12
Attention, Negative Valence, and Tragic Emotions

Cain Todd

Introduction

Why are we willing to put ourselves through the painful, sometimes harrowing experiences that certain works of art provide? This way of putting the problem perhaps lacks the punchy paradoxical-sounding formulation responsible for spilling so much philosophical ink – ‘How can we find pleasure in such painful experiences?’ – yet in avoiding the simplistic pleasure-in-pain dichotomy responsible for the so-called ‘paradox of tragedy’, it allows us to focus more intently on understanding the nature of the negative experiences that we are thus motivated to pursue.

Part of the difficulty in giving any adequate philosophical account of why we value these experiences of what I shall generally call ‘negative art’ is simply the variety of such art and such experiences. The thrills derived from the fear provoked by horror films seem to have little in common with the cathartic pleasures – if that’s what they are – aroused in response to the great Greek or Shakespearean tragedies. And neither have much in common with the curious sentimental satisfactions induced by listening to sad music, watching melodramatic soap operas, or just wallowing in self-pity. Moreover, it is all too frequently overlooked that often we simply are not very motivated to undergo such experiences. It can require a certain effort and quite specific desires and acts of will to choose to watch a production of Antigone over Monty Python’s Life of Brian or to commit ourselves to reading Anna Karenina instead of Catch-22. Often we are left simply shaken and exhausted and ambivalent about whether, for example, the unremitting bleakness of Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians was worth it.
As a result, the phenomenology of the 'tragic experience' is impossible to capture, but even in individual cases it is extremely difficult to pin down precisely. Do we feel a tension between pleasure and pain when watching Othello or listening to Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony? Do we oscillate between the two? Do we feel an overall complex but unitary mixed emotion constituted by, or perhaps emergent on, its contrary parts? Is the overall emotional experience that we feel a positive or a negative state?

A further, frequently ignored difficulty here is that our experiences of negative art unfold over time. The object at which our responses are directed is a complex, changing, and evolving one, and so too is the nature of our emotional experience(s) towards it. Cast simplistically as a problem of how we can take pleasure in painful experiences, discussions of this issue all too readily gloss over crucial differences between post facto reflective judgements and feelings, ante facto motivations, and first-order dynamic affective engagement.

With these observations in mind, one ought to be suspicious of any simplistic formulation of the problem of negative art, and suspicious too that any unitary account of the experience of negative art, and hence any one solution to the paradox of tragedy, will inevitably fall short as a philosophical explanation of the value of such putatively negative experiences. Accordingly, I will not offer any such solution here.

Nonetheless, we can gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon by focusing on some important issues that have generally, and surprisingly, remained unaddressed by philosophers working on this topic. These concern the nature of valence in emotional experiences, and the role of attention in our engagement with representational art. Once these have been examined we shall have good reason to discard the assumption that our first-order emotional experiences of negative art are intrinsically negative in any straightforward way, and to recognize that their nature and phenomenology is peculiar to the objects that arouse them.\(^2\)

12.1 The phenomenon

People seek and must therefore in some way positively value what appear to be the intrinsically painful experiences aroused by negative art. This is puzzling because painful experiences seem to be just the kinds of things that we are, or should be, inclined to avoid. Why indulge masochistic tendencies in the aesthetic sphere when we do not do so in real life? This question provides a clue to a possible explanation: however negative the