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Appreciating Beauty and Art

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APPRECIATING BEAUTY AND ART

An Introduction to Aesthetics

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1. INTRODUCTION

Not only artists and art connoisseurs, but also web designers, gardeners, carpenters, photographers, musical directors and managers make aesthetic judgements. When decorating our house, developing a logo for a firm or inviting friends over for an evening meal, we make all kinds of decisions that are based on aesthetic issues, that is, issues concerning the way things look or fit in. Which tablecloth will I use tonight, shall I put candles on the table or not, which clothes shall I wear, and so on. In our everyday choices, aesthetic values thus play an important part, even though we may not always realise this ourselves.

Moreover, when we are shopping for clothes, visiting a museum or attending a play, we often discuss our aesthetic judgements with friends and relatives. This can be a highly sensitive matter, as our aesthetic taste may reveal something about our personality in displaying what we value in life. People may therefore sometimes be reluctant to discuss their aesthetic preferences, being sceptical about whether aesthetic judgements can be compared, assessed and disputed. This raises the question whether it is at all possible to ground our aesthetic appreciations rationally. Can philosophers who are experts in aesthetics and philosophy of art offer relevant insights here?

What is the philosophical discipline of aesthetics about? One of the highly debated issues is whether aesthetic appreciations are subjective or objective. On the one hand, an aesthetic judgement such as 'This sunset is beautiful' seems to be merely reporting a subjective feeling of the person who utters it. On the other hand, as the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant argues, we are 'suitors for agreement' and enjoy sharing our aesthetic preferences. At least some types of aesthetic appreciations seem to lay claim to interpersonal or intersubjective validity, i.e., to require that others concur, and judgements of the type that some x is beautiful seem to be valid candidates.

Yet the traditional focus of philosophical aesthetics on beauty has become undermined by the practice that used to be a primary object of aesthetic study, namely art. Since the rise of abstract, non-figurative, conceptual art and the abundance of Duchamp-style readymades (prefabricated ordinary objects, such as a urinal or a snow shovel, that are taken into a museum and are thus elevated to the status of art by the artist), the art world has turned itself away from beauty and sometimes even aesthetic value altogether. This constitutes a challenge to philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of art, for the aesthetic value can no longer claim to be the only or even primordial value of the artefacts that we consider to be genuine works of art. Before considering the complicated issue of the values of art, we now first turn to questions about the meaning and status of aesthetic appreciation, more specifically the judgement of beauty and its purported intersubjective validity.

2. THE JUDGEMENT OF BEAUTY

As indicated, the philosophical discipline of aesthetics is not confined to exploring art or artistic value, but it is also a study of aesthetic judgement or appreciation, i.e., of the way in which we contemplate, experience and assess objects from an aesthetic point of view. In other words, aesthetics investigates what has traditionally – since the birth of the discipline in the eighteenth century – been called *the judgement of taste*. What kind of judgement is this? A judgement of taste is not merely a statement of personal preference such as 'I like vanilla ice cream' or 'I hate cauliflower', but an attempt to express what is aesthetically worthwhile in a particular (natural or artistic) object. Yet there is no agreement on what it exactly means to say that something is 'aesthetically worthwhile' or how to assess an object's aesthetic qualities.

The term 'aesthetic' is derived from the Greek word 'aisthèsis', which means sensory perception or sensation. Literally speaking, aesthetics would thus be the 'doctrine of sensory perception'. Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), who is usually credited to be the first to use 'aesthetics' in its modern sense, calls the discipline of aesthetics the study and perfection of sensible cognition (*cognitio*

sensitiva). As Baumgarten insists, aesthetic cognition is not inferior to intellectual cognition: it is not an inferior and provisional substitute for logical and scientific reasoning, but a worthy equivalent of it. What we perceive through aesthetic cognition is not merely the (lack of) perfection of an object. It is also the use of a broad range of our mental capacities that guides our exploration of sensible representations or imagery and our contemplation of the pleasing aspects of an object that offer us an experience of aesthetic pleasure. Baumgarten was the first to define the aim of aesthetics as the perfection of sensible cognition (*perfectio cognitionis sensitivae*), which is beauty. On Baumgarten's view, what may ground aesthetic pleasure is not merely perceiving the perfection of an object (so not merely the representation of some objective perfection in a form accessible to the senses), but also exploiting, developing and refining the possibilities of sensible representation for their own sake (see Guyer 2014, 326-329). Thus, aesthetic pleasure, and hence beauty, may be produced by perceiving perfection through the senses as well as by perfecting our sensible and imaginative capacities. Of course, sensory perception may be pleasurable without offering beauty. The smell of the petunias in my garden, my wife's perfume, the sensation of sinking into a hot bath, that gorgeous meal in my favourite restaurant, and so on: these are all pleasurable sensations, but experiencing pleasurable sensations is not sufficient for appreciating and experiencing beauty.

