Socratic Provocation in Art

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Abstract. In his 'Provocation in Philosophy and Art' Dan Egonsson argues that provocation is integral to Socrates' way of doing philosophy both when aiming for (the interlocutor's) personal moral development and as an instrument for societal change, and that provocation in art differs significantly from its Socratic counterpart. Morally dubious provocation in art can, however, Egonsson argues be justified on the grounds of its aesthetic qualities. In this response I discuss a number of aspects of Egonsson's insightful and thought-provoking treatment of the Socratic method and artistic provocation, and argue that Socratic provocation can have an important role to play in art that is structurally similar to its role in philosophy since provocative features of a work of art can be what grounds, or makes experientially available, the aesthetic qualities of the work.

Introduction

What follows is a commentary on Dan Egonsson's thought-provoking and perceptive 'Provocation in Philosophy and Art' (2015), where Egonsson argues that the role of provocation differs between philosophy and art due to the divergent *telē* of the disciplines—philosophy aims at discovering 'fundamental truths', whereas art, if it even has anything describable as a well-defined telos, aims to 'create aesthetic values' construed in terms of beauty and creativity (Egonsson 2015: 31)— and that morally dubious aesthetic provocation can nevertheless be justified on the grounds of the aesthetic qualities of the artistic provocation. In what follows, I argue that certain kinds of aesthetic provocation are such that they to a significant degree overlap with—or are perhaps identical to—Socratic provocation in philosophy.

The essay, meant to honour both Egonsson's scholarly efforts and remarkably encouraging Socratic teaching-style, proceeds as follows: After some stage-setting, I first give a brief characterisation of the concept of provocation before turning to its Socratic form. After that I consider comparable forms of Socratic provocation in the arts. The final section offers up some concluding remarks.

Setting the Stage

In what follows we shall not be mainly concerned with, but will touch upon, issues having to do with conceptual, axiological, or metaphysical connections between art and morality (on these issues see *e.g.,* Schellekens-Dammann 2020, 2008; Gaut 2007; Hämäläinen 2016; Kieran 2002; Stecker 2019, 2005; for an overview see Caroll 2000). Rather, at the forefront of the current text lies a structural issue, namely, 'Can artistic provocation, and provocation in the arts, be structurally similar (or perhaps identical) to its philosophical, *i.e.,* Socratic, counterpart?'.[1]

In saying that there is such structural similarity with regards to how provocation functions in the two domains, I do not wish to commit myself here to any further structural similarities. It is nevertheless true that what follows, in a seemingly paradoxical move, aligns both with John McDowell's (1983) manner of arguing for moral objectivity on aesthetic grounds and Philippa Foot's (1970) manner of arguing that morality, just as aesthetics, is subjective since both of these authors put structural issues (in terms of parallels between the moral and aesthetic domains) front and centre.[2] For similar structural reasons I do not wish to entangle myself in the fascinating issue of possible orderings (lexical or otherwise) of the two domains (on this see Egonsson 2015: 32-33; Wolf 2015).[3] Nor do I wish to take a definitive

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[1] Consequently, nothing of what follows depends upon us accepting any form of, analytic connection between the aesthetic and the ethical, or some axiological 'interaction theory' (Schellekens-Dammann 2020) of the value of art according to which aesthetic and moral value interact in important ways, or metaphysical connection between the two domains. Sure enough, accepting some version of these views will probably make it easier to argue for structural similarities between artistic and philosophical provocation, and I tend to think that axiological interaction seems rather plausible, at least with regard to certain artworks and artforms, but nothing in what follows hinges on that being so. As was pointed out by an anonymous reviewer the notion of 'structural similarity' employed here—and the precise determination of what kind of things can stand in such similarity relations—is difficult to fully explicate but all that is needed here, I think, is the idea that the moral and aesthetic domains can be more or less similar (with me seeing more such similarity in regards to the role of provocation than does Egonsson).

[2] Foot would ultimately change her mind on this issue (*cf. e.g.,* Foot 2001; on this see Hacker-Wright 2013 and the contributions to Hacker-Wright 2018).

