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SAITO, YURIKO, *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 232 pp., $24.25 paper, 15 b&w images.

Much of Yuriko Saito's work is dedicated to the idea that the world is richer than it might first appear. Where the philosophical study of aesthetics, and ordinary people's aesthetic attention, is (too) often focused on fine art, she urges us to take seriously the aesthetic dimensions of everyday experiences—of nature, packaging, wind farms, even an empty sky. To read her work is to read an invitation to see more of the world as worthy of a kind of aesthetic engagement than you might have thought; and to accept that invitation is, insofar as she is right, to live a more aesthetically enriched life.

In *Aesthetics of Care*, Saito is up to something similar. Another site of aesthetic value and experience are our interpersonal relations—of caring for and being cared for by others. Perhaps more surprisingly, Saito sees the world of aesthetics as laden with *ethical* significance. Artifacts—fine art and everyday—are vehicles of care. Most surprisingly, she thinks a life well lived is one that enters into aesthetic-ethical relations with *things*, that cares for and is cared for by them. Saito sees benches, bowls, socks, and public transit stops as artifacts with which we can form caring relationships that meaningfully enrich our lives both ethically and aesthetically. These are provocative claims, and Saito is refreshingly honest in declaring she is more interested in exploring them than arguing for them (p. 9); she paints a philosophical picture, filled with colorful and varied examples that make the book a joy to read. Some might find this frustrating, but the book is best read, like much of her work, as an invitation to see the world anew. It won't convince a skeptic, but for my own part, I find the invitation well worth accepting.

I'll first give a broad overview of Saito's integrated picture of aesthetics and ethics, then critically engage with a few of the book's many highlights: its treatment of the moral agency of artifacts, the aesthetics (and ethics) of repair, and the radical claim that maybe all of us—ethicists and philosophers of art alike—should be a little less preoccupied with the putative (and in Saito's view dubious) distinction between people and things.

The ancient question of the relation between the ethical and aesthetic has received much recent attention. Advocates of some kind of "interactionism" typically make the case that the ethical and aesthetic domains, demarcated though they may be, can nevertheless come into

contact. (For an excellent recent overview, see Nils-Hennes Stear's "Autonomism" in the *Oxford Handbook of Ethics & Art*.) Following Iris Murdoch—herself a kind of Platonist—Saito is after something more radical: it is not so much that the ethical and aesthetic *can* come into contact, but rather that they are so deeply integrated and interdependent that they can't be fully pulled apart in the first place. For Saito, the site of their deepest integration—and the point of departure for the book—is care.

Drawing on the ethics of care, Saito begins by offering parallel approaches to ethics and aesthetics which are virtue theoretic and fundamentally relational. It is not objects and their (moral or aesthetic) properties, but our agency in relation to those objects that Saito takes as the locus of normative assessment. Aesthetically and ethically virtuous agency is marked by three key features: attentiveness to the particularity of the other (whether person or object)—as opposed to a principle or rule-governed mode of engagement; a willingness to leave one's ego behind and enter into the world of the other; and active, not passive, relating. A book, a friend, and a garden are all things we can and should engage with *care*—we must do the work of imagining, seeing, conversing, and inhabiting without abstract ethical or aesthetic principles.

"Every thing is what it is, and not another thing," admonishes Bishop Butler in the preface of his *Fifteen Sermons*, and one might worry that Saito is running afoul of one of the most fundamental distinctions: between people and things! Maybe there is something of a parallel between good relations with people, books and gardens, but to claim anything more than resemblance would ride roughshod over the most normatively significant distinction there is.

But Saito's radical invitation is exactly that we give up a stark person/thing or object/subject divide as a starting point for ethics and aesthetics. If we take *good ways of relating* as the fundamental locus of normative assessment, she thinks we needn't and shouldn't draw distinctions based on moral status or ethical properties of the related-to object. For example, whatever the differences between them, good relations with both delicate vases and elderly neighbors are marked by the same virtue of gentleness. Admittedly interpersonal gentleness might involve modulations of voice, sensitivity to topic of conversation, etc., that don't characterize gentle vase-handling; nevertheless, both involve care in one's bodily movement and sensitive awareness of the particular needs of the other. Even if, as I myself will insist below, this parallelism shouldn't lead us to ignore a person/thing distinction, we can still follow Saito in

seeing examples like this (with which this book is brimming) as showing ethical and aesthetic virtues may well be continuous and integrated.

One who resists the idea that gentleness towards vases and people are the same virtue should at least acknowledge that the latter involves many skills that are paradigmatically aesthetic: of perception, grace in movement, care in vocal tone, etc. Likewise vicious treatment can be so in virtue of its aesthetic deficiencies. Imagine I begrudgingly help you out, rolling my eyes and huffing audibly; my ethical failure is rooted in an aesthetic one: a failure to control my body and voice with grace. So it makes sense, Saito argues, that Confucian and Japanese traditions of moral education center training in the arts, dance, calligraphy, and other activities which develop our aesthetic sensibilities and virtues. If aesthetic and ethical virtues are continuous, ethical growth and aesthetic development are, too.

