Philosophy of the Arts

An introduction to aesthetics

Third Edition

Gordon Graham

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Philosophy of The Arts presents a comprehensive and accessible introduction to those coming to aesthetics and the philosophy of art for the first time. The third edition is greatly enhanced by new chapters on art and beauty, the performing arts and modern art, and new sections on Aristotle, Hegel and Nietzsche. All other chapters have been thoroughly revised and extended.

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- includes regular summaries and suggestions for further reading.

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In memory of
Christina Marie Kennedy (1974–97)
to whom these questions *mattered*

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Preface to the Third Edition

The first edition of *Philosophy of The Arts* appeared in 1997, with a second revised edition appearing in 2000. From the start I have had the benefit of a large number of comments from teachers, students, readers and reviewers. The publisher's suggestion of a third edition has now allowed me to take account of most of them, but the list of people to whom I owe a debt has grown too long to detail. Continued thanks are due to staff at Routledge, who have promoted the book with both enthusiasm and success.

This third edition is a more major revision than the second. It includes a further two new chapters – Chapters 8 and 11 – and what was Chapter 1 in both previous editions has been split into two to allow the material on Kant to be expanded. All the other chapters have been rewritten, and new material added to most of them.

Early versions of some of the themes I discuss were published in papers in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the *Journal of Value Inquiry, Ends and Means*, the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* and the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. All of the material I have used from these papers has been extensively rewritten.

Gordon Graham
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October 2004

Introduction

The arts are an important part of human life and culture. They attract a large measure of attention and support from states, commercial companies and the public at large. But what makes something 'art', and why should we value it? These are practical questions for civil servants, charitable trusts, private sponsors and educational establishments. They are also theoretical questions with which philosophers have been concerned for more than 2,000 years. Over that long period a number of important answers have been developed and explored, and the purpose of this book is to introduce newcomers to the field of aesthetics and art theory to both the problems and their resolution. Philosophy of art is simply an attempt to answer these questions in a sustained and coherent way, while drawing upon the thinking of the major philosophers who have devoted most attention to them. My intention, however, is not just to provide a textbook for students of philosophy. The book also aims to demonstrate to anyone who reads it – student or non-student – that philosophy of art (or aesthetics) is directly relevant to the study, appreciation and practice of the arts.

Philosophers are not the only people to develop theories of art. Sociologists, musicologists, art critics and literary theorists have done so as well. But what philosophy has to say on these topics is especially relevant to any serious thinking about the value and importance of art. At the same time, it becomes lifelessly abstract if it is too far removed from the arts themselves. That is why, after four chapters on general themes, the book divides into chapters expressly devoted to particular art forms including, for the first time in this edition, the performing arts. The idea is to stimulate an interest in philosophy among those whose principal motivation for approaching these topics is a love of music, painting, film, literature, drama, dance or architecture. Chapter 10 considers at length some recent developments, especially in the plastic arts, and addresses a common concern about modern art – is it art at all? – while Chapter 11 investigates the topical subject of environmental aesthetics. The final chapter of the book explores more complex issues of art theory and, in particular, the Marxist, structuralist and postmodern approaches to art.

One special difficulty about focusing on the specific rather than the general

is this: we can only talk meaningfully about paintings, poems, symphonies, and so on if, quite literally, we know what we are talking about. This means that the reader needs to be familiar with the illustrative examples, and it is impossible to be sure of this in advance. So far as I can, I have used the very best-known examples of artworks – for example, the *Mona Lisa*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, etc. – but sometimes less well-known examples illustrate the point at issue better. Happily, this difficulty is much less great than it was with the first edition because of the internet, which has become a hugely valuable resource for this purpose. In addition to a complete bibliography, there is a list of websites where collections of artworks, including music, will be found.

Suggestions for further reading have also been reorganized for this edition. At the end of each chapter I have identified more advanced introductory reading, classic writings and major contemporary studies. With one or two exceptions, the advanced introductory reading is taken from two books that have appeared since the first edition was published – the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (now in its second edition) and the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, both of which are accessible, comprehensive and authoritative. So far as is possible I have identified 'classic' writings from the past, but in a few cases included more recent works. All of them have been the focus of widespread discussion. A third category aims to draw attention to major and important contemporary works, though inevitably this is a tiny selection out of all the available choices. The bibliography at the end includes full details of all these publications, together with works cited in the text. In addition it lists other books and articles that will be of interest to readers following up the topics of the different chapters.

There are a good many introductions to the philosophy of art, and several more since the first edition of this one. The distinctive feature of mine is its focus on the value of art, and the exploration of normative issues in the context of specific art forms as well as the aesthetic appreciation of nature. This approach rests upon an assumption that it is better for the philosopher of art to investigate the question of art's value than to try to arrive at a definition of art, an assumption defended at length in the final chapter. I have put this defence at the end of the book because, though it is logically prior and philosophically crucial to the cogency of my approach, a reader whose interest is primarily in matters artistic can usefully read the book up to that point without going on to engage directly with the rather more abstract philosophical issues involved in defending a normative approach.