[3] Egonsson (2015:32) argues that the ordering between the two domains (and the issue of which type of reason is construed as overriding) in all probability comes down to a form of soft relativism (*i.e.* the different domains normally retain some sensitivity to one another) rendering the choice between the two an existential one. I have serious qualms regarding such existential choices, but will not pursue the matter here (although see *e.g.,* Murdoch 1956, 1970).

stand here on the issue of interaction between aesthetic and ethical value. Nothing in what follows prevents us from saying either that the final value of a work of art such as *e.g.,* Umberto Boccioni's 1913 futurist bronze sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* [*Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio*] is more or less valuable because of the purportedly (proto-)fascist overtones of the work, or for that matter, that such moral values are neither here nor there as far as the value of the work as a work of art is concerned.[4]

Finally, another clarificatory concession must be made here. What follows is, arguably, dependent upon us granting that even if we agree with Egonsson (2015: 31) that art's functional *telos* is the production of aesthetic value (which Egonsson construes in terms of beauty and creativity (2015: 31)), it might still be the case that the grounding of such value, at least sometimes, in turn depends upon cognitive elements. Although this seemingly excludes formalist approaches (*i.e.* approaches, such as those of Bell (1913) and Fry (1920), that take aesthetic experiences, qualities, properties, and values to be formal in the sense of being accessible by direct sensation), it does not restrict the argument to what we—following Kant (1790: §16) but without feeling obliged to engage with the considerable interpretative difficulties associated with the notion—might call 'dependent' [*anhängend*] beauty, since we might still construe aesthetic experiences as free play unbounded by the conceptual and therefore direct, even if we allow for the possibility that such experiences are grounded in, or necessarily preceded by, cognition.[5]

The Concept of Provocation

I agree with Egonsson (2015: 29) that, for current purposes, we need not concern ourselves with a delineation of the concept of 'provocation' in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions since a rough description will do. Going along with Egonsson (2015: 29-30) we can say that a provocation is an intentional or unintentional incitement of an *active* moral negative response that can be ascribed to 'the *content* of a message (that is statement or work), the *manner* in which it is

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[4] Egonsson (2015: 32) distances himself from 'ethicism' (Gaut 2007: 10), i.e., the thesis that an aesthetically relevant ethical flaw is also necessarily an aesthetic flaw (the beauty of the brief love affair depicted in Clint Eastwood's 1995 romantic drama film *The Bridges of Madison County* based on the Robert James Wallers' novel being Egonsson's rather clever counter-example (see also *e.g.,* Stecker 2005; Kieran 2002; Schellekens-Dammann 2020)). I agree that strong ethicism of this kind seems rather implausible and think that the first option listed above renders the correct verdict in the Boccioni case, but will not pursue the matter further here.

[5] For influential criticisms of formalist approaches see Walton 1970; Danto 1981: 94-95; for an overview see Dowling 2022). For influential construals of the Kantian distinction between 'free' [*freie*] and 'dependent' beauty see Allison 2001; Crawford 1974; Guyer 1997. We will get back to the possibility of accommodating Socratic provocation in a formalist framework towards the end of the present text.

delivered and the way in which it is *received*' (2015: 29, emphasis in original).[6] Furthermore we can say that instances of provocation need not be intentional (in any sense over and above what is required for intentional action), but that paradigmatic instances of provocation both in philosophy and art are.

In order to move on from simply trying to understand the notion of provocation at work here, and without committing ourselves to any kind of overtly Wittgensteinian methodology (although see *e.g., PI* §§ 19, 23, 241), we might perhaps say that provocation only makes sense against a backdrop of human life as a whole and that perhaps provocation in philosophy, as well as in the arts, can only perform its most interesting function as part of an investigation into 'how we ought to live' (Pl. *Rep.* 352[d]5-6; *cf.* Pl. *Grg.* 487[e]7-488[a]2) in quite general terms.[7] Most importantly, this approach, or other relevantly similar approaches, would suggest that the value, or function (see Egonsson 2015: 31ff.), of provocation in art as well as in philosophy that we ought to look for here—*i.e.,* instances where such value, or such functional characteristics, converge across the two domains—stands to be found in a broad engagement with human life and meaning-making.

