* statuettes, novices get to know not only that these features represent locally preferred values like initiative, resourcefulness and aggressiveness but also why there is a wide stylistic difference between the small compact statuette and the architectonic figural type. It might seem that all this information is not really relevant for appreciating the aesthetic properties of the statuette. But without it to provide the relevant framework, novices will not be able to see the point of the artwork, let alone extend their perspective and sharpen their artistic sensibilities. However, increasing their knowledge equips them with the skills to function within the limits defined by the formal qualities of the statuette.

The kind of information required by the novice to make the artistic significance of the *ikenga* understandable is not to be found in such formal qualities as the design, the symmetry, the colour and the tactile qualities, but only in the cultural context. Take the formal element of frontality that is typical of many *ikenga* statuettes for instance. Nothing in the formal qualities alone tells us why Igbo carvers give a minimalist treatment to the rear side of their statuettes. Only when we look into the cultural artistic tradition of the Igbos do we find why this is done. Only then do we learn that it is not an arbitrary thing that is designed to free the carver from extensively working the back. By considering this tradition novices see that the reason for the frontal effects of the statuette is that the statuette is positioned for facial contact with its owner. He or she learns that, among this group, it is an undesirable thing for one to lack initiative and resourcefulness, and even more so for its symbolic representation to turn its back on

the owner. The information provides the novice with a keener insight of what to look for in evaluating an *ikenga* statuette.

To a casual viewer, it might seem that what is responsible for the frontal character of the *ikenga* statuette is the purely practical problem of the eventual location of the object. But that explanation by itself is unsatisfactory until one knows why these statuettes have to be placed in a specific position. Thus without this non-formal explanation to throw light on the rationale of Igbo stylistics and principles of design, the frontal character of the sculptural form appears arbitrary. The obscurity that follows means that novices would lack a relevant perspective from which to grasp the artistic point of the style. Should this happen, viewers would be unable to demonstrate an understanding of the finer points of the Igbo artistic convention, and hence would be unable to justify their claims to appreciation. The importance of artistic understanding to aesthetic appreciation is not only to expand one's awareness, but also to sharpen one's aesthetic sensibilities and back up one's claims to appreciation.

Needless to say, viewers who express little interest in the context will lack a clear understanding of why certain artistic decisions were made by the carvers. In particular, they will not be able to identify what artistic excellence is for the Igbo sculptor. Nor will they be able to judge the strength of an Igbo carving or distinguish between a well-carved and a badly carved statuette. For instance, unless one knows that the facial scarification on the face of the seated figure is not an artistic decoration, one might assign it a higher artistic value and treat it as giving the visual design an added edge. Moreover, there is the serious possibility that formal elements will be misinterpreted so that the artistic strength of the statuette becomes a weakness and a flaw perceived as a strength. In other words, lacking an understanding of what is significant means that one has yet to develop the relevant ability to appreciate artworks of that style.

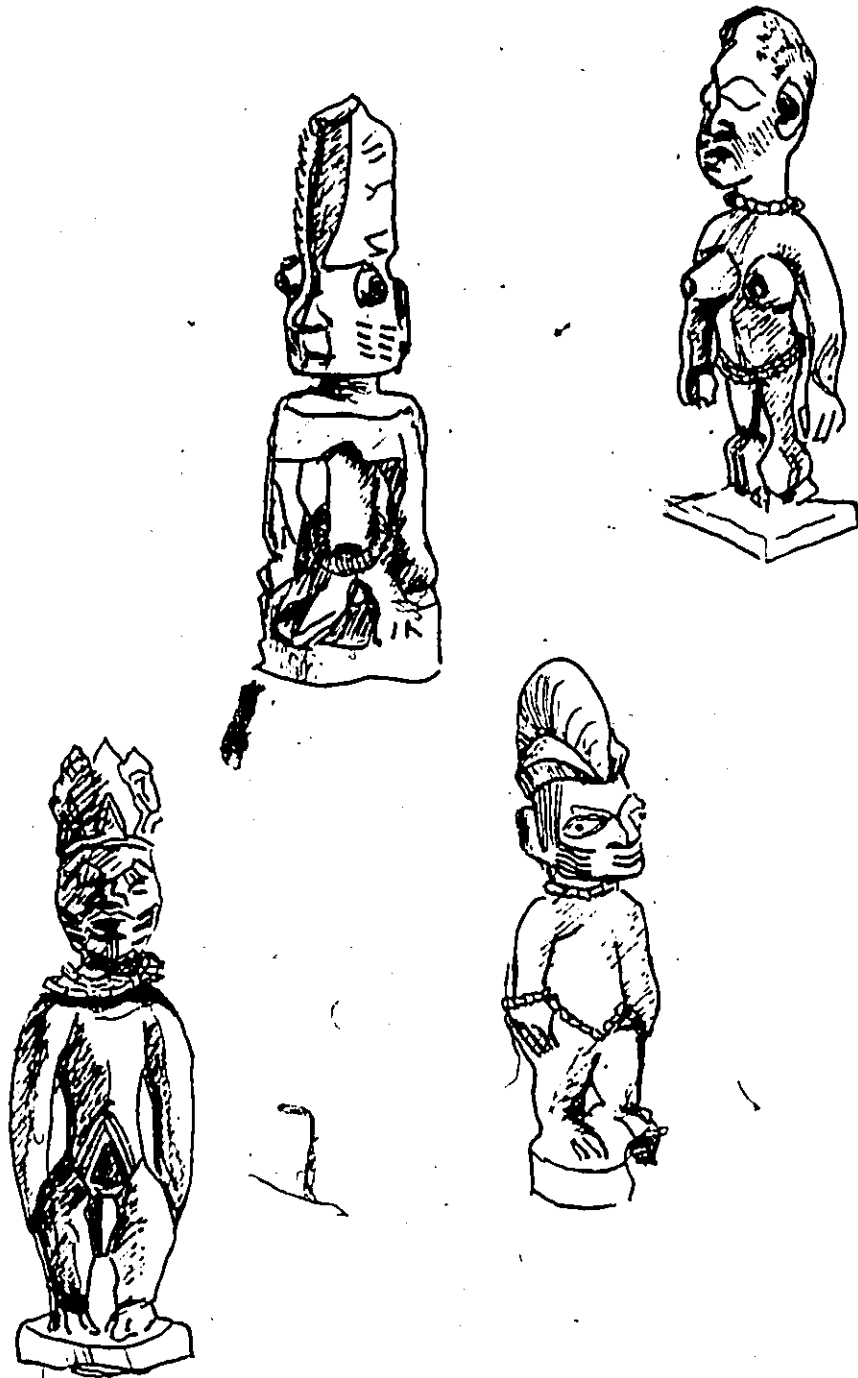
The fact that artistic significance of formal elements cannot be decided upon without the novice knowing or assuming something about the cultural and artistic tradition, indicates that contextual and other non-formal qualities are interwoven in appreciation and that they shape the character of aesthetic response. An analogy might be useful here. Just as we cannot separate the identity of a person from his or her family connections, political leanings, and social and economic status, neither can we separate the point of an artwork and the meaning of its formal qualities from the non-formal concerns of its creator and the cultural tradition to which it belongs. Attempts to do so leave one with a superficial understanding of the underlying principle of design that might inhibit appreciation.

The reason one cannot reach an informed opinion of what is or is not aesthetically pleasing in an unfamiliar artform is not that the individual's observation is uninformative, but that he or she has to understand the meaning of what is perceived. Visual messages are informative only when the content of the signs, symbols and compositional design are understood. Consider the curved shaped cone in the hand of the seated figure (Fig. 1). What is it? Nothing in the design and style tells us how it is to be understood. Is it a mere curved shaped cone, or is it an elephant tusk? There is no model "out there" that an *ikenga* statuette instantiates that will help one determine this. Yet one needs to ascertain what it is to see what the Igbo sculptor is attempting to achieve. Artistic understanding is at least in part knowing what the artwork represents. It consists in understanding the symbols and imagery used, in being able to see the strengths and weaknesses of the mode of representation and in knowing what it is to succeed and what it is to fall short as an artwork in the relevant art tradition.

It has long been observed that aesthetic experience is the ability to notice and discern artistic properties. However, seduced by the idea of appreciation as an experi-

ence, and of experience as a perceptual act that takes place in consciousness, what counts as aesthetic appreciation is misleadingly taken to refer to an event in the mind. But as the learning process indicates, the aim of the programme is to enable a novice to develop the competency to function in an environment that calls for a specific type of response. Because aesthetic appreciation involves the development of a capacity, and since we appreciate by exercising the skill, what counts as appreciation is our ability to understand the aims and objectives of the object in question, to see its strength and weaknesses, and to respond favourably to the overall design pattern and to the unique way the formal elements have been organized. We know that others appreciate by having mastered the rules and requirements of the practice of appreciation and by knowing what it means to exercise one's ability in appreciating an artwork.

*ERE IBEJI*



Figures of "ere ibeji"

These commemorative figures of deceased twins are of relatively modest dimension, averaging from twenty-three to thirty-five centimeters in height. They are carved out of wood, and are generally of shiny dark brown or clear brown yellowish patinas and are sometimes touched up with red and blue colours. The figures are carved in a frontal stance with hands placed on the sides of the thighs. Most have carefully carved ears and scarification and stand on a round base. The carving may be polished with palm oil mixed with camwood powder. This results in a rich patina seen on many *ibejis*. *Ibejis* are also decorated with cowries, beads, metal and strings.