The third edition covers several topics that the first and second did not. Despite these additions, however, some interesting questions in aesthetics have inevitably been omitted. This is unavoidable because typically philosophy raises more questions than it answers. The point of an introduction is not to provide a definitive set of solutions to a designated set of problems, but to start the mind of the reader on an exploratory journey of its own.

1

Art and pleasure

The most familiar question in philosophical aesthetics is this: what is art? Why is this question worth asking? The answer has to be that art *matters*. The question 'what is art?' is really the question 'what *counts* as art?' and we want an answer to it in order to know whether or not something should be accorded the *status* of art. In other words, a concern with what is art is not just a matter of classification, but a matter of cultural esteem. There are, then, two fundamental issues in aesthetics – the essential nature of art, and its social importance (or lack of it). Philosophical aesthetics has tended to focus on the first of these questions, almost exclusively in fact. But there is a lot to be said for tackling the second question first. Accordingly, over the course of the next few chapters we will examine four attempts to formulate a *normative* theory of art, which is to say, one that will explain its *value*.

What makes art valuable? A spontaneous answer, even to the point of being commonplace, is this: art is a source of pleasure or enjoyment. For the sake of a label we could call this view 'aesthetic hedonism' from *hedos*, the Greek word for pleasure. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the adequacy of aesthetic hedonism as a normative theory of art.

Hume on taste and tragedy

Some philosophers have thought that the value of art is *necessarily* connected with pleasure or enjoyment because, they argue, to say that a painting, a poem, a play or a piece of music is good is just the same as saying that it pleases us. The best-known philosopher to hold this view was the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76). In a famous essay entitled 'Of the Standard of Taste' Hume argues that the important thing about art is its 'agreeableness', the pleasure we derive from it, and that this is a matter of *our* sentiments, not *its* intrinsic nature. 'Judgements' about good and bad in art, according to Hume, are not really judgements at all 'because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always

real, wherever a man is conscious of it' (Hume 1963: 238). In other words, if I like a thing, I like it, irrespective of any characteristics it possesses. 'To seek the real beauty, or the real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to seek the real sweet or real bitter' (*ibid.* 239). That is to say, aesthetic preferences are expressions of the taste of the observer, not statements about the object, and Hume thinks the wide diversity of opinions about art that we find in the world is confirmation of this fact.

Here we touch upon a question that many people think is central to the philosophy of art – can there be objective judgements of aesthetic value? Hume's essay is widely taken to be the classic exposition and defence of view that they cannot be, that aesthetic opinions are essentially subjective. However, the main discussion of this issue will be postponed to a later stage (Chapter 10), because for the moment we are concerned not with the suggestion that aesthetic appraisals are subjective, but with the idea that, by their very nature, they are connected with pleasure.

As a defence of subjectivism in aesthetics, though, Hume's essay is not really very persuasive. While he observes that aesthetic opinions can differ greatly, he also recognizes that at least some artistic sentiments can be so wide of the mark as to be discountable. If aesthetic appraisal is a matter of feeling, it seems there can be aberrant feelings. The case he considers is that of a minor writer being compared with John Milton, the great poetic genius who wrote *Paradise Lost*. Though, says Hume, 'there may be found persons who give the preference to the former . . . no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous'. What this implies is that, even though taste is a matter of feeling things to be agreeable or disagreeable, there is still a *standard* of taste, and the question is how these two ideas can be made consistent.

Hume's answer is that the standard of taste arises from the nature of human beings. Since they share a common nature, broadly speaking they like the same things. When it comes to art, he thinks, '[s]ome particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric [of the human mind], are calculated to please, and others to displease' (1963: 271). There are of course strange reactions and opinions; people can prefer the oddest things. But Hume believes that the test of time will eventually tell, and that only those things which truly are aesthetically pleasing will go on calling forth approbation as the years pass.

On the face of it, Hume's theory seems to fit the facts. Artistic tastes do differ greatly, yet broadly speaking, most people like and admire the same great masterpieces in music, painting, literature or architecture. Still, contrary to Hume's suggestion, this shared tendency on the part of the majority of people merely reveals a *common* taste, it does not validate any *standard* of taste. The fact that a feeling is shared by many people does not make it rationally obligatory for everyone to feel the same. If an individual has

extremely peculiar musical tastes, say, we can certainly regard them as odd, but if Hume is right in thinking that aesthetics is all a matter of feeling, we have no good reason to call them 'absurd and ridiculous'; they are merely different. If we want to say that some views about art are mistaken, we cannot make the mistake rest on human *feeling* about art – it just is what it is – but on something about the art itself.

For present purposes, however, Hume's contention about feeling as the basis of aesthetic judgement is not the main issue, which is rather the connection he alleges between aesthetics and pleasure. Suppose it is true that people declare artworks and performances to be good or bad in accordance with the feeling those works prompt in them. It does not follow that the feeling has to be one of *pleasure*. Hume, along with most of his contemporaries, believed that only pleasure could explain the power of art to attract and hold us. This is why, in another famous essay entitled 'Of Tragedy', he finds it puzzling that people should willingly watch plays, read poems and view paintings that include events which would normally horrify them. His explanation of this phenomenon is that though the horribleness of the events would naturally repel us, it is overlaid with (or even turned into) pleasure by the artistry with which the events are depicted.

