Introduction to Aesthetics
An Analytic Approach
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Chapter 1

Introductory Remarks

The problems included in aesthetics are many and appear to be heterogeneous. This makes a study of the literature of aesthetics a perplexing matter. One of the major aims of Part I will be to outline the basic historical routes along which the problems of aesthetics have evolved from ancient Greek times to just past the middle of the twentieth century. Such an outline will serve to orient the reader and show how various problems are historically and logically related to each other. Without such a guide, the problems of aesthetics have the appearance of being a series of not very closely connected questions.

The questions included within the field of aesthetics have developed out of twin concerns in the history of thought: the theory of beauty and the theory of art. These two philosophical concerns were first discussed by Plato. Although philosophers have disagreed about the theory of art (roughly, disagreed about how art should be defined), they have until very recently continued to debate the theory of art pretty much on the same terms as Plato did. The theory of beauty, however, underwent a drastic change in the eighteenth century. Whereas earlier philosophers had discussed only the nature of beauty, eighteenth-century thinkers began to be interested in additional concepts: the sublime, the picturesque, and so on. This new activity may be thought of as either breaking up beauty into its parts or supplementing beauty with additional concepts.

At the same time that beauty was undergoing this change, a related development was taking place—the concept of taste was being worked out in the
thought of such philosophers as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Burke, Alison, and Kant. In general, these philosophers were concerned about developing a theory of taste that would enable them to give an adequate analysis of the experience of the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque, and related phenomena as they occur in nature and art. The notion of disinterestedness forms the center of these analyses and is the core of these philosophers’ concept of taste. After the eighteenth century, theorizing in the taste mode was replaced by theorizing about the aesthetic. The word “beautiful” then came to be used either as a synonym of “having aesthetic value” or as one of the many aesthetic adjectives on the same level as “sublime” and “picturesque,” which are used to describe art and nature. Since the end of the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, the twin concerns of aestheticians have been the theory of the aesthetic and the theory of art.

It may seem that the theory of the aesthetic became the prime concern of aestheticians and that the theory of art and the question of aesthetic qualities are simply subsumed under that theory. The concept of art is certainly related in important ways to the concept of the aesthetic, but the aesthetic cannot completely absorb the concept of art.

My discussions of beauty, eighteenth-century theories of taste, and the philosophy of art are, for the most part, developed by examining and summarizing the theories of historical figures. This arrangement permits the reader to glean some idea of the theories of, for example, Plato, Aristotle, Shaftesbury, and Kant and, at the same time, get a sense of how the problems and theories of aesthetics have developed through history.

The subject matter of twentieth-century analytic aesthetics will be presented here and divided into three areas: (1) the philosophy of the aesthetic, which in the nineteenth century replaced the philosophy of beauty, (2) the philosophy of art, and (3) the philosophy of criticism or metacriticism. Developments in twentieth-century philosophy and in the thought of twentieth-century art critics (mostly literary) have produced this third area in aesthetics. The philosophy of criticism or metacriticism is conceived of as a philosophical activity that analyzes and clarifies the basic concepts art critics use when they describe, interpret, or evaluate particular works of art. The development in philosophy that led to metacriticism in aesthetics was the widespread influence of analytic, linguistic philosophy, which conceives of philosophy as a second-order activity taking as its subject matter the language of some first-order activity. The relevant development in art criticism that led to metacriticism was the renewed emphasis by such critics as I. A. Richards and the school of critics known as the New Critics on the importance of focusing critical attention on the works themselves rather than on the biography of the artist and the like. The rise of the New Criticism was important to the development of metacriticism because the concepts used by the New Critics in describing, interpreting, and evaluating works of art were taken by the metacritics (the philosophers) as their subject matter. Examples of the concepts an art critic might use are representation (“The painting is a representation of London Bridge”), the intention of the artist (“The poem is a good one because the poet succeeded in realizing his intention”), or form (“This music has a sonata form”).

The twentieth-century representatives of the theory of the aesthetic are the philosophers who use and defend a notion they call “the aesthetic attitude.” Such philosophers maintain that there is an identifiable aesthetic attitude and that any object, artificial or natural, toward which a person takes the aesthetic attitude can become an aesthetic object. An aesthetic object is the focus or cause of aesthetic experience and therefore the proper object of attention, appreciation, and criticism. There is nothing in metacriticism, that is, the analysis of the concepts of criticism, that actually contradicts the theory of the aesthetic attitude. In fact, Jerome Stolnitz, who has been one of the most prominent attitude theorists, conceives of aesthetics and presents it in his book as the theory of the aesthetic attitude plus metacriticism. However, Monroe Beardsley, who was the foremost defender of metacriticism, developed his complete theory without using the notion of the aesthetic attitude. Others have explicitly argued that the notion of the aesthetic attitude is untenable. I will examine the aesthetic attitude theory in detail in Chapter 3.

