# DIOGENES

# Aesthetics Tomorrow: Re-Contextualizations?

## Peter McCormick

Institut Internationale de Philosophie, Paris, France

For Megumi SAKABE, *in memoriam*

The general theme of this paper is future possibilities for aesthetics as a discipline.[1] Since aesthetics and certain distinctive kinds of reflection often go together,[2] critically developing in the future several merely inchoative types of aesthetic reflection today could have important consequences for developing possible new orientations for aesthetics itself tomorrow.

In particular, the paper is about future possibilities for aesthetics that may arise from developing rather new kinds of aesthetic reflection in connection with the still problematic relations between the traditional couple of aesthetics and ethics. The aim is not so much to criticize standard accounts of those troubled relations, but to complement them. The paper's standpoint is mainly that of aesthetics and not of ethics.

Part of the central purpose of the present collection is 'to give a different context to aesthetics in order to cultivate a new vision in the discipline,' according to the suggestion made by Ken-ichi Sasaki. One way to offer 'a different context' is to suggest possible new orientations for future work in aesthetics. My suggestion here will be that some new orientations for aesthetics may be seen to arise from what I will be calling 're-contextualizing,' a specific kind of aesthetic reflection to be understood not just in today's narrow academic terms, but also in tomorrow's broadly global ones.

Our ethically much troubled global situation today most probably will continue tomorrow. This situation constitutes our present and future contexts. Accordingly, some new possibilities for aesthetics in the future probably will need to include critical reflection on the place of some artworks in these contexts. Further, this reflection probably will also require critically retrieving and then developing further certain creative conceptual tensions between aesthetics and ethics in the past that were largely lost since A. G. Baumgarten's invention of modern aesthetics in the eighteenth century.[3]

In short, the specific character of one kind of a still inchoative aesthetic reflection today, I will be suggesting, prefigures several new possibilities both for articulating in particular the relations between aesthetics and ethics more perspicuously and pertinently in the future, and, more generally and more importantly, for opening up new possibilities for aesthetics itself tomorrow.

**Corresponding author:**
Peter McCormick, Institut Internationale de Philosophie, 96 blvd. Raspail, Paris 75006, France.
Email: jmccormick@yahoo.com

## 1. Relations between aesthetics and ethics today

The relations today between aesthetics and ethics are difficult.[4] For some otherwise important reflection in aesthetics today continues to neglect the ethical contexts of some works of art, for example their connections with, among other things, environmental issues. Conversely, some similarly important work in contemporary ethics continues to neglect the fact that some aesthetic experiences of works of art may contribute to the development of ethical judgment, for example in the cultivation of moral sensibilities. Before proceeding further, then, we do well to recall just how aesthetics and ethics are said today to be related.

On one rather standard and quite influential contemporary account, aesthetics and ethics are said to be related in at least three ways.[5] Perhaps we may summarize the gist of this account not unfairly as follows.

The first way starts with the claim that, in general, aesthetics is a branch of value theory.[6] Since generally ethics too is a branch of value theory, both aesthetics and ethics may be said to be related in being different forms of the same theory.

The second way starts with the claim that, in particular, aesthetics is concerned with the value inherent in some objects intrinsically, that is, with the value some objects have for their own sake only. Since ethics too is particularly concerned with inherent value, both aesthetics and value may also be said to be related in being different forms of concern with intrinsic value.

And the third way in which aesthetics and ethics are said to be related involves a larger claim. The claim is that aesthetics concerns itself 'with the value of perceptual and imaginative experiences to be had from engagement with objects, both natural and man-made, or with the value inherent in those objects in relation to human lives.' Since on this account ethics too concerns itself specifically with 'the evaluation of human conduct, with how human beings ought fundamentally to behave, particularly in relation to one another' (Lemos 1999), both aesthetics and ethics are related in being specifically concerned with evaluations of human actions.

Such an account of the basic relations between aesthetics and ethics is certainly plausible; moreover, it is basically sound. Still, while it is true that aesthetics and ethics may be considered as being related forms of value theory, the nature of value, whether aesthetic or moral or otherwise, remains strongly controversial.[7] Hence any general argument for interrelatedness just on the grounds of aesthetics and ethics being 'branches of value theory' remains too dependent on a still elusive consensus among philosophers and others about just what values are. Perhaps additional grounds, for example historical ones, should also be considered?

