REPLIES TO ARGUMENTS SUGGESTING THAT CRITICS’ STRONG EVALUATIONS COULD NOT BE SOUNDLY DEDUCED

Stephen DAVIES
University of Auckland, New Zealand

There is a widely held view according to which the truth or otherwise of strong evaluative judgments of critics is not (and could not be) established by sound deduction from the descriptions of the work which they might offer in support of those judgments. That is to say, on this view, the reasons offered by critics in support of their judgments are not (and could not be) such as to entail the truth of the judgment that a work of art is good or great.

Not only is this position widely held, a surprising number and variety of arguments have been employed in its favour. In this paper I shall consider seven of the arguments which have been used in the service of this account of the nature of the critic’s reasoning and I shall argue that each is inadequate.

The paper is divided into two main parts. In the first I consider four arguments, each of which focuses on the nature of critics’ evaluative judgments in deciding that such judgments cannot be established as the conclusions of sound deductive arguments. The first two of these arguments are of a generality which suggests that they might count against many accounts of practical reasoning; the third and fourth arguments, as well as those in Part Two, are more specific to the case of aesthetic or artistic evaluations. In the second section I consider three further arguments, each of which concentrates on the nature of the evidence offered by critics. These arguments suggest that such evidence as critics might consider could not be adequate to serve as premises from which strong evaluative judgments may be soundly deduced. In a brief, final section, I consider an eighth objection to the claim that critical reasoning in aesthetics is deductive.

Part One

(A) One reason offered for thinking that reasoning in aesthetics cannot be deductive appeals to the alleged gap between facts and values. Critics’ reasons are descriptive of the work in question; no factual premises of
that type could validly yield evaluative conclusions. Evaluations go beyond truth and, hence, cannot be entailed by premises which are merely factual.

This general objection to the deduction of evaluations from factual premises could be met if it were the case that evaluations are measures of instrumental efficiency. If a good fishing knife is good because it efficiently performs the function of fishing-knives, then it will be a matter of fact whether or not a particular fishing-knife is or is not a good fishing-knife, because it will be a matter of fact whether or not the particular fishing-knife in question efficiently meets the function for which we have fishing-knives.\(^1\) On an instrumental account of value, goodness is relative to needs and needs can be specified as matters of fact. Accordingly, goodness itself becomes a matter of fact. Evaluations are a sub-set within the realm of facts. Evaluative facts are objective (and so may be assessed in accordance with inter-personal criteria for truth) in that the needs in questions are the needs of people in general, and not the special needs of any particular person at any particular time. (I can agree that this is a good fishing-knife although not what I need, since at the moment it is a drink which I need.) That which is good is not indifferent to the wants of people, although goodness is impersonal in depending neither on the wants of any particular person, nor on the wants of everybody at some particular time. (A good fishing-knife would still be a good fishing-knife even if no-one had a need for a fishing knife at that time, where ‘that’ time is any particular time. Equally, a good fishing-knife would still be a good fishing-knife even if the knife which I need at the moment is a bad fishing-knife – perhaps because I do not want to appear to be very adept in the use of fishing-knives.) What makes goodness a property of the object, rather than of its observer, is this dimension of impersonality, even if it is true that nothing would have a value had no people ever existed.

Is the value of art instrumental in the way outlined? Apparently so. ‘Art’ seems not to identify a natural kind, but rather, a type of thing we go out of our way to introduce into the world. That is, the concept is one that we have adopted, rather than one which has been forced upon us by divisions inherent in the world’s structure. ‘Art’ is a classificatory term which reflects not so much the world’s natural divisions, but rather the

1. I take the good-making properties in such a case to include the following: a blade of more than ten and less than thirty centimeters in length; a pointed rather than a rounded tip to the blade; a handle which not only offers a secure grip, but which also is made of a material such as to give the whole sufficient buoyancy that it floats in water; a serrated [top] edge suitable for scaling, etc. etc.