The Philosophical Status of Aesthetics

I would like to begin with two preliminary questions: what does “status” mean? and what are we asking when we ask about the status of aesthetics? According to the American Heritage Dictionary, “status” can be defined as: (1) position relative to that of others; standing: her status is that of a guest; (2) high standing; prestige: a position of status in the community, e.g., the status of a leader or healer; (3) in law, the legal character or condition of a person or thing: the status of a minor; (4) a state of affairs; situation; (5) a condition of something or someone, e.g., a patient”s medical status.

Given this general understanding of the term “status,” what specifically do we have in mind when we inquire into the status of aesthetics? There are at least three different questions at issue. (1) A question about the state or internal condition of aesthetics: what is the relative health of the field? what kind of shape are we in? are things going smoothly and well? (2) A question about the de facto standing of aesthetics relative to that of other fields within philosophy: where, on the current philosophical map, does aesthetics fit? what is its reputation, prestige, repute? (3) A question about the proper standing of aesthetics in relation to philosophy: what position should aesthetics occupy? what are its rightful tasks and central philosophical roles?

The question about the internal condition of aesthetics has two components. One concerns the quality of work being done in aesthetics; the other concerns the professional prospects of aestheticians. About the quality of work being done, the picture is generally optimistic. While contemporary aesthetics has no Kant (a fact that doesn”t distinguish it from other specialties), work by Nelson Goodman, Stanley Cavell, Arthur Danto and other influential figures has had a major impact on the field. Several developments in particular have reinvigorated aesthetics. Let me mention just three.

The first is that, by roughly the end of the 1970s, philosophers of art had abandoned their armchairs for a much closer scrutiny of the problems and practices of the arts themselves, taking up a broad range of topics in painting, photography, film, music, literature and dance. Like contemporary philosophers of science, who are expected to know a fair amount of science, aestheticians nowadays need to know something about the arts. One result is that now, more than ever in the past, aesthetics involves the practice of art criticism and enjoys close ties with fields such as art history, literature and film study.

The second, no less important, development is the emergence of feminist aesthetics in the 1980s. The effects of feminist work in aesthetics can perhaps be seen most clearly in research into standards of aesthetic evaluation. The discovery that aesthetic standards presented as timeless and universal are in practice neither timeless nor universal – that they largely reflect beliefs and values typical of European patriarchy – has led to a more critical, historically grounded analysis of artistic concepts, institutions and practices generally. This in turn has resulted in a broader and deeper understanding of the many social and cultural variables that contribute to prevailing notions of taste, aesthetic value and artistic genius.

Lastly, aesthetics has benefited from “an ethical turn:” a revival of long-standing debates about the moral function of narrative and the social impact of the arts. This development has drawn aestheticians into current

political debates concerning public funding for the arts, the function of public art, and the cultural value of arts education. Clearly, the “dreary decades” in aesthetics, so famously lamented by John Passmore, are over. Aesthetics is now, most people acquainted with the field would agree, a lively and attractive discipline.

About the professional prospects of those in the field, however, the picture is less bright. The unpleasant truth is that there simply aren”t many jobs in aesthetics. Even the most talented and well-trained people entering the field face considerable hurdles in finding positions. The problem isn”t that there aren”t any jobs in philosophy, period – though such jobs are scarce – it”s that only a few of the four hundred or so positions advertised each year mention aesthetics and then, nearly always, as an area of competence rather than specialization. Why are so few of the jobs in philosophy, jobs in aesthetics?

This question brings us to the second of the three issues outlined above – that of the de facto standing of aesthetics, its prestige or reputation relative to other fields within philosophy. What is that standing? Here there is little room for disagreement: philosophers widely regard aesthetics as a marginal field. Aesthetics is marginal not only in the relatively benign sense that it lies at the edge, or border, of the discipline, but also in the additional, more troubling, sense that it is deemed philosophically unimportant. In this respect, aesthetics contrasts with areas like the philosophy of mathematics, a field which, while marginal in the first sense, is widely regarded as philosophically important. A few years ago Arthur Danto quipped, and he wasn”t that far off the mark, that the position of aesthetics is “about as low on the scale of philosophical undertakings as bugs are in the chain of being.”

In this context, it”s worth recalling that the idea that aesthetic issues have little or no bearing on the central concerns of philosophy is relatively recent, largely an artifact of the rise of analytic philosophy itself. As is evident from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche and Hegel, questions of art and beauty were once regarded as essential concerns of philosophy.

The current, marginalized, position of aesthetics is reflected in the existing institutional structure of the profession. Consider, for example, curricula. Few Anglo-American graduate programs require even a passing acquaintance with aesthetics. Few departments have – or feel the need to have – anyone to teach courses in aesthetics or to advise dissertations in the area. Aesthetics is an “optional extra,” nice when you can get it, but in no sense a necessary part of the philosophical training of graduate students.

This is more than just the result of the growth in academic specialization. No one comes out of a Ph.D. program in philosophy without some grounding in metaphysics and epistemology, logic and philosophy of science, the history of philosophy and ethics. Metaphysics and epistemology, like logic, are defined as “core areas” of philosophy. History and ethics, while not core areas, belong nonetheless to the “essential perimeter” of the field. It is difficult – indeed, in most programs, impossible – to get a Ph.D. without doing work in these areas. They are areas in which everyone is expected to have opinions and be able to discuss at least the standard problems.