> [T]his extraordinary effect proceeds from that very eloquence with which the melancholy scene is depicted. The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgement displayed in disposing them; the exercise, I say, together with the force of expression and beauty of oratorial numbers, diffuse the highest satisfaction on the audience and excite the most delightful moments. By this means the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind, but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure.
>
> (Hume 1963: 224)

But why is it puzzling that people are attracted by tragedy? The problem arises only because Hume assumes that people must be deriving pleasure from the depiction of horrible events. Perhaps, on the contrary, some people relish *unpleasant* feeling. If so, and if it is on this ground that they commend tragedies, horror films and so on, then Hume is right to think that their aesthetic appraisals reflect sentiment or feeling, but wrong to think that the feeling in question is one of pleasure.

It follows that the connection between art and pleasure is not a necessary one; to say that a work of art is good or valuable on the strength of the feelings it invokes in us, is not the same as saying that we find it enjoyable. Moreover, we might describe it in positive terms – gripping or compelling, for instance – without implying that we derive pleasure from it; the loathsome can exercise a powerful fascination.

Nevertheless, though 'good' does not *mean* 'pleasurable', it still makes sense to claim that art is to be valued chiefly *because of* the pleasure or enjoyment it gives. It is this, I think, rather than Hume's thesis, that most people who believe there is a connection between art and enjoyment mean to assert.

Collingwood on art as amusement

Is it true that art is principally valuable as a source of pleasure and enjoyment? It is worth noting that it is not always natural to speak of 'enjoying' art. People quite easily say this of novels, plays, films and pieces of music, but less easily of paintings, sculptures and buildings. So even if it were agreed that 'enjoyment' often explains the value of art, some further explanation of just what this might mean in the case of the plastic arts and architecture would be needed.

But a more important difficulty is this. To say that art is something we enjoy, tells us next to nothing. People enjoy lots of things – their work, their holidays, their food. When someone says he enjoys his work, we usually ask what it is about the work that is enjoyable, and expect his answer to tell us about what he finds of *value* in it. 'Enjoyment' does no more than signal that he values it. In a similar fashion, the initial claim that art is a source of enjoyment is not in itself informative. It simply leads on to the next question. What *makes* it enjoyable?

It is often assumed (as Hume assumes) that the answer is obvious; things are enjoyable because they give us pleasure. Now the concept of 'pleasure' also needs some clarification, because it can be used in such a general fashion that it means little more than 'enjoyment' in the sense just described, in which case we are no further forward. But getting clear about the concept of pleasure is not as easy as we might suppose. There is a tendency to conflate 'pleasure' with 'happiness' as though they were synonymous, when they are not, and another tendency to think of 'pleasure' as the psychological opposite of 'pain'. Both these tendencies are to be found in the founders of philosophical utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), and since utilitarian ideas have had such a powerful influence on contemporary culture, these tendencies have become widespread.

The sense of 'pleasure' we want to examine here is something like 'entertainment value'. The value of art is that it offers us entertainment. This is a thesis that the British philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) discusses in *The Principles of Art*, one of the major works of aesthetics published in the twentieth century and one to which we will have occasion to return in a later chapter. Collingwood calls the belief that the value of art lies in its ability to entertain us, 'art as amusement'. While he is partly engaged in the traditional task of philosophical aesthetics – namely defining what art is – his interest is a normative one. The purpose of his book is to arrive at a

satisfactory conception of 'art proper' or *true* art, as we might say, and what he wants to show is that 'art as amusement' falls short of 'art proper'. Confusing the two hides an important mistake.

Collingwood does not mean to deny that there are people for whom the arts are a form of entertainment, and it may indeed be the case that, as a matter of fact, they genuinely find amusement in plays, novels, and so on. This is an important point to stress. To claim that 'art as amusement' falls short of 'art proper' does not require us to deny that the arts have recreational value and can entertain us. Collingwood's contention is that if this is *all* we find there, we have missed the thing most worth finding. His analysis of the error in 'art as amusement' is both insightful and persuasive, but best considered in connection with his own, positive theory of art which will be examined in Chapter 3. At this point in the argument, it is sufficient to register a doubt he raises about an important assumption at work. The thesis that art is valuable for the pleasure or amusement we derive from it depends, crucially, on the truth of a factual claim – that we do indeed derive pleasure from it.

Is this actually true? What is at issue here is not a matter of language or belief, but a matter of experience. First, people readily use the language of pleasure and enjoyment in connection with the arts, but it does not follow that the thing they experience is properly called 'pleasure'. Second, for all sorts of reasons people will claim that they enjoy major novels, great masters, the music of the concert hall, and may make this claim quite sincerely. But what they choose to *do* is often a more convincing test of their real opinion than what they feel constrained to *say*. Once we shift our attention to the choices they make, it is not at all obvious that most people find most of what we call art pleasurable in any straightforward sense.

Someone who wants to read simply for pleasure is far more likely to choose a novel by John Grisham than by William Faulkner, though the label 'literature' would be attached to the latter rather than the former. Romantic comedy is a more obvious choice than art film for most people going to the cinema, *just for pleasure*. Channel hoppers wanting an evening's entertainment at home are, by and large, more likely to stop at soap opera than Shakespeare. And who, apart from a very few, would prefer the art gallery to the restaurant if what is in view is simply pleasure?