Something similar may also be said about the second claim that both aesthetics and ethics are interrelated in that each is particularly concerned with different forms of intrinsic value. For here too, and perhaps even more so, most philosophers today remain perplexed about how exactly to categorize not just the nature of value but also the many different kinds of value, including so-called extrinsic and intrinsic value.[8] Perhaps further categories, for example axiological vagueness and precision, should be identified?

But the still further claim that both aesthetics and ethics are specifically concerned with the evaluation of actions is especially contentious. Here the problem is not one of an unavailable consensus about the nature of value generally or of the nature of intrinsic value in particular; the problem rather is one of exaggeration. That is, on the abundant evidence of the professional reflection appearing regularly in contemporary professional journals, catalogues, and reviews, in fact most work in both aesthetics and ethics is not centered on evaluation.

For while some work in aesthetics indeed concerns evaluating works of art and results in aesthetic judgments, most work in aesthetics in fact does not issue in value judgments at all. Much

work is historical or descriptive or interpretive and so on. For example, one often speaks today in aesthetic reflection on Renaissance works of art not of evaluating and judging a work of art but of 'reading a work of art' (Shearman 1992: 5–6).

Moreover, while some work in ethics also involves evaluating practical actions, most work in normative ethics is much more concerned with what makes certain actions either morally right or ethically good. For example, one also often speaks today in ethical reflection on social problems not of evaluating and judging a social situation but of properly discerning its most central elements (Brighouse and Robeyns 2010: 10–11). Perhaps using a fuller account of description, for example a hermeneutic one, would be more fruitful?

Replying cogently to each one of these counterclaims is not difficult. Still, there is evidently room for further inquiry, and I will return briefly to each of the possibly larger similarities between aesthetics and ethics below. More importantly, further inquiry into these relations could prove useful for developing possibilities for aesthetics and aesthetic reflection in the future.

In the following sections I consider several new possibilities for aesthetics in the future by focusing on several interactions, not between the two disciplines themselves, but between aesthetic and ethical reflection specifically at the outset of what would become the main European tradition in the fine arts.

## 2. The appearance of *sôphrosunê*

In 480 BCE, in the aftermath of the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis between Greeks and Persians and just after the ancient Iranian sack of Athens, workmen buried in a mass grave on the fire-devastated remains of the Acropolis the broken fragments and physical evidence of the emergence of the new ethical virtue of *sôphrosunê*.[9]

The evidence is dated reliably from between ca. 485 and 480 BCE. It consists of several central sculptural examples of the transition from Late Archaic Greek statuary to Early Classical Greek statuary, a period that stretches from roughly 480 to 450 BCE.[10] Details of the statues, this historical claim continues, still show us today the emergence of *sôphrosunê.*

*Sôphrosunê* is one of the classical ethical virtues Socrates subjects to philosophical examination in Plato's *Republic*.[11] English translations usually render '*sôphrosunê*' as 'temperance.'[12] And they sometimes paraphrase *sôphrosunê* as acting virtuously out of effective knowledge of one's limitations, as showing moderation or self-restraint.

In much English-language moral philosophy today, however, talk of temperance has often drifted towards talk of moderation, where 'moderation' is understood as the avoidance not just of excesses but of extremes. Moreover, much philosophical reflection has turned from examining the ethical virtue of temperance to investigating self-control understood as 'a capacity to conduct oneself as one judges best when tempted to do otherwise' (Mele 2005: 861; see Mele 1995). Thus, the contemporary understanding of *sôphrosunê* as mainly self-control has expanded the word's original extension. Unlike Aristotle's restriction of *sôphrosunê* as temperance to the ethical realm, much contemporary reflection extends *sôphrosunê* to the much larger practical domain as a whole.

The Athenian ethical innovation of ca. 460 BCE, however, was not *sôphrosunê* in the much later contemporary sense of temperance as moderated self-control. Nor was *sôphrosunê* to be taken in the then contemporaneous sense of temperance. Rather, the Athenian ethical innovation was a pre-philosophical sense of *sôphrosunê* as what we may call self-restraint.