In addition, not all pleasure we take in beautiful objects is (primarily) sensual: surely the pleasure of enjoying a novel or poem is not sensual. Moreover, not all our senses seem fit to appreciate beauty. The senses of taste, smell and touch do not seem to be our usual tools for sensing beauty. It is plausible to think that the relevant senses for appreciating beauty are sight and hearing, though it is not easy to categorise every experience of beauty as one of these two. Consider, for instance, the reading of a novel: to appreciate the beauty of, say, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* we need our eyes, but it is not the letters as such of course that are beautiful; the beauty of the novel is based on the meanings of the words and their relation to the way the author expresses them.

What is the difference, then, between sensual pleasure and the pleasure of beauty? Beauty requires more than merely agreeable sensations. Immanuel Kant, who provided the first elaborate account of the logical requirements of the judgement of taste, distinguishes between the agreeable and the beautiful. Judgements of the agreeable, expressed by saying that one likes (or dislikes) something or finds it (dis)satisfying (for example, food, drink, perfume …) are statements of merely personal preference. In contrast, judgements of the beautiful are *normative* judgements that make a claim to universal validity, i.e., they are presented as binding on everyone. For, as Immanuel Kant argues, the judgement of beauty is based on disinterested pleasure (*Wohlgefallen*) and not on merely sensual excitement or satisfaction (*Vergnügen*).

Furthermore, beauty concerns pleasure *at* something. Rather than being primarily about sensations within ourselves (as when enjoying a cool morning breeze on our skin), the pleasure is directed outwards. It is about the beautiful *object*, instead of about me: it implies, as it were, a joyful affirmation of the presence of, say, a beautiful landscape, painting or sculpture. For this reason, one may call this kind of aesthetic pleasure *contemplative*: beauty is a reason for attending carefully to the particular object that possesses it. The term 'aesthetic' is therefore somewhat misleading, as it suggests that what we consider as aesthetic pleasure is always necessarily connected to sensory pleasures (as Baumgarten suggested). Yet – as George Santayana aptly puts it in his influential essay on *The Sense of Beauty* (1896): "beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing" (Santayana 1955, §11, 31).

Judgements of beauty are taken to be the privilege of rational creatures, who possess imagination, for only human beings are capable of enjoying particular objects for their own sake and providing reasons for their aesthetic appreciations. For instance, when asked "*Why is this sunset beautiful?*", human beings are supposed to be able to give reasons that are related to the qualities of the very sunset which is the focus of the aesthetic judgement. Hence, although appreciating beauty is not based on a description of the object, but on a personal feeling of pleasure, beauty is not *merely* subjective. Contrary to sensory pleasures ('sensations') or judgements about the (dis)agreeable features of something (e.g. spinach or oysters), a judgement of beauty such as "This sunset is beautiful" claims, as it were, to disclose an 'objective' quality of the aesthetic object, for instance this sunset that I am admiring now in Venice. The question therefore arises whether the judgement of beauty is at all possible, i.e., whether a judgement exists that can be subjective (and hence relative) as well as objective (and hence intersubjectively valid). This has been one of the main questions of philosophical aesthetics since the eighteenth century: How can an intersubjectively valid form of judgement be based on something so personal as the pleasure felt in appreciating a particular object as beautiful? It is to this complex issue that we now turn.

3. BEAUTY: THE PROBLEM

Appreciating beauty is founded upon a personal feeling of, what Kant called, disinterested pleasure. Yet, the pleasurable feeling is not *merely* personal, hence the word 'disinterested': I also demand that others ought to feel the same, that is, that they, in their disinterested feeling, ought to concur with my judgement. (Whether they will agree or not is an empirical matter.) When I admire a beautiful landscape painting by Constable, for example, I do not merely experience agreeable sensations in myself. My aesthetic appreciation ('This

painting is beautiful') does not report on inner sensations, but expresses that the painting *is* beautiful. A judgement of taste does not describe my personal feeling of pleasure, even though it is based on it.