As noted, I will present twentieth-century analytic aesthetics as divided into three areas: the philosophy of the aesthetic, the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of criticism. Art and its subconcepts, however, are concepts that critics use, and for that reason it might be thought that they are simply concepts of criticism and that the philosophy of art is subsumable under the philosophy of criticism. But philosophers have had a direct interest in the concept of art since the time of Plato, long before the rise of the idea of the philosophy of criticism. If this argument is unconvincing, the independence of the philosophy of criticism and the philosophy of art is demonstrated by the fact that some of the essential aspects of works of art are not things of the sort to which criticism can be addressed. This point will be argued in later chapters.

I have been greatly helped in understanding all phases of the history of aesthetics by Monroe Beardsley’s Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present. My discussion of the development of aesthetic theory in eighteenth-century British philosophy relies heavily on a series of incisive studies by Jerome Stolnitz: “The Significance of Lord Shaftesbury in Modern Aesthetic Theory,” “Beauty: Some Stages in the History of an Idea,” and “On the Origins of Aesthetic Disinterestedness.” On many points I have been helped by W. J. Hippie’s The Beautiful, The Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory. In the years since the first version of this book was published, I have worked from time to time on eighteenth-century theories of taste; this has culminated in my book, The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century.
His argument very briefly is that although an artist’s intention is causally related to the work of art the artist produces, an intention is distinct from (not part of) an actual work. His view is that if something is not part of a work of art, it cannot be part of the aesthetic object of that work. Beardsley has many other things to say about this topic, but this is the core of his argument.

The criterion of distinctness as a necessary condition for aesthetic objects may be formulated in the following way:

If something is part of an aesthetic object, then it must be (is) part of (not distinct from) a work of art.

This criterion functions to exclude things—artist’s intentions, for example—from aesthetic objects. (An analysis of the concept “work of art” will not be given until later, but the expression “work of art” is being used here in the classificatory, nonevaluative sense, and it is not being used as a synonym for “aesthetic object.”)

Please remember that the current discussion of aesthetic objects is limited to the domain of art. Natural objects may, of course, be aesthetic objects, but they are not under discussion here. A brief remark about natural objects as aesthetic objects is made at the end of this chapter.

Assuming that the criterion of distinctness is acceptable and that its application in the case concerning intention is correct, more is obviously needed to sort out the widely differing aspects of works of art. It is clear that it would be silly to take many of the aspects of works of art to be parts of their aesthetic objects. For example, the color of the back of a painting or the actions of stagehands backstage at the performance of a play are surely not properly objects of appreciation and criticism.

Drawing on a long tradition that emphasizes the importance of sensory elements in aesthetics, Beardsley attempts to use the distinction between the perceptible and the nonperceptible and make perceptibility a necessary condition of aesthetic objects. His criterion of perceptibility may be formulated in the following way:

If something is part of an aesthetic object, then it must be (is) perceptible under the normal conditions of experiencing the kind of art in question.

The qualification about normal conditions must be added because, for example, the color of the back of a painting is perceptible, but not under the normal conditions of viewing paintings. This second criterion also functions to exclude things from aesthetic objects.

I will now consider some cases to illustrate how the criterion of perceptibility is supposed to work and how difficulties arise in certain cases.

First, consider the case of the stagehands in traditional theater productions. Although this work is necessary for a performance of the actors, the performance of the stagehands is clearly not part of the aesthetic objects of the plays to which
An aesthetic object is either a visual design or a musical composition or a literary work.

I will discuss only visual design, which will sufficiently illustrate how the criterion is supposed to work. Beardsley defines "visual design" as "a bounded visual area that exhibits heterogeneity." Presumably, this definition is supposed to complete the process of isolating the elements of purely visual aesthetic objects.

I return now the case of the performance of the actor in Hamlet, focusing only on its visual aspects as seen from a seat in a theater. Beardsley's notion of visual design certainly applies here. The outline of the stage furnishes a boundary and the various elements within that boundary exhibit a heterogeneity. Thus, since a visual design is by definition an aesthetic object, any element of visual design, which includes the actor's performance, is ruled in as an element of a visual design.

Consider now a third case—the case of the property man in traditional Chinese theater, who appears on stage while the action of the play is in progress and moves props around, shifts scenery, and so on. (In this case also I am concerned only with the visual aspects of plays.) The Chinese property man is not, however, part of an aesthetic object as are the actors in the play to which the property man is connected. The Chinese property man is in a broad way a part of the play to which he is connected and he is perceptible under normal conditions, so the first two criteria do not exclude him from the aesthetic object of the play. Will the notion of visual design rule him out? Since the Chinese property man is visible on stage just as the actors are, if the notion of visual design rules the actors in, it also rules in the property man. The notion of visual design is not discriminatory enough in what it rules in.