It is believed that twins bring good fortune to those who honour them, the reverse to those who neglect them. When a twin dies an *ibeji* is commissioned as a surrogate, a repository for his or her spirit. The mother treats the carving just as she does the living twin, it is ritually bathed, fed the favourite food, and carried on her back. At night it is carefully wrapped and put to bed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AESTHETIC PROBLEMS REVISITED:

#### OVERCOMING RELATIVISM AND RESTRAINING UNIVERSALISM

In this chapter, I examine the aesthetic problems of "Cultural Relativism" and "Universalism".<sup>1</sup> These are one of the underlying problems that provided the rationale for some of the moves made by subjectivists and institutionalists in their accounts of how we appreciate works of art.<sup>2</sup> Here I shall examine the nature of these two problems in greater detail. The purpose of the examination is to determine whether the question of the universal appeal of an artwork can be reconciled with the contextual and cultural specificity of the object if the inner/outer dichotomy is undermined. In other words, my aim is to determine whether we can talk about the universal aspect of artistic qualities and the contextual features of the object without having to invoke "essential" features to ground our discourse.

An examination of the basic tenets of Cultural Relativism shows that the thesis derives its sceptical force by injecting a dichotomy between the inner/beliefs and the outer/social practices. This dichotomy enables the Cultural Relativist to interpret the relation between individuals and their culture so that the artistic significance of the artworks of other cultures become privileged. Their privileged status comes from their being located in the inner realm. On this view, only natives can have a full aesthetic experience of the works of art of their culture; others by virtue of their being outsiders or non-natives cannot have it in principle. It is worth noting that this argument patterns the solipstist's view that only the individual, by virtue of his or her privileged position can know the contents of his or her mind; likewise others may surmise them but

they cannot in principle know them.<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Universalism broadly interprets the relation between people and other cultures so that the culturally intended artistic significance of an artwork is available to all regardless of cultural background. The Universalist accepts the division of a culture into an inner and an outer realm but unlike the Cultural Relativist believes that access to the inner is not privileged. On this view, anyone can fully appreciate the putative aesthetic properties of any work of art if only because all human beings share the genetic nature and so can legitimately be seen as having the same artistic practice. It is worth noting that the Universalist's view echoes the rationalist argument that we know others have experiences like ours because they are human beings like us.

The philosophical problem of how we appreciate the artworks of other cultures turns on the issue of the relationship that exists between the inner/beliefs and the outer/social realm. The question of appreciating the arts of other cultures is construed as a problem of access to the world-view of other cultures. When this happens as in the Universalist/Cultural Relativist debate, philosophical attention is directed away from an investigation of how cross-cultural appreciation comes about in our ordinary everyday world to an inquiry of whether or not access to the world-view of other cultures is closed. The obfuscating nature of the philosophical debate is further complicated by the underlying idea of what counts as a genuine experience. The use of natives' experiences both to *determine* what constitutes full appreciation and to *set* the standard for what is to be accepted as genuine appreciation virtually guarantees a protracted dispute.

From the descriptions of the basic tenets of the two views, it is clear that the differences between Cultural Relativism and Universalism cannot be resolved simply by coming down on one side or the other. A satisfactory solution requires that we get at

the underlying ideas funding the debate. To this end, it is necessary to turn our attention to the events in everyday life about which the philosophical debate is concerned.

### *Pursuing the Mundane*

Because philosophers generally claim that their accounts accord with or explain everyday reality or life, I turn first to examine how the issue of appreciating the artworks of other cultures is ordinarily dealt with at the everyday non-philosophical level. My objective is to see whether in ordinary life the central problem in how we appreciate the artworks of other cultures is best regarded as a question of how well a non-native must know an artwork before claiming to appreciate it. In a nutshell I want to consider how the problem is handled at the everyday level and what is done to resolve it.

The unusual nature of traditional African artworks is often used to question the idea that works of art have universal appeal. Confronted by the strange stylistic form of artworks like the *ibeji*, some viewers are undeterred by the unusual nature of the object. Not unreasonably, these viewers believe that full artistic understanding is possible given sufficient time to study the artworks. But some viewers are far less confident and excuse their bewilderment by contending that Yorubas (or natives) are *en rapport* with these works in a way that non-natives can never hope to be. They believe that they cannot possibly grasp the intended artistic significance of these works if only because they lack the deep understanding of these works that natives have.

It would seem that the viewers' perplexities are simply the result of unfamiliarity with the artform rather than of a conceptual inability to see the artistic merit of the works. So construing the viewer's difficulty as an appeal for practical assistance, two

kinds of responses generally emerge to deal with his or her self-doubts. The first I shall call the commonsense universalist approach, and the second, the everyday cultural relativist approach. I should caution that these two approaches do not define definite theoretical positions but merely describe the angle from which a solution is proposed.

The commonsense universalist approach emphasizes the unity of the works of art of all cultures in order to play down the strangeness of the unfamiliar style while the everyday cultural relativist account stresses the need to understand the artistic scheme of interpretation of a culture in order to grasp the point of its artworks. Although each approach has differing starting points, they complement each other by bringing into focus things that the other overlooks. And by acknowledging the main points of the others' position, they build a more comprehensive picture of the relevant things one should do in understanding the artistic significance of other cultures' artworks. It is worth noting that the combined efforts of the commonsense universalist and the everyday cultural relativist are aimed at providing such practical assistance that will help a non-native appreciate the artworks of other cultures, and at undermining the view that cultural and conceptual differences constitute an insurmountable obstacle to aesthetic appreciation. In effect, advocates of the two approaches allay the viewer's fears by pointing out that given sufficient time for study and familiarization, he or she will be able to appreciate works of art like the *ibeji*. The following are the sorts of general moves they make.

Advocates of the everyday universalist view begin by sketching the outline of a general framework within which a perplexed viewer would see the artwork of another culture as an extension, albeit with some differences, of the artistic activity of his or her own culture. While acknowledging that there are significant differences between cultures in theme and subject-matter, the commonsense universalist maintains that

these differences do not obscure the formal qualities which artworks necessarily exhibit, and towards which aesthetic appreciation is directed. For example, he or she observes that the mimetic mode of representation which is typical of classical Western art is very different from the stylized abstract mode of representation that is characteristic of traditional African art like the *ibeji*, but that they share important similarities nonetheless. The commonsense universalist indicates what these are by calling the viewer's attention to the formal qualities of the *ibeji* like its simplicity of style, the expressive power of its tight compact design, the sense of vitality created by its rounded surfaces, and the vertical sweep of its symmetry, and by comparing them with relevant artworks with which the viewer is familiar. Thus, the commonsense universalist dispels the viewer's self-doubts by showing him or her the sorts of things that one normally looks for to establish a rapport with, and ultimately to appreciate, a work of art.

The everyday cultural relativist complements this universalist's approach by filling in the content of the general aesthetic framework sketched by the universalist. He or she does this by directing attention to the enriched appreciation that comes to one with an informed understanding of the cultural significance of the artwork in question. Take the *ibeji* statuette for instance. The everyday relativist would argue that in strictly formal terms it is a free standing sculptural form, that it possesses the requisite artistic features of unity, form and symmetry no less than Michaelangelo's *David* or Henry Moore's *Head*. The relativist goes on to say that these formal elements alone do not tell us much about the underlying principle of design or the artistic success of the work. The everyday cultural relativist impresses on the viewer that his or her perplexity is due to a lack of sufficient information about the *ibeji* with which to appreciate the formal qualities of the object. This difficulty in appreciating the *ibeji*, the relativist insists, merely calls for a greater understanding of the Yoruba aesthetic framework and can be achieved by learning about the Yoruba artistic tradition to which the statuette

belongs. In recommending that the special features of the artwork be understood, the everyday cultural relativist is suggesting a practical solution to the viewer if he or she wants to appreciate the artistic qualities of the *ibeji*.

Because commonsense universalists start by underscoring the similarity between the artworks of all cultures, it might be assumed that they overlook the relevance of understanding cultural differences. But this is not so. Their starting point is not the result of thinking that cultural differences are unimportant. They know how overwhelming these differences can be if one lacks the relevant perspective to handle them. This apart, commonsense universalists are in complete agreement with the suggestion of the everyday cultural relativist that it is important to understand the symbols, imagery and all the special features that make the artworks of other cultures different. On this perspective, to be a commonsense universalist is simply to maintain that artworks of all cultures like Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Michelangelo's *David*, the Yoruba *ibeji*, Ruben's *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can in principle be appreciated by anyone. It is not to set beforehand how the appreciation of artworks comes about.

Equally, as we have seen, everyday relativists do not start off with a universal premise but this is not because they want to suggest that works of art have no universal appeal, still less that appreciation of the works of art of other cultures is impossible. What they are out to highlight is simply the point that an understanding of contextual features is needed to grasp the significance of the formal qualities of artworks. Lest it be assumed that this necessity of understanding is limited only to the arts of other cultures, they point out that it applies also to the works of one's own culture as becomes evident when a New Yorker runs into Andy Warhol's *100 Campbell's Soup Cans*, or when a Yoruba encounters the *ikenga* statuettes of the Igbos. What the everyday cul-

Y  
tural relativist is highlighting is that it becomes proportionately difficult, as differences in style and form increase between cultures, to recognize what constitutes formal qualities in the artworks of fundamentally different cultures. Despite the sharp contrast that obscures the similarity between such works, it is still possible to grasp the artistic point of the works by understanding their special features. In effect, to be an everyday cultural relativist is simply to recognize the importance of understanding the relevant artistic tradition; it is not to preclude in advance what a non-native can possibly know about the artworks of other cultures.