Of course self-control, temperance, and self-restraint are closely related in several ways. We may take the contemporary expression today of 'self-control' mainly in its connotations of

moderating such scalar mental events as feelings, sentiments, emotions, passions, motivations so that they do not come to any extreme expressions. And we may take the cotemporaneous expression then of 'temperance' as the standing disposition to exercise the 'right extent of indulgence,' the right extent of 'the satisfaction of bodily desires' (Aristotle 1999: 350). By contrast, we may take 'self-restraint' here mainly in its connotations of voluntarily diminishing still further what may already be an appropriately moderate expression of such mental events and sensual pleasures.

In these rather regimented senses, *sôphrosunê* today is no longer then ethical virtue of *sôphrosunê* as temperance; *sôphrosunê* today is self-control. And what I am calling the pre-philosophical *sôphrosunê* as self-restraint is not to be understood either in contemporaneous Platonic and Aristotelian terms as just temperance nor in contemporary terms as just self-control. Perhaps we might now surmise that the aesthetic emergence of a virtue of self-restraint is prior to the ethical emergence of the virtue of temperance.

Now if we are reading the art history here correctly, we would then seem to have an instance where a particular kind of art historical aesthetic reflection has preceded philosophical reflection. More specifically, a particular instance of aesthetic reflection today has 'contextualized' some of the past relations between aesthetics and ethics. Aesthetic reflection here certainly 'contextualizes' the shift in the sculptural representations of human figures during the stylistic transition from the Late Archaic to the Early Classical styles of Greek sculpture. But this particular kind of aesthetic reflection, I think, begins to do something more; it also begins to 're-contextualize' that transition. That is, the aesthetic reflection on view in this kind of inquiry positions that stylistic transition partly in a new context rather than simply placing that transition in its original context. The aesthetic reflection here begins to position the artworks in an ethical context. That new context, however, is merely contemporaneous with the appearance of the artwork. Hence, this contextualizing aesthetic reflection is still only inchoative; it only begins to bring that transition into the conceptual tensions between aesthetics and ethics.

In the moment when Athenian culture underwent the two Persian Wars of 490 and 480 BCE and then the evacuations and the sack of Athens, Greek civilization transited from the Late Archaic to the Early Classical period. That is, Greek civilization passed from the representations of human figures in the poetry of Pindar to that of Simonides, from the painting of the Onesimos cup painter to that of the vase painting of the Kleophrades Painter of Cassandra grasping the statue of Athena to defend herself against Ajax's murderous spear at Troy, and from the tragedies of Aeschylus to those of Sophocles.

At the same time Athenian sculptural representation of human beings changed radically (Hallett 1996). In particular, Athenian sculptural representations of the human face attested both to the omnipresence of excessive desires and to the necessities not just of self-control but of what I am calling self-restraint, to the omnipresence, that is, of perhaps some similar excesses and necessities now globally in evidence today.

Among the once sacred and now defiled broken statues of teen-aged nude male athletes that the Athenians buried were two subsequently famous pieces. These pieces were called, respectively after their supposed sculptor and from some extant flakes of bright gold paint on the head, 'The Kritios Boy' and 'The Blond Boy' (Hurwit 1985: 341–342; Johnston 1993; Hurwit 1989). Both are reliably dated to roughly the ten-year period between the first Persian invasion and the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE and the second Persian invasion and the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE (Tölle-Kastenbein 1983). Let us consider now in some detail how these two Athenian sculptures might not improperly be said to represent the emergence of a new ethical virtue.[13]

The sculptures of the Kritios Boy and the Blond Boy, J Hurwit (1985: 344) writes,

> . . . have something the [earlier] *kouroi* [Archaic Greek statues of standing nude young men] lack: mental life, innerness, or character *(ethos).* Something weighs upon their minds, and it affects the way they stand: the body now has a language. The Blond Boy in particular thinks melancholy thoughts. It is likely that both statues commemorated athletes, and it may seem odd that their meditations on victory – on their personal *arête* [virtue as an excellence] – have elicited not confidence or elation but, apparently, consciousness of their own mortal struggle to be 'excellent,' of their failure to transcend. They have acted, the world has acted upon them, and they react by withdrawing within themselves. It is as if their sculptors attacked the claims the *kouros* had made – the claim of timelessness and the automatic aristocratic equation of goodness with beauty *(kalokagathia).* It is as if these new self-conscious youths accept limitations, the responsibility for their own actions, the possibility of choice, flux, and impermanence all at once. The Kritios Boy and the Blond Boy, in fact, announce a new ideal, a new virtue: *sôphrosynê,* moderation, the doctrine of self knowledge and the knowledge of human limitations – the Classical doctrine par excellence.

