

IS IT ART?

How aesthetics has been understood and the sorts of questions it deals with has a lot to do with when that investigation took place. For most of Western intellectual history, the spotlight of aesthetics was on the topic of beauty, primarily as it is found in created objects. First we will examine twentieth-century philosophers, Weitz and Dickie, who offer perspectives from more recent years, when beauty has taken a back seat and aesthetics has focused on the philosophy of art—what constitutes art and what its purpose is. Our next two philosophers—Plato and Aristotle—give us perspectives on beauty from the ancient world. Hume and Kant will then guide us through the Enlightenment, when a shift occurred in which beauty remained at the forefront of the discussion but was increasingly viewed as something inwardly perceived by those who encountered art, not as an inherent attribute of an object.

Regardless of the historical era, aesthetics has usually been something of a philosophical stepchild. In fact, most philosophy texts don't include a chapter on the topic. One reason for this exclusion is that some view art as something that we enjoy in a manner analogous to how we might enjoy watching TV crime dramas, fishing, or eating dessert. While enjoyable activities bring pleasure to life, they do not seem to rise to the level of "big questions," and thus seem out of place in philosophical investigations. Another reason that philosophy gives

scant attention to this field is that “aesthetics” comes from a Greek verb that means “to sense” or “to feel.” Since most philosophers see their task as clearing up thought processes, it isn’t obvious how feelings are relevant to this job description. In fact, many philosophers suspect that emotions interfere with rational thought. If it is dangerous to make big decisions when we are angry or depressed, why would we bring inner sensations and feelings into our philosophical considerations?

Second, as noted above, aesthetics has traditionally focused on the topic of beauty. We appreciate beauty when we see or hear it, but what else is there to say about it? We can envision how to frame good arguments about whether a shape is a circle, or God exists, or a set of laws is just, or we know more by beginning from concepts or perceptions. But can we argue about whether something is beautiful or about which piece of art is superior to the other? If we can, such arguments would seem to be different from how we discuss other philosophical topics. So is aesthetics something that philosophers should engage?

Moreover, for much of history, it seemed clear that we knew what was beautiful and we knew what art was. But over the last century, a renaissance of sorts has occurred within aesthetics. In part, this renewed interest came about because new forms emerged that severely stretched traditional notions of art itself. A related challenge arose because it was once assumed that art should be beautiful. But the new art forms didn’t seem very interested in beauty. So if we cannot detect visual or auditory beauty in an artwork, how do we know if it is actually art? A famous case from the contemporary art world will help frame this discussion.

FOUNTAIN

In 1917 the Society of Independent Artists (SIA) announced an exhibit in which they would display one work from each artist who submitted an entry, provided a modest fee was paid. They were true to their word, with one exception. A single submission—a sculpture—was rejected, not because it was thought to be bad art, but because it was considered non-art. Eighty-seven years later, that same rejected

piece was declared the most influential artwork of the twentieth century by a group of about five hundred art professionals in England. The rejected (and later celebrated) art piece was submitted by Marcel Duchamp (who was, ironically, a founder and board member of the SIA). The sculpture was a store-bought urinal (new, thankfully) that was modified in only two minor ways: it was laid on its back so the top of the urinal faced outward toward the viewer, and it displayed the signature “R. Mutt 1917” on the front edge. Duchamp titled the work *Fountain*.

So is *Fountain* art (as some argued since the ninety-degree reorientation of the urinal provided a new perspective of a familiar object) or not (since it was a ready-made object that involved no contribution of the artist other than a fake signature)? To push the argument even further, the original *Fountain* was lost, probably thrown out by someone who thought it was trash. However, decades later, Duchamp made several reproductions of *Fountain*, one of which sold for more than \$1.5 million. Several of these *Fountain* copies reside in prestigious museums such as the Tate Modern in London and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Even if we agree that the original *Fountain* was art, is a copy of a manufactured object also a work of art? And if you thought the discussion couldn’t get any weirder, some performance artists have urinated in reproductions of *Fountain* and proclaimed that act to be art. While it has never occurred to me to consider urination an artistic activity, can a particular intent or context make it so?

The *Fountain* saga is the sort of “Is it art?” example that causes many people to view the philosophy of art as nothing more than absurd and inconsequential gibberish. And that may also be a reason the topic is ignored in most philosophy textbooks. However, there are a few factors that make us think that aesthetics is worthy of our attention. First, extreme cases like *Fountain* may obscure the fact that we are surrounded by art that is clearly recognizable as art every day. We listen to music created by individuals referred to as recording artists. I am more likely to buy an end table or throw pillow that has been designed by someone with a sense of style and artistry than one that only serves a utilitarian purpose. We tune in the Oscars to see

if our favorite movies and actors receive awards in the cinematic arts. The magazine we leaf through has received careful attention from a graphic artist who knows how to balance text, images, and white space for maximum impact. Everyday life is certainly enhanced by these forms of art. Moreover, many have a keen appreciation for what are often called the fine arts, such as sculpture, painting, opera, and ballet. And some may be deeply enriched by the artistry of a well-written novel or poem. In short, art and beauty make life better, and anything that enhances life deserves careful consideration.