It is important to see that proponents of the two approaches do not see themselves in opposition and acknowledge the salient points of the other's contribution. Although commonsense universalists stress the shared nature of artistic experience, they are as aware as the everyday cultural relativist that artworks are products of differing cultural experiences. This awareness finds reflection in their acknowledgment that one must understand these cultural differences if one is to appreciate the works fully. Similarly, it would be a mistake to think of everyday cultural relativists as completely ignoring the universal character of works of art. They admit that there is a universal level of unity in which an assortment of objects can be grouped as artworks. So, far from denying the universality of artistic qualities, everyday cultural relativists are merely saying that it cannot be determined beforehand but only in terms of individual cases.

Thus, in ordinary non-philosophical discourse, the commonsense universalist and everyday cultural relativist accounts portray the issue of how to appreciate the arts of other cultures as merely a question of the sorts of things one should know in claiming to appreciate an artwork. Both are reasonable. Both provide valuable insights into the significant things that matter in appreciating the artworks of another culture.

But tapping into these two everyday accounts are two philosophical versions of the views — Universalism and Cultural Relativism. These philosophical accounts are markedly similar to the everyday variants but differ from them in perceiving major "fundamental" problems in the non-natives' bewilderment of the unfamiliar *ibeji* art-form. Needless to say, the everyday accounts and solutions are seen from the philosophical perspective to involve a superficial understanding of the issues at stake. The conceptual problems that are perceived by philosophers are claimed to go to the very "nature of things" and are beyond practical resolution. It is these conceptual problems that the philosophical posturings of Universalism and Cultural Relativism are out to settle.

### *Philosophical Moves*

In its philosophical garb Cultural Relativism discerns a special relationship between natives and their culture that undermines the possibility of cross-cultural appreciation, while Universalism perceives an important relationship between the artistic experiences of peoples of all cultures that secures the possibility of cross-cultural appreciation. For the Universalist, artistic experience is basically the same in all cultures, and aesthetic appreciation of other cultures' artworks is possible without dealing with obvious cultural differences. Conversely, Cultural Relativists contend that the fundamental differences between works of art of various cultures are so deep that (in some mysterious ways) they hinder cross-cultural appreciation. In typical philosophical manner, each denies what the other affirms and affirms what the other denies. Universalists affirm the possibility of cross-cultural appreciation by denying cultural differences; Cultural Relativists deny the possibility of cross-cultural appreciation to affirm the existence of cultural differences. The consequence of these philosophical meta-

chimeras of the everyday accounts on the issue of appreciating the artworks of other cultures is the erosion of the insights that were captured in the ordinary deflated views.

Few philosophers or theorists openly admit to being thoroughgoing Universalists or straightforward Cultural Relativists.<sup>4</sup> When admissions to these theoretical positions are reluctantly extracted, it is usually with a long list of qualifications that the person's thesis no longer fits the standard philosophical description of either Universalism or Cultural Relativism. Yet despite determined efforts by all and sundry to keep a respectable distance from the more problematic ideas of the two philosophical perspectives, the seductive appeal of the ideas is so compelling that even the most careful opponents can be caught. What usually gives them away are the sorts of things they feel obliged to defend.<sup>5</sup>

Because there is no one special way into either Universalism or Cultural Relativism, there are no recognizable specific theories to consider. Hence, I shall instead portray some of the sources of the two philosophical positions with an eye to determine what compels theorists to make the kind of moves they do, and why they believe that the everyday practical accounts are defective.<sup>6</sup> Here my objective is not so much to bring out the limitations of either Universalism or Cultural Relativism as it is to expose the moves that prompt them in the first place. In other words, I am concerned to indicate where the shifts occur and to uncover the reasons that motivate them.

Let us review the case of the perplexed viewer with these objectives in mind.

Worried that the viewer's difficulties may provide a basis for suggesting that appreciation is relative, Universalists characteristically play down the viewer's perplexity and contend that the appreciation of the artworks of another culture is not a problem. Arguing that creative expression, of which art is a product, a uniquely human activity,

Universalists claim that there is a finite set of formal qualities — such as form, style, symmetry, design and so on — that define artistic activity and that are common to works of art. Universalists insist that cultural differences in theme, subject-matter, and mode of representation do not obstruct aesthetic appreciation because the shared common formal qualities provide an entrance into understanding the special artistic features of any artwork. Since for them aesthetic appreciation is directed just to formal qualities, Universalists believe that the cross-cultural similarity of formal qualities provides an adequate means of grasping the artistic significance of, say, the *ibeji*. This means that works like Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*; Ruben's *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus* or the *ibeji* can be appreciated by anyone as their artistic significance can readily be discerned. Thus, regardless of differences in how art is conceived, Universalists contend that the point of the artwork is not obscured by sharp cultural differences.

The slide into Universalism starts with the reluctance to attach much importance to the viewer's difficulties, but this is not because Universalists do not believe that differences exist. They are well aware that differences exist, but they fear that these differences can easily be exploited to challenge the possibility of cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation and to argue the case that aesthetic appreciation is culturally relative. Being committed to the Ideal of the unity of all human events, artistic activities and phenomena, Universalists are wary about providing ammunition for views that would undermine this Ideal. The step into Universalism comes from the reluctance to treat the viewers' perplexity as a call for practical assistance in understanding the *ibeji*. This construal of the call as posing a legitimate threat to the Universalist's ideal of global unity, becomes an effective tool in the slide into Universalism.

The reluctance to acknowledge cultural differences by providing assistance to the viewer greases the slide into Universalism. The urge to defend the view of universally shared artistic activity propels Universalists to deny that there is a *real* theoretical or practical problem in relating to an unfamiliar artwork. This denial fuels the suggestion that all that is required in appreciating unfamiliar artworks is to focus on just those formal qualities that all works of art necessarily exhibit. The tacit suggestion here is that it is fairly easy to recognize formal qualities and to discern the artistic significance of an unfamiliar artwork. This underlying suggestion operates in a way that gives non-natives unlimited understanding of the artistic significance of the artworks of other cultures. The assumption that artistic ideas are available underpins the Universalist's contention that cross-cultural appreciation is to be explained by reference to a basic level of universally shared artistic ideas. We should note that on this view, non-natives' appreciation of the *ibeji* is explained by reference to ideas that derive from a shared human nature.

By exploiting the psychological appeal of universally shared ideas and investing in them a capacity that they do not have, Universalists suggest that learning the relevant artistic framework of the culture is not necessary for understanding and appreciating the artistic ideas of other cultures. For Universalists, having the relevant cultural experience is no longer essential because artistic ideas are already shared between cultures, and the artistic ideas of a culture are never special or peculiar to it. Thus, the move into Universalism comes not so much from assuming that the artistic ideas and beliefs are universal, as it does in invoking a false picture of understanding of the artistic beliefs of other cultures. The picture this idea suggests is of uninformed non-natives possessing a full and complete understanding of the artistic beliefs and ideas of cultures of which they are unfamiliar with.

Universalism is underpinned by two notions of publicity, which I refer to as epistemic publicity and public sharedness. Epistemic publicity is the idea that anyone can understand and appreciate the works of art of other cultures, and public sharedness is the idea that the intended significance of the artworks is available to all. These two notions constitute the basis on which Universalism turns and they indicate why the Universalist's claim that the practices and the artistic significance of artworks are accessible to others is plausible. We should remember that those who embrace Universalism do not deny that cultural differences might stall appreciation but only that such perceptual problems are never irresolvable. However, by underemphasizing cultural differences and promoting the primacy of the underlying shared common artistic qualities, Universalists end up denying the existence of cultural differences if only by eliminating them from the picture.

Opposed to the Universalists' claim that access to the artistic significance of the works of art of other cultures is readily available, Cultural Relativists contend that there are important differences between works of art of different cultures which Universalists ignore. For example, they insist that the mimetic mode of representation which is typical of classical Western art is very different from the stylized abstract mode of representation that is characteristic of traditional African art like the *ibeji*. They maintain that these differences are of such importance that people in different cultures react differently to, say, Ruben's *The Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus* than they do to the *ibeji* statuette. Cultural Relativists argue that viewers for whom realism is an artistic ideal generally find it difficult to determine what constitutes formal qualities in non-representational abstract works.<sup>7</sup> According to Cultural Relativists, this difficulty underscores the point of their position, which is that as differences in style and form increase between cultures, it becomes correspondingly difficult to recognize the similarities between formal qualities and to grasp the point of their respective works of art.

The move into philosophical Cultural Relativism starts with the intuitively correct idea that there are important differences between the artistic practices of different cultures that obstruct understanding. The slide is helped by the Cultural Relativist's reluctance to attribute the perplexities of the non-native viewer to ignorance or unfamiliarity. This reluctance suggests that the viewer's difficulty in appreciating the *ibeji* is not something that can be resolved by studying the artistic ideas of the culture to which the artwork belongs. In fact, the suggestion is that something is required other than can be provided by our normal process of learning. Building on the idea of cultural differences, Cultural Relativists use it to inject a distinction between what non-natives know and what they can understand. They do this by playing down non-natives' understanding and by exalting that of natives. The message put out is that a non-native can never *truly* understand and *really* appreciate the artistic significance of other cultures' activities, however hard she or he studies them. In fact, on this picture, appreciating the *ibeji* is something only Yorubas are capable of, a view that suggests that the artistic significance of the statuette is in some closed realm to which only Yorubas have access.