Such preferences need not prevail universally for the general point to hold; great novels can also be diverting and amusing. But there is this further point to be emphasized. People who, for the purposes of entertainment, choose soap opera over Shakespeare or Grisham over Faulkner, are most unlikely to claim that what they have chosen is artistically more valuable or significant. Probably, they will agree that Faulkner is a far more important writer than Grisham. Even so, his novels provide a much less pleasurable way of passing the time. In the same way 'easy listening' is preferable to Beethoven's late *Quartets*, because it is easy, not because it is greater art.

The fact that personal pleasure and artistic significance can be divorced in this way lends support to Collingwood's contention that the prevalence of 'art as amusement' as the explanation of aesthetic value has distorted people's ability to ask honestly just how much pleasure they derive from 'high' art. Collingwood thinks that there is often a measure of self-deception in people's attitudes, because there is often a conventional pressure to *claim* to enjoy art. But if we are honest most of us will admit that the entertainment value of high art is quite low compared to other amusements.

> The masses of cinema goers and magazine readers cannot be elevated by offering them . . . the aristocratic amusements of a past age. This is called bringing art to the people, but that is clap-trap; what is brought is still amusement, very cleverly designed by a Shakespeare or a Purcell to please an Elizabethan or a Restoration audience, but now, for all its genius, far less amusing than Mickey Mouse or jazz, except to people laboriously trained to enjoy it.
>
> (Collingwood 1938: 103)

Collingwood's judgement on (his) contemporary culture may sound harsh, but he draws our attention to a point of some substance. Forms of entertainment have become more sophisticated over the centuries. What would have amused the 'yokels' in the pit at Shakespeare's Globe theatre must seem a very poor form of entertainment to a generation reared on television programmes like *Fawlty Towers, Friends* and *Blackadder*. These are far funnier than the comic scenes in *Twelfth Night* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is only a dogmatic commitment to the belief that great art gives great pleasure that could lead us to deny it.

In any case, there is this further objection. Even if we were to agree, contrary to what has been said, that art can be relied upon to amuse, this would not give us any special reason to value or pursue it. There are many other cheaper and less taxing forms of amusement – card games, picnics, crossword puzzles, computer games, for example. If simple pleasure is what is at issue, on the surface at any rate, art is at best only a *contender* for value, and in all probability a rather weak one.

Mill on higher and lower pleasures

The argument of the preceding section called into question an alleged fact – that people generally derive pleasure from art. But suppose that they do. There is still an important difficulty to be overcome. Not all works of art are to be valued to the same extent. If the value of art did lie in the pleasure we get from it, how are we to discriminate between artworks that differ in quality? How could pleasure explain the difference between, for example, Bach's *B Minor Mass* and Boccerini's *Minuet*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and

Graham Green's *Brighton Rock*, or a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company and one by the local amateur dramatic association? If all of them give pleasure, why should we rank some so much more highly than others?

Some people feel tempted to reply that we shouldn't. We ought to respect the fact that different people enjoy different things, and not try to elevate some personal preferences over others. In fact, this appeal to equality has led critics and teachers to abandon, not just the distinction between high and low art, but any notion of a 'canon', i.e. any list of great masters and classic works, whether in music, painting, literature or the theatre. This attack on the idea of a canon is an important aspect of the avant-garde in modern art and will be discussed at length in Chapter 11.

For the moment, though, it is enough to note that most people do go on distinguishing between major and minor writers, painters and composers, and between their greatest and less great works. It is common, furthermore, for both artists and audiences to differentiate between the light and the serious in art, between, for instance, farces and tragedies, Strauss waltzes and Beethoven symphonies, the poetry of Edward Lear and that of T. S. Eliot, the novels of P. G. Wodehouse and those of Jane Austen. Strauss, Lear and Wodehouse were all highly talented, and the works they produced are all to be valued. But they lack the profundity and significance of Beethoven, Eliot and Austen. The question is: how can such distinctions be drawn if all we have to go on is the pleasure we derive from them?

This second distinction – between the light and the serious in art – cuts across the first. Part of the motivation for subverting any 'canon' has been a sense that an unwarranted 'bourgeois' elevation of the art of the gallery and the concert hall has led to a denigration of folk art. But as far as our present concerns go, folk art can sometimes be 'serious' when high art, by contrast, can be frivolous. Many of the folk tales and rhymes assiduously collected by Peter and Iona Opie, for example, touch on themes far deeper than the story lines of many modern novels. It still remains to explain this difference.

One possible answer relies on establishing a difference between higher and lower pleasures, and arguing that the major works of great artists provide a higher kind of pleasure compared to that provided by lighter or more minor works that may still require considerable skill and talent. Can such a difference be elaborated convincingly? John Stuart Mill attempts to do so in the essay entitled *Utilitarianism*. He is not expressly concerned with the question of the value of art, but it is hard to see how any such distinction could be drawn other than in the ways he suggests.