In addition to the fact we are surrounded by art, we also realize that in many cases we are able to agree on artistic evaluations. Most will agree that *Argo*, which won the Oscar for the best movie of the year in 2013, was probably a far superior choice for the award than *Sharknado*, a TV movie that came out the same year, even if the latter was followed by four (so far) sequels. A vast majority of people would consider a colorful sunset in Yosemite Valley as more beautiful than a smoggy panorama of a gritty industrial area. If you follow *The Voice* from the beginning of a season, you can probably make some pretty accurate choices about which singers aren't going to be around for the last few rounds (my wife is pretty good at this). The point is that even if we are not familiar enough with many fine art genres to make educated artistic judgments, we often find broad swaths of agreement on the merits of more common art forms. If nothing else, pursuit of the reasons why we can concur on aesthetic evaluation may lead us in some interesting directions.

A third reason to consider aesthetics is that philosophy's history includes conversations about art that have receded into the background in recent years. Perhaps earlier views on the nature of art and its purposes will allow us to recover valuable ideas often overlooked today. For example, many older views argued that art was a means of gaining insight into the divine or was a major contributor toward the development of moral virtue. While these ideas are out of vogue, if art can be a conduit to the holy and to moral goodness, Christians may want to think about how this works and perhaps reconsider the ambivalence many Christians have toward the arts.

Like philosophy, art is a distinctly human activity. Just as monkeys and box turtles do not, as far as we know, speculate about whether an idea is the most basic reality in the universe, they also do not attempt to spark the imagination by writing a song, composing poetry, or painting pictures (with perhaps one exception we will encounter later in the chapter). Art is uniquely human. This means that art may tell us something important about the nature of our humanity or the purpose of our life.

Finally, art is a unique and powerful form of communication. A story touches us at a different level when combined with the music and drama of an opera. When we read lyrics, we just don't hear the same message as we do when these words are combined with the artistry of a talented singer accompanied by skilled musicians. There is a reason we worship in music, and even the architecture of a church or cathedral is intended to send a theological message. Because art conveys messages and ideas so powerfully, and because one of philosophy's basic assumptions is that ideas are important, we need to think carefully about how art communicates.

WITTGENSTEIN ON LANGUAGE ART

It may seem odd that we will begin our investigation with a philosopher who wrote almost nothing about aesthetics, but it makes sense in view of the point we made immediately above. *Ludwig Wittgenstein's* (1889–1951) philosophy of language exerted a profound impact on aesthetics because art, like language, intends to communicate with an audience. The central question for Wittgenstein was how language communicates its message.

Early in his career, Wittgenstein advocated a **picture theory of language** (or **meaning**) that said that words, if used properly, create "pictures of facts." A sentence, then, is ideally a group of words that are logically related to each other in a way that mirrors the way things really are in the world. The goal was for words to communicate with the same precision as mathematical terms or logical symbols so that **propositions** would be unambiguous and exact. For example, for a square to be a square, it must meet some **necessary conditions**. A shape cannot be a square unless it has four and only four sides.

However, rectangles and trapezoids also have four sides, but they are not squares. Thus in order for our four-sided figure to be a square, it must also meet some **sufficient conditions**. Its lines must all be of equal length and must meet the other lines at ninety-degree angles. Thus, just as a square must conform to a clear definition in order for us to correctly identify its meaning, a word should have a clear definition that determines whether it has given us a trustworthy picture of something. Using these criteria, if we want to know if something is art, we have to determine whether it meets the necessary and sufficient conditions of a definition of art.

Later, however, Wittgenstein radically changed his view of language, stating that we should think of everyday language usage as a **language game**. In this view, words do not have a single unambiguous meaning but receive their meaning from the context in which they are used. These contexts are what Wittgenstein means when he talks about language as a game. For example, the word "horse" can refer to one's mode of transportation, heroin, or something you don't want to be, and what it means is determined by whether we are talking to cowboys, drug addicts, or a group of kids with a basketball. In each case, a word's meaning is determined by context and usage within a group—it depends on which "game" we are playing. Insiders know which meaning to attach to "horse" when the definition associated with the word effectively communicates to other insiders. Stated otherwise, unlike his earlier view in which words function like names, Wittgenstein's idea of language games thinks of words as tools that are used to communicate a meaning within a social context.