Although Cultural Relativists believe that non-natives might surmise the artistic significance of the *ibeji*, and the meaning of its symbols, designs and imageries, still they maintain that their comprehension of them falls short of the mark. They invoke a "special feature" of Yoruba reality which only natives *can* know. So from the Cultural Relativist's perspective, non-natives are incapable of grasping the salient features of the artistic world-view of other cultures because they miss the full ramifications of the cultural experience that come from being a native. The idea that the artistic significance of the works of art of other cultures are beyond the reach of non-natives gives the relationship between natives and their artistic world-view a special force that it does not ordinarily have. Thus, the decisive jump into Cultural Relativism lies not so much in denying access to non-natives as it does in invoking a false picture about the relationship between natives and their artistic world-view.

Admittedly, those who succumb to Cultural Relativism do not rule out such routine ways of learning as research and practical experience, but they declare them to be insufficient if only by the stances they adopt. Their shift into Cultural Relativism is recognizable in their unquestioned acceptance of the view that there is more to appreciating other works of art than the normal process of learning permits. The trouble with the manoeuvre is not just that Cultural Relativists arbitrarily limit a non-native's ability to understand the artworks of other cultures, but in addition they suggest that our ordinary ways of learning and understanding the practices of other cultures are insufficient. In other words, they think that our normal process of understanding everyday reality is not adequate for understanding in this special case. Although Cultural Relativists would deny suggesting that a non-native does not appreciate nor understand the art forms of the Yorubas at all, in so far as they treat aesthetic appreciation as rooted in a person's cultural identity they exclude a non-native's appreciation of an *ibeji*. After all, the basis on which non-natives' knowledge is being rejected has nothing to do with the content of what they know – as this is yet to be tested – but with an arbitrary issue concerning individuals' relations to a culture.

Like its mirror image, two notions of privacy underpin Cultural Relativism and constitute the pivot on which the thesis turns. The first is the notion of epistemic privacy which holds that only natives can *really* understand their artworks. The second is the notion of privacy of ownership which holds that only natives have access to the intended artistic significance of the artwork. These notions provide the relevant theoretical support that enable Cultural Relativists to restrict the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork just to natives.

As we have seen, the move into either Universalism or Cultural Relativism starts off in a quite ordinary manner and with ordinarily unproblematic ideas. Cultural Rela-

tivists correctly note that cultural differences in art are not just a matter of different aesthetic qualities but draw the wrong conclusion that non-natives cannot fully understand them. Universalists correctly note that one can, in principle, fully appreciate the works of art of other cultures but draw the wrong conclusion that our shared nature accounts for this.

It is worth noting how Universalists and Cultural Relativists wind up making "important" theoretical claims by shying away from the viewer's problems to uphold some presupposed pictures of social reality. (These will be examined in the next section.) The Universalist's picture is of a world in which cultural differences are so unimportant that they hardly constitute a problem for cross-cultural appreciation, and the Cultural Relativist's picture is one in which they are so important that they exclude the possibility of *real* appreciation. Lastly, it is important to recall that the feature that sets them apart from their everyday variants is the degree of commitment to the theoretical assumptions of their position; a commitment that supercedes the concern for the plight of the perplexed viewer.

From the basic tenets of the arguments, we see that the debate between Universalists and Cultural Relativists derives from the assumption of an inner/outer dichotomy underlying their conception of a culture. This distinction between the inner (or world-view) and the outer (or social environment) captures the special characteristics of the two realms, namely the internal (or invisible) beliefs, values, myths of a culture's world-view, and the external practices, institutions and forms of organization. These two realms stand in a parallel relationship with the outer as the facade of the tenuous invisible inner realm.

As was seen in chapter three, the assumption that there is an inner and an outer realm to a culture is subject to two kinds of interpretations: a commonsense one and a

philosophical one. In the everyday commonsense understanding of the assumption, no special cognitive importance is attached to the bifurcation of a culture into an inner and an outer realm and so the division is unproblematic and unobjectionable. The idea that the outer social environment is substantially different in character to the inner beliefs is not seen to present insurmountable problems to intra- and inter-cultural relations. This is not to say, however, that problems do not arise but they are subject to practical solutions. But the philosophical view of the distinction differs from its commonplace variant because philosophers attach great theoretical importance to the distinction between the inner and the outer realms. Universalists and Cultural Relativists see the dichotomy as picking out a genuine separation – a conceptual gap – that calls for serious investigation of the relationship of the two realms, and an explanation of how individuals are able to function in such environments.

It is not by chance that the Universalist/Cultural Relativist debate revolves on the question of how non-natives can understand or grasp the artistic significance of another culture's artworks. The philosophical interpretation of the commonplace assumption sets up the conceptual framework for the debate on the question of whether or not access is possible to the inner realm of other cultures. It does this by assuming that the inner/outer division of cultures traces out a real separation. In short, the jump from the trivial to the philosophical level of discourse is achieved by placing an immense epistemic weight on a simple prosaic observation about a certain perceived duality in the character of cultural life.

From the way the two philosophical positions shape up, we see that the main lines of argument follow the attributes that Universalists and Cultural Relativists have ascribed to the two cultural realms. Because Universalists see the inner hidden realm as an underlying level of shared ideas that cuts across cultures, they contend that cross-

cultural aesthetic appreciation is possible provided that one employs the basic level of shared ideas as a bridge towards grasping the full significance of the artistic beliefs of other cultures. Cultural Relativists, on the other hand, construe the inner hidden realm as privileged and accessible only to natives. For this reason, they claim that *full* cross-cultural appreciation is impossible because non-natives lack the necessary access to the inner realm or world-view that fully explains the artistic significance of an artwork. What is evident from the Universalist/Cultural Relativist debate is that the shift from the commonplace to the philosophical level of discourse is aimed more at legitimizing the dual-aspect picture of cultures than in examining the practical issue of what goes on in cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation. Thus, much energy is expended in defending pictures of false relationships between individuals and the artistic world-view of other cultures.

### *Philosophical Excavations*

When Universalists ground aesthetic appreciation in shared artistic features, they assume that human nature underpins and accounts for non-natives' ability to appreciate the art of other cultures. But why should they suppose that cultural differences can be circumvented simply because people of all cultures share the same nature? Why do they believe that the artistic significance of an artwork can somehow be grasped by virtue of the fact that we are human beings? Suppose that it were pointed out to them that in making this move they are locating what explains aesthetic appreciation in human nature and are ignoring important differences that come from conceiving of art differently. Suppose, that is, we alert them to the fact that they are about to embrace a highly unrealistic position.

No doubt their response would be that their thesis reflects the true picture of things as they are in the actual world. After all, aesthetic practice is a uniquely human practice and the main reason we are able to appreciate works of art is because of our shared nature. For Universalists, there is no question that human nature underpins aesthetic appreciation. People relate to the works of art of their own culture and that of other cultures *because* they know what artistic activity is and understand the point of the practice. To support their position, the Universalist might cite the case of the response of modernist European artists to the simplicity and expressiveness of African art objects. Arguing that this response occurred even when little was known about such artworks and the artistic ideas of the relevant culture, they establish that human nature accounts for cross-cultural appreciation. Universalists believe that the fact appreciation is possible without informed understanding establishes that cultural differences are not as fundamental as they might seem. In short, Universalists believe that since cross-cultural contact and communication is grounded on a shared nature, our appreciation of the arts of other cultures can legitimately be explained by it.

In making this move, Universalists attack the central idea of the opposition, namely that each culture provides the foundation or touchstone for explaining the artistic significance of a work of art and a person's appreciation of an artwork.<sup>8</sup> By showing that aesthetic appreciation of an *ibeji*, for example, need not depend on knowledge of the Yoruba artistic ideas, Universalists strive to expose the illegitimacy of the Cultural Relativist's linkage of aesthetic appreciation to an informed understanding of the culture. If aesthetic appreciation is possible as the case of the modernist European artists' response illustrates, it is — says the Universalist — illegitimate to suggest that an understanding of the culture to which the artwork belongs underpins aesthetic appreciation. From the Universalist point of view, the fact that appreciation is possible even without informed knowledge of the traditional African culture shows that human nature is what correctly explains the phenomenon.

Moreover, Universalists might correctly argue that the Cultural Relativist's attempt to secure the plausibility of Relativism by portraying the world-view of other cultures as inaccessible, is achieved by illegitimately reducing cultures to their differentiating features without acknowledging the affinity that exists between them. This sleight of hand, Universalists would note, misleadingly portrays two cultures (and peoples) with different distinguishing features as diametrically opposed. They would hold that this exaggeration of cultural differences at the expense of cultural similarities blinds Cultural Relativists to the role of human nature in explaining cross-cultural appreciation and makes it seem that cross-cultural appreciation is impossible.

To counteract the tendency of placing a higher epistemic value on a culture, Universalists elevate human nature to a position of immense epistemological importance so that its explanatory role cannot possibly be ignored.<sup>9</sup> Using a transcendental argument they construct a picture in which artistic activity of all cultures holds necessarily of cultures and in advance of unique cultural experiences. Universalists maintain that this does not mean that artistic activity is independent of cultural environments but only of such special differences that are unintelligible to members of other cultures and hence preclude the possibility of cross-cultural understanding. To eliminate the possibility of any artistic ideas being unintelligible to others, the Universalist contends that all human beings basically think and understand the world the same way in terms of the same concepts. Construing these concepts as pure instruments of thought that organize human aesthetic experiences in an intelligible manner, Universalists assume that the possibility of there being artistic ideas that cannot, in principle, be understood by others no longer obtains. On this theoretical picture, no cultural differences can conceivably be privileged if only because all cultural ideas arise from the same concepts.