This in fact unusual kind of aesthetic reflection may strike some reflective persons as overly subjective or as moralizing or as both. But before accepting such criticisms, consider again several of the main points this art historical interpretation seems to be making. These points suggest that the aesthetic reflection here is better understood neither as overly subjective nor as moralizing but as a fuller kind of traditional contextualization, a substantial repositioning of artworks in the contemporaneous conceptual tensions then between artworks and actions, between aesthetics and ethics.

First, Hurwit stresses the importance of appreciating a contrast between the older, Late Archaic sculptural representations of young men and their newer, Early Classical representations. The idea is that, although some archaic statues represented lifelikeness in, say, impassive stony smiles, these two Early Classical statues represent a greater lifelikeness by reason of their representing mentality, 'innerness or character *(ethos)*,'[14] in their facial expressions as a whole.

Second, our critic stresses the importance of appreciating the suggestiveness of the Early Classical sculptural representation of human beings, the 'as if.' He refers to the statues making claims to timelessness and to the identification of goodness with beauty. Then he proceeds to refer not to the statues but to those persons the statues are taken to represent as being self-conscious. Finally, he refers to those persons the statues represent as 'accept[ing] limitations, the responsibility for their own actions, the possibility of choice, flux, and impermanence all at once.'

The key idea here is taking the statues as personifications. To Hurwit, they do not just represent some historical figures who may have triumphed in certain athletic competitions; he also takes them as representing some abstract qualities in actual human beings: the two *kuroi* 'announce a new ideal, a new virtue: *sôphrosunê ...*'. Note here the movement from the merely contemporaneous aesthetic context to future contexts in later Greek ethical reflection – not yet, though, to the contemporary context in which Hurwit's reflection is formulated.

We seem to have here an instance of a kind of aesthetic reflection that suggests a broader contextualization, even a re-contextualization, of some relations between aesthetics and ethics. In aesthetics, re-contextualizing a work of art would entail re-situating that work in the original contexts from which it had been removed. In other words, 're-contextualization consists in setting the work in its original total or global context, unlike simple contextualization which takes into account only the original artistic context.'[15]

Some further clarification may prove helpful. Re-contextualizing an artwork as one of the new possibilities for aesthetics and aesthetic reflection in the future would involve not just situating an

artwork in its contemporary (and not just contemporaneous) contexts. But re-contextualization would also involve 'actualization' of the contemporary aesthetic reflection on that artwork.

That is, re-contextualization as actualization is making the artwork *current* with the concerns of those who share the urgent global ethical environments of the artwork when appreciated today. This kind of aesthetic reflection not only makes an artwork current in the sense of situating it among many present concerns today: it highlights certain features in the artwork that makes it *pertinent* in the sense of having especially relevant ethical importance and not just generic interest.

Note however that the notion here of the 'currency' of an aesthetic reflection is reasonably precise, for the notion depends on the clear distinction above between what is contemporaneous to an artwork in the past and what is contemporary to an artwork in the present. By contrast, the notion of 'pertinence' of an aesthetic reflection is vague, for that notion is always tied to uncertainties affecting the changing ethical priorities that a society continually struggles to establish. In the first case we have the category of a reasonable precision and in the second that of a reasonable vagueness' (Williamson 1994: esp. 216–247).

## 3. Attitude, attention, and inwardness

When we scrutinize photographs of the two sculptural works that provoked this inchoative re-contextualizing aesthetic reflection, we are brought to reconsider an earlier passage from the same distinguished work of aesthetics and art history. Hurwit develops his aesthetic reflection in the passages I have *italicized* below far beyond the art-historical details of stylistic change only.