Wittgenstein's idea of language as a game arises from his observation that we all know what a game is, but we can't identify the specific characteristics that make an activity a game. In other words, we cannot isolate the necessary and sufficient conditions that allow us to define "game." Some games are sports, but card games are not sports, even if you can watch poker on ESPN. We may keep score in many sports, but Wittgenstein points out that a game like tossing a ball against a wall and catching it doesn't entail winning or losing. Someone might say that the common thread is amusement, but not all amusing activities are games; and few people who have played

or watched a football game in subzero weather would describe the experience as amusing.

While Wittgenstein believes that it is not possible to give a single unambiguous definition of "game," this does not mean that the word is hopelessly ambiguous and that we have no idea what a person means when they use it. What we mean by "game" is determined by its usage within a particular group. Thus, even though we may be most familiar with games as activities in which we are active enough to get sweaty, we can also understand why chess may be referred to as a game, even if we have no interest in playing it. This is because there are what Wittgenstein calls **family resemblances** between games, features that allow us to see some sort of relationship between the widely varied array of activities called "games." Thus, when computers burst into everyday life and people began to create new stuff to do on them, we called some of these programs computer *games* because they included family resemblances to board games, athletic competitions, or other activities already recognized as games.

WEITZ AND OPEN CONCEPTS

While Wittgenstein's primary interest was explaining how words convey meaning, it is only a short step to see how the ideas of language games and family resemblances can be applied to art. *Morris Weitz* (1916–1981) makes the case that our ability to determine what constitutes art does not depend on agreeing on a definition. He instead takes a **nonessentialist** approach to art. Just as no necessary and sufficient conditions can be identified as the essence of all games, art has no necessary and sufficient properties that provide a single unambiguous definition of art. Thus, like Wittgenstein's language games, in which the meaning of a word is determined by its usage within a social context, the identity and meaning of art can only be understood within a particular artistic context.

The flexibility of art to encompass new forms and expressions leads Weitz to refer to art as an **open concept**. Just as the word "game" is an open concept that allows us to apply the term to a new medium such as computer games, that to which we apply the word "art" is, as Weitz puts it, "emendable and corrigible." In other words, we can

expand the category to include what was previously unknown or not recognized as art. What makes something identifiable as art relies not on our ability to define it but on our ability to recognize and describe family resemblances between that which is already accepted as art and artifacts that may or may not be art.

Weitz's argument that art is undefinable is not simply because all prior attempts have failed, making it improbable that future attempts at definition will succeed. Instead, he gives two distinct supports for his position. First, he argues that it is impossible for any single piece of art to possess all of the properties necessary to satisfy a definition that encompasses all of the arts. After all, what does an operatic aria have in common with a ceramic vase, the movie *Last Tango in Paris* with an abstract painting? Second, he says that openness is necessary to allow for the "expansive, adventurous character of art." If art is not an open concept, then creativity—the ability to introduce that which is new and previously unimagined—is stifled. Thus Weitz says that any definition of art kills the very thing it attempts to define by eliminating the possibility of novelty. When movies and photography were invented, we realized that these new media had such obvious family resemblances to paintings or stage productions that they were easily accepted as art forms. As Weitz notes, we intuitively recognize that art must be open to new styles and forms.

While Weitz believes that defining art is a dead end, he does allow that previous efforts to find such a definition have been helpful. These definitions provide clues that tell us what to be attentive to in evaluating an object's artistic qualities. In other words, definitions point to characteristics common to some types of art, and these help us identify family resemblances in new forms. Because potential resemblances may not be obvious or known to outsiders, those who are insiders in the arts will be better judges of whether an avant-garde piece is art or how we should compare one work to another. Thus, just as Wittgenstein argues that language is communal, Weitz argues that art's boundaries are shaped by a community assent.

Weitz's idea of art as an open concept has a lot of initial appeal, if for no other reason than the fact that finding a broadly applicable definition of art is anything but easy. Moreover, it seemed to be a

useful tool at a time when the Western world was becoming increasingly acquainted with the arts from other cultures and avant-garde art forms were gaining popularity. However, Weitz's critics are concerned that he overlooked a critical distinction. Art doesn't just appear out of nowhere; people make art. However, only a small portion of what humanity makes is identified as art. This leads some to suspect that the openness in Weitz's open concept applies more to *how* we make art, not to the undefinable nature of art. In other words, the idea that art is an open concept can explain why we should accept a new medium, such as computer generated graphics, as an artistic tool, but does it help us determine which computer images are or are not art?