If I am right in thinking that there are, or at least can be, instances of provocation in art as well as in philosophy that come together in this intersection between art, philosophy, and life in general then it would seem that while Egonsson is surely right in claiming that in many cases a morally dubious aesthetic provocation can (only) be justified on the grounds of the aesthetic qualities of the work (2015: 31-33) and that aesthetic provocation often is quite different from its Socratic-philosophical counterpart, we should also be open to the possibility that the two can come together in such a way that at least some aesthetic or artistic provocations function in a way that is structurally, or functionally, similar to Socratic provocation in philosophy. In order to see how, we need to say something more about the nature and function of Socratic provocation.

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[6] Egonsson (2015: 30) insightfully compares the structure of provocation, thus understood, to blasphemy. The etymology of blasphemy (gr. *blasphēmía*; from *blaptō* ('to hurt') and *phēmē* ('speech, talk, utterance' but also 'fame' and 'reputation')), as Yvonne Sherwood (2021: 2; *cf.* Burnes Coleman 2011) notes, brings 'blasphemy' rather close not only to 'provocation', but also to our notion of 'hate speech', both in terms of being offensive and having a social dimension. (See also *e.g.,* Perret 1987; Fisher & Ramsay 2000). As was pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, Egonson's construal of 'provocation' casts the net rather widely and while we might quarrel with this it is important to keep in mind that such a wide construal also has its benefits, chief among them in the present context being that it allows for a work of art to be provocative even in the absence of any corresponding intention on the part of the artist (even if it might well be the case that typical instances of provocation are such that someone intentionally seeks to elicit a negative response to oneself or one's actions).

[7] An alternative way of putting forth the same point would be to argue, with *e.g.,* Michael Thompson (2008: 25-82) and Philippa Foot (2001: 25-37), that 'life' is a logical concept (see also Midgley 1973, 1979; on this see Lipscomb 2016). Another—I think fruitful—alternative, suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer is to utilize an Austinian (1962) 'speech-act' analysis of 'provocation'. It seems to me that such an Austinian approach can be fruitfully combined with the aforementioned Wittgensteinian approach. For readings of Wittgenstein and Austin along such combinatory lines see *e.g.,* Cavell (1979); Forsberg (2022).

Socratic Provocation

Even if Plato's Socrates is marked by paradox (Vlastos 1971) it is safe to say that he clearly envisages provocation as central to not only his dialectics but to his societal rôle even in the early, or 'Socratic' dialogues[8]:

> For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity, and I go about arousing and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long. Such another is not likely to come to you, gentlemen; but if you take my advice, you will spare me. But you, perhaps, might be angry, like people awakened from a nap, and might slap me, as Anytus advises, and easily kill me; then you would pass the rest of your lives in slumber, unless God, in his care for you, should send someone else to sting you. And that I am, as I say, a kind of gift from the god (Pl. *Ap.* 30ᵉ-31ᵃ, trans. Harold North Fowler).

As Egonsson (2015: 27-29) shows, this self-image persists through the occasionally overbearingly preachy 'middle' dialogues (*cf. e.g.,* Pl. *Rep.* 331ᵈ ff., 357ᵃ ff., 449ᵃ ff., 471ᶜ ff.; on this see Miller 1985)—where the very idea of philosophical provocation is at one point criticised, albeit briefly (Pl. *Gorg.* 482ᶜ ff.)—and is still very much present in what is probably later works such as the *Symposium*.[9] The

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[8] On the ordering of the dialogues into early (or 'Socratic' *cf. e.g.,* Arist. *Metaphysics* 987ᵇ1, *Sophistical Refutations* 183ᵇ7), middle, and late see Gregory Vlastos (1991: ch. 2-3; see also Vlastos 1994: 135). This tripartite division is obviously not without its problems (*Timaios, Theaitetos* and the first book of the *Republic* are difficult to place, for instance), but it gives us a handy way of organising the *corpus platonicum* that gives us a sense of development over time.