> By shifting his weight and twisting free, the Kritios Boy comes to life. One part of the body affects another, and all parts are subordinated to the curving rhythm of the whole. The block of stone that has always been implicit in the foursquare *kouros* and that had rigidly controlled it is finally shattered, and the barrier between the limited space of the statue and the unconfined space of the beholder falls. *The Kritios Boy is not the democratic Everyman some scholars have made him: he is still an aristocratic image. But aristocrats in a democracy must act differently from the way they do in an aristocracy. The rise of democracy in Athens necessitated adjustments in the aristocracy's conception of itself and its values. Adjustments therefore also had to be made in the images the aristocracy used to reflect and present itself. The kouros was not merely by now an artistic fossil: it was a politically and socially loaded image, with all the wrong associations, expressing all the wrong ideals. That is why it would no longer do.* At all events, the Kritios Boy seems to exercise free will and to occupy the same space we do, in the same way we do, breathing the same air. The aristocratic *kouros is* distant, untouchable. The Kritios Boy is penetrable. He is almost vulnerable. (Hurwit 1985: 340)

Hurwit presented the emergence of a new ethical virtue as both a reaction and an adaptation of Athenian society and culture to its defilement by Persian invaders. He now introduces an additional component in his aesthetic reflection, by according a new attention to other than strictly art historical concerns.

'[T]he rise of democracy in Athens,' he writes, led to the emergence of an artistic innovation, the Early Classical style, and of an ethical innovation: the new virtue I am calling here neither temperance nor moderation nor simply self-restraint but reasoned self-restraint.

Yet Hurwit's reflection remains mainly aesthetic. 'The Blond Boy or the Kritios Boy,' he summarizes, 'represents not the abstract idea of a youth, the way a *kouros* does, but an ideal youth. Yet they brood. The *kouros,* safe in his schema and spatial box, stares past us, transcending human limitations and mutability by paying no attention to them. The Blond Boy and the Kritios Boy

pause and seem to pay a great deal of attention. They look not outward but inward, and it is their introversion as much as their pose that makes them Classical' (Hurwit 1985: 343).

The remarks of how changes in the sculptural representation of the human face were contemporaneous with changes in what acting rightly now had to mean for members of the Greek privileged class after the devastation of Athens are much more than mere aesthetic or stylistic reflections. The unusual kind of aesthetic reflection here is starting to apprehend several Greek transitional sculptural artworks in the tenuous spaces between major artistic innovations and major ethical ones. From a historical point of view, this kind of 're-contextualizing' some works of art might retrieve certain aspects of the relations between art and ethics that emerged in Greek art and then were lost in the modern period. In broader terms, they might even suggest that 'the moral significance of what is represented . . . makes an essential contribution to the overall perfection of the object, and [contemporary and not just contemporaneous] ethical criticism of the content of the work of art would be part of the criticism of it as a work of art' (Guyer 2008: 5).

## Reorientations

I have been considering here some rather novel kinds of contemporary aesthetic reflection in view of opening up several possibilities for the future of aesthetics as a discipline. These still inchoative kinds of aesthetic reflection have centered on the development of one of the arts and the emergence of one of the ethical virtues at a crucial historical moment in Western culture. The focus has been on the suggestive but incomplete character today of one kind of art-historical reflection on the earlier appearance in Late Archaic Greek sculpture of certain artistic innovations that partly led to the later appearance of a major ethical innovation. First adumbrated in an artistic innovation, this ethical innovation of a reasoned self-restraint later helped Greek societies modify their earlier self-destructive cultural ideal of a violent, warrior ethos.

Could such a later ethical innovation have arisen without the earlier artistic innovations in the development of Greek sculptural art? Could this artistic novelty have emerged without a new kind of reflection that Greek sculptors brought to their experience? And can we today critically grasp the relations between such initial artistic and subsequent ethical innovations without developing newly perspicuous 're-contextualizing' kinds of aesthetic reflection?

New possibilities for aesthetics and aesthetic reflection in the future might arise from just how some artistic practices today could be re-contextualized tomorrow. Recall that, under the onslaught of ancient Persia, Athens lost its once flourishing population. The Athenian populace was violently reduced to no more than disorientated collections of bewildered persons evacuated precipitously to nearer islands like Aegina; their unprecedented wealth was sacked, their sacred temples and sculptures desecrated, their city utterly consumed in fire, and the luminous sky above become almost imperceptible in the drifting, apocalyptic ash.