Perhaps an even more powerful criticism of Weitz is leveled at the vagueness of his notion of family resemblances. The problem is that any two things will resemble each other in some way, since every object has a multitude of attributes (e.g., weighs less than a ton, is edible, is primarily blue, is warmer than zero degrees centigrade, or is taller than a Smurf). A boxcar load of cotton balls may weigh exactly the same as an eight-foot iron construction beam. Flowers and freshly baked cinnamon rolls both emit pleasant aromas. In each case, we have a resemblance, but is it a *family* resemblance, one that allows us to place them in the same category?

I resemble only one of my three brothers in appearance (my handsome brother, of course). However, our shared DNA is a much more reliable indicator of family resemblance than surface similarities such as appearance, facial expressions, or personality. The point is that our DNA defines who we are and what family we belong to more accurately than the external resemblances Weitz relies on to determine what constitutes art. This and the other problems reopen the search for art's DNA, bringing us back to the quest for a definition of art.

THE INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART

George Dickie (1926–) has offered an influential approach to defining art—the **institutional theory of art**. For something to be considered art, he said it must be an artifact "upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain institution (the art world) confers the status of candidate for appreciation." Arthur Danto (1924–2013)

supplies the idea of an **art world**—a community that possesses knowledge of art, its history, and the theories that inform art at various points in that history. As Dickie uses the phrase, however, “art world” doesn’t so much refer to the ideas of art professionals as it does to the professionals themselves—artists, critics, dealers, museum curators, gallery owners, and others knowledgeable about the various forms of art. Thus we see the influence of Wittgenstein’s language games emerging in a new way. Just as Wittgenstein argues that a word’s meaning depends on an insider’s knowledge, Dickie believes that the insiders of the art world have the expertise to confer upon an artifact the status of art and to evaluate its merit.

With this in place, we now have a way to resolve the “Is it art?” question. The answer is that something is art if it is the work of an artisan (even if that individual’s contribution is minor) and someone within the art world puts it forward to be appreciated as such. Two things should be noted. First, this approach accomplishes the same thing Weitz wanted to do with his notion of open concepts. It allows new or unfamiliar forms to be included as art. Thus an object rejected as art in one age might later be embraced as a masterpiece (e.g., *Fountain*) as the art world and its ideas about art change. The second notable element is that the institutional theory of art offers a definition that outlines both the necessary condition (an artifact) and sufficient condition (the art world confers the status of candidate for appreciation) for art. Since this definition argues that art is a socially constructed idea, it rebuts Weitz’s claim that any definition would limit what can be classified as art. In other words, the institutional theory of art avoids the limitation problem by stating that art is not defined by what it does (a *functional definition*) but by the process by which it is deemed art (a *procedural definition*).

As we have seen above, the art world refers to artists who create an object intending that it will receive artistic appreciation from an audience, or to an exhibiter or curator who might display an object for a public group. In the latter case, a work can become a candidate for appreciation—even if the object’s creator did not intend it to be perceived as art—as long as some member of the art world confers artistic status on a work. But by what authority does the institution

of the art world confer such status? Dickie argues that it is the understanding of and expertise in the craft that grants the members of the art world their legitimacy to label an artifact as art. A demolition expert may dump a load of bricks on a museum floor, and it may be externally indistinguishable from a similar brick pile offered by an artist. The difference is that members of the art world view the artist’s work from the context of artistic practices, aesthetic theory, and knowledge of art history.

Several criticisms have arisen in response to the institutional theory of art. One problem is whether this informal web of art professionals can be viewed as an institution with the authority to cause something to become a reality. If I say to a couple, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” my pronouncement creates a new reality—two people who were unmarried are now married. However, my words can only cause a marriage to come into existence if I’m duly authorized by an institution such as a state government. Such an institution carries authority because it is bound by laws, a constitution, accountability to voters, and formal processes such as those that certify certain citizens to confer marital status on a couple. However, since the art world lacks these rules, organizational structures, and duly elected officials, does it make sense to think of it as an institution?

A problem also arises with the implication that any individual within the art world is authorized to confer artistic status. This is certainly not the way institutions work, and it leads to some odd situations. Since the manufacturer of Duchamp’s urinal had no artistic intent, can it become art simply by an artist turning it on its back and scribbling a name on it? Moreover, when Duchamp submitted *Fountain*, is his self-identification as an artist sufficient to confer artistic status on the urinal? Why would Duchamp’s identification of *Fountain* as art outweigh the judgments of the majority of the SIA, also members of the art world, who originally determined that *Fountain* was not art? Moreover, if something is art simply because a member declares it so, this implies that the judgment of any individual within the art world is infallible. However, the disagreement between Duchamp and the SIA makes this seem illogical. Their conclusions are mutually exclusive, so they cannot both be right.