[9] The *Symposium* itself could arguably be seen as an example of the kind of Socratically provocative art that we are here concerned with since it makes those who engage with it contemplate the passion of personal love (in the sense of both *erôs* and *philia*), a central aspect of human life, in new ways and challenges social conventions. Like in the other dialogues that relate to these issues (the *Lysis* and the *Phaedrus*) the central character of Socrates plays the part of the quintessential philosopher (*i.e.,* lover of wisdom and (elenchtic) discussion) and subverter of erotic norms since both of these aspects bring Socrates into conflict with the *paiderastia*—a set of social norms that regulate the intercourse between an older male and a teenage boy where the latter is supposed to learn virtue from the former. There are, naturally, a range of problematic aspects to this social practice that should be evident to the modern-day reader. But those issues, having to do with, among other things, the power dynamics involved are not Socrates' (or Plato's) immediate concern in the *Symposium* (even though the discussion at Pl. *Symp.* 204ᵈ-209ᵉ seems to address and criticise the sexism and exclusively male perspective of the previous speakers and some issues, such as *e.g.,* the classist practises involved in determining the 'guest list' for a symposium of this sort are addressed in other dialogues). What Plato is arguing here, I believe, is that the ideology of the *paiderasteia*—that love is a combination of a love of the soul (virtue) and love of the body (sexual gratification; cf. Pl. *Symp.* 180ᶜ-ᵈ) where the latter must masquerade as the former—involves an inherent risk of us succumbing to fantasy and illusion. We might be led to believe that the fruits of love of the soul (real wisdom and virtue) can be gained as easily and quickly as sexual gratification. In other words, Plato is warning us that focusing too much

provocative element is thus a constant through the changes in method that seemingly transpires in the dialogues. Socrates' provocations are there to jump-start the *standard elenchus*[10] of the early dialogues and they serve to retain the *pro forma* interlocutor's interest through the maieutic middle period[11], and Socrates' provocativeness is equally as prominent in the 'erotic' dialogues[12] of the middle period. The drunk Alcibiades's likening of Socrates' arguments (*logoi*) to the songs of the satyr Marsyas gives us insight into the function of their provocative elements:

> Whether they are played by the greatest flautist or the meanest flute-girl, his melodies have in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries (Pl. *Symp.* 215ᶜ, trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff; *cf.* Miller 1985: 163).

Marsyas is a notoriously double-edged figure in the mythic tradition. On the one hand we have common stories of the hubristic satyr that rebels against the gods by picking up Athena's discarded aulos and challenging Apollo to a music contest, but on the other hand we are also on occasion (*e.g.,* Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* III.59) met with the wise Marsyas marked by intelligence (*sunesis*) and self-control (*sophrosune*), which is the side presumably alluded to by Alcibiades. I believe that Plato, by having Alcibiades invoke the satyr's likeness to Socrates in the *Symposium*, is drawing on both sides of the character, thus inviting us as readers to

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on the pleasures of sexual intercourse and thus not committing fully to the process of self-transformation might make us forget that self-knowledge is hard to gain.

[10] *I.e.* a process where one of Socrates' interlocutors presents a thesis, *p*, (usually a suggested definition of an ethical concept) and Socrates goes on to show how its negation ($\neg p$) follows from some other propositions (*q, r*) which the interlocutor (and usually Socrates) take to be true, thus showing that the conjunction of the original thesis and these {*p* & *q* & *r*} is false due to inconsistency (on this see Vlastos 1994: 1-28). Ex. *Charmides* 160ᵉ2-161ᵇ4: (*p*): temperence (*sōphrosunē*) is a sense of shame (*aidōs*)(160ᵉ2-5); (*q*) temperence is fine (*kalon*) and good (160ᵉ13); (*r*) Homer was right to say that a sense of shame is not always a good thing (161ᵃ2-4).