And just as aesthetic training can support moral improvement, Saito thinks we can lead more aesthetically enriched lives by bringing features of good interpersonal relationships to our relationships with objects. Like people, some objects are worthy of being *cherished*, of being valued in a way that treats them as unique, irreplaceable particulars. The right way of caring for such things will, of course, depend on the particulars (as caring always does). But cleaning, tuning, displaying, storing, freshening, and above all else an orientation towards an object as a unique, irreplaceable particular are all markers of caring relationships with objects.

One of the highlights of the book is the resulting account of the aesthetics and ethics of repair. Saito diagnoses a central problem with consumerist approaches to artifacts: we too often see each iPhone, wine glass, and jacket as replaceable and unworthy of care. We don't attend to them with the kind of particular, caring attention that would enrich our lives. Repair, especially visible repair, celebrates and values one's history with a thing—resulting tears, cracks, dents and all. Where the instinct to replace objects, or if to repair them to do so invisibly, valorizes *newness*, Saito asks us to take as a paradigm of virtuous engagement with objects a practice like *kintsugi*, in which an artisan fills the cracks of broken pottery with *urushi* lacquer flaked with gold, leaving a piece all the more beautiful for having been broken. Not everything should be repaired—some historical artifacts, for example, are best cared for by leaving them broken, and not all objects are worthy of repair. But Saito urges an orientation towards objects that sees repair as a serious possibility because no (cherished) object is truly replaceable. It's an orientation that

can also inform our relationships towards people; people and inter-personal relationships are likewise breakable and irreplaceable, and often the more beautiful having been repaired.

It's important to understand the nature of Saito's claims about good relations with objects. She does not think bowls, paintings, blue jeans, or novels have *rights* to be repaired or cherished, or that we are *wronging* them if we fail to care for them. In the first place, there is more to caringly attend to than one life can hold; in much the same way that we cannot care for all people, it is confused to recommend we care for all artifacts. And in the second place, Saito assiduously avoids attributing to artifacts any kind of moral or aesthetic *status* that would *demand* such care. The emphasis, instead, is on what kinds of relations make for a life well lived. A life devoid of care for objects is impoverished; agency that never takes objects as worthy of care is defective—vicious. It's not that any bowl *ought* to be repaired; it's that your life can be enriched by cherishing a bowl, i.e., by forming a relationship in which you receive its care for you (look how it serves me daily!) and you care for it in turn (including being disposed to repair it—after all, *that bowl* is irreplaceable). Saito remains averse to assigning hierarchical statuses to people over objects and urges instead that as we see an opportunity to enrich our lives with caring interpersonal relationships, so, too, should we see the opportunity to form caring relationships with things. While I have trouble giving up on hierarchies—when my friend and my bike are both broken and in urgent need of care, the former wins every time—Saito's vision of the world as filled with more opportunities for caring, meaningful relationships which can enrich a life is a beautiful one.

That is especially so when we see that the ethical-aesthetic relationship with objects runs the other way as well: objects can care for us. Sometimes, that's because another person's care for us is imbued in an object—the carefully made matcha in a Japanese tea ceremony is a vehicle for the care and regard of the host towards her guest. Its aesthetic dimensions—the taste of the tea, the delicacy of the froth, the grace of the host's movements—are all ways the host manifests her care. And if at the conclusion of the ceremony, she gives her guest a bowl as a gift, that bowl can serve as a vessel for ongoing care, helping mediate a loving interpersonal connection.

More surprisingly, Saito thinks that objects can care for us—or be *uncaring*—even when the intentions of the people who designed, built, or put them before us are unknown. A bridge built just low enough to block the buses used by Black residents to go the beach can be uncaring—and much else besides, like racist, and cruel—whatever the intentions of the designer,

builder, and city planners who solicited it. (The example of the Long Island Parkway's bus-precluding bridges is a bit of an odd example for Saito to use here; their designer, Robert Moses, did intend their design to obstruct racial minorities and low-income groups from long island. But Saito's point is that *even if* Moses's intentions were otherwise, the bridge's de facto exclusion still makes it uncaring.) By contrast, an urban park might be caring with its shade, accessible paths, and ability to bring people together. Saito is willing to attribute real moral agency to objects, and thinks that many of the virtues and vices of human character can be used to assess objects and their design, e.g., a building could be arrogant, bold, friendly or humble. These assessments are neither metaphor nor shadows of their designers' intentions; the striking humility of Frank Lloyd Wright's homes doesn't depend on his intentions or character—neither of which were notably humble. Instead, Saito suggests that an artifact has a virtue or vice when and because it is disposed to affect those who interact with it in the manner of that character trait. For a home to be humble is for it to be disposed to effect those in it in the way that a humble person would—it facilitates their life, it doesn't seek attention, it is quiet and supportive, etc.