But does this Universalist coupling of artistic significance to conceptual categories bypass the Cultural Relativist's claim that cultural identity imposes constraints on what is known, and does it undermine the suggestion that cultural origin determine what a person can and cannot know? Moreover, why should a Cultural Relativist assume that there is more to appreciating the *ibeji* than a non-native understands? Why must a non-native's knowledge of the Yoruba culture, for example, be necessarily incomplete? Before examining the reasons Cultural Relativists will draw on to justify their view, however, it is important to note how pervasive the view is. The very same assumption is made in gender and Black studies. Men cannot speak about feminine experience, and only Blacks can speak about the welfare of Blacks. Interestingly, nobody makes the same claims about Classics or Elizabethan drama.

Suppose it is pointed out to Cultural Relativists that treating a non-native's understanding of the Yoruba culture as necessarily incomplete violates the normal and ordinary way of understanding appreciation and of vindicating one's claims to appreciation. In particular, suppose that it is pointed out that shifting the ground of justification from a public to a culturally exclusive domain falsely assumes that appreciation occurs in ways that differ from the usual. That is, suppose as was done for Universalists, we alert Cultural Relativists to the fact that they are distorting social reality.

Their immediate response would be that their thesis is not at variance with social practice but that it reflects the true picture of the actual situation in various social environments. If anything, Cultural Relativists would claim that their thesis errs on the side of following everyday reality to the letter since it correctly accords priority to each culture's social practice in deciding what appreciation is. Moreover, they would insist that it recognizes the special features of each culture's experiences. To buttress their claims, they might point out examples of Nigerians finding the long-drawn out notes of

Western classical music particularly irritating and Westerners looking on the *ibej* as bizarre fetishes. The significance of these differences is taken by Cultural Relativists to support their stand that the significance of another culture's formal qualities is not available to non-natives. As they see it, the Westerners' limitation in appreciating the *ibej* like a Yoruba does is a fact of social life and not something that Cultural Relativists created.

The thrust of Cultural Relativism is directed at the Universalist's linkage of artistic meaning to fixed conceptual categories of thought and at the transcultural basis upon which cross-cultural aesthetic experience is grounded. To undermine this linkage, Cultural Relativists would first expose the fact that it is achieved by illegitimately contriving human nature to be uniform and by dissolving whatever differences there are between cultures. Cultural Relativists would argue that it is by mistakenly ignoring the differentiating features of divergent cultures that Universalists treat the world as one global village when in fact no such homogeneity exists. Furthermore, Cultural Relativists would contend that the epistemic weight placed on human nature in explaining aesthetic appreciation is unwarranted as it is yet to be shown that it is what brings about this aesthetic experience. Consider the outrage of contemporaries of the modernist artists when they beheld the non-mimetic mode of representation of traditional African artworks. Cultural Relativists would argue that, if considered, it is not so clear that human nature provides the answer to the artists' different responses. Quite apart from the fact that more historical evidence could be elicited to disprove the idea that human nature *per se* underpins appreciation, Cultural Relativists would insist that the Universalist's grounding of appreciation on human nature disregards the influence of socialization on human nature itself.

By taking the effects of socialization to be as rigid as anything Universalists think of as human nature, Cultural Relativists construe socialization as having the same function that the conceptual categories have for Universalists.<sup>10</sup> They depict our conceptual scheme of interpretation as information transmitters and processors and argue that data from external sources are processed in line with the dominant beliefs of the culture. This means that our understanding of artistic ideas from profoundly different cultures is coloured by the aesthetic beliefs of our own culture. Cultural Relativists elevate culture to a position of great epistemological importance not just by ensuring that the character of our conceptual scheme of interpretation is dependent on specific cultural experiences but also by ensuring that individuals cannot put them aside. Because these conceptual processors mediate between individuals and external social reality, and because there is no way we can possibly put them aside, Cultural Relativists contend that non-natives can never experience that aspect of the stimuli of other cultures that contains information about the artistic significance of the relevant artworks of these cultures.

In appealing to socialization to undermine the Universalists' grounding of cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation in human nature, Cultural Relativists employ the same line of attack that is generally used against the notion of immutable conceptual categories of thought. The essential lines of the argument are that supposedly pure categories of thought are basically a reflection of the forms of relationship that exist in the culture. By calling attention to people's "immersion" in the values and beliefs of their culture, Cultural Relativists contend that the character of people's conceptual categories is constituted by the type of social, economic, and historical relationships that prevail in the culture. Categories are no more universal and socially neutral than the social conditions they reflect, from which it follows that cultural differences exist at that conceptual level as they do at the practical level.

In an important sense, Universalists and Cultural Relativists are arguing the same point: they just differ on what they take to be the character of "human nature" and on what they wish to ground aesthetic practice. The Universalist's critique of Cultural Relativism shows that the thesis derives its force from reducing cultures to their differentiating features. Thus, two cultures become diametrically opposed with no common ground between them when their definitive features are different. At the other end of the spectrum, the Cultural Relativist's critique of Universalism shows that the thesis derives its plausibility by exaggerating cultural similarities. Thus the formal qualities, the mode of representation, the symbols and imagery of the artwork of two divergent cultures are depicted as being fundamentally the same. As is correctly noted by Cultural Relativists, biological similarity cannot perform the services expected of it if only because the influences of socialization affect the constitutive nature of people. However, accepting this is not to deny the sameness of human nature but rather to lead us to perceive that human nature has been given more weight than it can bear. Similarly, as Universalists correctly observe, cultural differences are not so rigid that non-natives cannot grasp the artistic significance of the artworks of other cultures. Seeing this is not to deny the effect of socialization nor to exalt human nature but rather to perceive that our normal process of understanding provides an effective way for learning about others.

Advocates of both views may want to object to how their positions have been characterized. Cultural Relativists may assert that they do not deny that cultural similarities exist, and Universalists might want to claim that they recognize the existence of cultural differences. On the other hand, Cultural Relativists cannot plausibly claim to recognize cultural affinities since these are not reflected in their account, according to which different cultures belong to different categorical types and the artistic significance of other cultures is taken to be privileged. On the other hand, Universalists can-

not claim to have been misrepresented since their oversimplified picture of cross-cultural appreciation does not give a sense of how non-natives deal with the cultural differences that they encounter. However, while chastizing Universalists and Cultural Relativists for their exaggeration of specific features that are assumed to be basic, it must be acknowledged that there is nothing wrong with characterizing cultures either by their differences or in terms of their shared features. The problem is rather with the philosophical use to which these characterizations are put. For when either culture or human nature is used to account for aesthetic appreciation, Cultural Relativists and Universalists arbitrarily exclude *beforehand and in advance of all experiences* the possibility that a non-native's appreciation can plausibly be explained by other means.

From the way the two positions line up, there is no question that the single most important concern to the Universalists and Cultural Relativists is the preservation of false relationships between individuals and the artistic world-view of other cultures. These relationships derive from the imposition of immense epistemic weight on an unproblematic observation of the two kinds cultural phenomena. Thus, the philosophical inquiry into how it is or is not possible for there to be cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation and what is or is not of importance in cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation is futile. These issues are pseudo-problems that derive from assumptions of an inner/outer dichotomy in a culture. The solution to the Universalist/Cultural Relativist philosophical debate is to remove the underlying assumption of a dichotomy that sets up the conceptual framework of the debate. Doing this shifts the problematic and dissolves the conceptual framework within which the debate arises. The removal of theoretical emphasis situates the issue of how cross-cultural appreciation is possible back to the ordinary everyday context where it appropriately belongs.

### *Learning is Key*

The typical philosophical approach to problems consists in getting at the basic feature or features that best explain an event or phenomena. The everyday deflated approach that aims for a practical solution is decried as being inadequate since it falls short of providing an answer that is valid for all times and for all contexts. For philosophers, what is required is the basic feature that underpins and gives a full and complete explanation of all cases of cross-cultural appreciation. As a result, their investigation bypasses and distorts what goes on in real life — such as determining what people do in practice, how they go about appreciating artworks, what influences them, and so on. But the question the philosophical explanation prompts is "What has all this got to do with the question of how one appreciates the artworks of other cultures; what does it matter which feature is basic?" Moreover, how does knowing that one shares a common nature with Yorubas help the perplexed viewer to understand and appreciate the artistic qualities of the *ibeji*? And how do we explain to the person who obviously appreciates the *ibeji* that his or her appreciation falls short of the mark? In other words, what does the philosophical explanation tell us about appreciation over and above how people actually appreciate?

An understanding of the basic tenets of Universalism and Cultural Relativism shows that there is no convincing evidence to back up either the Universalist's assumption that human nature provides the basis for cross-cultural appreciation, or the Cultural Relativist's limiting of non-natives' ability to understand and appreciate the artwork of other cultures. The former's accordance of epistemic importance to shared artistic concepts and the latter's assumption that the artistic significance of artworks is privileged are misguided. One need only think of the vast wide range of diverse and conflicting viewpoints existing within one culture to see that socialization does not preclude

the possibility of a cross-cultural exchange of ideas. Members of a culture handle these internal differences by extending their conceptual frameworks, or by changing their perspectives. There is no reason why the same approach cannot be used in dealing with external differences of the sort that exist between cultures.

We should recognize that the possibility of changing or extending one's perspective does not deny the importance of socialization in fashioning people's artistic perspectives and tastes. This possibility does, however, challenge the view that socialization precludes cross-cultural appreciation. This in no way validates the Universalist's view that a person's grasp of the artistic point of the artworks of other cultures is to be explained by reference to some immutable conceptual categories. As the everyday approach correctly recognizes, non-natives need to develop the requisite framework for seeing the artistic points of these culturally different artforms if they are to appreciate them. To acquire this ability, a non-native learns the sense of the imagery, designs and motifs, and the artistic tradition of the work in question. In applying what one has learnt one inevitably makes mistakes, and through learning from such mistakes, one acquires an understanding of the salient points of that culture's art practice. As proficiency increases, the learner's sensitivity to the nuances of the aesthetic ideas of the culture will deepen and with that comes appreciation.