[11] In these dialogues the theses under investigation are introduced, argued for, examined, and amended by Socrates himself in a didactic style, with the interlocutor reduced to a yes-man that might occasionally raise objections but never puts up sustained resistance. On this see (Vlastos 1994: 29-37). The underlying epistemic assumption here, it is commonly assumed, is that what appears to be new knowledge is really reminded or recollected. A, to my mind, more promising suggestion that I think is in line with Egonsson's general argument is to treat Plato's Theory of Recollection as touching upon a similar problem as that which concerns Wittgenstein in the sections (§§ 201 ff.) on rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*—*i.e.,* how can someone who is being shown part of a pattern know how to go on? On the standard picture Plato's answer is that we are reminded of innate knowledge, but what if we instead take the Wittgensteinian route (which seems compatible with a Platonic concern for our human nature) and argue that the pattern is part of human life? On this see (Anscombe 1993; see also McDowell 1984; Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022: 254-256)

[12] In these dialogues the idea seems to be that through love of what is beautiful (*cf.* Pl. *Symp.*) and Good (*cf.* Pl. *Rep.*) the soul can come to gaze on the Forms. It is telling that it is in these dialogues that Plato's use of myth and metaphor is at its most prominent.

evaluate the different sides to the paradoxical Socrates of the dialogue. One of the greatest virtues of Egonsson's 'Provocation in Philosophy and Art' is the way that this tension is brought out: just as there is a thin line between righteousness and self-righteousness, there is a thin line between engagingly productive provocation and provocation that results in utter breakdown of the discussion. Socratic provocation, then, is a means to "provoke and irritate in order to awake" (Egonsson 2015: 28) those susceptible to go deeper, at the expense of what is familiar, and so structures the interlocutors' own self-initiation into the mystery that is philosophy. Naturally, there is an extra-textual level here as well: through Socrates' exchange with his interlocutors Plato challenges *us*, as readers, as we are invited to show, or at least ponder, our own aptitude (Miller 1985: 165-166). Or, as Iris Murdoch puts it:

> Plato pictures human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. The intelligence, seeking satisfaction, moves from uncritical acceptance of sense experience and of conduct, to a more sophisticated and morally enlightened understanding (Murdoch 1977: 2).

In order for this pilgrimage to be set in motion the reader must be provoked into taking the first stumbling steps. The deepest function of Socratic provocation, then, is to provoke us, as readers, into philosophical reflection that goes beyond the (explicit) content of the dialogue and manifests as our own philosophical insight.

Egonsson's discussion of these matters makes it abundantly clear not just how painful this process can be—since it requires us to cast aside not only convention but also our neurotic self-obsession in order to see reality as it really is (*cf.* Pl. *Rep.* 515 ff.; Murdoch 1958b: 268; Holland 2012)—but also how *fragile* Socratic provocation is. Socrates's provocations in the *Symposium* aim both at questioning societal convention (*e.g.,* the exclusion of women from symposia and the practise of *paiderastia*) and neurotic self-obsession (the main criticism of the other symposiasts' speeches is that they are both too particular, *i.e.* are concerned with particular loves rather than love itself, and all too tied up with the speech-giver's own field of expertise and perspective (*cf.* Agathon's remarks at Pl. *Symp.* 195[a] and Socrates' rebuttal in the form of an *elenchus* at Pl. *Symp.* 198[a]-201[c])). Plato often has the discussion come dangerously close to deteriorating, thus illustrating the fragility of provocation as a philosophical strategy.[13] The reason for the fragility of provocation mirrors, and is in many cases parasitic upon, the painfulness of the process of philosophical realization since it is the demand to cast aside convention

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[13] Interlocutors such as Protagoras (Pl. *Prot.* 333[e], 360[d]), Callicles (Pl. *Gorg.* 489[b-c]), and Anytus (Pl. *Men.* 94[e]) all at various places voice their irritation with Socrates' provocative conversation style. In addition, the *Euthydemus* would not work as a special case in which Socrates' ironic modesty is played for comic effect (thus constituting a self-reflexive critique of ironic technique itself), which in turn is transformed into a subtle mockery of rhetoric, were it not put forth in contrast to Socrates' usual provocative style (on this see Michelini 2000).