This however looks contradictory; it leads to what Kant technically refers to as an *antinomy*, i.e., a contradiction which he believed inescapably follows from our rational nature. The antinomy of the judgement of taste can be formulated as follows: this type of judgement is grounded in a subjective feeling of pleasure (or displeasure in the case of negative judgements of taste) *and* lays claim to objective validity, since it is presented as binding on everyone. Whereas the beauty of a thing cannot be proved by means of objective rules or concepts, I can reasonably be asked to justify my appraisal and we can argue about the beauty of the thing. There can actually be a genuine *disagreement* (and not simply a *difference* as is usually the case in, for instance, disputes about the tastes in food) about whether, for instance, Franz Schubert's song-cycle *Die Winterreise* is really more beautiful than Gustav Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* or not. I would definitely say that the former is more beautiful than the latter, but you may not agree.

One cannot provide objective principles that determine once and for all what is beautiful and what is not, or whether something is more beautiful than something else. However, beauty is not mere sensual attraction. We can (attempt to) explain why Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is more beautiful than *Mansfield Park*, because (for instance) the description of the characters is subtler and more penetrating in the former, or why the film *The Godfather II* is better than *The Godfather III*, because the former's plot is more balanced and the main character possesses more psychological profundity. Thus, even though there may not be objective principles that determine beauty, there may well be rational grounds for appreciating it.

4. IS TASTE RELATIVE?

Since no objective principles seem to be available to determine the correctness of aesthetic appreciations, a number of thinkers, especially so-called postmodernist and neo-Marxist ones, contend that art has no specific value or that the value of art differs hardly or not at all from non-artistic artefacts, such as cheap soap series, vulgar B-films or cheesy potboilers. They argue that 'taste is relative' and that the distinction between art and non-art, between high and low culture or beauty and kitsch is ultimately an 'ideological' construction, which serves merely to maintain certain elitist ideals and 'bourgeois' institutions. Furthermore, they contend, these ideological concepts and distinctions blind us to the social truth. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, Terry Eagleton and several others argue (customarily in a very flamboyant way)

that universal values do not exist and that the Western canon of great art and literature is actually delusional, authoritarian and unjust. Only a struggle against the 'bourgeois' values can overturn the canon and liberate us from the chains of 'power'. If these thinkers are right, this has radical consequences for the very concept of beauty, since the concept could no longer be justified, except as an 'ideology', that is, as a theory that is accepted merely for its (pernicious) political and social utility and not for its truth.

This postmodernist critique of the 'ideological' nature of beauty contains a number of valuable elements.

First, this critique draws attention to the social and political injustices that are downplayed by those philosophers and art critics that focus exclusively or primarily on the aesthetic merits of artworks. For instance, downplaying or ignoring the social, moral and political outrage at the horrors of war that is conveyed by superb masterpieces like Goya's *The Third of May*, *1808* or Picasso's *Guernica*, while only focusing on the fine rendering of the depicted scenes can hardly be called a sensible and fair assessment of the value of such artworks. To focus only on the aesthetic qualities of such works is one-sided and displays a lack of understanding of what the paintings are really about and what turbulent emotions are expressed in them.

Second, the above-mentioned thinkers and their followers criticise the 'Eurocentric' one-sidedness of focusing on so-called Western art and aesthetics, and demand the recognition of non-Western artistic and aesthetic traditions.

Third, this type of critique emphasises the provisional and context-bounded character of aesthetic and artistic appreciations. Those are inevitably influenced by our perspective, background knowledge, education and social position; they are never neutral. Thus, from this perspective, Kant's thought that beauty is a universal value, anchored in our rational nature, would definitely be questionable.

However, against such a 'postmodernist' critique, the following objections might be raised.

First, to say that the distinction between art and non-art is an ideological *construction* does not imply that the distinction is not valid. In fact, human practices (science, philosophy, religion, art etc.) may fail to have value 'in themselves' and may yet be of value and be respected by all those who take part in those practices.

