



Philosophical Review

What is Aesthetics?

Author(s): G. Santayana

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (May, 1904), pp. 320-327

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2176284>

Accessed: 15-09-2016 09:11 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Duke University Press, Philosophical Review are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*

WHAT IS ÆSTHETICS?

AN accomplished mathematician, who is certainly free from those prejudices which his science might be expected to foster, once said that all problems are divided into two classes, soluble questions, which are trivial, and important questions, which are insoluble. This epigram, if we chose for the moment to take it seriously, might help us to deal in a quick and trenchant fashion with the topic before us. Our problem would indeed be soluble and trivial, if we wished merely to fix the relation of an æsthetics arbitrarily defined to other sciences of our own delimitation. It would be all a question of dragooning reality into a fresh verbal uniform. We should have on our hands, if we were successful, a regiment of ideal and non-existent sciences, to which we should be applying titles more or less preëmpted by actual human studies; but in its flawless articulation and symmetry our classification would absolve itself from any subservience to usage, and would ignore the historic grouping and genealogy of existing pursuits.

Thus, for instance, in the recent *Estetica*, by Benedetto Croce, we learn that æsthetics is purely and simply the science of expression; expression being itself so defined as to be identical with every form of apperception, intuition, or imaginative synthesis. This imagined æsthetics includes the theory of speech and of all attentive perception, while it has nothing in particular to do with art or with beauty or with any kind of preference. Such system-making may be a most learned game, but it contributes nothing to knowledge. The inventor of Volapük might exhibit considerable acquaintance with current languages, and much acumen in comparing and criticizing their grammar, but his own grammar would not on that account describe any living speech. So the author of some new and ideal articulation of the sciences merely tells us how knowledge might have fallen together, if it had prophetically conformed to a scheme now suggesting itself to his verbal fancy; much as if a man fond by nature of archi-

tectural magnificence, but living by chance in a house built of mud and rubble, should plaster it on the outside, and, by the aid of a little paint, should divide it into huge blocks conjoined with masterly precision and apparently fit to outlast the ages. When this brilliant effect was achieved, and the speculative eye had gloated sufficiently on its masterpiece, the truly important question would still remain; namely, what the structure of that house really was and how long it could be expected to retain traces of the unmeaning checkerwork with which its owner's caprice had overlaid it.

Perhaps we may pursue our subject to better advantage if we revert to our mathematical friend, and try to turn his satirical dictum into something like a sober truth. Some questions, let us say, are important and soluble, because the subject-matter can control the answer we give to them; others are insoluble and merely vexatious, because the terms they are stated in already traduce and dislocate the constitution of things. Now the word 'æsthetics' is nothing but a loose term lately applied in academic circles to everything that has to do with works of art or with the sense of beauty. The man who studies Venetian painting is æsthetically employed; so is he who experiments in a laboratory about the most pleasing division of a strip of white paper. The latter person is undoubtedly a psychologist; the former is nothing but a miserable amateur, or at best a historian of art. Æsthetic too would be any speculation about the dialectical relation of the beautiful to the rational or to the absolutely good; so that a theologian, excogitating the emanation of the Holy Ghost from the Son and from the Father, might be an æsthetician into the bargain, if only the Holy Ghost turned out to mean the fulness of life realized in beauty, when deep emotion suffuses luminous and complex ideas.

The truth is that the group of activities we can call æsthetic is a motley one, created by certain historic and literary accidents. Wherever consciousness becomes at all imaginative and finds a flattering unction in its *phantasmagoria*, or whenever a work, for whatever purpose constructed, happens to have notable intrinsic values for perception, we utter the word 'æsthetic'; but these occa-

sions are miscellaneous, and there is no single agency in nature, no specific organ in sense, and no separable task in spirit, to which the æsthetic quality can be attributed. Æsthetic experience is so broad and so incidental, it is spread so thin over all life, that like life itself it opens out for reflection into divergent vistas. The most important natural division in the field of reflection is that between the vista of things found and the vista of things only conceived or desired. These are two opposite and centrifugal directions in which reasoned knowledge may expand; both diverge from the common root furnished by practical knowledge, memory, and history; one, proceeding by observation, yields natural science, and the other yields ideal science, which proceeds by dialectic. Yet even these two regions, the most disparate possible in speculation, covered respectively by pre-Socratic and by Socratic philosophy, are themselves far from separable, since before external facts can be studied they have to be arrested by attention and translated into terms having a fixed intent, so that relations and propositions may be asserted about them; while these terms in discourse, these goals of intent or attention, must in turn be borne along in the flux of existence, and must interpret its incidental formations.