and neurosis that most reliably irritate the interlocutors.[14] In order for Socratic provocation to fulfil its function of combating both the interlocutors' neurotic self-obsession and societal convention, as Egonsson (2015: 29) observes, '[t]he spectators are to be amused whereas the interlocutor is to be kept in good humour'.[15] With this understanding of Socratic provocation as a painful and fragile incitement to move beyond both our own neurotic tendencies and societal convention in hand, let us move on to investigate whether structurally or functionally similar forms of provocation can be conceived of as central to (at least some instances, genres, and types of) Art.[16]

Provocation in Art

Provocative art is arguably as old as art itself, and yet far from all such provocative art can be said to be reliant on 'Socratic provocation' in the sense sketched above. As Egonsson (2015: 30) points out, provocative aspects of art were increasingly emphasised starting with romanticism and continuing into the historical avant-garde and beyond. Much of this historical development is regrettably tangled up in values, concerns, and ideals that are less than flattering. It is indeed inviting to view the resulting artistic provocation as simply either (a) provocation for provocation's sake (*e.g.,* Hugo Ball's 1916 'sound-poem' *Karawane*), (b) as primarily directed towards

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[14] Perhaps this is at its most obvious in Socrates' exchange with the headstrongly naïve Polus in the *Meno* (Pl. *Men.* 461ᵇ-481ᵇ), even though the matter is further complicated by the fact that the point of that particular exchange apart from showing off Socrates' dialectical skills, as far as I understand it, is also to illustrate the difficulty of discerning a genuine philosophical victory (fairly won and free of fallacious reasoning) from mere rhetorical subjugation (on this see *e.g.,* Vlastos 1967; Johnson 1989).

[15] Naturally, as Ann Michelini observes, irony and humility can sometimes be self-defeating: "In *Euthydemus,* both the narrator, Socrates, and his secondary audience, Crito, suggest that the primary audience in the Lyceum may have seen Socrates' fake adoration of the brothers at face value, as demeaning him and elevating them" (2000: 516).

[16] It might be thought that, as one anonymous reviewer objected, that the dialogical character of Socratic provocation—where Socrates' provocations are part of a process where Socrates follows up on the provocation and guides the interlocutor to a better understanding of the topic at hand—differentiates it from, at least paradigmatic, provocation in art as we are, at least typically, left to our own devices in sorting out our responses to art (or are at least not given the opportunity of continued dialogue with the artist). While there is something to this line of criticism, I would like to point to two things that I think lessen its appeal. Firstly, the Platonic dialogues themselves are literary artworks that we, as readers, are meant to wrestle with in solitude (that is, the dialectics are not as open-ended as they might at first glance appear and there was never meant to be anything like a continuous conversation with the author). Secondly, it doesn't seem to me that we are as solitary in coming to grips with our responses to art as the objection assumes. Rather, even if we do not necessarily subscribe to anything as strong as a Gadamerian (*e.g.,* Gadamer 1986) understanding of art as interlocutor, art is still plausibly something that we engage with as a community, otherwise, what would be the point of evaluative criticism (on this see Gilmore 2013).

art itself and its various media ((see Greenberg 1961; Brüger 1984) *e.g.,* Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness novels, Cézanne's landscape paintings[17], Mallarmé's poems), (c) the institution of the artworld and its critics (*e.g., the Salon des Refusés*[18], Duchamp's 'ready-mades', Maurizio Cattelan's 2019 *Comedian*), or even (d) the public at large (*e.g.,* Andres Serrano's 1987 *Piss Christ,* Tracy Emin's 1998 sculpture *My Bed,* Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* (on the latter see Schellekens 2007: 82)).

