What is Aesthetics?

The unexamined life is not worth living.  
- Attributed to Socrates

1 Introduction

1.1 Aesthetics and Philosophy

• **Q: What is Aesthetics?**
  - Aesthetics is a subfield of **PHILOSOPHY**
  - The term “aesthetics” was first introduced into philosophical literature by Alexander Baumgarten, in 1750

• **Q: What is Philosophy?**
  - **PHILOSOPHY**, broadly speaking, involves the **careful** and **reasoned** **EXAMINATION of, or thought about** phenomena and concepts in the world around us.  
    "This is not how people use the term philosophy in actual speech! This is the academic discipline “philosophy,” not the casual use of the word as in “Well, my philosophy to life is...”

1.2 Aesthetics and Beauty as Value

• One major area of philosophical examination is the study of how we assign **VALUE**

• Plato distinguished three major kinds of value (Phaedrus, 246 EC)
  1. **Goodness**

• These correlate to how 19th-century philosophers divided up philosophy into three branches

  1. **ETHICS** How do you assess whether something is **GOOD**, or better?
  2. **LOGIC** How do you assess whether something is **TRUE**, or valid?
  3. **AESTHETICS** How do you assess whether something is **BEAUTIFUL**?

• So we can arrive at the following definition:

  **DEFINITION: AESTHETICS**
  
  The careful and reasoned examination of **BEAUTY** as a **VALUE-JUDGEMENT**

  cf. Baumgarten in the 18th Century:
  
  Aesthetics = The study of “Art, Beauty and Human Sensibility”
  (Where “sensibility” ≈ “good taste”)

1.3 Aesthetic Questions

**Q1:** How do we know that something is beautiful?

**Q2:** Is beauty/aesthetic appeal and **FUNCTIONALITY** related?  
If so, how?

**Q3:** Is aesthetic appeal/beauty **SUBJECTIVE** or **OBJECTIVE**?
  → Can an aesthetic judgement be **PREDICTED WITH RULES**?

**Q4:** What **IS** the aesthetic judgement?  
  Pleasure? Awe? Intense Curiosity? ...

• Immanuel Kant proposed an answer to some of these questions:
Kant’s Theory of Aesthetics

The **aesthetic** judgement
(i.e., the act of judging something beautiful)

1 is **subjective** (a felt judgement, not an intellectual calculation)

2 is **universal** (...not just a personal opinion)

3 is **disinterested**, and (value independent of usefulness/benefit to perceiver)

4 **engages imagination and intellect** (in addition to the senses)

2 Criteria for Aesthetic Judgements

2.1 What is the Aesthetic Judgement?

- **Observation**: People respond to sensory stimuli from the world, eg., with a judgement “It’s beautiful”

  → These responses (and how they *pattern* in the world) are what AESTHETICS investigates

“Pine Forest National Park” by Photokamok; freedigitalphotos.net

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

“Waterfall In Forest” by Porbital; freedigitalphotos.net

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?
A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

"View of Toledo" by El Greco, c. 1596–1600, oil on canvas, 47.75 × 42.75 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

"The Calling of Saint Matthew" by Caravaggio, c. 1599–1600, oil on canvas, 340 × 322 cm, Contarelli Chapel, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Roma, Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

"Ratto di Prosperina" by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1621-22, Sculpture in Marble, 225 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

"Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)" by Picasso, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 73.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art New York Licensed under Public Domain via Commons
A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

WHY?

- **QUESTION**: What makes you judge these as beautiful or not? Are there formal properties that *cause* beauty in an object?

  - **POSSIBLE FACTORS**: Complexity, simplicity, regularity, symmetry (or asymmetry), proportion, harmony, contrast ...

- **QUESTION**: How can we *describe* what makes something beautiful?

- **QUESTION**: How can we *describe* what makes something art?

  → We’ll discuss how to describe formal characteristics of art:

    - **FORM and COMPOSITION**

    - Colour (**HUE**, **VALUE**, **CHROMA**, local vs perceived)

    - Light (types of **LIGHT SOURCES**, types of shadows)

- In the past, some people believed that beauty was defined mathematically - i.e., that if an object had the correct proportions, it would be beautiful

  - eg., Fibonacci’s Golden Mean

  - This $\frac{1 + \sqrt{5}}{2}$ mathematical ratio is found in nature:

  - Classical and High Renaissance art/architecture often used this ratio as a compositional principle:

- In this traditional view, **BEAUTY** was viewed as a **PROPERTY OF THE OBJECT** (“It’s beautiful”)

- This contrasts with Kant’s approach, as Kant suggested that the **PERCEIVER** is also a crucial component for beauty value-judgements
2.2 The Aesthetic Judgement and Art

- Traditionally, an “aesthetic judgement” is a **positive judgement** (“It’s beautiful”)
- ... but aesthetics and art are inextricably intertwined
- “What counts as art” and hence beautiful changes over time

A: Beautiful!
B: Ugly!
C: Neither

A: Art!
B: Not Art!

“Fountain” by Marcel Duchamp, Urinal “readymade” signed with joke name; early example of “Dada” art. A paradigmatic example of found-art. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. Captions read: “Fountain by R. Mutt, Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS,” Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

- **Question**: Did you always have the same response to the question “Is this beautiful”? and “Is this Art?”
- **Question**: What makes you judge something as ART or not? Are there **criteria** an object must meet in order for it to count as ART?
  - **Possible Factors**: beauty, intentionality of artist, skill/talent of artist, effort of artist, ...

- **Question**: How do we assign **artistic value** to an object?

→ We’ll also discuss theories that aim at answering this question

- **Representational/Mimetic** Function of Art
- The **Expressive** Nature of Art
- The **Value** of Art as
  - **Aesthetic**
  - **Contextualist**
  - **Constructivist**

3 Course Expectations

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**Week 1**: Instagram Assignment Task

**Option 1**: →Find/create something aesthetically pleasing to you
- identify one of Kant’s Criteria that it fulfills

**Option 2**: →Find something that illustrates Fibonacci’s Ratio
- annotate, or discuss the composition in the caption

**Course Website**:
https://mlouieling.wordpress.com/swu252-2018/

**References**

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