One clear example that our normal process of understanding enables us to get at the artistic significance of other culture's artworks, is the case of a Western sculptor who lives and works in Oshogbo (Nigeria) today as a fervent devotee of the *Oshun* river goddess. Her understanding of the Yoruba mythical reality is reflected in her works and has not been hampered by her Western origin. Nor has her appreciation of traditional Yoruba art forms ever been called into question by Yorubas. Evidence of her understanding is clear to all who know her and is reflected in her sculptural works at

the *Oshun* shrine. Thus it cannot be argued that the sculptor's experience of the Yoruba culture is still distinct from that of the Yorubas. To insist on a difference is to illicitly assume that the question of *what* a person experiences is to be answered by *who* experiences it.<sup>11</sup>

Lest Universalists hope to find solace in all this, I should add that the sculptor's admiration of Yoruba artistic style came about through sustained contact and learning, not by unhelpful references to our conceptual scheme of thought.

There is no question that our normal process of learning enables us to have an understanding of the specific features of the artistic practice of other cultures. However, when Cultural Relativists maintain, for instance, that the *ibeji* statuette is more a part of the everyday experience of the Yorubas than it is a part of a non-native, there is an intuitive sense in which this is correct. Natives of a culture have a greater tendency towards understanding the point of their artistic mode of representation than do non-natives. Yorubas encounter no great difficulty in identifying an *ibeji* statuette. They know what it is used for, they recognize its significance, and they know how they should relate to it. This is not so for the non-native who must learn all this and who might not even have the time to improve on his or her proficiency.

But the fact that natives relate more easily to their artworks is not due to a "special" relationship with their culture, one which no one else can have. Rather, it is because they are more familiar with the artworks, these being regular features in their ordinary everyday life. The same relationship can be cultivated – albeit with considerable effort – by almost anyone as the case of the Western sculptor and numerous others illustrates. To the extent that this familiarity is what Cultural Relativists depend on for theoretical support, they have made a serious mistake because this familiarity does not substantiate the view that a non-native's understanding and aesthetic appreciation are limited.

The Cultural Relativist cannot get around the matter by contrasting the non-native's experiences of the *ibeji* with that of the *iya beji's* (mother of twins). For the woman's experiences of the statuette are governed by considerations that are not primarily aesthetic, whereas those of the non-native and many Yorubas who are not in the same position as the *iya ibeji* are primarily aesthetic and secondarily mythical. Their aesthetic interest might be held by the alternating mass and volumes of the sculptural treatment, or by the manifestation of physical and spiritual human qualities in concrete form, while the *iya beji* herself concentrates on the loss of her infant and of her obligations to fulfill the relevant religious requirements. The mistake in the comparison is that it illegitimately substitutes a non-aesthetic for an aesthetic experience.

In as much as it may be advisable for non-natives to learn where aesthetic emphases lie from natives, that cannot be construed as suggesting that a non-native must respond like a native. For instance, legitimate questions may in certain circumstances be raised about how well a non-native understands the *ibeji*. But when grounds that accord with normally accepted ways of validating one's appreciation are given -- such as stating what one appreciates about the object, how one looks at the piece of work and so on -- it makes no sense to ask further whether the non-native's appreciation is like a Yoruba's. The person's response reveals that he or she has a good grasp of what the artistic and aesthetic objectives are of the artist.

With regard to the central claims of Universalism, there is a perfectly legitimate sense in which it is reasonable to say that a person's appreciation of the art of a different culture is a result of sharing the same nature. But we should note that this sense does not vindicate the Universalist thesis. There is nothing in what has been said that suggests that understanding cultural and artistic differences is adequately explained by a shared human nature. As one who has had to learn the art of a basically different

culture, human nature notwithstanding, I find that to speak of appreciating, say, Impressionist paintings, one must know who the Impressionist artists were, what distinguishes that style from the neo-Classical, the Fauvist and the Cubist style, and so on. One must know what counts as an impressionist painting, what the artists were trying to achieve by their peculiar style and why those artistic concerns were seen to be important. In short, one must have an informed understanding of the special features of the art style that distinguishes it from one's own.

Universalists might say they are not construing human nature as fully explaining a non-native's understanding of the artworks of another culture, nor are they saying that no significant differences exist between the artforms of different cultures. But if they make these claims, what is the point of philosophical Universalism? Why object to the low level of description of the commonsense universalist account? Moreover, what is the point of searching for a basic feature and of appealing to human nature to explain that cultural differences do not pose a problem to cross-cultural appreciation? Universalists cannot plausibly deny that they are using human nature to explain our ability to appreciate.

### *Sliding into Philosophy*

We should realize that the two inflated theoretical views – Universalism and Cultural Relativism – have nothing to do with the quite reasonable everyday views from which they started. Examination shows theorists to be responding to underlying theoretical concerns of the inner/outer dichotomy rather than to the practical concerns of everyday life. As has earlier been shown, the jump into Universalism and Cultural Relativism comes from making more out of everyday life and relationships than ordinary reality supports. Philosophers do this by investing everyday notions with subtle

nuances of meaning that twist them out of context. These radically altered notions and relations are then put to work either to undermine the possibility of cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation, or to secure it by refusing to see the problem.<sup>12</sup> The central mistake in Universalism is that it ignores cultural differences, or at least treats them as if they did not exist; and the central mistake in Cultural Relativism is that it arbitrarily limits non-natives' understanding of other cultures and treats it as privileged.

So why do advocates of Universalism and Cultural Relativism fail to see the basic error in their theses? Why is the mistake obscured?

The reason advocates of the two approaches fail to note the mistake in their positions is because they illicitly oscillate between two distinct poles of explanation. At one pole is the philosophical explanation that accords cognitive significance to the inner/outer dichotomy, and at the other pole is the commonsense everyday view that attaches no special importance to the inner/outer dichotomy. In shoring up their philosophical claims, Universalists and Cultural Relativists slide back and forth between these two views. The oscillation often occurs when the plausibility of the commonsense view is stretched beyond its proper limits to support a particular claim. At critical moments the philosophers appeal to mundane prosaic examples to lend plausibility to their claims and mask the illegitimacy of the theoretical claim.

For example, when Universalists attempt to explain a non-native's appreciation of the *ibeji* by reference to human nature, they generally rely on and cite actual cases to buttress their claims. But this reliance is illegitimate if only because in everyday life numerous cases abound to controvert the suggestion that aesthetic appreciation is underpinned by our shared nature. This restriction of cognitive focus just to examples that validate the Universalist position contributes in creating the illusion that cross-cultural appreciation can be accounted for by our common nature. This shift by Uni-

versalists to the everyday pole -- albeit to draw on examples -- enables Universalists to mask the errors in their claims. The normal and pedestrian character of the examples obscures the fact that they are functioning out of context to support a theoretical perspective that fails to emphasize that non-natives generally appreciate an artwork by learning about the artistic ideas underpinning it. Thus, the Universalist's objective to deny the relevance of cultural differences in aesthetic appreciation goes unchallenged because one is swayed or taken in by the ordinariness of the example.

The situation is much the same for Cultural Relativists. They engage in the same ploys in order to defend their view about the cultural exclusivity of the artistic significance of the artwork of other cultures. To establish their claims concerning the difficulty of appreciating the art of other cultures, they often point to cases in which appreciation falters, cases like those of Nigerians finding the long-drawn out notes of Western classical music particularly irritating and Westerners looking on the *ibeji* as bizarre fetishes. These difficulties are used to reinforce their stand that the content of the artistic qualities of other cultures is not available to non-natives. But this too is illegitimate, not because it involves a selective use of examples, but because in the everyday environment in which such cases occur these examples do not rule out the possibility of the non-natives' ability to understand. What is disturbing here is that the very ordinariness and commonplace nature of the examples beguiles the unwary into missing the problematic ideas of Cultural Relativism so that he or she fails to detect the pseudo-nature of the philosophical problems.

The false claims of Universalism and Cultural Relativism are masked when advocates of the two views illicitly hitch a ride with everyday examples and notions to give a semblance of truth to views that are clearly indefensible. This exploitation of the familiar and pedestrian nature of ordinary examples makes it difficult to expose the

theoretical errors of Universalism and Cultural Relativism, and as a result, the two theses are able to maintain the illusion of penetrating to the very nature of things. The slide from the philosophical to the commonplace level of discourse is used to set up theoretical frameworks within which philosophical speculation thrives. In sum, the obfuscations associated with philosophical posturing prevents us from seeing the fundamental mistakes of Universalism and Cultural Relativism alike.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Some philosophers may worry that the broad condemnation of "philosophical" approaches in this chapter is unjustified and, indeed, rather self-defeating. While sympathetic to the central theme of this thesis, namely that aesthetic appreciation has been distorted because of the immense epistemic significance given to the inner/outer dichotomy, these philosophers are uncomfortable with the suggestion that philosophical enterprise be abandoned. They reason that the objective of a critique must be to transform and extend the limits of philosophical discourse. Consequently, these philosophers see a strong anti-theoretical stance of the sort contained in this chapter as self-defeating, since it fails to propose an alternative theoretical account based on the possibilities that open up when false dichotomies and conundrums are undermined. In short, a sweeping indictment of philosophical inquiry is unacceptable, because it negates the search of another more satisfying account.