While Egonsson (2015: 30) might be right that much modern art is "anti-philistine but pro-critic", still, as should be evidenced by the list of works just given, elements of this modernist avant-gardist drive towards provocation (seen by Lyotard (1984) as driven by a search for the sublime) touch upon philosophical concerns that arguably render its provocativeness Socratic in the sense we are here interested in. While much of the impetus behind the Decadent poets' rallying cry of 'Épater la bourgeoisie' was undoubtedly pure-shock value it does still imply defying convention in a sense that corresponds to the societal aspect of Socrates' provocative practices. There are a number of candidate artworks and art forms—from the Dada and Fluxus movements, via Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings', to the *Esthétique Rélationnel* of the 1990's (see Bourriaud 1997 [2002]; on this see Bishop 2004)— that would seem to rely in some way or other upon something close to Socratic provocation since these artforms and artworks in various ways seek to interactively engage with its audience, and such engagement may well occasionally require a provocative impetus to kick-start said engagement. Granted, proto-philosophical concerns of this kind may not be enough for us to consider such artistic provocations Socratic in the full sense, but it does at least open up for the possibility of genuine Socratic provocation in the arts as a possible grounding of aesthetic qualities and values.

If we instead take a birds-eye view of this development and construe the 'ancient quarrel' (Pl. *Rep.* 607[b-c]) between 'poetry' and 'philosophy' in Western culture as a series of responses to Plato's challenge directed at mimetic art—*i.e.,* art hinders philosophical awakening by directing our attention (on this see Murdoch 1959, 1970, 1977; on this see Wolf 2015: 163-180; Forsberg 2013: 138-150; Bolton 2019; Gåvertsson 2018: 61-85) away from what is real and towards a simulacrum, thus

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[17] At least, I gather, this is how Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 1964b) understands Cézanne's post-impressionist paintings. Given such an understanding the artist's work involves significant philosophical elements pertaining primarily to phenomenology and the philosophy of perception.

[18] Arguably, many works associated with the Salon des Refusés, such as *e.g.,* Édouard Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863), scandalised the general public as much as the artworld and can be seen as aiming at defying convention in a manner that would render their provocativeness at least proto-Socratic. Even the provocative use of light and darkness in *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* can, I think, be seen as a not-so-subtle form of social commentary and the hard to pin down gaze of the central figure seems like a simultaneous invitation to see the Other and a commentary on the moral metaphor of 'vision', but, then again, the difficulty in fixating the meaning of the work remains part of its provocative appeal (on this see *e.g.,* Læssøe 2005).

fostering our own self-protective illusions (and so serving to fuel our neurotic tendency of turning towards the ego or resort to conventional thinking) rather than directing our gaze towards a transcendent reality—we can, following Beardsley (1958: 558-571) and Gaut (2007: 3-5), talk in terms of three general types of response. Two of these, it seems, directly depend upon something like Socratic provocation as an essential part of their response to Plato's challenge.

Firstly, there are those—often called 'humanists', including figures such as *e.g.*, Ruskin, Henry James, Tolstoy, and others—that seek to go against Plato's challenge head on by trying to emphasise the moral value of art. Any such strategy seemingly draws on the first aspect of Socratic provocative potential in art, to put it in Platonic terms, to combat the interlocutor-spectator's neurotic self-obsession and in doing so facilitate their pilgrimage from appearance to reality.

Secondly, another type of response—often called 'transgressionalist' and associated with figures such as Manet and Stravinsky, but also, perhaps more prominently with de Sade, Maplethorpe, and Easton Ellis—argues against Plato's challenge that art can be good because it transgresses, and so invites us to challenge, conventional morals, assumptions, and attitudes. In a manner similar to the humanist, this response draws on the second aspect of Socratic provocative potential in art by challenging societal convention.

A third type of response—often called 'aestheticism' and primarily associated with prominent figures during the latter half of the nineteenth century and onwards such as Whistler, Bell, Fry and Beardsley—argue that Plato's challenge is misdirected since moral evaluation of art rests on a category mistake, or that subjecting art to moral or cognitive evaluation somehow abases it.