In the aftermath of that more than just cultural disaster, artists first caught up several sobering remains of the catastrophe in lifelike yet still wordless forms. The sculptural forms that some of their own vague artistic reflections fashioned later challenged tragedians and philosophers to find the right words for making the mute and stony lessons of excessive pride, of unrestrained self-assertion and then of inescapable catastrophe, of hubris and of nemesis, finally unforgettable. Much later, several art historians began to develop a re-contextualizing kind of aesthetic reflection that suggests the importance for future aesthetics and aesthetic reflection of re-contextualizing some artworks in today's still undefined spaces between aesthetics and ethics.[16]

Perhaps some future forms of aesthetics and aesthetic reflection as re-contextualization might fruitfully enlarge our present still parochial understanding of the proper limits between aesthetics and ethics, between art and life.[17]

## Notes

1. I thank Ken-ichi Sasaki for his invitation to contribute to this special issue of *Diogenes,* and especially for his very helpful constructive comments on earlier versions of this paper.
2. See for example 'Arguing About the Arts,' in Toulmin et al. (1984: 349–367).
3. For the eighteenth-century historical backgrounds see Guyer (2008).
4. See for example Carroll (2004).
5. This is J Levinson's view. His account may be described as 'rather standard' in the sense that Levinson signs the key entry, 'Ethics and Aesthetics,' in one of the most recent English language standard reference works for philosophy (Honderich 2005: 270–271). See also Levinson (1998, 2003); Eldridge (2003); Gaut and McIver Lopes (2005). In the general interest of avoiding overly controversial points and idiosyncrasy, where possible I refer to other standard reference works below.
6. Value theory may be taken here rather standardly as the philosophical investigation of the nature of the property or characteristic of those things taken to be valuable or to have value (Lemos 1999).
7. See for example the discussion in Zimmerman (2001: 3).
8. On aesthetic value see for example Janaway (2005). On ethical value, see Chisholm (2001).
9. I rely here mainly on Pollitt (1990); Hurwit (1985: 320–355); Boardman (1991); Ridgway (1993); and Holzmann (2010: 118–179).
10. In the 1880s, German archeologists first uncovered these statues systematically. The Greek traveler, Pausanias, had already noted the importance on the acropolis of the Persian debris still unburied in his own times. See Habicht (1985).
11. Plato also discusses the virtues in general and *sôphrosunê* in particular in the *Cratylus* (411d4–415a7), in the *Protagoras* (332b4), and in the *Phaedrus* (247d7).
12. Cf. however T Irwin's qualifications in his notes to his translation (Aristotle 1999: 350).
13. The standard general histories of both male and female statues from this period are Richter (1970, 1968). Here I focus on features of the two nude male transitional statues from the Athenian Acropolis only. As transitional figures they are not, properly speaking, *kouroi.*
14. Note the overly general virtue-ethical notion here of 'ethos' as character. On the original senses of the notion of *ethos*, see Woerther (2007).
15. K. Sasaki, personal communication regarding the formulation of my point here.
16. Note however the objection of K. Sasaki (personal communication) which I hope to be able to address in detail on another occasion. 'There are two axes: aesthetics and ethics, and ancient and contemporary. What you are doing is that in order to prove the pertinence of the relation or link of the first couple, you appeal to an ancient case and try to transpose it to the contemporary context of [the] aesthetic-ethic relation. The relation between the two fields is clearly demonstrated in the ancient example. But its transposition to the contemporary context is dubious, because, in the ancient case, the inchoative meaning of future ethics the sculptures implied can only be revealed to the eye of an expert historian of art long after that time: in other words, this meaning was not deciphered by any contemporaneous eyes. So even if you transpose this case to our times, we cannot expect anything positive from such orientation.' By way of for now a partial reply only, note that my concern here is not to transpose anything. Rather I would hope but to suggest for the future of aesthetics as a discipline among other resources the further development of a rather novel kind of aesthetic reflection today on relations between aesthetics and ethics in some art historical works.
17. For a recent, and only partly successful, attempt at re-contextualizing see McCormick (2010).

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