Now, much that is æsthetic is factual, for instance the phenomena of art and taste; and all this is an object for natural history and natural philosophy; but much also is ideal, like the effort and intent of poetic composition, or the interpretation of music, all of which is concerned only with fulfilling intent and establishing values. That psychology may occasionally deal with æsthetic questions is undeniable. No matter how clearly objects may originally stand out in their own proper and natural medium, in retrospect they may be made to retreat into the experience which discovered them. Now, to reduce everything to the experience which discloses it is doubtless the mission of psychology,—a feat on which current idealism is founded; so that the subject-matter of æsthetics, however various in itself, may be swallowed up in the psychological vortex, together with everything else that exists. But mathematics or history or judgments of taste can fall within the psychological field only adventitiously

and for a third person. An eventual subsumption of the whole universe under psychological categories would still leave every human pursuit standing and every field of experience or faith distinct in its native and persisting hypostasis. Intelligence is centrifugal. Every part of rational life, in spite of all after-thoughts and criticisms, remains in the presence of its own ideal, conscious of the objects it itself envisages, rather than of the process imputed to it by another. Æsthetic experience will therefore continue to elude and overflow psychology in a hundred ways, although in its own way psychology might eventually survey and represent all æsthetic experience.

If psychology must sometimes consider æsthetic facts, so must moral philosophy sometimes consider æsthetic values. As mathematical dialectic, starting with simple intuitions, develops their import, so moral dialectic, starting with an animal will, develops its ideals. Now a part of man's ideal, an ingredient in his ultimate happiness, is to find satisfaction for his eyes, for his imagination, for his hand or voice aching to embody latent tendencies in explicit forms. Perfect success in this vital, æsthetic undertaking is possible, however, only when artistic impulse is quite healthy and representative, that is, when it is favorable to all other interests and is in turn supported by them all. If this harmony fails, the æsthetic activity collapses inwardly by inanition,—since every other impulse is fighting against it,—while for the same reason its external products are rendered trivial, meretricious, and mean. They will still remain symptomatic, as excrements are, but they will cease to be works of rational art, because they will have no further vital function, no human use. It will become impossible for a mind with the least scope to relish them, or to find them even initially beautiful. Æsthetic good is accordingly no separable value; it is not realizable by itself in a set of objects not otherwise interesting. Anything which is to entertain the imagination must first have exercised the senses; it must first have stimulated some animal reaction, engaged attention, and intertwined itself in the vital process; and later this æsthetic good, with animal and sensuous values imbedded in it and making its very substance, must be swallowed

up in a rational life ; for reason will immediately feel itself called upon to synthesize those imaginative activities with whatever else is valuable. As the underlying sensuous good must be necessarily merged in the imaginative (their product being what we call æsthetic charm), so in a cultivated mind ulterior rational interests, never being out of sight, will merge in the same total and immediate appreciation. It will be as impossible wholly to welcome what is cruel or silly, what is groundless, mindless, and purely æsthetical, as wholly to welcome what gives physical pain. Reason suffers us to approve with no part of our nature what is offensive to any other part ; and even mathematical cogency, for instance, becomes trivial, in so far as mathematical being is irrelevant to human good. The whole of wisdom must color a judgment which is to be truly imaginative and is to express adequately an enlightened and quick sensibility.

The question whether æsthetics is a part of psychology or a philosophic discipline apart is therefore an insoluble question, because æsthetics is neither. The terms of the problem do violence to the structure of things. The lines of cleavage in human history and art do not isolate any such block of experience as æsthetics is supposed to describe. The realm of the beautiful is no scientific enclosure ; like religion it is a field of sublimated experience which various sciences may partly traverse and which is wholly covered by none. Nor can we say that, because to analyze the sense of beauty is a psychological task, this analysis constitutes a special science. For then astronomy too would have a psychology of its own, and even its special æsthetics, and a fresh science would spring into being whenever a new object offered itself to any observer.

What exists in the ideal region in lieu of an æsthetic science is the art and function of criticism. This is a reasoned appreciation of human works by a mind not wholly ignorant of their subject or occasion, their school, and their process of manufacture. Good criticism leans on a great variety of considerations, more numerous in proportion to the critic's competence and maturity. Nothing relevant to the object's efficacy should be ignored, and an intelligent critic must look impartially to beauty,