It should be plain to see that it is accommodating Socratic provocation in art given an aestheticist outlook that is the most pressing challenge here since such an approach does not seem to draw on the cognitive or moral potential in Socratic provocation in the same direct manner as the other two. Nevertheless, it seems possible, even given an aestheticist stance to admit that Socratic provocative elements in a work of art can be either a (perhaps necessary) causal or metaphysical ground for the aesthetic interest of the work (which could be cashed out in terms of value, qualities, properties, judgments, attitudes, and so on). That is, provocation in art, and aesthetic provocation, can be a prerequisite, or ground, for a work of art succeeding as a work of art, and whatever Socratic provocation adds to such a ground need not be considered what Beardsley (1958: 558) terms "side effects" but may well be a prerequisite for, or constituent part of, the ground of that produces the inherent immediate effect. If this is an open possibility, then Egonsson's (tentative) assertion that philosophy and art have divergent goals does not preclude the possibility of Socratic provocation having a structurally similar function in art.

It might turn out that much modern art in general, and perhaps conceptual art in particular since much of it is put forth in a provocative spirit (see Young 2001; on this see Schellekens [forthcoming]), even if it seeks to provoke in fact is of little interest since much of what it says and is turns out rather morally trivial, cognitively

commonplace, and aesthetically unchallenging or uninteresting. Still, it seems to me that most provocative works that retain their aesthetic interest over time do so in virtue of their provocative elements being Socratic. The reason these works merit continual discussion, and why such artworks play a major part in our lives and our understanding of ourselves and our relation to the world is precisely because they challenge us to engage with *e.g.,* our own neurotic tendencies and social conventions in order to truly see the world and the Other. Thus, it might be that much art might fail to attain an interesting degree of Socratic provocation, but that '[g]ood art, on the other hand, provides work for the spirit' (Murdoch 1977: 77). It seems plausible to me that proper engagement with, say, Cormac McCarthy's Western novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) and the aesthetic achievement of its prose requires attending to and being provoked by the abhorrent violence depicted. That is, it seems to me that our attention wouldn't be directed at the rhythm, sound, and cadence of the words were it not for the terror it invokes. This way of looking at Socratic provocation in art also provides us with additional ways to analyse less successful attempts at artistic provocation since we have opened up for failure not only, as Egonsson (2015: 34) suggests through a lack of artistry and originality, but also through a failure to properly see and attend to the Other and to reality, or failing to ground, or make experientially available, the aesthetic qualities of the work.

Nothing in what was said above necessarily implies anti-formalism. To see why, let us return to Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. Nothing prevents us from saying that the fluidly forceful dynamic qualities of the work are accessible by direct sensation whilst still saying that these qualities are grounded in, or made experientially available by, the Socratically provocative nature of the work. This also allows us to say that the provocative (proto-)fascist undertones of the work are aesthetically important not because they somehow deepen our moral perspective or transgress societal convention, but because they ground, or make experientially available, the dynamic qualities of the work.

If I am right in what has been said here it might be that Socratic provocation has a role to play in art that is structurally similar to its function in philosophy, even if the cognitive, the moral, or what have you, should be properly and steadfastly differentiated from the aesthetic since the relevant aesthetic qualities might be grounded in the provocative elements of the work. If this is right, then Egonsson's assertion that artistic provocation, in order to be aesthetically successful, must be intrinsically aesthetically fascinating, must be modified somewhat since it might be the case that Socratic provocation in art can also function as grounds for, or means for making accessible, the aesthetic qualities of the work. In these latter cases it would appear that Socratic provocation in art and philosophy function in a structurally similar manner.

Conclusion

What has been said here about how I believe that Socratic provocation can have an important, albeit perhaps rather limited, role to play in art constitute but some initial remarks on provocation and its place in art and morality. In short, I have argued that Socratic provocation—understood as a painful and often fragile incitement to move beyond both our own neurotic tendencies and societal convention—can have an important role to play in art that is structurally similar to its role in philosophy. These remarks should not be taken as indicating my endorsement of a thoroughly cognitivistic or moralistic understanding of art, artistic or aesthetic value, and the like. Quite to the contrary, perhaps cognitive values are being emphasised a tad too much in the cultural and intellectual climate at the moment (at the expense of investigations focusing on more purely experiential matters); we shouldn't forget the purer enjoyments of aesthetic pleasure, even if it sometimes takes something provocative to ground or evoke such unusually delightfully pleasant experiences, and this appears to me a conclusion befitting the Dan Egonsson I know.[19]

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