Second, the idea that the distinction between art and non-art or beauty and kitsch is 'ideological' makes it difficult to explain why there is a fairly stable list of 'classic' works on the basis of which an aesthetic and/or artistic difference in

value has been acknowledged – between, say, novels such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

Third, the postmodernists confuse interests, goals and needs which can be identified independently of the existence of an artistic practice with interests, goals and needs which are *determined by* a practice. Therefore, they (unjustly) reduce art to 'that which a community decides to call art'. They consider 'art' as a descriptive concept. However, 'art' is an *evaluative* concept, which presupposes that there are really values that come about in and through creating and appreciating art (and that are not incidentally called 'artistic values'). The value of art is constituted by the practice of creating and appreciating art and is also constitutive of the concept of art.[1]

Fourth, the terms and distinctions between 'art' and 'non-art', between 'high culture' and 'low culture' and between 'aesthetically valuable' and 'aesthetically failed' may have been fully acknowledged in the West only since the 18th century, but the discussions had been around for centuries and are not limited to our 'authoritarian', modern, European culture. Similar distinctions were discussed by e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Bharata, Confucius, Augustine and Boethius, and many others everywhere around the world. Claiming that they are *merely* an 18th century, European 'invention' is wrong and unjustly undermines their universal significance.[2]

Fifth, (postmodernist) relativism is usually a mere theoretical stance. In practice, even the fiercest defenders of aesthetic relativism demonstrate aesthetic norms and preferences when, say, decorating their house, deciding which clothes to wear or which places to visit on a city trip. A certain kind of inconsistency, which some may label hypocrisy, seems to be involved in their theoretical dismissal of the 'aesthetic ideology'.

Finally, and this may be the most important argument, relativists often defend their views on the basis of an 'anti-authoritarian' feeling of justice. They aim to resist the taste of the 'ruling classes', giving voice to suppressed minority groups. That goal is noble, but are their strategies convincing? For if we need to accept that 'everything is relative', is discussion still possible? If these 'anti-authoritarian' thinkers consider their judgements immune from criticism, they might themselves be called intolerant and authoritarian since they do not accept (universally acceptable) standards on the basis of which aesthetic disputes might be resolved. For, in their view, taste is relative: we cannot criticise the others' appreciations, since 'anything goes'. Thus, some postmodernists actually

1. The first three arguments can be found in a slightly different form and applied to literature in Lamarque & Olsen (2002, 441-442).
2. I borrow this line of thinking from Scruton (2009, 64).

force us to accept their judgements uncritically. According to them, a rational discussion about art and aesthetic matters is impossible, as each judgement is equally valid.

Yet, true tolerance with regard to matters of taste is possible only if we are prepared to let others question our own aesthetic appreciations. A proper discussion about the intersubjective validity of our aesthetic appreciations is impossible, unless we acknowledge that there are correct and incorrect aesthetic appreciations, which is precisely what the relativist denies. Furthermore, as we shall see in the following section, a dismissal of relativism does not imply that the value of an artwork *as art* can be reduced or restricted to its aesthetic features, let alone that only beautiful artworks are artistically valuable.

5. VALUES OF ART

In this section, we shall discuss non-aesthetic reasons for valuing art and connect these to theories of art that focus on typical reasons we may have to grant human artefacts the status of *art*: representation (*mimesis*), expression of emotions, moral education, knowledge, and existential significance.

A first theory about the value of art says that art is about representation or depiction (*mimesis*). Indeed, one of the most striking features of many works of art is that they represent events, objects, human beings, and so on. We do not merely see paint blots or pixels or a piece of marble, but we see someone or something in the material that the artist deploys. In addition, the landscape painted may of course also stand for something else, e.g. Arcadia. A still-life may represent death or mortality. This observation has led to the idea that something is a work of art only if it represents or depicts something. This theory is known as the *mimesis* theory of art.

That a work of art is first and foremost a depiction of something is a centuries-old view. Plato and Aristotle already defended it, but the rise of non-figurative and abstract art in the 20th century has undermined its plausibility: it is hard to say what it is exactly that an abstract painting by Mondrian, Rothko or Pollock actually represents. Yet this does not render the *mimesis* theory completely obsolete. For many of the greatest artworks in history are genuine depictions. Not all works of art represent things, but many undoubtedly do: this is still ordinarily the case in photography, film, and sculpture. If we take architecture, music and dance into account, matters become more difficult. For whereas we can argue that a still-life painting of apples represents real apples or, say, objects of temptation in a garden of Eden, it is much harder to find out what it is that a work of architecture, e.g. Canterbury cathedral, represents. Although it may be correct to say that it *is* a house of God, it does not represent a house of God (see Carroll 1999, 25). The

same difficulty holds for musical compositions: what do Mozart's or Beethoven's string quartets represent? For sure, there is certain music, called programmatic music (such as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*), that may be said to represent events (the seasons), but that the *mimesis* theory can capture the essence of *all* artworks is clearly wrong.