According to Mill, there are only two possibilities. Either we say that higher pleasures hold out the possibility of a greater *quantity* of pleasure, or we say that a higher pleasure is of a different *quality*. The first of these alternatives is plainly inadequate because it makes the value of art strictly commensurable with that of other pleasures. If the only difference is that pleasure in art is more concentrated, it can be substituted without loss by

more items affording a lower pleasure. Thus, if what Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* has over *Friends* or *Neighbours* is *quantity* of pleasure, we can make up the difference simply by watching more episodes of *Friends*. In fact, we don't even have to confine ourselves to similar sorts of thing. Food is often a pleasure, so we could make up for any lack of artistic pleasures, by eating more of the food we especially like.

The implication of this line of thought is that people who have never acquired any familiarity with any of the things that pass for serious art, including the serious elements in folk art, are in no way impoverished, provided only that they have had a sufficient quantity of more mundane pleasures. Pizza is as good as poetry, we might say, a modern version of a famous remark by Bentham. Most of us would want to dissent from such a judgement, but whether we do or not, the fact of this implication is enough to show that the pleasure theory of art understood in this way is inadequate since it cannot show art to have any special value at all.

Mill thinks that 'it is absurd that . . . the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone' (Mill 1985: 12). Instead he appeals to the respective quality of different pleasures.

> If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it . . . we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality. . . . On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures . . . the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final.
>
> (Mill 1985: 14–15)

According to Mill, this higher quality of pleasure more than compensates for any diminution in quantity and will in fact offset a good deal of pain and discontent. In a famous passage he concludes:

> It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the pig, or the fool, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.
>
> (Mill 1985: 14)

Whether Mill's account of higher and lower pleasures is adequate for his purposes in *Utilitarianism* is not the question here. Rather we want to ask

whether the same strategy can be used to explain the difference in value that is attached to light and serious art. And the answer plainly seems to be that it does not. This is chiefly because, as we know, tastes differ in art, and consequently the test he proposes cannot be used to adjudicate between competing responses to kinds of art.

Let us take the case of grand opera versus soap opera as both a test and an illustration. Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is an astonishing amalgamation of three major artistic forms – musical, visual and dramatic – on an immense scale. In the estimation of many people, it represents one of the greatest artistic achievements of all time. Television soap operas like *Dallas* are also very protracted, continuing through a vast number of episodes, and they combine the visual and the dramatic. But generally speaking they have poor dialogue and hackneyed plots. No one heralds them as major artistic creations, and the names of their script writers and directors are virtually unknown.

Employing Mill's test, then, it ought to be the case that a competent judge who has seen both will prefer grand opera to soap opera. Suppose that someone who has seen both and is asked to judge, expresses a preference for grand opera. How are we to tell that they are a competent judge? The mere fact that they have seen both will not suffice, because tastes differ, and it may be the case, therefore, that the preference expressed does not arise from the perception of a higher pleasure, but from a liking for grand opera. Someone else, asked the same question, who has also seen both, might have a taste for soap opera and so express a different preference.

Consequently it has to be Mill's majority test that must do the work. Now if we assume (almost certainly without foundation) that majority opinion among those who have seen both favours grand opera, we still have no reason to infer from this that the works of Wagner generate a higher quality of pleasure than episodes of *Dallas*. The larger number of votes for the former may signal nothing more than that taste for grand opera is in the majority. Suppose (more plausibly) that the vote goes the other way, and the majority express a preference for soap opera. We can conclude that more people get more pleasure from soap opera than grand opera, (which seems almost certainly true to me). What we cannot infer is that the normal estimation that puts grand opera on a higher scale than soap opera, artistically speaking, is mistaken. We cannot show that beer is *better* than wine simply by showing that more people prefer it. The suggestion that we can, just begs the question in the present context. The fact that people really enjoy soap opera does not make the dialogue any more sophisticated or the plots any less hackneyed.

It might be said that construing Mill's test in terms of taste ignores an important suggestion: higher pleasures involve the higher faculties; this is what makes them of a higher quality. Such seems certainly to be Mill's view, and it is what justifies him in discounting the opinions of the fool and the pig. Their experience is of a lower order and hence their pleasures are too.

Applied to the subject of art, what this implies is that serious art engages aspects of the mind that lighter art does not address, or even attempt to.

In general this seems to be true. Great art – literary, musical, visual, dramatic – tends to make considerable demands on us, of attention and concentration – whereas light art is much less demanding. However, it is not clear how this would make a difference to the relative value of the two *in terms of pleasure*. It is easy to accept Mill's claim that there is more to human life than eating, sleeping and procreating, and it seems to follow that human beings can expect to enjoy a range of pleasures that are closed to pigs, because human beings have innate endowments of mind and emotional capacity that pigs do not. But these evident differences give us no reason to think that the engagement of a higher capacity brings a different kind of pleasure that can be ranked higher. Pigs cannot do crosswords, and fools cannot while away the time with mathematical 'brainteasers'. Such activities undoubtedly engage higher faculties, but this of itself does not give us reason to think that the pleasure we derive from them is of a more valuable 'higher' kind than the pleasure to be found in, say, sunbathing or ice cream. We can define 'higher' pleasures as those that involve the higher faculties if we choose, but this is mere stipulation. It does not help us to identify a distinctive property that would validate the claim that crosswords and the like are more significant or important than other pleasurable pastimes.