This last claim is the first of three I want to critically examine. Virtues and vices are in large part about the *reasons* agents act on. A cruel person is not cruel in virtue of her effects on others. She is cruel because of what she does and doesn't notice, how she reasons, and then (lastly) how she acts in ways that affect others. Two people could step on my foot— what makes one cruel and the other endearingly clumsy are the reasons (if any) why they stepped on my foot. Homes don't reason; so the virtues of intentional agency are not something we can assign to homes.

Still, Saito is right to emphasize that homes, bridges, and parks are all things that *do things*; they are agents in the minimal sense that they can turn people away, welcome them in, obstruct them, etc. (Cf. Setiya, K. (2011). Reasons and causes. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 19(1):129–157.) So even if they can't manifest the virtues of intentional action, they can manifest virtues of minimal agency, i.e., dispositions to do things of ethical significance as Saito would have it. Talk of objects' virtues and vices can make sense even if they aren't the *same* virtues and vices had by intentional actors.

Second, I want to turn back to Saito's ideas about repair and irreplaceability. She thoroughly convinced me both that a life is impoverished when it takes a wholly utilitarian attitude towards things, and that repair is an invaluable aesthetic practice we could do more to

incorporate in our lives. But I see the claims about caring relationships being essentially non-fungible and meriting consideration of repair as standing in tension with the idea that each object needs to be appreciated and valued in its particularity. Consider a well-designed, single-use fuse—it's elegance and ability to care for us consists exactly in its doing its job once and then being easily replaced. (Thanks to Isaijah Shadrak for this example.) In a Saito-ian vein, I think a consumable like that can care for us; likewise it can utterly fail to manifest care—as when it is made too difficult to remove, is poorly labeled, or is neglectfully constructed in a way that risks fire. But a fuse is able to care for me exactly in virtue of its fungibility—and I can have a suitably caring relationship with it exactly by valuing it (and its replacement) exactly for its being completely replaceable.

Nor is it just consumables meant to be broken that might care for us exactly because they can be replaced. Consider the lowly IKEA wine glass—well proportioned, very cheap, and easily recycled when broken. It invites us not to be too precious or gentle in an evening of merry-making exactly because it is so easily replaceable. If homes can be humble, so, too, can wine glasses, and their humility might consist exactly in allowing us not to take the same kind of care we would with other glassware. Valuing responsibly mass-produced, well-designed objects that can care for us in part by being easily replaced (and responsibly recycled) seems very much in the spirit of Saito's aesthetics of care. This doesn't undermine the main point of Saito's argument about repair and replaceability—many objects are better related to as irreplaceable. To cherish a person or a jacket essentially involves seeing it as non-replaceable. But to cherish a fuse or IKEA wine glass—to appreciate the particular value either offers—turns on valuing each as replaceable. If this is right, we can accept that Saito's claim that cherishing something involves seeing at as irreplaceable is generally true, but insist (in a Saito-ian spirit) that the appropriate mode of care and valuing always depends on the particulars.

Lastly, I want to turn to my deeper disagreement with Saito: her aversion to drawing a distinction between people and things. This, too, stands in tension with Saito's insistence that virtuous relations with people and things are deeply attentive to their particularity. People are not things, and so relationships with each should, on pain of insensitivity, be different. While a home or a bowl can, I agree, act upon me and be acted on in ethically significant ways, there is (obviously) all the difference in the world between a bowl and a friend. To be gentle towards the latter is to be gentle towards something that is a subject, that I can ask questions of, and for

whom gentleness will fundamentally involve sensitivity to the mind and heart of the other. Yes a bowl can care for me, but only a friend meets my lovingly attentive gaze by looking back.

I read Saito as suggesting that while all this might be right, it doesn't really matter. When virtue is a matter of my agency in relation to other things, what matters is how I act, how I relate, how I reason first-personally; what does the other's intrinsic moral status, mindedness, or lack thereof have to do with that? I submit it has everything to do with it— a virtuous person is virtuous in large part because of how she sees the world and how she reasons; so to virtuously treat a vase and a person involves seeing them (intrinsic statuses and all!) as they really are, and crafting one's caring response in light of everything that they are. To notice that a vase and a friend are fragile but fail to notice that the fragility of one is that of a minded entity, who inter-subjectively relates back, is itself a vice. Relational virtue theory needn't and mustn't be blind to the particulars of each relata; nor does it excuse us from recognizing that demand a special status in our reasoning, just in virtue of being people, that bowls do not. My life would be impoverished if I saw all material objects as replaceable. But it would be monstrous if I saw any person as replaceable, and we shouldn't lose sight of the difference between the two. That said, what Saito so carefully shows us in her enormously creative and beautiful book that we must not lose sight of the former either.

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