Consider now a fourth case, not in connection with the third criterion, but in connection with the criterion of perceptibility. This is the hypothetical case of a ballet dancer who uses imperceptible wires in order to make incredible leaps. These imperceptible wires are part of the aesthetic object because it would be necessary to know if such wires were being used in order to appreciate and evaluate the performance correctly. A given leap might be magnificent if wires were not being used but mediocre if wires were being used. The wires would be an integral part of the performance. However, it deductively follows from the criterion of perceptibility that the wires are not part of an aesthetic object as is shown by the following valid argument:

1. If something is part of an aesthetic object, then it is perceptible under normal conditions.
2. The invisible wires are not perceptible.

Therefore,

3. The invisible wires are not part of an aesthetic object.
The criterion of perceptibility is thus shown to be defective because it entails the false conclusion that the imperceptible wires are not part of an aesthetic object. In this case, our intuitions and the results of the applications of Beardsley criteria yield different results.

The criterion of the consideration of the basic properties of perceptual fields is defective because it rules in things—the Chinese property man, for example—that ought not to be ruled in. The criterion of perceptibility is defective because it rules out things—the invisible wires, for example—that ought not to be ruled out.

Concluding Remarks

Unlike the attitude theorists who seem to be wrong in a very basic way, Beardsley's difficulty seems more a matter of detail. Perhaps, then, an adequate metacritical theory of aesthetic object may be worked out by following the trail Beardsley has blazed.²

Perhaps the criterion of distinctness can be applied a second time to yield the desired results. In its first use, this principle was used to distinguish art from nonart—specifically, the work of art from the artist's intention. Perhaps the criterion can be applied within the category of art to distinguish those aspects of a work of art that belong to an aesthetic object from those that do not. This second application would come off if, on inspection and reflection, the various aspects of works of art fall into two distinct classes, one of which contains all and only those aspects it is proper to appreciate and criticize. These aspects would constitute aesthetic objects.

However, by this time it may already be evident that the criterion of distinctness in its first use cannot actually be applied in a simple, straightforward way. Knowing whether something is distinct from a work of art presupposes that one already knows what kinds of things are and are not parts of works of art and their aesthetic objects. Determining whether or not something is part of a work of art is actually a case of realizing, on the basis of what one knows about works of the type in question, that a given thing is or is not a part. There will no doubt be cases of artistic innovation concerning which very little information is available and for which conventions have not been established. Time will take care of these cases in one way or another. Even if the determination of distinctness between things that are and are not parts of a work of art cannot be made in an easy way, it does seem that it can be made. And, if this is so, it encourages one to think that a second and similar kind of determination of distinctions can be made within the category of art. That is, on the basis of what one knows about the various types of art and the conventions and rules that govern their presentation, one can come to realize which aspects are the proper aspects for appreciation and criticism. The realization at either of the two levels will not always or even typically be easy. In many cases, a great deal of thought will be necessary and controversy will certainly not be easily settled. The controversy, for example, over whether or not the intention of the artist is part of a work of art is still hotly debated. It is worth noting that the abandoned criterion of perceptibility cannot be applied in a simple, straightforward way either; perceptibility is qualified by "under the normal conditions of experiencing the kind of art in question," which indicates that perceptibility is not established independently of the concept of a particular type of art.

To sum up, it seems that a conception of aesthetic object can be arrived at but not in the clean-cut way that either the attitude theorists or Beardsley had hoped. What it makes sense to appreciate and criticize in the case of a given work of art cannot be known antecedent to a rich experience of and full understanding of works of art of the type in question. Thus, the method of arriving at a concept of aesthetic object will have to be piecemeal reflection on one type of art at a time. The concept produced by this procedure will be complicated and variegated, but this simply reflects the complexity of the arts.

There are two matters that it seems appropriate to mention at this point. First, Beardsley's view of aesthetic object as it is formulated here and that of the aesthetic-attitude theorists are different in scope. According to the latter, anything—a work of art or natural thing—may become an aesthetic object, whereas Beardsley's view does not include an account of natural objects as aesthetic objects. This is not surprising because metacriticism takes art criticism as its subject matter and art criticism takes as its subject matter art, not natural objects. For metacriticism to be a complete aesthetic theory, some account that deals with natural objects must be added to it. There is no space to pursue this topic here, but perhaps the account might be developed along these lines: a natural object is an aesthetic object when it functions in someone's experience in a manner similar to the way a work of art functions when it is taken as an object of appreciation and/or criticism.

Second, it may seem appropriate at this point to have a discussion of the nature of aesthetic experience. However, insofar as the aesthetic-attitude theorists are concerned, aesthetic experience seems to mean "that experience that is had when in the aesthetic attitude." Thus, for the attitude theories, the concept of aesthetic experience has, in effect, already been discussed. Beardsley, however, has an explicit theory of aesthetic experience, arguing that it has certain specific characteristics that differentiate it from ordinary experience. Since Beardsley's theory of aesthetic experience is so closely related to his account of evaluation, it seems best to leave a discussion of it until Part IV.