The nature of pleasure

So far it has proved impossible to ground the value or importance of art on pleasure or entertainment value. The concept of pleasure with which Mill is operating is one of a mental or psychological experience that different things can cause in us roughly opposite to pain. Since it is a commonplace that there are different kinds of pain – some much more intense than others – the idea of discriminating between pleasures in terms of their intensity seems plausible. But arguably, this is a mistaken understanding of the nature of pleasure. An older understanding that goes back to Aristotle holds that pleasure is not itself an experience, but something that *supervenes upon* experience. What this means is that the pleasure we derive from an activity is not an after-effect of the activity, in the way that being slightly drunk is the after-effect of a few glasses of wine. Pleasure, rather, is the manner in which we engage in that activity. If I play a game for pleasure, this is to be contrasted with playing it for money, or because I am compelled to, or because I can think of nothing else to do, and it means that I am playing it for the sake of the game itself. What I enjoy when I play tennis for pleasure is not an experience called 'pleasure' which arises as I walk off the court, an experience that might be compared with the 'pleasure' generated by music as I leave the concert hall, say. What I enjoy is the business of playing *tennis*.

This alternative account of pleasure leads to an important shift in the line of thought we have been examining in the course of this chapter. If enjoyment or pleasure in the arts is a mode or manner in which we engage with them – whether as artists or as spectators – then it is in the arts themselves that their value is to be found and not in the pleasurable feelings that may or may not arise from them. We can repeat and refine the question with which we are concerned. Is there an intrinsic feature of the arts that gives them special value, and if so what could it be? One longstanding answer is 'beauty', and this will form the central topic of the next chapter.

Suggested further reading

Advanced introductory reading

Routledge Companion to Aesthetics (second edition), Chapter 4
Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, Chapter 44

Classic writings

David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste' and 'Of Tragedy'
R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Chapter 5
John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Major contemporary works

Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (1996)

2

Art and beauty

Beauty and pleasure

In the previous chapter we explored the idea that the value of the arts lies in the pleasure we derive from them and saw that such a view is insufficient to explain what is special about the arts over other sources of pleasure, and what makes some artworks serious and others light. Accordingly, we are still in search of something that will enable us to explain art's special value.

To have reached this point is not necessarily to have put the concept of pleasure behind us, because some philosophers have thought that what is special about art is a distinctive kind of pleasure – 'aesthetic pleasure'. The Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden, for instance, urges us to recognize that aesthetic pleasures 'have a special character of their own and exist in a different manner from the pleasures deriving from a good meal or fresh air or a good bath' (Ingarden 1972: 43).

What could this pleasure be? One obvious answer is – the pleasure that accompanies beauty. It has been observed from ancient times that it seems contradictory to describe something as beautiful and deny that we are in any way pleasurably affected by it. The same thing would not be true of a large range of concepts that can be used without any personal evaluative implication or overtone. Colour words are like this. People do often prefer one colour to another, and can even be said to have a favourite colour. But we can't know this from their use of colour words alone. If I describe an apple as 'red', you cannot draw the inference that I favour it in some way; perhaps I only like green apples. But if I describe it as a *beautiful* red apple, you can tell at once that I regard it in a positive light.

Whereas we can apply colour words like red and green without committing ourselves to a favourable estimation of the things we apply them to, we automatically praise something when we call it beautiful, and criticize it when we describe it as ugly. But this raises an important philosophical question. What is the connection between a purely descriptive term like 'red' or 'green' and the evaluative term 'beautiful'?

There are two possibilities that philosophers have discussed at great length. The first is that the connection is purely subjective. That is to say, whereas terms like red and green identify real properties of the apple, the term 'beautiful' says something about the person who uses it. This is the view embodied in the familiar saying that 'Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder' and it is exactly the view we found Hume espousing in the previous chapter – 'To seek the real beauty, or the real deformity, is as fruitless an enquiry, as to seek the real sweet or real bitter' (1963: 239).

Now there are two principal objections to such a view. The first is one that Hume's Scottish contemporary Thomas Reid brought against him. If saying 'This is a beautiful red apple' means 'I like/love/value/prefer this red apple', why don't I just say that? Why cast my opinion in such a misleadingly objective form, as though it *were* about the apple, when in fact it is about me, and my feelings towards it? The other objection is this. If judgements of beauty are purely subjective, why does anyone bother to argue about them? '*De gustibus non disputandum*' an ancient Latin saying goes – 'There can be no disputing over matters of taste'. If I say, I like the taste of avocado, whereas you do not, how could there be any point in arguing about it? I can't give you *reasons* to like the taste of avocado; you just don't. But when it comes to judgements of beauty then people *do* argue. What is more, for the practical purposes of buying paintings and sculptures, judging flower competitions, awarding fashion prizes, granting scholarships, they *need* to argue. We want to award the prize to the most beautiful roses, we want to choose the most beautiful painting submitted in the competition, we want to buy the most beautiful recording of a piece of music, etc.

