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### Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Things: In Touch with the Past."

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**Carolyn Korsmeyer.** *Things: In Touch with the Past.* Oxford University Press 2019. 232 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190904876).

This fascinating book addresses two questions. First, it asks why we value encounters with genuine things from the past in a way that we do not value encounters with replicas of such things. Some people, Korsmeyer admits, may not value experience of a genuine thing over and above experience of a replica. Nevertheless, there is a real phenomenon here that needs to be explained. The vast majority of people, it seems, do value genuine things from the past in a way that they do not value even the best reproduction. I, for example, would be deeply disappointed if I were told that my Athenian tetradrachm, which Socrates or Plato may have held in his hand, is a forgery. The second question is a metaphysical one. Korsmeyer asks about what constitutes genuine artifacts (or, as she sometimes calls them, real things). This question is particularly pressing since artifacts from the past decay and are damaged, repaired, and restored.

Korsmeyer grants that genuine artifacts can have cognitive or historical value but she denies that this exhausts their value. According to Korsmeyer, ‘a genuine artifact also has ethical and aesthetic value’ (3).

Consider first the claim that genuine artifacts have ethical value. This value becomes evident, Korsmeyer says, when objects are ‘willfully damaged or destroyed and a moral wrong is perceived to have been done—to the culture that produced them’ (3). I agree that damaging or destroying many genuine objects is wrong (and not just ‘perceived’ to be wrong). The wrong, however, is not merely a wrong to the culture that produced them. It is wrong to damage or destroy many artifacts that were produced by cultures that have long since ceased to exist and can no longer be harmed. All of humanity can be harmed by damage to, or destruction of, some genuine artifacts and this is why such damage and destruction is wrong.

The claim that genuine artifacts have aesthetic, as opposed to ethical, importance is more central to *Things*. Korsmeyer holds that genuineness is an aesthetic property. We feel ‘the thrill of an encounter with the genuine’ and using ‘the term “aesthetic” does as well as any to describe it’ (29). Later Korsmeyer states that an encounter with a real thing is ‘like Wow. Or more articulately, it is akin to emotions such as love, reverence, respect, awe or wonder—those directed at the very being of an object’ (117).

At a number of points Korsmeyer stresses the importance of the tactile modality in the apprehension of the aesthetic value of genuine artifacts. She writes that, ‘touch performs a covert but indispensable operation with the appreciation of’ real things (8) and ‘registers a singular thrill of contact with something old and rare’ (25). If we cannot actually touch artifacts, then at least we need to be close to them to appreciate their aesthetic value.

It is not clear whether Korsmeyer is a realist about the aesthetic value of genuine things. At times she seems to hold that a thing will only have the aesthetic value of a genuine thing if it matters to someone and a thing can lose this value when it ceases to matter. She gives the example of the little treasures that Harriet Smith burns in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. This suggests that the aesthetic value of genuine things is a response-dependent property. On the other hand, Korsmeyer writes that, ‘there can be valuable objects that no one notices—things that *should* be held in higher regard than they are. So the absence of sentiment does not signal that an object is not valuably genuine’ (90). She also writes that genuineness ‘is a property that commands attention in itself’ (35). Elsewhere (142) we are told that the value of a genuine thing does not arise from experience of it. These passages suggest that the aesthetic value of a genuine thing is an objective property.

I am sceptical about Korsmeyer's suggestion that the value of genuine objects is to be analyzed in terms of aesthetic value. For a start, the concept of aesthetic value is poorly understood. Analyzing the value of genuine things in terms of a poorly understood concept is bound to leave many unanswered questions. I also think that another, better, explanation is available for the fact that experience of genuine artifacts from the past is valued.

Korsmeyer hints at this alternative explanation at a few points in the course of this book. In a passage already quoted she mentions feelings of 'love, reverence, respect, awe or wonder.' Some of these feelings are plausibly held to be aesthetic experiences. In particular, the feeling of wonder could well be aesthetic. The others are less plausibly held to be aesthetic affects. Elsewhere Korsmeyer writes that, 'Affective ties to objects from the past honor that past and those who went before us, and they register the fact that time engulfs us all' (111). In this context, Korsmeyer also suggests that valuing genuine things contributes to our social and emotional well-being. These passages capture important truths, namely that experience of genuine things is a way of honouring past persons and promoting social and emotional health. But, again, they do not suggest that the experience of genuine things is an aesthetic one. Perhaps the experience of genuine things is partly aesthetic, but the aesthetic account seems to be incomplete.

I suggest that contact or proximity with genuine things is a form of communion with past people. Genuine things put some people in the frame of mind where such communion is possible. In a similar way, some people go to church, or seek out relics, as a way of promoting spiritual thoughts. Spiritual thoughts are possible anywhere, but a church can promote them. I hypothesize that we value the sense of communion with (at least some) past persons as a way of honouring people in the past and of feeling part of something greater than ourselves. This hypothesis is a genuine explanation of the phenomenon with which Korsmeyer is concerned in a way that reference to the poorly understood concept of the aesthetic is not. We understand why communion with (at least some) past people is important and why we value this communion. We understand why feeling part of a whole is important to many people. On this account we are able to explain why the age of something is valuable. It is not valuable in itself, but it is valuable because it facilitates communion with people remote from our time.

Korsmeyer also provides an answer to the metaphysical question of what it is for a thing to be genuine. On Korsmeyer's account, genuineness is a function of two factors: persistence of something material through time and mattering to some people. On my view, she would have been wiser to divorce these two factors. A cash register receipt from last week, valued by no one, can be just as genuine as the Parthenon.

When Korsmeyer comes to consider the metaphysical question she leaves the question of mattering to one side and focuses on persistence of material objects through time. There are enough problems with understanding what makes a thing identical to itself through time given that artifacts are constantly changing: through normal decay, routine maintenance, deliberate damage and restoration. Korsmeyer presents five theses about the metaphysics of genuine things. First, she states that, 'Aesthetic encounters with Real Things ... require the presence of a tangible, material object' (166). In order to explain how objects (such as the Ming tomb in the Royal Ontario Museum) that have been disassembled and reassembled can be identical to past objects, she adopts a second thesis: 'Things persist over time despite temporary derangement of their physical components' (177). In order to account for persistence despite restoration and maintenance, Korsmeyer writes that, 'Real things are to be understood as objects having a three-dimensional identity that persists over certain degrees of change' (181). Moreover, 'Objects that persist over time are vague in that their precise

parts and their exact dimensions are not so determinate that change automatically destroys their identity' (184).

Korsmeyer makes clear that genuineness comes in degrees. A minimally altered object is the most genuine. It is still genuine if it has undergone some gradual maintenance in the course of its use. An object that has been damaged, but repaired using all or mostly its origin parts, is still genuine. A fragment of a genuine object can be a genuine fragment. Persistence of original materials is the key in all cases. Objects such as Wright's Darwin Martin House complex, where whole buildings have been rebuilt to original plans, has only 'a fair degree of genuineness' (191). New York's Cloisters, constructed with parts of a medieval cloisters, has a smaller degree of genuineness.

*Things* is a fascinating book full of thought-provoking examples of cultural artifacts and insightful reflections on them. It is likely to generate a great deal of debate and it can be thoroughly recommended to philosophers with an interest in cultural heritage, aesthetics and metaphysics.

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