But we should also note that the resistance to the anti-theoretical stance of this chapter operates at another far deeper level. The opposition is much more than the perceived self-defeating nature of an anti-theoretical stance. An examination of the source of the philosophical unease shows that it stems from the idea that commonsense reality or everyday practice is being cast in the role of arbiter of the adequacy of philo-

sophical analysis. In other words, the resentment derives from fears that everyday practice is being envisioned as a surrogate for philosophical explanations. For these philosophers, the idea that the adequacy of philosophical claims and prescriptions are to be determined by everyday practice is problematic. To them, this requires that we elevate everyday practice to the status of an explanatory principle. The problem they envisage is twofold. The first concerns how commonsense reality can adequately function as an explanatory principle since it is this reality that spawns the problems that philosophers are concerned with; and the second concerns how we adjudicate between answers that everyday practice will provide since these answers cannot reasonably be taken at face value or as a given. In fact, the questions that fuel the opposition to the anti-theoretical perspective derive from the view that everyday practice or commonsense reality cannot provide answers to the sorts of questions a philosopher might want to ask even if these are reformulated to avoid false dichotomies.

One obvious response to this is, If commonsense reality cannot provide answers to philosophical puzzlement, where can the philosopher plausibly expect to find solutions to his or her problems. What is important to note is that the philosophical resistance to an anti-theoretical perspective derives from a particular conception of everyday practice or commonsense reality and an underlying belief that to adjudicate between answers and solutions provided by everyday practice we require a standpoint that is disengaged from the practice. The picture of everyday practice underpinning the philosophical opposition to an anti-theoretical perspective is of a monolithic entity that is "there", which we can somehow examine from a disengaged or theoretical position, and which contains the answers to any questions that one might think of. Now, when this particular picture of what counts as everyday practice is put to work in a theoretical setting, everyday practice is conceived of as something that is appealed to by anti-theoreticians to explain the "deep" puzzlement produced by the commonsense way of

talking that generates philosophical problems. Pointing out that everyday practice is a complex environment and its solutions cannot be taken at face value, or treated as a given (since we have to adjudicate between claims) then becomes a convenient way of legitimizing the importance of theory.

But the anti-theoretical perspective is not so easily dismissed because the picture of everyday practice as a surrogate for theory is not the one that informs my argument. In keeping with the low-level of description favoured in this investigation, everyday practice or commonsense reality is simply a useful means of describing people's activities in the world. It does not function in any absolute theoretical sense of having all the answers laid out, nor does it suggest that we can find the answers to all questions that might be asked. In fact, in recognition of the complexity of the everyday environment and the fact that we cannot, in any absolute sense, disengage ourselves from our real life situation, the anti-theoretical perspective advocates that answers be worked out in context rather than arrived at by pure speculation or abstract thought.

On my perspective, everyday practice defines the ordinary situation in which potential philosophical problems have their source, and are attended to without according or perceiving weighty epistemological issues that upon investigation turn out to derive from certain unexamined presuppositions. In this sense, everyday practice can provide a measure of adequacy of philosophical claims and prescriptions since the content of these claims and prescriptions have important consequences for how we live our lives. However, in claiming that everyday practice can serve as an arbiter for philosophical analyses, I do not mean that it does so in any absolute sense. We do not just pick any answer as the correct solution to a particular question. The suggested answers are deliberated upon to determine which of them best reflects the events in real life, and whether what is proposed meets with the contingencies of our ordinary life.

Thus, the anti-theoretical stance adopted in this chapter is directed at the philosophical tendency to exploit ordinary ways of describing our aesthetic experiences, and not necessarily at philosophy itself. As a result, the positive aspect of my thesis is not undermined by the condemnation of this way of doing philosophy. On the constructive side, my advocacy for a non-theoretical position is a proposal that philosophical discourse should keep to a low-level of descriptions for it is at this level that we can better determine whether the perceived "deep" puzzlement of everyday practice is as deep as is philosophically made out. This proposal is pertinent since investigation reveals that the misconstrual of aesthetic appreciation is the result of conferring greater epistemological importance on commonplaces than they deserve, not because philosophers have lost sight of everyday practice.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

### CHAPTER ONE

1. See Monroe Beardsley *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958: ch. 1.
2. Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani, (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press; 1977: 759.
3. See Allan Casebier "The Concept of Aesthetic Distance" in George Dickie, and Richard J. Sclafani, (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 783-799.
4. Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (1961): 131-143.
5. See Virgil Aldrich "Prehension" in *Philosophy of Art*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963
6. Monroe Beardsley "Aesthetic Experience" in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ Press, 1982: 283-297.
7. *ibid.*, p. 289.
8. *ibid.*, pp. 290-2.
9. *ibid* pp. 285-297.
10. See Richard Sclafani in Arthur Danto "Art Works, Art Theory, and the Artworld", *Theoria*, 34 (1973): 18-34.
11. See George Dickie's "All Aesthetic Attitude Theories Fail: The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 800-814; "Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience", *Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1965): 129-136; and "Attitude an Object: Aldrich on the Aesthetic", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 25 (1966): 89-91. Also see *Aesthetics*, Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971; and *Art and the Aesthetic*, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975.
12. See Arthur Danto "The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: The Artworld" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 22-35; and "Artworks and Real Things". *Theoria*, (1973): 1-7.
13. See "The Artworld" p. 527.

## CHAPTER TWO

1. For works that give a strong humanistic account, see Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958; J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (eds.), *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ Press, 1982; and Virgil Aldrich *Philosophy of Art*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1963. Also see Edward Bullough "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 758-782; and Ted Cohen's "A Critique on the Institutional Theory of Art: The Possibility of Art" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 183-194.
2. See George Dickie "Defining Art", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969): 253-256.
3. Following Danto's lead in the use of the name "the Artworld", Dickie contends that the key notion in his conception of art is the social institution with its established way of doing and behaving. See "The Institutional Conception of Art", p. 27.
4. See Beardsley's "Aesthetic Experience Regained" in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ Press, 1982: 81.
5. In his examination of the Beardsley's notion of aesthetic experience, Dickie teases out the de-contextualized asocial view of aesthetic experience underpinning Beardsley's account. See "Affective Unity?" in *Art and the Aesthetic*, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975: 182-200.
6. See Dickie's "All Aesthetic Attitude Theories Fail: The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 800-814.
7. See B. R. Tilghman *But is it Art? The Value of Art and the Temptation of Theory*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984: ch. 2
8. Dempster argues that if aesthetic experience depends on one's internal responses, and if these in turn depend on one's psychological make up, then a teacher cannot justifiably tell his or her students that their psychological responses are improper. This is because the authority of the teacher is superseded by that of the students whose psychological response depend on who they are. Dempster quite rightly notes, that learning what appreciation is would become irrelevant under those conditions. See Douglas Dempster "Aesthetic Experience and Psychological Definitions of Art", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1985): 153-165.
9. We should note that there is a commonplace sense in which we claim to have intuitive insight. But this sense differs from that presupposed by subjectivism. The pedestrian understanding of intuitive insight occurs within a context of what we know about the object.
10. See Arthur Danto's "The Artworld", pp. 572-4 in *Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964): 571-584.
11. See Ted Cohen "A Critique on the Institutional Theory of Art: The Possibility of Art" in Dickie, George and Sclafani, Richard J.(eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*

gy, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977: 183-194.

### CHAPTER THREE

1. Beardsley appeals to this problem as a justification of why it is essential to isolate a special phenomenological state of aesthetic experience. Aldrich's investigation of the perceptual process of aesthetic experience, as well as Stolnitz's theory of disinterested aesthetic attitude, all stem from this conception. Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View", "Aesthetic Experience", and "Aesthetic Experience Regained", in Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (eds.). *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982: 15-34, 283-297, 77-92. Also see Virgil Aldrich "Prehension" in *Philosophy of Art*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1963: 19-24, and Jerome Stolnitz "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (1961): 131-143.
2. Much of this worry is voiced in "The Aesthetic Point of View", "Aesthetic Experience Regained" and "Aesthetic Experience". The worry constitutes the main theme of many of Beardsley's inquiries into the nature and character of aesthetic experience.
3. I should however point out that the institutionalist assumption that a legitimate separation can be made between what counts as aesthetic experience in outer social manifestations is an instance of the view that experience is something that goes on in the inner. See George Dickie's "Affective Unity?" in *Art and the Aesthetic*, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975: 182-200.
4. See Beardsley's "Aesthetic Experience Regained," p. 81 in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ Press, 1982: 77-92.
5. There are different variations of the institutionalist approach. However, the following defend the institutionalist perspective: see Rowland Abiodun's "The Concept of IWA in Yoruba Aesthetics: Identity and the Artistic Process" a revised version of a paper presented at the Fifth Triennial On African Art in Atlanta, Georgia, 1980; and Robert Farris Thompson, "Aesthetic of the Cool" in *African Arts* VII, 1(1973), and *Black Gods and Kings*, Bloomington; Indiana Univ. Press, 1976: ch. 3; and J. Vansina *Art History in Africa* London. Longman, 1984: 130-3; And Ekpo Eyo's *Two Thousand Years Nigeria Art*, Lagos, Federal Department of Antiquities, 1977: 8.
6. Dickie and Tilghman hold that appreciation of an artwork such as the *ikenga* statuette cannot occur independently of the reference frame or object in the outer world. See Dickie's "Aesthetic Experience: Affective Unity?" *Art and the Aesthetic*, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975: 182-200; and Tilghman's *But is it Art? The Value of Art and the Temptation of Theory*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984: chs., 2-3.
7. It must be mentioned that subjectivists are aware of this problem and are intensifying their efforts to find a way of overcoming this handicap. This concern underpins Beardsley's justification as to why it is important to isolate a special phenomenological state of aesthetic experience. Aldrich's investigation into the perceptual process of aesthetic experience and Stolnitz's theory of disinterested aesthetic attitude all stem from this same basis.
8. For more discussion on the effect of this inner/outer dichotomy see P. M. S. Hack-

er, *Insight and Illusion*; Oxford: Clarendon Press rev. ed., 1986: 245-247.

