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Aesthetics

Aesthetics owes its name to Alexander Baumgarten who derived it from the Greek *aisthanomai*, which means perception by means of the senses (see Baumgarten, A.G.). As the subject is now understood, it consists of two parts: the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of the aesthetic experience and character of objects or phenomena that are not art. Non-art items include both artefacts that possess aspects susceptible of aesthetic appreciation, and phenomena that lack any traces of human design in virtue of being products of nature, not humanity. How are the two sides of the subject related: is one part of aesthetics more fundamental than the other? There are two obvious possibilities. The first is that the philosophy of art is basic, since the aesthetic appreciation of anything that is not art is the appreciation of it as if it were art. The second is that there is a unitary notion of the aesthetic that applies to both art and non-art; this notion defines the idea of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested delight in the immediately perceptible properties of an object for their own sake; and artistic appreciation is just aesthetic appreciation of works of art. But neither of these possibilities is plausible.

The first represents the aesthetic appreciation of nature as essentially informed by ideas intrinsic to the appreciation of art, such as style, reference and the expression of psychological states. But in order for that curious feeling, the experience of the sublime – invoked, perhaps, by the immensity of the universe as disclosed by the magnitude of stars visible in the night sky (see Sublime, the) – to be aesthetic, or for you to delight in the beauty of a flower, it is unnecessary for you to imagine these natural objects as being works of art. In fact, your appreciation of them is determined by their lack of features specific to works of art and perhaps also by their possession of features available only to aspects of nature (see Nature, aesthetic appreciation of).

The second fails to do justice to the significance for artistic appreciation of various features of works of art that are not immediately perceptible, such as a work's provenance (see Artistic forgery) and its position in the artist's oeuvre. A more

accurate view represents the two parts of the subject as being related to each other in a looser fashion than either of these positions recognizes, each part exhibiting variety in itself, the two being united by a number of common issues or counterpart problems, but nevertheless manifesting considerable differences in virtue of the topics that are specific to them. In fact, although some issues are common to the two parts, many are specific to the philosophy of art and a few specific to the aesthetics of non-art objects. Moreover, not every object of aesthetic appreciation falls neatly on one side or the other of the art–non-art distinction, so that appreciation sometimes involves an element of both of artistic and non-artistic appreciation (see Gardens, aesthetics of; Environmental aesthetics).

Both works of art and other objects can possess specifically aesthetic properties, such as beauty and gracefulness. If they do possess properties of this sort, they will also possess properties that are not specifically aesthetic, such as size and shape. And they will be susceptible of aesthetic and non-aesthetic appreciation, and subject to aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgments. What distinguishes an item's aesthetic from its non-aesthetic properties and what faculties are essential to detecting aesthetic properties (see Aesthetic concepts)? What is the nature of aesthetic appreciation? It has often been thought that there is a particular attitude that is distinctive of aesthetic appreciation: you must adopt this attitude in order for the item's aesthetic properties to be manifest to you, and if you are in this attitude you are in a state of aesthetic contemplation (see Aesthetic attitude). This suppositious attitude has often been thought of as one of disinterested contemplation focused on an item's intrinsic, non-relational, immediately perceptible properties. But perhaps this view of aesthetic interest as disinterested attention is the product of masculine bias, involving the assumption of a position of power over the observed object, a reflection of masculine privilege, an expression of the 'male gaze' (see Feminist aesthetics §3). Another idea is that awareness of an object's aesthetic properties is the product of a particular species of perception, an idea which stands in opposition to the claim that this awareness is nothing but the projection of the observer's response onto the object (see Artistic taste).

An object's beauty would appear to be a relational, mind-dependent property – a property it possesses in virtue of its capacity to affect observers in a certain manner.

But which observers and what manner? And can attributions of beauty, which often aspire to universal interpersonal validity, ever attain that status (see Beauty)? The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant presented a conception of an aesthetic judgment as a judgment that must be founded on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure; he insisted that a pure aesthetic judgment about an object is one that is unaffected by any concepts under which the object might be seen; and he tried to show that the implicit claim of such a judgment to be valid for everyone is justified. But how acceptable is his conception of an aesthetic judgment and how successful is his attempted justification of the claims of pure aesthetic judgments (see Kant, I. §12)?

1 Aesthetics of art

Those questions that are specific to the philosophy of art are of three kinds: ones that arise only within a particular art form or set of related arts (perhaps arts addressed to the same sense), ones that arise across a number of arts of heterogeneous natures, and ones that are entirely general, necessarily applying to anything falling under the mantle of art.

Here are some of the most salient facts about art. Not everything is art. Artists create works of art, which reflect the skills, knowledge and personalities of their makers, and succeed or fail in realizing their aims. Works of art can be interpreted in different ways, understood, misunderstood or baffle the mind, subjected to analysis, and praised or criticized. Although there are many kinds of value that works of art may possess, their distinctive value is their value as art. The character of a work of art endows it with a greater or lesser degree of this distinctive value.