In the face of these objections, subjectivists about beauty need not concede defeat. But what they must do is add to their account what is called an 'error theory'. If they want to interpret beauty statements subjectively, they must also explain why ordinary language and practice seems to be in error about them. Why do human beings go on speaking in a misleadingly 'objectivist' way about beauty? Why do they engage in arguments that cannot in the end be any more than simple confrontations? And why do they run competitions that cannot have any rational outcome? A philosophically astute subjectivist can offer answers to these questions, but it seems more desirable not to have to answer them in the first place. In other words, the need for 'error theories' of this kind seems to give the alternative, objectivist account of beauty a natural advantage.

However, it also faces two important difficulties. The first trades precisely upon that fact that people do disagree over judgements of beauty. If beauty were an objective matter like the colour of a thing, why would there be so much disagreement? Furthermore, this disagreement is to be found not just between individuals, but across times and cultures. Different cultures have different ideals of beauty and these ideals change as time passes. Surely, if beauty and ugliness were real properties of objects that we discover in

the way we discover chemical properties, say, there would be a steady convergence of opinion over time? A second objection is this. Everyone agrees that beauty attracts and ugliness repels. That is to say, an important part of judging something to be beautiful or ugly lies in human response to an object and not just the nature of the object itself. But how could an objective property in and of itself be guaranteed to move us? Surely, for any property that lies purely in the object, we can regard it with either enthusiasm or indifference.

It is possible to reply to this second objection by acknowledging that 'beauty' is not like 'red' or 'green'. Beauty is inferred from more basic descriptive properties, in the way that 'guilty' and 'innocent' are. Someone accused of a crime really is either guilty or innocent. It is not enough for people, even the majority, simply to believe that they are. But guilt and innocence are not properties that can be seen by an eyewitness. They have to be *inferred from* the observations of eyewitnesses. The same is true of judgements of beauty, someone might allege. Beauty is a 'higher order' property, so to speak, whose presence we infer from other more directly observable properties.

The trouble with this reply, however, is that the analogy is hard to sustain. In the case of guilt and innocence, the law provides us with principles (laws) by means of which we can infer one or the other from the evidence of eyewitnesses. But what are the equivalent laws or principles of beauty? There do not seem to be any. We can *say*, if we wish, that aesthetic properties like 'beauty' are inferred from non-aesthetic properties like 'red', but what is to validate these inferences?

Kant on beauty

It seems then that between subjectivist and objectivist accounts of beauty there is a stand-off. Some aspects of the way we talk and act support a subjectivist interpretation, and others support an objectivist interpretation. How then are we to judge between them? This is the problem addressed by one of the greatest modern philosophers, and possibly the thinker who has had the most enduring influence on contemporary ideas of art and aesthetics – Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). The motivation behind most of Kant's philosophy was the pressing need to resolve certain fundamental antinomies. An antinomy is a conflict between two contradictory propositions both of which appear to be provable by reason. For instance, human beings have free will and can choose what to do. At the same time they are physical objects subject to deterministic laws of nature. By focusing on the first we can prove that the second cannot be true; but by focusing on the second we equally prove that the first cannot be true. How is such an antinomy to be resolved?

The stand-off we have just been considering with respect to the nature of beauty can be interpreted as an antinomy of sorts. It seems that the ascription

of beauty can equally well be interpreted as an exercise of rational judgement *and* as an expression of personal sentiment or feeling. But both cannot be true and so we seem to have a philosophical impasse.

It is principally this problem that Kant addresses in *The Critique of Judgement*, his great work on aesthetics first published in 1790. This was a late work of Kant's because earlier in his philosophical career he had thought that aesthetic appreciation was purely subjective, simply a matter of pleasure. Kant draws a sharp distinction between feeling and reason, and on the face of it experience of pleasure cannot be rational or irrational, any more than a pain can be rational or irrational, because it is part of our sensitive rather than our intellectual nature; either things give us pleasure or they don't. But Kant came to the view that the aesthetic is a *special* kind of pleasure precisely because it in some sense transcends mere individual preference. Aesthetic pleasure, or pleasure in the beautiful, is something we can expect others to experience at the same time as ourselves. That is not to say that everyone *does* share the pleasure that is to be found in beautiful things. It means, rather, that pleasure in the beautiful is a pleasure it is proper to commend to others. To this extent, appreciating the beautiful is an act of mind as well as a matter of sensuous feeling, and that is why it is correct to speak of aesthetic *judgement*. The task of *The Critique of Judgement* is to give an adequate account of its special character.