The case of Pierre Brassau also raises doubts about the judgment of the art world. Four abstract paintings by Brassau, a previously unknown French painter, were submitted to an exhibition in Sweden in 1964. The critics were somewhat mixed on his paintings, but the majority thought the works were quite good. One even said, "Pierre is an artist who performs with the delicacy of a ballet dancer." It turned out that Pierre Brassau was a chimpanzee who lived in the local zoo. The obvious question is why the artistic knowledge possessed by these art world members did not cue them in that they were being hoaxed by a journalist.

For both Weitz and Dickie, one must understand how to properly "read" art in order to fully appreciate it, or even to recognize it, as art. This insider knowledge requires a grasp of the artistic conventions of the age. One problem with this is elitism, which tends to restrict artistic judgment and appreciation to the experts. But what about the vast majority of us who lack this specialized expertise but still find value in art, even if we don't really "get" the more avant-garde stuff that contemporary philosophies of art focus on? The ancient philosophers shift the focus back to art for the masses, arguing that humans have always and will always create art because there is something about our desire to experience beauty that we just can't shake. Thus, their discussions of art were focused on the beautiful.

The quest of ancient philosophy is often summarized as a search for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. These were viewed as the transcendental realities that must be grasped in order for one to have a wise and flourishing life. Moreover, they were also something of a trinity in which, even in their distinctiveness, they were unified so that the true was also good and beautiful. Thus art, through its beauty, was thought to communicate something of the deepest truths of the universe and of our moral existence. We catch hints of this older view when we recognize that "beauty" is a big word. In addition to works of art, we can apply it to a broad range of things: a solution to a problem, a person, an act of kindness or sacrifice, a mathematical equation, or a sunrise. So what do these things have in common with works of art that we might call them all beautiful?

PLATO ON ART

For *Plato*, beauty is something that captivates us and enlivens the imagination. Thus he views art as *mimesis* ("imitation"). Imitative art seeks something in our environment that captivates us in some way and then endeavors to represent it in a created object. To be sure, the point of imitative art is not simply to reproduce another object in all its detail but to allow us to see something in a more profound way. To state it otherwise, *mimesis* refers to a desire not to imitate an object but to draw out the beauty within it.

We have spoken of Plato's idea of forms elsewhere, and his aesthetic theory is closely tied to this. Forms are the unchanging, immaterial, and conceptual realities that are more real than the particular physical manifestations of them. Thus, the form of a table (table-ness), which is best grasped by a conceptual definition, is more real and stable than any specific physical table. For Plato, the beauty manifested in a painting of a table provokes the true philosopher to move beyond the loveliness of this particular object toward higher, unchanging, nonphysical, and divine forms of beauty. In other words, lesser beauty leads the properly oriented person toward the form of beauty, in which we discern that which makes all beautiful things beautiful.

While Plato speaks of beauty in exalted terms, he has little positive to say about the actual art of his day. We will better understand his concerns if we look at them through four primary avenues of criticism. His first beef with art was religious in nature, and poetry and the theater were the primary targets. Unlike our age, exposure to poetry in ancient Greece occurred through public recitation rather than through private reading. In particular, the poetry of Homer held almost scriptural authority and was a primary tool for teaching people about the gods. The problem for Plato was that the Greek gods of Homeric poetry often behaved quite badly. They were connivers, cheaters, seducers, and liars—all activities that Plato considered unworthy of divine behavior. On top of that, these gods changed, and Plato believed that the divine (and the beautiful) is unchanging and unchangeable. Thus he complained that the arts of his day misled people about the nature and character of the gods.

Plato's second criticism was closely related. The task of the gods was to exemplify the moral **virtues** that humans should imitate, not engage in behaviors that honorable people should avoid. In addition, Plato was concerned that the arts, particularly the theater, played on the emotions of the audience. Emotions arise from the **soul's** lowest function—the **appetites**—and these passions are in tension with **reason**, the soul's highest capacity (as we saw in chapter 7). However, artists and actors knew that the masses could be drawn into a story by tugging on emotions such as anger, fear, and grief. This was problematic, because Plato saw ethics as an intellectual activity that required stepping back and taking a thoughtful and long-term perspective. More precisely, Plato believed that reason ruled over and tamed the appetites and passions of a good person. So when the drama of a theatrical presentation or poetic recitation tangled the audience in their emotions, he feared that would interfere with reason's ability to control the passions and lead the audience toward moral virtue.