Accordingly, the most fundamental general question about art would seem to be: what is art? Is it possible to distinguish art from non-art by means of an account that is definitive of the nature of art, or are the arts too loosely related to one another for them to possess an essence that can be captured in a definition (see Art, definition of)? Whatever the answer to this question may be, another entirely general issue follows hard on its heels. It concerns the ontology of art, the kind of thing a work of art is. Do some works of art fall into one ontological category (particulars) and some into another (types) or do they all fall within the same category (see Art works, ontology of)? And a number of other important general questions quickly arise. What is a

work's artistic value and which aspects of a work are relevant to or determine this value? Is the value of a work of art, considered as art, an intrinsic or an extrinsic feature of it? Is it determined solely by the work's form or by certain aspects of its content – its truth or its moral sensitivity, for example? Can judgments about a work's artistic value justifiably lay claim to universal agreement or are they merely expressions of subjective preferences? And how is a work's artistic value related to, and how important is it in comparison with, other kinds of value it may possess (see Art, value of; Formalism in art; Art and truth; Art and morality; Schiller, J.C.F.)? What is required to detect the critically relevant properties of artworks, over and above normal perceptual and intellectual powers, and how can judgments that attribute such properties be supported (see Art criticism)? What kinds of understanding are involved in artistic appreciation, and must an acceptable interpretation of a work be compatible with any other acceptable interpretation (see Art, understanding of; Artistic interpretation; Structuralism in literary theory)? In what way, if any, does the artist's intention determine the meaning of their work (see Artist's intention)? What is an artist's style and what is its significance in the appreciation of the artist's work (see Artistic style)?

2 Aesthetics and the arts

One question that arises only for a small set of art forms concerns the nature of depiction. It might be thought that the analysis of the nature of depiction has no special importance within the philosophy of art, for pictorial representation is just as frequent outside as inside art. But this overlooks the fact that real clarity about the ways in which pictures can acquire value as art must be founded on a sophisticated understanding of what a picture is and the psychological resources needed to grasp what it depicts. So what is it for a surface to be or contain a picture of an object or state of affairs? Must the design on the surface be such as to elicit a certain species of visual experience, and must the function of the means by which the pattern was produced, or the intention of the person who created it, be to replicate features of the visible world? Or is a picture a member of a distinctive kind of symbol system, which can be defined without making use of any specifically visual concepts (see Depiction; Goodman, N. §2)? Another question that has a limited application concerns the distinctive nature and value of a particular artistic genre, the response it encourages

from us, and the insight into human life it displays and imparts. For example, whereas a comedy exploits our capacity to find something funny, a tragedy engages our capacity to be moved by the fate of other individuals, and erotic art aims to evoke a sexual reaction; and this difference in the emotional responses at the hearts of the genres goes hand in hand with the different aspects of human life they illuminate (see Comedy; Emotion in response to art; Erotic art; Humour; Tragedy).

Questions about the individual natures and possibilities of the various arts include some that are specific to the particular art and some that apply also to other arts. On the one hand, relatively few art forms (architecture and pottery, for example) are directed to the production of works that are intended to perform non-artistic functions, or are of a kind standardly used for utilitarian purposes, and, accordingly, the issue of the relevance to its artistic value of a work's performing, or presenting the appearance of performing, its intended non-artistic function satisfactorily is confined to such arts (see Architecture, aesthetics of). Again, only in some arts does a spectator witness a performance of a work, so that issues about a performer's contribution to the interpretation of a work or about the evaluation of different performances of the same work are limited to such arts (see Art, performing). And since only some works of art (novels, plays and films, for example) tell a story, and only some refer to fictional persons or events, questions about the means by which a story is told or how references to fictional objects should be understood have a restricted application within the arts (see Narrative; Fictional entities). On the other hand, most, if not all, arts allow of works within their domain being correctly perceived as being expressive of psychological states, and, accordingly, give rise to the question of what it is for a work to be expressive of such a condition (see Artistic expression). But the means available within the different arts for the expression of psychological states are various: poetry consists of words, dance exploits the human body, and instrumental music uses nothing other than sounds. And these different artistic media impose different limits on the kinds of state that can be expressed by works of art, the specificity of the states, and the significance within an art of the expressive aspects of its products (see Gurney, E. §2). Furthermore, it is a general truth about the various arts, rather than one special to expression, that what can be achieved within an art is determined by the nature of the medium the art is based on.

Accordingly, an adequate philosophy of art must investigate the variety of such media and elucidate the peculiar advantages they offer and the limitations they impose (see Abstract art; Dance, aesthetics of; Eliot, T.S.; Food, philosophy of §2; Film, aesthetics of; Hanslick, E.; Langer, S.K.K>; Lessing, G.E. §2; Music, aesthetics of; Opera, aesthetics of; Painting, aesthetics of; Photography, aesthetics of; Poetry; Wagner, R.).