Because the same is not true of aesthetics, the vast majority of philosophers enter the profession with little or no knowledge of the methods or questions of the field. As a result, philosophers generally either ignore issues of art and aesthetics or think of them as having little or no bearing on the central concerns of the

discipline. Most systematic philosophers pass entire careers without ever turning their attention to questions of art or beauty. Davidson and Goodman are rare exceptions. Nor is this lack of interest in aesthetics – or the related absence of aesthetics from the pages of the most widely read and prestigious philosophy journals – likely to raise any eyebrows. And so, when philosophy departments sit down to determine the fields in which they wish to hire, it should come as no surprise that it doesn”t occur to anyone to think of aesthetics. Marginalization begets marginalization.

So much for the de facto standing of aesthetics. What are we to make of this situation? This leads to the third question mentioned above: what is the proper standing, the true value or significance, of aesthetics?

Perhaps the most common answer to this question is that aesthetics, properly understood, just is philosophically marginal. The view that the de facto standing of aesthetics is indeed its proper standing is held not only by philistines who don”t care about art – “this is all aesthetics deserves” – but also by those, like Stanley Cavell and Ted Cohen, who care about art a great deal – as Cohen puts it, “it is here, despite the precariousness of its position, that aesthetics is at its best.”

My own position, however, is that the common view – the view that “aesthetics just is philosophically marginal” – is wrong. Aesthetics is an integral part of philosophy. And this is why aesthetics deserves a more central place in the profession. The pragmatic advantages of defending the significance of aesthetics for people working in aesthetics is clear. But in order to argue from this position, the philosophical case for this claim has to be made.

Making this case is no easy task. There”s no going back to the tradition of grand metaphysical aesthetics. That tradition, and with it the kind of importance ascribed to aesthetics by Kant and Hegel, is over. Nor would many of us wish to return to the arid aesthetics that resulted from the application of the methods of linguistic analysis that prevailed in the 1940s and 50s. Moreover, one of the fundamental and positive features of aesthetics today – its strong connection with the arts and with theoretical disciplines outside of philosophy – may be one of the very things that make it of less interest to philosophers generally. As recent work in aesthetics moves closer to the arts and to other fields, it comes to be viewed as moving further away from the central projects of philosophy.

How then is a case to be made for the philosophical importance of aesthetics? One place to begin is by challenging the view that movement toward the arts is movement away from philosophy. No one thinks it a scandal for philosophers of science to dirty their hands with the details of black body radiation or vector processing. Reflection on empirical findings, be they in physics or neurophysiology, questions about how these findings are to be correctly interpreted, about the problems they raise or help to solve, is recognized as a legitimate and essential part of the philosophy of science.

When one considers this development in the philosophy of science, the prevalence of the view that close connection with the arts makes aesthetics less philosophical is rather surprising. Could it be that this is the result of an unrecognized and unacknowledged, lingering commitment to the analytic/synthetic distinction – a distinction widely thought to be discredited? In aesthetics as elsewhere, a well-grounded familiarity with the empirical domain under investigation should be regarded as a philosophical plus not a minus. Knowledge

of the history of musical practice or the development of modern literary criticism, for example, may usefully call into question generalizations about “the work of art itself” or the conditions of aesthetic appreciation.

Philosophers think that philosophy of science which takes science seriously is philosophically important because they think science is philosophically important. Few philosophers, however, think that art is philosophically important. But this, I think, is a mistake. Art matters philosophically because it matters humanly. To be sure, art in the last century has changed in ways that make it more difficult to understand or appreciate and the works of Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Cage and others are less likely than those of past traditions to be met with veneration or awe. But these changes are part of the subject which aesthetics must now address. Despite changes in philosophical method, understanding human experience remains a fundamental aspiration of philosophy. It is as part of this larger humanistic project that aesthetics can be seen as an important branch of philosophy. Alas, this line of defense, worthy though it is, may be met with the stock response: “yes, yes, art is humanly important, but what does it have to do with philosophy?” Is there anything that can be said in reply?

One response would be to look to the theory of value. Most philosophers today, including those whose philosophical interests lie in scientific and technical areas, recognize the importance of value theory. Aesthetics is part of value theory, and if the theory of value is philosophically important, aesthetics is philosophical important, too. How can philosophers aspire to understand the nature of value without attention to aesthetic value?

This is an auspicious time for such inquiry. In aesthetics, philosophers have increasingly rejected the formalist separation of aesthetic and moral value to pursue substantive questions concerning, for example, the moral function of art, authorial responsibility, the moral limits of aesthetic appreciation. A central concern of aesthetics today is the relation of aesthetic and moral value. Moral philosophers, in turn, are looking to art. Joel Feinberg, Peter Railton, Susan Wolf and others working in ethics have turned their attention to issues such as the justification of government subsidies for the arts, the narrative aspects of moral life, and the value of moral insights or moral training acquired through literature and art. We might say, with slight exaggeration, that we are experiencing an “ethical turn” in aesthetics and an “aesthetic turn” in ethics.

I have sketched two ways in which the philosophical importance of aesthetics might be defended. Doubtless there are others. The larger lesson here is that what we need is substantive work in aesthetics at a foundational level. And this means a return to issues that have long been bracketed. The old strategy of protecting aesthetics by operating on the margins of philosophy was appropriate for its time, successfully keeping aesthetics from being absorbed by the reductive practices of linguistic philosophy. But ours is a different time and the cost of continued marginalization is high. In suggesting that we return to foundational issues, I”m not saying that this enterprise should take place in isolation from the arts themselves. The only way in which we can meaningfully explore general questions about the nature of art and aesthetics is through close attention to the particularity and concreteness of specific cases.

My aim in these remarks has been to invite further reflection about the philosophical significance of aesthetics. This in turn will require further thought about the proper aspirations of philosophy, and about

what aesthetics as a discipline and a way of thinking really is.