A second reason for valuing art is because it succeeds in expressing, arousing and/or stimulating affects and emotions. In his famous sonnet 'Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?' William Shakespeare expresses his admiration for his beloved (and for poetry) in such a rich, profound and subtle way that many of us will be moved on reading it. The same holds for music: we can be deeply moved by Chopin's *Nocturnes*, because (among other things) of the expressive power of the wistful melodies that we hear. That is why we often share our appreciations for works of art in terms such as 'lively colours', 'a sad melody', 'a cheerful *scherzo*' etc. We then no longer consider (parts of) the artwork as depictions of things in reality, but as the *expression* of feelings and emotions. Leo Tolstoi (in *What is Art?*), Susanne Langer (in *Feeling and Form*), Robin G. Collingwood (in *The Principles of Art*) and many other thinkers defend varieties of the expression theory of art. In spite of their differences, they have in common the idea that the value of art lies (mainly) in the value of its expression of emotions. The value of a work of art is a function of the emotions that it expresses. As the 19th-century poet William Wordsworth famously states in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." In this way art may *humanise* us: we succeed not merely in approaching the world with human feelings but also in getting to know, estimate, and refine our own emotions and those of others.

How convincing is this second, 'expression' account of the nature and value of art? It is implausible insofar as it claims that a work can be artistically valuable primarily because it expresses and/or arouses affects and emotions. Numerous artworks convey first and foremost ideas, views and thoughts, and they do not *express* emotions nor are they aimed at *arousing* feelings or emotions in us – think of conceptual art, but also of many novels, films and paintings. Another problem is that it is not that easy to provide a satisfactory philosophical account of emotion. Exactly what should be classified as 'emotions' and how can we discriminate between different kinds of affective states, such as, for example, moods (cheerfulness, depression …) and emotions (anger, sadness …)? Moreover, it is often claimed that in some works of art, especially those involving fiction, emotions are not directly aroused: perhaps they are imagined or contemplated. Or maybe merely 'quasi-emotions' are evoked, for when we are watching a play or a film we are not moved to direct action and may even remain in a state of tranquil contemplation (see Schopenhauer 2010, 200-204; Sheppard 1987, 18-37; Walton 1978). Although it is plausible to argue that the expressive power of many works

of art intensifies or even determines their value as art, the expression theory clearly faces a number of difficulties. Therefore, a number of philosophers, such as Rudolf Arnheim, Deryck Cooke, and Nelson Goodman, have developed more nuanced versions of the expression theory that focus on the artwork itself and characterise emotional expression in terms of an artwork somehow *symbolising* or *representing* emotion, regardless of the feelings of the artist and the audience (see Neill 2005, 422-23).

A third reason for valuing art originates in the *moral* value certain works of art possess. Aristotle already argued that a successful tragedy should always possess moral value: the hero should be noble in order that the spectators can identify with him and can be moved by his downfall. Aristotle's famous idea of the (moral) purification or purgation (*katharsis*) is intimately connected to the specific value of Greek tragedy. In contemporary aesthetic theories, too, the relation between aesthetic and moral value is a highly debated issue. Several philosophers argue that moral flaws of an artwork impair its artistic value. One of the more extreme examples may be pornography. An intriguing dispute in the philosophy of art concerns the issue whether pornography can be art and, if so, whether and how it is that pornographic art can be valuable *as art* – think of many paintings by Egon Schiele or a film like *L'empire des sens* (1976).

Many philosophers defend the morally educational value of art. The American philosophers Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, for instance, are convinced that art and literature somehow contribute to our moral education. The British philosopher Roger Scruton (2007) claims that (some good) artworks teach us how we ought to behave properly and what we ought to feel when confronted with injustice, the death of a close friend, the birth of a child, war, family conflicts … The question remains, however, whether we can really become better people by listening to Mozart, reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *Pride and Prejudice*, studying paintings by Marlene Dumas or Luc Tuymans or sculptures by Auguste Rodin. Even though many artworks might teach or show us to feel what we ought to feel and do what we ought to do, it is not clear whether we *will* actually feel and do what we ought to feel and do when the time is right for it in real life situations. Nazis adoring Mozart or Schubert clearly did not. Moreover, we might raise the question who or what determines what we ought to feel or to do.