The Critique of Judgement is Kant's third critique. The first, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, is concerned with how human minds can have knowledge of the world outside them, how science is possible if you like. The second, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, is an attempt to discern the principles that make action rational and morality possible. The third *Critique* accounts for the aesthetic by locating it in relation to these other two. Kant places aesthetic judgement between the logically necessary (mathematical theorems for example) and the purely subjective (expressions of personal taste). Though the proposition 'this is beautiful' does indeed have the appearance of a cognitive judgement, that is a judgement about how things are, Kant agrees with Hume that expressing such a judgement 'cannot be other than subjective'; that is, arising from a feeling of approval (§1. These numbers refer to sections of *The Critique of Judgement*). But in contrast to Hume, he rejects the view that the experience of beauty is *merely* subjective. This is because, although Hume thinks that the attribution of 'beauty' to an object reflects a sentiment or feeling within us, Kant is aware that this is not how it seems to us. As with a judgement about fact or necessity,

> [the person who declares something to be beautiful] can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party . . . [and therefore] . . . must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from everyone. Accordingly he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a quality of the object and

> the judgement logical . . . although it is only aesthetic and contains merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject. (§6)

In plainer language the idea is this: while it is true that beauty needs to be appreciated subjectively, when we see beautiful things we are aware that the pleasure we derive from them is not a function of something peculiar to us, some 'personal condition to which our own subjective self might alone be party'. Beauty is subjective, but it is not merely personal, as the expression of a preference is when we refer to something of which we happen to be especially fond – a tune that has personal associations, for example, or a favourite dish. Kant gives the example of a preference for 'Canary-wine'. Someone who expresses a preference for the light sweet wine from the Canary Islands over the heavier port that comes from Portugal, does no more than express a personal liking, and has no reason to expect others to share this preference. But in declaring an object to be beautiful, we think we have a 'reason for demanding a similar delight from everyone'.

An aesthetic judgement is thus to be distinguished as one that falls between the universally necessary (or 'logical') and the merely personal. But it occupies another middle ground as well, the middle ground between being merely pleasant or agreeable and being demonstrably good or useful. Delight in the beautiful is neither of these. Suppose I fancy a particular hat. This is a matter of my finding it attractive. Suppose, though, I also think it especially good at keeping my head warm and dry. This is a demonstrable matter; it can be shown to be true or not. In this second case, my judgement (Kant believes) arises 'from the concept' of the end that is to be served – hats are for keeping out moisture and for retaining heat. Once a given end or purpose is specified, then whether something is good (i.e. useful to that end) is not a matter of *taste* but a matter of *fact*.

Now the aesthetic case does not seem to fit either of these exactly. Beautiful objects don't merely catch our fancy. They seem more significant than that. But neither do they seem to have any special purpose; art is not design. So the distinguishing characteristic of the aesthetic must lie in this: it is free but not purely fanciful. In Kant's terminology an aesthetic judgement is 'disinterestedly free'. It has, in one of his most famous expressions, 'purposefulness without purpose' (§10). When I find something beautiful, it is purposeful, but it does not have some specific purpose that might make it useful to me.

Aesthetic judgement is thus to be distinguished (1) from a judgement of fact because it is subjective, (2) from the merely subjective because it commands the assent of others, (3) from a judgement grounded in practical rationality because the beautiful has no practical purpose, and (4) from the merely fanciful or superficially attractive because it has the mark of purposefulness. What sort of judgement is it that falls between these alternatives?

Kant's answer is – a judgement arising from the 'free play of the imagination'. In contemporary English this expression suggests a greater degree of licence than Kant intends, perhaps, because imagination is often confused with fancy. If the two are different it is because imagination, unlike fancy, is constrained or disciplined in some way. But what way? The answer cannot be truth or fact, since these *determine* our judgements and thereby undermine their freedom. I am not free to decide what causes cancer, as I am free to choose what coat to wear. The crucial point is that while the play of the imagination has to be free, it must also be able to command universal assent just as a claim to knowledge or usefulness does.

To explain this curious double nature, Kant postulates a *sensus communis* (or 'common sensitive nature') among humans that is invoked and appealed to when a judgement of taste is made (§§22 and 40). This shared sense is not the same as shared knowledge about the objective properties of classes of things, like the knowledge that aspirin relieves pain, say. If it were, it would lose what is distinctive to aesthetic judgements, their subjective 'freedom'. That is why aesthetic judgements are not about classes of things at all, but about individual objects. In Kant's language, judgements of taste must be 'invariably laid down as a singular judgement upon the Object'. So, when I declare something to be beautiful, I am not placing it within a general category of 'beautiful things' as I place 'aspirin' within the category 'painkiller'. I am focused upon and 'delighting' in this particular object. 'Delight' in the beautiful is fixed upon an object. Instead of an intellectual classification, it consists in contemplation of the object itself.

The aesthetic attitude and the sublime

So far this exposition of Kant has focused exclusively on the business of judging something to be beautiful, but in *The Critique of Judgement* Kant is also concerned with 'the sublime'. The sublime is found most obviously in nature. So too are beautiful things, of course. Indeed, at many points Kant seems more interested in natural than artistic beauty. But whereas a flower, say, strikes us as beautiful because of its delicacy and the interplay between colour and form it displays, a mighty waterfall such as Niagara Falls impresses us by the sheer chaos of its power. The same sort of contrast is to be found in art. The delicacy of a Tudor cottage with oriel windows, say, contrasts with the black forbidding appearance of a castle like Caernarfon in Wales. Similarly, while 'beautiful' is exactly the right word to describe the slow movement of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*, it seems a poor, or even erroneous description of a symphony orchestra playing at full volume the high Romantic music of Tchaikovsky or Mahler.

Though these examples are to this extent contrasting, they can also be construed as having something in common – namely the kind of attitude