Plato's third concern about the arts was metaphysical. If we paint a picture of a table, what exists on the canvas is nothing like a real table. Instead, it is a pattern of colors and shapes created by dabs of paint. The painting itself is only a copy of a copy (the physical table) of the most real (the form of table-ness). In metaphysical terms, then, an artwork is two steps removed from the purest reality. At the root of this criticism lies Plato's view that art is an imitation, and imitations are deceptive unless one is wise enough to know that what is tangible should elevate us toward the intangible and divine.

Finally, Plato's criticism of art takes an epistemological turn. An artist can paint a table without knowing its use or purpose. In contrast, one cannot build a table without having some knowledge of the form of a table, because tables have a particular use. If an object doesn't facilitate the purposes of a table, it isn't a table. Likewise, one who uses a table must already have an idea of what tables are used for, a knowledge that a painter does not necessarily have. Therefore, makers and users are required to have more knowledge of a table's essence than the artist, who is capable of painting a table even though ignorant of its essence or purpose.

Because of the objections above, early in the *Republic*, Plato suggests that public poetry should be heavily censored so that only virtuous behavior, whether in human or divine characters, was presented via art. Thus even if the arts rely on faint imitations of reality and emotional impulses, he grudgingly allows that this might lead us toward what is higher if one is properly attuned to desire the higher. However, by the end of the *Republic*, Plato seems to be overcome with his conviction that art always deceives, and states that a healthy nation will ban poetry altogether. Nevertheless, his pessimism about the ability of most people to understand the proper use of art should not obscure another point. For those who are wise, the glimmer of beauty in an imitation sparks interest in the true and the good.

ARISTOTLE ON ART

Aristotle had a more positive view of art's value for the masses than his teacher, Plato. While both viewed art as a form of mimesis, Aristotle did not see imitation as deception. A key reason behind the difference between these two philosophers is metaphysical in nature. Aristotle does not view forms as entities that exist apart from physical objects. Instead, forms are embedded in **particular things**. For example, the form of table-ness, for Aristotle, is found in each individual table. Thus most art strives to transcend the blemishes and deficiencies found in actual objects in order to present an idealized picture of what is or could be. When an artist invests beauty in a work of art, this invites the audience to intellectually grasp beauty in its most perfect form through a particular and imperfect object that embodies beauty. The eternal and pure is thus imitated by an individual object.

Because Aristotle believes that knowledge begins with the senses—that sensory experiences provided by art do not divert our attention from truth and reality but provide the raw material our mind needs to discover what is true and real. When combined with the pleasure we experience through it, art also helps us hear and retain valuable moral lessons. The heroes of epic poetry are larger than life, and their examples encourage us to live courageously. Statuary portraying a city's benefactors encourage civic pride and spur us to develop the virtue of generosity. On the other end of the spectrum, human faults

and frailties are exaggerated in art and allow us to clearly see the inevitable outcomes of poor character. Thus Aristotle believes that portrayals of anti-exemplars can teach us the danger of moral vices.

In addition to art's function as a moral educator, Aristotle believes that it can help us properly regulate our emotions. While Plato believes that one of art's flaws is that it evokes passions such as fear or anger, Aristotle celebrates the fact that tragedy brings these emotions to the surface, and that it does so in a bigger-than-life manner. As the audience empathizes with the characters and their deep emotions, it experiences *catharsis*. Aristotle is not very precise in his explanation of catharsis, but it seems to refer to a sort of purging. All experience the powerful emotions of pity and fear as a result of life's uncertainties. Through tragedy, these feelings rise to the surface and are experienced in a way that allows us to release them in a controlled and safe manner. It may also be that catharsis refers to restoring a balance to the soul, because pity is an emotion that draws us toward another while fear repels us. Because tragedy combines both, perhaps Aristotle views this as a means of holding both emotions in equilibrium.

Finally, Aristotle recognizes that we all need the opportunity to unwind and enjoy life. The arts provide the occasion for us to portray all the elements of human life in forms that are enjoyable and engaging. Thus, in response to Plato's negative evaluation of immoral behavior within Homeric works, Aristotle says that beauty and pleasure are necessary for human flourishing. If the pleasure evoked by well-written verse is enhanced by speaking of the gods' faults, then the poetry has drawn us toward a worthy good. While the primary goals of politics or philosophy are goodness and truth, we should not impose these demands on art; poetry is about beauty.

Plato and Aristotle both view art as imitative of the world in a way that, if used properly, allows us to discern that which is morally virtuous and holy through the beautiful. It is not difficult to see how the mimetic view of art shaped Christian thought. Just as God is revealed in the sacraments through common things like bread, wine, and water, the beauty of skillfully written music, soaring cathedral architecture, and dramatic frescos reveal the majesty and goodness

of God. Thus the church has used the arts to teach virtue and as a medium to communicate its doctrines.