A fourth reason to value art pertains to the cognitive rewards one may gain from it. Schelling, Solger, Hegel, and several other 19th-century German idealist philosophers defended some version of the cognitive theory. Some of them also maintained the superiority of philosophy regarding this cognitive function. According to Hegel, the knowledge we may gain from artworks is sensuous and, therefore, inferior to the abstract, conceptual knowledge we obtain through philosophy. Is it true that the *content* of the knowledge conveyed by art and

philosophy is the same, namely the World Spirit, as Hegel claims? Today we are reluctant to follow Hegel in believing that all works of art are merely sensuous vehicles of the universal World Spirit, which will be superseded by or sublated (*aufgehoben*) in religion and philosophy. The Hegelian idealist philosophy of art thus considers art an imperfect expression of metaphysical ideas (and of the essence of the *Weltgeist*, which all ideas ultimately express).

Other, non-Hegelian philosophers also argue that the value of art is primarily cognitive. Contrary to Hegel and some of his followers, philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, George Santayana, and Roger Scruton acknowledge the cognitive value of art, denying that philosophy is superior to art. For the ideas that artists express are not necessarily metaphysical or historical truths that can be more clearly conveyed by philosophers than by artists. They are the product of the imagination of the artist, bringing about a free play of the spectator's mental powers. The power of art is such that it may well surpass in certain imaginative ways the conceptual rigour typical of philosophical reasoning. Their conclusion is that art definitely possesses cognitive value – it offers valuable insight into the world, other human beings and ourselves – but this value is of a different nature than that of philosophy and science. The knowledge offered by artworks cannot be translated into philosophical or scientific terms without losing much or all of its meaning. An artwork has meaning in the sense that it is meaningful or relevant to you, perhaps in an ineffable sense, because it somehow (at least temporarily) fulfils your life. Artworks may convey much interesting information, but they are not (cognitively) valuable primarily because of this characteristic. There is a specific kind of cognition that, as Wittgenstein says, cannot be conveyed through concepts but can only be *shown*. On this view, artworks might be said to show what is ineffable.

This highlights a fifth reason to appreciate works of art. Apart from their representational, expressive, moral and cognitive value, works of art have *existential* significance. This existential theory claims the following: great works of art can be considered as evocative symbols whose meaning cannot be transferred to another medium: they can show only what they show in the very way they show it. Only in such a way do they really make sense and can they be significant to human beings. The meaning of an artwork has a non-transferable relation to its medium. Its content cannot be transferred to another medium while still remaining equally meaningful or evocative. Artistic meaning can never be adequately paraphrased in discursive terms. If we paraphrase a poem or recount a film or novel, we cannot ultimately do justice to the meaning of the work *as a work of art*. Works of art are not decorative forms providing paraphrasable contents and transient pleasures, but suggestive symbols with existential value. This implies that they not only represent but may also *transform*

human existence. Great works of art, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, David's *Psalms* and Wagner's *Parsifal*, and their unique and subtle combinations of forms, styles and contents, are said to convey deep meanings that evoke a transfiguring experience of the world.

This fifth value of art, its existential significance, may well be the most difficult to grasp and express. Great artworks have made us see the world in a wholly new perspective – think of Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Goya's *Black Paintings*, Picasso's *Guernica*, the Pantheon in Rome, the Taj Mahal in Agra, etc. Those masterpieces have altered the way we experience reality. One could contend that such works of art put a spell on us, for they reveal and defuse immense and often untameable powers and emotions. Take the view on sexual desire and love developed by Richard Wagner in his great opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner characterises the tremendous and potentially destructive power of erotic love – not merely in the narrative, but also primarily in and through the music itself – by showing how the two young lovers hunger to be united at any cost, and how they are eventually joined in death. Because of its enchanting rendering of deep emotions and important moral insights concerning the nature of erotic passion, longing and love, the opera may be said to console, elevate and ennoble us. By centring on self-sacrifice as the inexorable engine of love, the work possesses a redeeming quality that seems to lift us temporarily above the world of our own mortal condition as embodied individuals (see Scruton 2004).