9. We should note that this example is not as far-fetched as may initially seem. A similar experiment has been carried out on epileptic patients to produce the feeling of *deja vu* that normally precedes a seizure. The objective of the medical experiment is to isolate the specific region of the brain that triggered off these seizures.

10. On April 17, 1988 the C.B.C. programme "State of the Arts" looked at the unpleasant experiences of some Toronto high school students of racial minority groups regarding their literature texts. Aggravated by the taunts and jeers of peers that clearly derived from the negative images depicted in the texts, the traumatic experiences of these students led to the suspension of *The Merchant of Venice* from the curriculum pending a review by the School Board.

11. See Leslie Bennets "Two Film Critics Quit Festival Panel in Protest" in *The New York Times*, C 19, February 5, 1988.

12. I owe much of the insight for this to the ideas developed by Hacker in *Insight and Illusion*, pp. 245-247.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

1. Beardsley for one observes this distinction when he accepts that though musical programme notes might help increase our appreciation of the music, the information provided is merely a condition for appreciation, not the appreciation itself. See "The Aesthetic Point of View", pp. 28-30.

2. Formalists like Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Adrian Stokes, to mention a few, are staunch adherents of this view.

3. William Rubin shares this subjectivist viewpoint. See Roberta Smith in "Art: Multiple Viewpoints in African Sculptures", *New York Times*, October 23 1987, C 38; and Harold Osborne in "Aesthetic Experience and Cultural Value" in *JAAC XLIV* (1986): 334; and also evident when experts in African art talk to themselves about their works.

4. For more extensive discussion on the peculiar logical grammar of intentional notion and why it is misguided to construe them as analyzable into definite descriptions, see Hector-Neri Castenada, "He': A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness", in *Ratio*, 8 (1966): 130-157; and "On the Logic of Attributions of Self-Knowledge to Others", in *Journal of Philosophy*, 54 (1968): 439-456. Also see Sydney Shoemaker, "Self-Reference and Self-Awareness", in *JP*, 65 (1968): 555-567. See P. M. S. Hacker, "A Cloud of Philosophy Condensed in a Drop of Grammar" *Insight and Illusion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press rev., 1986, pp. 276-306; and Saul Kripke, "Other Minds" *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.

5. Lest it be assumed that such reactions occur only with artworks of other cultures, it is worthwhile to recall the uproar that greeted the works of Impressionist painters in the Salon des Refusés in Paris in 1863, the acid comments of the British Art Establishment about Moore's "Gruyère cheese" sculptures in the 1950s, the and 1973 furore generated by Robert Murray's metal sculpture in Ottawa, to mention a few.

6. This is contained in Danto's views that artistic significance of an artwork is logically dependent on the relevant aesthetic theory. Dickie's view is that an understanding of contextual features is a prerequisite for artistic understanding.
7. Even Beardsley readily acknowledges the importance of understanding the meaning of aesthetic terms and referents, and he recommends such an approach to appreciation. See Monroe Beardsley's, "Artistic Form" in *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, pp.165-209.
8. Beardsley argues that a distinction is to be made between the condition that sets up the framework for appreciation and the condition that defines artistic value. Though, for him, knowledge of the artworld may provide favourable conditions that increase our appreciation, he insists that this does not make the artworld part of the experience. He believes that aesthetic appreciation derives from the artistic qualities of an object.
9. In a debate with Ted Cohen, Dickie trivializes the relevance of formal qualities in establishing what is or is not an artwork by focusing on the formal qualities of whiteness, and smoothness of a urinal. He goes on to note that just about any man-made object exhibits the same qualities. Cohen counters Dickie's elimination of the role of formal qualities in defining the objectives of the art practice, by arguing that if these qualities are played down as much as Dickie does, then Dickie cannot explain why some artworks rather than others are candidates for appreciation. In which case, bestowing the status of art on objects becomes an arbitrary and pointless exercise, a situation that does not auger well for Dickie's institutionalist theory of art.
10. See Douglas C. McGill's "The Art in Ordinary African Objects" in *The New York Times*, January 28, 1988; and Roberta Smith's "Art: African Artworks and Artifacts" in *The New York Times*, C 28, February 19, 1988.
11. See Emezie Ikenga-Metu, "Igbo Religious Symbols of Personal Achievement" in *Africana Marburgensia*, 19, 1 (1986): 37-49; Carol Ann Lorenz, "The Ishan Cult of the Hand" in *African Arts*, 4 (1987); and Okechukwu E. Odita, *African Studies Review*, 16, 1 (1973): 73-82.

## CHAPTER FIVE

1. When 'Universalism' and 'Cultural Relativism' begin with capital letters they are being used to describe the philosophical views. But when they begin with small letters — 'universalism' and 'cultural relativism' — they are being used in a deflated everyday sense.
2. See chapter 1, pp. 30-31, and p. 33.
3. In many respects, the problem that both Cultural Relativism and Universalism are concerned with bears a strong resemblance to the epistemological problem of other minds. The epistemological concerns of both are so uncannily similar that one can plausibly say that the philosophical debate of how we appreciate the artworks of other cultures is an extension of the "other mind" debate, or at least a transference of its cognitive problems to the cultural level. Just as the "other mind" problem has its basis in the distinction between the inner/mental and the outer/physical, likewise the problem

of appreciating the artworks of other cultures derives from a similar distinction: the inner/world-view and the outer/social activities.

4. Fascimile of the strong programme of Cultural Relativism are to be found in the views of Barry Barnes and David Bloor. See their co-authored paper "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge" in *Rationality and Relativism*, Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.), pp. 21-47. Also see Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976; and K.C. Anyanwu's "Artistic and Aesthetic Experience" in E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu (eds.), *African Philosophy*, Catholic Book Agency, 1981: 270-282. Among anthropologists, those who favour the particularistic theory of cultures like Franz Boas, share this strong view. Fascimile of the strong version of Universalism are to be found in the works of Martin Hollis "The Social Destruction of Reasoning" *Rationality and Relativism*, op cit., pp. 67-86; W. Newton-Smith "Relativism and the Possibility of Interpretation", *ibid.*, 106-122. This strong universalist version is evident in the works of anthropologists who favour a linear evolutionary theory of cultures.

5. The more moderate versions of Universalism are found in the views of Ian Hacking "Language, Truth and Reason" in *Rationality and Relativism*, op cit., pp. 46-88; and Ernest Gellner "Relativism and Universals", *ibid.*, pp. 181-200. A restrained version of Cultural Relativism is contained in the views of bridgehead theorists like Robin Horton "Tradition and Modernity Revisited", *ibid.*, pp.201-260; and Steven Lukes "Relativism in Its Place", *ibid.*, pp. 261-305.

6. Dan Sperber gives an indication of how anthropologists set about reconstructing the data in their field notes to serve certain underlying interests and objectives. See his paper "Apparently Irrational Beliefs" in *Rationality and Relativism*, pp. 177-180. Also, it is worth noting that nearly all the contributors to *Rationalism and Relativism*, start off their discussion by envisioning Cultural Relativism either as a threat to Truth, Reason and Objectivity and so must be combatted, or as crucial to understanding other societies and so must be encouraged. Indeed, the kind of theoretical moves philosophers or theorists make are already pre-fixed by their visions of reality and the place of relativistic ideas within them.

7. See Jacqueline Delange-Fry's "On Exhibiting African Art" p. 548 in *The Visual Arts: Plastic and Graphic*, Justine M. Cordwell (ed.). The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979; 535-552.

8. Concern for the status of Truth, Reason, Reality and Objectivity gives rise to the uncompromising response of Universalists to relativistic ideas.

9. Theorists employ differing strategies in making this point. Ernest Gellner in "Relativism and Universals" appeals to science as what provides the conceptual unity that bypasses the problem of Relativism. We should, however, note that what props up Gellner's notion of science (or single world) is human intelligence, for this is what explains the efficacy of scientific endeavours. In his own contribution, Martin Hollis grounds conceptual unity on human rationality and logic. Steven Lukes and Robin Horton invoke a core of shared beliefs which they explain by reference to human nature. Although the language and the choice of concepts that function as surrogate for human nature may differ, but the logic of the Universalists' argument rests on the idea of a common human nature. This, for them, provides an escape route from the constraining implications of relativism.

10. Theorists like K.C. Anyanwu, Wole Soyinka, Barry Barnes and David Bloor

employ the idea that experience is ordered differently to make culture a touchstone in understanding other societies.

11. For further discussion on the illegitimacy of assuming that the person having the experience characterizes the experience rather than the other way around see Hacker "The Ownership Condition" in *Insight and Illusion*, 238-241. Also see Thomas C. Mayberry "The Same Psychological State" on why the assumption that psychological states can be numerically distinguished is misguided. *Analysis*, 31 (1971): 122-127.

12. See Warren Goldfarb, "I Want You To Bring Me A Slab: Remarks On The Opening Sections Of The *Philosophical Investigations*" pp. 272-8 in *Synthese* 56 (1983): 265-282, on how ordinary notions are exploited and given a meaning they do not have in their ordinary context and which our commonplace understanding of those notions do not bear.

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