As we move from the ancient world to the Enlightenment, we see several radical shifts. First, our representatives of this era, Kant and Hume, do not view art as a moral instructor or as a vehicle for theological truth. While they are in continuity with the ancient philosophers in their belief that art should strive for the beautiful, beauty is not considered to be an objective feature of art itself, but is instead a way of talking about the pleasure that art evokes within us. Although beauty takes this subjective turn, both agreed that a standard exists by which we can judge artistic quality.

HUME ON ART

Sensory capacities such as sight or hearing give us access to art. It is, for example, hard to know how we might appreciate a musical without hearing the dialogue and music or seeing the movements of the characters and their facial expressions. By themselves, though, sensory data provide only facts: the female lead uttered her lines from the script, followed by a slow song performed by the male lead, who had a pained expression on his face. But how do we get from these sensory observations to evaluative statements, such as whether the musical segments adequately supported and moved the plot line forward, whether the male lead's voice was better than that of his understudy, or whether the dialogue in this dramatic presentation offered a more robust portrayal of human jealousy than other musicals?

To help us understand this additional evaluative feature, *David Hume* (1711–1776) speaks of *artistic taste*. For him, artistic taste is analogous to our faculties of sight or touch. Just as sight allows us to make judgments about the dominant colors in a painting or whether images on a canvas are more distinct or blurry than in another, Hume believes that our capacity for artistic taste allows us to determine whether one painting or poem has greater artistic merit than another.

Our own experience of discussions with others about which artwork is better than another already warns us that Hume has taken on a daunting task in setting up standards for artistic taste. However, he makes this even more challenging by arguing that tastes—or

sentiments, as he often calls them—are subjective; they are not facts. In other words, when we argue about which orchestral composition is most beautiful, we generally assume that we are talking about a characteristic (i.e., beauty) of the music itself. That isn't the case for Hume. Beauty is not something that is an attribute of any artwork but is the judgment of one who perceives a work of art. However, if artistic taste judges something that is inward and subjective, not something objective and obvious to our senses, it is difficult to know what sorts of standards might be used to evaluate artistic merit. Nevertheless, Hume argues that the subjectivity of beauty does not mean that we should be aesthetic skeptics who are forced to conclude that all judgments are equal. Some individuals are better judges of aesthetic taste than others.

Perhaps ironically, Hume builds his assertion that some tastes are superior to others on the common sentiments of mankind. These common sentiments refer to the capacity of all humans to feel pleasure when confronted by that which is beautiful. He points out that great works of literature or art have stood the test of time, which he sees as evidence that such common aesthetic sentiments exist. While all people are capable of experiencing the full range of human sentiments that may be evoked by art of any medium, few are able to discern the connection between the formal elements of an artwork and the sentiments that are stirred by them. According to Hume, the **true critic**, the individual who is a reliable judge of aesthetic taste, will possess five qualities: “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and clear of all prejudice.”

On one level Hume's standards for judging artistic value make sense. By “strong sense” Hume seems to mean something like a keen intellect that allows the critic to know what is fitting or apt. “Delicate sentiment” refers to one's capacity to see nuances and details that might be missed by others. Moreover, the third and fourth criteria seem reasonable. I cannot claim to be a reliable judge unless I have sufficient artistic experience to compare a work to others that are similar in medium or genre. Finally, we recognize that a myriad of nonartistic concerns might hinder our ability to make judgments of artistic skill. I might prefer Michelangelo's sculpture of the *Pietà*

over Bernini's because, in the former, Mary's face reminds me of my mom's sad but calm expression whenever something really rotten has happened to me. However, that seems to be a prejudice that has nothing to do with artistic superiority.

Hume's strict standards for aesthetic taste leave him vulnerable to the criticism of elitism. After all, a very small number of people will have the opportunity to educate their aesthetic judgments to meet his standards for the true critic. However, he argues that we rely on those who have unique and concentrated training to help us with all sorts of things. Since all human beings do possess common sentiments, a trained critic can draw on these to assist the untrained in recognizing the features that make one artwork superior to another.

However, many have argued that Hume's standards seem to be ambiguous and circular. For example, my “delicate sentiment” may allow me to detect nuances in brushstrokes from one painter that are different from those of another artist from the same time period. But how can we connect this factor with the different degrees of pleasure a true critic should experience when this detail is observed? Moreover, Hume argues that the artistic evaluations of true critics will match those who are already deemed to possess these skills. But that simply pushes the question back another step. How did these earlier “true critics” attain this status? It seems like a circular argument to say that we know someone is a true critic because that individual agrees with earlier true critics.