It is in this sense that one could argue, with Roger Scruton and others, that experiencing great art is akin to religious experience and the sacred. Not in the sense that art necessarily conveys 'spiritual' messages (whatever that may mean), but because it displays energies and emotions that we would not be able to experience otherwise, and because it defuses what we cannot control: the stunning magnitude of the universe, the messiness of life, the finitude of human existence, and so on. From this it does not follow that the meaning of aesthetic appreciation and art is so mysterious that we cannot say anything about it, nor that it inevitably leads to a religious attitude. It does imply, however, that words may fail to express the unique and irreplaceable intensity and impact of a great work of art. One cannot paraphrase the meaning of a profound work of art without *essentially* detracting from the value of directly experiencing it.

Even though none of the discussed theories can be considered to have fully grasped the essence of (the value of) art, each one of them offers thought-provoking insights and rightly insists that art has an indispensable part to play in shaping the human world. Taken together, the discussed views definitely show why it remains worthwhile not only to engage with works of art but also to treasure great works of art and the rewarding experiences they offer.

6. CONCLUSION

Beauty is an important human value and is widely considered to give meaning to human life. We have examined the problem of the judgement of beauty and the relativity of aesthetic taste and, subsequently, discussed the different reasons we may have for valuing art. But appreciating beauty and art are activities that raise a number of difficult issues. Beauty can occur in many different objects, contexts and events, and appreciating it raises the problem of the objectivity of one's judgement: it is based on a personal experience and feeling of pleasure, but claiming that something or someone is beautiful seems to be more than merely expressing our individual preference: we require that others agree and seem to ascribe an objective quality to a particular object. This led to a discussion of the nature and worth of the judgement of beauty, as well as arguments pro and contra relativism concerning beauty and artistic value more generally. Furthermore, we examined different accounts of the value of art.

Whatever one's exact position in the debate about relativity/universality and subjectivity/objectivity, it has become clear that the issues are complex and cannot be easily and definitively settled in favour of one or other position. In fact, there are many subtly refined viewpoints that are to be situated somehow between subjectivism and objectivism. Furthermore, artistic practices have become so diverse that it is impossible to identify one (primordial) value that *all* artworks possess.

Moreover, novel insights from the relatively new domains of experimental philosophy, empirical aesthetics and neuroaesthetics will undoubtedly raise new questions about the issues discussed above. Whether this novel empirical methodology will undermine the need for and significance of a purely philosophical approach of beauty, aesthetic judgement, the value of art and related topics remains to be seen, but it will undoubtedly stimulate philosophers to refine their conceptual analyses and revise some of their arguments and hypotheses. The philosophical enquiry into the nature of beauty, art and aesthetic value will thus remain a very lively and important research area, not in the least because the need for a philosophical reflection on beauty and art is crucial to all of us who consider them of paramount importance to a humane and civilised existence.[3]

3. I wish to thank Bart Engelen, Martin van Hees, Lodi Nauta and Veerle Rotsaert for their comments.

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VORLESUNGEN ÜBER DIE PHILOSOPHIE DER KUNST

Hegel's series of lectures on the philosophy of art has been a landmark in the history of aesthetics ever since its publication in 1835 and has had an immense impact on a wide variety of thinkers, including Rosenkranz, Vischer, Dewey, Heidegger, Croce, Adorno, Lukács and Danto. Hegel is a metaphysical idealist, who claims not merely that artworks express divine and human freedom and ultimately embody the so-called 'absolute spirit' or the ultimate rationality of reality, but also that the material aspects of art are ultimately dispensable for thoughts that can be expressed more appropriately through the more intellectual means of religion and philosophy. Fine or 'beautiful' art (*schöne Kunst*) is defined as 'the sensible shining of the idea'. Art, religion and philosophy have the same content (i.e. the freedom of the spirit), but different forms. Despite its grand metaphysical claims and its clearly cognitivist approach, Hegel's philosophy of art provides often stunningly detailed studies of specific artworks, e.g. of Flemish 15th-century paintings by Memling and the Van Eyck brothers. He also offers an historical account of the value of art that formed the basis of the 19th-century discipline of art history. Hegel distinguishes three art forms: the symbolical (e.g. Egyptian), classical (e.g. Ancient Greek) and romantic (e.g. mediaeval) art forms. The latter art form, which Hegel mainly situates in Christian painting, announces the notorious 'end of art'. The outward forms of the artwork have become superfluous. Hegel argues that for us art has become something of the past and has to be superseded by religion and philosophy, for (in his view) any material, sensible medium is inadequate to capture fully the ultimately spiritual essence of reality.