

Part One

The Nature of Aesthetic Interests

It is notoriously difficult to define the boundaries of such large and lively interests as the scientific, the moral, and the aesthetic. At least since Immanuel Kant, philosophers have hoped to be able to mark out nice logical distinctions among the kinds of judgments corresponding to such interests. In fact, Kant imposed one of the great obstacles to modern philosophy in this respect: enormous effort has been required to show that the demarcation lines Kant favored—or other similarly construed distinctions—actually falsify or distort the uniformities and differences favored among our conceptual networks. This is not to say that questions that belong to the very heart of empirical science, moral judgment, the appreciation and criticism of fine art are not easily identified. They are, of course. But since Kant, philosophers have been inclined to hope that when they are sorted, such questions will lead to neat categorical differences justifying their having been distinguished in the ways in which they have. Hence, there is a certain embarrassment at stake in failing to discover the required distinctions.

On the other hand, one may very well question the notion of discovering the difference between the scientific, the moral, and the aesthetic. What would such a discovery be like? It seems fairly clear that the distinctions would prove to be some philosopher's proposal, not a discovery at all. One need not deny that there are certain hard-core questions that belong unquestionably to each of these domains. But that hardly means that the boundaries of each are open to inspection. Criticism shades into science, and moral considerations into appreciation. In the moral domain, for instance, it is often maintained that moral judgments are inherently action-guiding, that there is no point to a moral judgment if it is not intended to direct another or oneself to act appropriately in a relevant situation. But if that is *so*, then how are we to understand valid moral judgments in situations in which the required action is impossible ("you ought to, or are obliged to, pay that loan today though you've squandered the money

at the racetrack”) or in which the action appraised or appreciated is beyond the capacity of normal persons to perform at will (“St. Francis acted as a saint”)?

Even after it develops that no simple logical differences exist among scientific, moral, and aesthetic judgments, philosophers may enthusiastically continue their attempt to distinguish the aesthetic domain. Inquiry then turns to another sort of distinction—for instance, the controlling interest of each of these domains. *So* one may argue that distinctive sets of reasons are regularly put forward to defend those sorts of judgments we call aesthetic, economic, or moral. The judgments themselves need not differ in their logical properties; it may be only that there are clusters or classes of reasons that would be relevant to each. And the question arises whether these are overlapping for the sorts of judgment distinguished, whether they may be sharply defined, or whether they may be exhibited only by way of admissible samples.

Beneath all this lurks the question of the nature of such large category-terms as the aesthetic, the moral, the scientific. It may be asked, **for** instance, whether philosophers are primarily explicating the meaning of “aesthetic” or whether, by an ellipsis, they are really generalizing about the properties of certain sorts of judgments or remarks that are taken without dispute (though they are not infrequently disputed) to belong within the scope of aesthetic interest. That is, one may ask whether an analysis of the meaning of “aesthetic” will be fruitful independently of the second sort of issue, whether in fact it can even be undertaken. The point is not without some interest (given the professional literature), because it is well known that philosophers have quite regularly disputed among themselves whether this or that is *really* appropriate to the aesthetic point of view. It may then be that statements about the aesthetic point of view are actually elliptical summaries of findings upon this or that set of *avored* data—which some philosophers at least will have thought to be related in an important way to our concern with fine art; other philosophers, appearing to dispute the very meaning of the aesthetic, may either be disputing those findings or providing alternative findings for other sets of data.

J. O. Urmson’s contribution, some years ago, to the Aristotelian Society’s symposium on “What makes a situation aesthetic?” (1957) threads through this sort of consideration. His method is in accord both with some traditional conceptions of the central features of aesthetic interest and with a certain powerful theme in recent Anglo-American philosophy (associated originally with the name of Wittgenstein): that the **use** of terms in actual currency in our language need not, and may not be able to, be defined by means of necessary and sufficient conditions. There are, however, certain telltale features of Urmson’s account. Urmson adopts the cautious approach of distinguishing between the “simpler cases” and the more difficult

cases of aesthetic evaluation, He favors the view—associated with the original sense of the “aesthetic”—that the aesthetic aspects of things are concerned with how objects or phenomena appear to, or are discriminated by, the senses. He saves the thesis by admitting both that non-perceptual properties may be included “by courtesy” and by conceding that the more complex cases of aesthetic concern cannot be satisfactorily reduced to the formula for the simpler cases. He also distinguishes between the merit of things as being good things of a kind and the aesthetic merit of things, that is, their merit judged from a certain point of view. It is, in his view, merely contingent that the criteria for judging the goodness of a thing of a kind may well be the same as the criteria for being aesthetically meritorious (dining room tables, for instance). But the combination of these two concessions forces us to request a more detailed account of what it is, precisely, that makes a situation aesthetic.