propriety, difficulty, originality, truth, and moral significance in the work he judges. In other words, as each thing, by its existence and influence, radiates effects over human life, it acquires various functions and values, sometimes cumulative, sometimes alternative. These values it is the moral philosopher's business to perceive and to combine as best he can in a harmonious ideal, to be the goal of human effort and a standard for the relative estimation of things. Under the authority of such a standard arts and their products fall of necessity, together with everything else that heaven or earth may contain. Towards the rational framing of this standard must go, together with every other interest and delight, the interest and delight which men find in the beautiful, either to watch it or to conceive and to produce it. *Æsthetic* sensibility and artistic impulse are two gifts distinguishable from each other and from other human gifts; the pleasures that accompany them may of course be separated artificially from the massive pleasures and fluid energies of life. But to pride oneself on holding a single interest free from all others, and on being lost in that specific sensation to the exclusion of all its affinities and effects, would be to pride oneself on being a voluntary fool. Isolated, local sensibility, helplessness before each successive stimulus, is precisely what foolishness consists in. To attempt, then, to abstract a so-called *æsthetic* interest from all other interests, and a so-called work of art from whatever work ministers, in one way or another, to all human good, is to make the *æsthetic* sphere contemptible. There has never been any art worthy of notice without a practical basis and occasion, or without some intellectual or religious function. To divorce in a schematic fashion one phase of rational activity from the rest is to render each part and the whole again irrational; such a course would lead in the arts, if it led to anything, to works with no subject or meaning or moral glow. It would lead in other fields to a mathematics without application in nature, to a morality without roots in life, and to other fantastic abstractions wholly irrelevant to one another and useless for judging the world.

Nor would such an insulation of the *æsthetic* ideal secure any permanent division of functions, nor even attain an ultimate tech-

nical analysis. For after the alleged æsthetic sphere had been abstracted, at the cost of making it a region of pure idiocy, it would turn out that an æsthetic element had remained imbedded in men's other thoughts and actions. Their steam-engines, their games, their prose, and their religion would prove incorrigibly, inherently, beautiful or ugly. So that side by side with pure æstheticism, — something so dubious and inhuman, — we should have to admit the undeniable beauties of the non-æsthetic, of everything that was fit, lucid, beneficent, or profound. For what is practically helpful soon acquires a gracious presence; the eye learns to trace its form, to piece out its characteristics with a latent consciousness of their function, and, if possible, to remodel the object itself so as to fit it better to the abstract requirements of vision, that so excellent a thing may become altogether congenial. Æsthetic satisfaction thus comes to perfect all other values; they would remain imperfect if beauty did not supervene upon them, but beauty would be absolutely impossible if they did not underlie it. For perception, while in itself a process, is not perception if it means nothing or has no ulterior function; and so the pleasures of perception are not beauties, if they are attached to nothing substantial and rational, to nothing with a right of citizenship in the natural or in the moral world. But happily the merit of immediate pleasantness tends to diffuse itself over what otherwise is good, and to become, for refined minds, a symbol of total excellence. And simultaneously, knowledge of what things are, of what skill means, of what man has endured and desired, reënters like a flood that no man's land of mere æstheticism; and what we were asked to call beautiful out of pure affectation and pedantry, now becomes beautiful indeed.

In moral philosophy, then, there is as little room for a special discipline called 'æsthetics' as there is among the natural sciences. Just as we may consider, among other natural facts, the pleasures incident to imagination and art, as we may describe their occasions and detail their varieties, so in moral philosophy we may train ourselves to articulate the judgments vaguely called æsthetic, to enlarge and clarify them, to estimate their weight, catch their varying message, and find their congruity or

incongruity with other interests. This will be an exercise of moral judgment, of idealizing reason ; and its very function of attributing worth reflectively and with comprehensive justice, will forbid its arrest at the face value of dumb sensation, or of abstract skill, or of automatic self-expression ; whatever distinguishable interests may be covered by these terms will be only ingredients in the total appreciation our criticism is to reach. The critic's function is precisely to feel and to confront all values, bringing them into relation, and if possible into harmony.

Accordingly, the question whether *æsthetics* is a part of psychology or a separate discipline is, I repeat, an insoluble question, because it creates a dilemma which does not exist in the facts. A part of psychology deals with *æsthetic* matters, but cannot exhaust them ; parts of other sciences also deal with the same. A single and complete *æsthetic* science, natural or ideal, is an idol of the cave and a scholastic chimera. As art has hardly prospered where men were barbarous or unintelligent, or where wealth and freedom did not exist, so the theory of *æsthetic* sensibility cannot advance except by an advance in history and psychology ; while to produce a just and fruitful appreciation of beauty it is first requisite to ennoble life, to purify the mind with a high education, with much discipline of thought and desire. Creative genius would otherwise find no materials fit to interpret ; nor could art otherwise divine what direction its idealizations should take, so as to make them, what true beauties are, so many premonitions of benefit or so many echoes of happiness.

G. SANTAYANA.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.