KANT ON ART

We should have learned two things from our experience with *Kant's* philosophy in previous chapters: his ideas are important to the discipline, and they are very difficult to understand. Kant's philosophy of beauty is no exception because, for him, the processes within the human mind are highly complex. One of the functions of the mind is **understanding**. Understanding occurs when the mind grasps a concept. Forming concepts of the physical world requires sense data. However, sensory information by itself is not a concept. Kant explains why by using the example of drawing a line. As we draw, our senses perceive only the segment of the line we are currently drawing. He

calls this immediate sensation an **intuition**. As our line gets longer, we do not see (have an intuition of) the beginning parts of our line. Yet we are still aware of the earlier segments of the line through what Kant calls **imagination**. As Kant uses the term, imagination refers to the mind's ability to make a sensory element available to the mind when we are not perceiving it directly. Thus our concept of a unified line occurs when understanding and imagination work together. The interaction between intuition and imagination is also what allows us to grasp the concept of "dog" when we see a canine face peering out from a car window. I have an intuition (visual perception) of the face, but imagination supplies the parts that are not visible so that I can understand that there is a whole dog in the car and not just a dog's head.

Kant says that our capacity to perceive beauty also requires the interaction of understanding and imagination, but it works in a slightly different way. When I experience an actual dog, my mind connects my perception with a concept. In contrast, when I experience beauty, my perception is linked to a feeling of pleasure. This means that when I find the architecture of a building beautiful, the beauty is not in the building itself. Instead, beauty describes the pleasant effect that building has on me. Thus, like Hume, Kant argues that beauty is not a property of an object (i.e., not part of the concept of "building") but is instead a judgment that arises within us as a form of pleasure. Also, like Hume, Kant argues that while beauty is subjective, all people should come to the same aesthetic judgments about what is truly beautiful. However, Kant takes a different route in explaining why there is a universal standard of taste.

I have sometimes heard people say, "I don't know if it's actually art, but I like it." The reality is, though, that I may like an artwork for reasons that have nothing to do with art. It could appeal to me because I know my brother-in-law would find it offensive, because a sculpture's pedestal is the perfect size to cover a broken tile in the location I want to put it, or because I have a hunch that I could sell it in a decade for triple the purchase price. None of these reasons for liking this artwork has anything to do with artistic merit. After all, I have already admitted that I don't even know if it's really art.

Because "liking" can arise from nonaesthetic interests, Kant insists that true aesthetic judgment must be *disinterested*. By saying that one should take a disinterested approach to art doesn't mean that we should not be interested in experiencing a beautiful object. Instead, to be disinterested means that we are interested in the aesthetic experience and nothing else. In other words, a disinterested approach to art means that we set aside all other interests, such as the reasons given above, for liking a work. To be disinterested means that we stop thinking about how art can be used and simply appreciate it for its aesthetic value—art for art's sake.

For Kant, artistic judgments vary among people because we fail to approach art from the state of disinterestedness. However, he argues that aesthetic judgments are universal to the extent that we view beauty with no other goal than to experience beauty. The argument goes something like this: Cognition is what all people have in common, and we presuppose this commonality when we believe that there is an actual answer to disagreements about whether an object is an airplane or a muffin. Likewise, it is a common human attribute to take pleasure in beauty. Therefore, if we set aside all idiosyncratic interests and get down to our common humanity, we should all find similar pleasure, and thus universal judgments of beauty, in the same things. This does not mean that I or others will be successful in achieving a disinterested perspective. Kant just says that *if* we would do this, all people would find truly beautiful things to be truly beautiful.

CONCLUSION

Several years back, I asked a class of thirty-five students to write down three words they associated with truth. Out of the 105 responses, not one linked truth with beauty. This was somewhat distressing since our discussion for that day was a reading by a philosopher named Plotinus that clearly connected these two ideas. But it led to an interesting discussion centered on aesthetics. What is it about beauty that compels us to see and hear in new ways? Does God speak to us through beauty? Why is art everywhere, both in our everyday world and in our churches? What forms of art have often been used to convey Christianity's message and traditions, and what art forms have Christians

frequently shied away from? Is there a valid use of art as protest and criticism within Christianity? Do we miss important dimensions of faith, and of God's nature, if we don't think carefully about beauty in all its forms?

As we have seen in this chapter, aesthetics often takes us into complex discussions that deal with difficult and extreme cases, and one can quickly get the impression that these are debates best left to the experts. I think those are important discussions to be aware of, and it is disappointing to me that Christians haven't been more engaged in them. But behind these more rarified deliberations about art are the sorts of questions that came up in our class discussion of Plotinus, truth, and beauty. Art is everywhere, and it is a powerful force in the world. If for no other reasons than these, art ought to be one of the "big questions" Christians think about carefully.