Here, the difficulties encountered are of the greatest importance. For one thing, the extension of the terms “aesthetic” and “work of art” are clearly not the same, though it is often supposed that the point of aesthetics is to clarify the nature of our appreciation of fine art: natural phenomena and objects not designated artworks are ordinarily admitted to be aesthetically eligible. But then, the very range of artworks changes in rather surprising ways (see Part Three) and, with that, the range of what might be viewed as aesthetically relevant changes as well. The principal pressure points regarding the meaning of aesthetic interest, however, are all centered, in one way or another, on the aesthetic relevance of the imperceptible or the non-perceptual. But the quarrelsome nature of the non-perceivable cannot be denied. For instance, the distinction of forgeries and fakes in art suggests a consideration that cannot normally be restricted to what is perceptually accessible. Sometimes, as in print-making, it may merely be that the intention to produce a print from an authentic plate contrary to the original artist’s authorization makes a particular print a forgery. *If* that consideration is aesthetically relevant, then the aesthetic cannot be confined to the perceptible. But the question remains whether *that* consideration is actually relevant aesthetically—rather than in some other way. Commentators disagree. Again, it is extremely difficult to see how the literary arts can be subsumed under the formula for the “simpler cases.” Clive Bell had already admitted this in pressing the general thesis that Urmson’s view approaches: it occasioned the most acrobatic adjustments imaginable; some theorists were led to hold that reading texts in order to understand the meaning of what was written was simply not essential to (though it was needed to occasion) one’s aesthetic appreciation of a poem or novel. A third difficulty concerns the relevance of background information—cultural, biographical, intentional factors (see Part Six). If one must grasp something of the context in which a work of art is produced in order

to appreciate it aesthetically, then even if one centers one's interest on what is perceivable, non-perceptual factors will and must relevantly inform what is perceivable. **For** example, to understand a style, a genre, a representation, a symbol, an historical tradition, a personal intention, is to understand what cannot be explicated solely in perceptual terms. Finally, if these difficulties be conceded, then one must concede as well that the appreciation of works of art may entail the exercise of capacities other than perceptual—for instance, imagination or conceptual understanding. The point is that the properties of a work of art may not be such as either to invite perceptual inspection at all or to invite perception primarily or exclusively. So-called conceptual art is often not perceptually accessible at all, though for that reason some will dispute whether conceptual art is not a contradiction in terms. And much art, not only literature but painting and music as well, seems to be appreciated only when certain imagining abilities are called into play. The empathists had pressed the thesis in a certain restricted way, but there seems to be a larger range of abilities at stake. The perception of physiognomic aspects of the lines in a painting, discrimination of the "movement" of a musical line, the appreciation of scenes depicted in novels or of the motivation of characters in a play all suggest our reliance on abilities that may inform sensory perception but that cannot be characterized merely as such.

Monroe Beardsley's comparatively recent effort (1970) to isolate the aesthetic point of view and the nature of aesthetic qualities is cognizant of all these difficulties. Beardsley attempts nevertheless to salvage a thesis, associated with his well-known effort to construe aesthetic appreciation as an objective undertaking, in which aesthetic properties or values are actually possessed by objects, objects that may be examined for them in certain assignably correct ways by normally endowed percipients. He shifts here from earlier formulations, in speaking of the experiencing rather than the perceiving of artworks (or other suitable objects); and he holds that aesthetic gratification is primarily obtained by attending to the "formal unity" and "regional qualities" of an object or phenomenon. This raises questions about whether such properties can be shown actually to obtain in a given object, to be somehow discernible in it, to preclude the tenability of alternative and incompatible ascriptions of such properties (see Part Seven); it also imposes on us the problem of specifying how to give "correct" and "complete" instructions about experiencing the actual aesthetic values that an object may be supposed to have. Whatever the difficulties Beardsley's account generates, it constitutes the most forthright and informed effort we have to recover the objectivity of aesthetic discourse as such from the pressures of the sort already adduced.

Timothy Binkley's very recent paper (1977) is a witty, iconoclastic piece—one of a number he has written in the same spirit—in which the

more received and conventional views about the aesthetic appreciation of works of art are threatened by attention to implications drawn from older, more recent, and more extreme efforts in the arts themselves. Here, relying on certain novel developments in so-called conceptual art, Binkley shows effectively that there are actually works of art (if such they may be called) that **cannot** be explicated in perceptual terms. Even if one contests his specimens—though the dubious force of doing *so* is clear enough—Binkley does oblige us to see that, even in more conventional settings, intentional, contextual, background considerations are all but impossible to eliminate (see Parts Five and Six). So construed, his account challenges not only the more straightforward presumption of Urmson's discussion but also the prospect of sustaining the kind of objective discovery that Beardsley favors.

Perhaps the most important implication of Binkley's account is that it is quite impossible to separate the characterization of the aesthetic from one's sense of the range of what constitutes art. This is not to say that definitions, here, isolate essential properties (see Part Three) but only that the point of defining the aesthetic is to throw into relief the kinds of properties prized in the context of appreciating art. R. K. Elliott (1966–67), reflecting on this very consideration within the range of more standard objects of art than Binkley favors, notes that the usual perception-centered theories of aesthetic experience tend to impoverish our actual appreciation of art. In order to accommodate the full range of what we savor, Elliott proposes an expression theory. What is distinctive about it is, precisely, that it is not an expression theory of art or of artistic creation but of what is appreciated in properly attending to art (see Part Six) and that, in that regard, the objectivism to which a perception-centered account pretends is found deficient. **Here**, then, we *see* the potential opposition between speaking of the nature of art (the actual properties of which can be discriminated) and speaking of the nature of aesthetic experience, which leads us to speak of experiencing a work of art "from within" and hence, to hold that objective **contemplation** is simply an inadequate characterization of aesthetic engagement. It forces us to see, therefore, the import of counterpart tendencies in defining the nature of art itself (see Part Three).