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Against Reductionism: Lessons for the History of Aesthetics

In this talk I will revisit the lessons of my *History of Modern Aesthetics* (2014). My thesis is that it is a mistake to restrict the possible sources of pleasure in aesthetic experience, and especially the experience of art, to any single source, even for otherwise sound theoretical reasons. Simplicity alone is certainly not an adequate reason for rejecting common aspects of human experience, even when under circumstances it might be a valid theoretical objective. Another example of a theoretical goal that gets in the way of theoretical adequacy is Kant's insistence on the intersubjective validity of judgments of taste: that might be a desirable goal of aesthetic judgment and discourse in some contexts, but not if it comes at the cost of truth to experience. On my account, human experience, at least as expressed through philosophical theory over the centuries, reveals *at least* three very general sources of pleasure in aesthetic experience, especially in the case of art: the perceptual experience of form, the communication of insight or knowledge, and the expression and experience of emotion. (It would be fine with me if other theorists came up with even more.) Through a comparison of Kant's position with that of Moses Mendelssohn, I will show that at least at the level of theoretical proclamation, Kant unnecessarily excludes emotional impact from his account of aesthetic experience, although perhaps it sneaks in the backdoor as an implicit consequence of his theory of "aesthetic ideas" as the "spirit" of art. Among more recent theories, I can contrast the monistic cognitivism of Nelson Goodman and the dualistic content plus style approach in Arthur Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* to more open accounts of aesthetic experience such as those of Stanley Cavell and Alexander Nehamas.