

CHAPTER 13

HOW DO WE APPRECIATE THE ART (BEAUTY) IN LIFE?

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Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will explore what it means when you say that something is beautiful. You will ponder why we appreciate the grand views of nature. You will consider how we understand and evaluate art. You will ask what artists do when they create art and what we do when we enjoy art. You will enter into the debate concerning whether art should be censored or sponsored or not. You will read about Japanese calligraphy and German music. And in the end you will think about Beauty, where it comes from and where it leads us. After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- identify some of the main questions explored in the field of aesthetics
- name the four points of view from which aesthetics can be viewed and briefly summarize how looking at aesthetics from each point of view changes how we understand the subject
- describe the various intentions an artist may have in producing a work of art
- compare and contrast the different ways people have identified and evaluated aesthetic objects as "beautiful"
- argue for or against the censorship of art in society
- summarize Plotinus' understanding of the origin and end of Beauty

Beauty is a powerful force. One of the most well-known plots in all of story-telling is that of the man who journeys far and wide, overcoming many obstacles, in search of a beautiful woman. Then there are the stories of "the artist," someone like Ludwig van Beethoven who hears the beauty of the

symphony in his mind even though at the end of his life he cannot hear it with his ears. There are poets, artists and composers who would flee their country or even die rather than compromise their pursuit of the beautiful. Beauty commands our attention like few other powers. You can probably still remember that special song that moved you somewhere at some point in time, that song that moves you every time you listen to it. You can perhaps still remember that special place, that sunset or view that touched you and can touch you now.

The power of beauty reaches us not only in the big things of life, but also in the small. Listen, for example, to this anecdote, posted on a story-telling blogsite:

I was not having a good time tonight. Technical and logistical problems were driving me nuts. In fact, I'm at my parents house right now, and I walked in to my moms room to ask her how easy it was to get on the roof, because I wanted to jump off of it. She was watching America's Got Talent on TV, and it just happened that a magician by the name of Landon Swank was up to perform in what I think is the semifinal episode. I love magic, and I'm talking about stage magic here – the art of illusion. I've loved it since I was a kid, so I had to stop and watch him perform. It was so elegant, so beautiful. He was in this stage set of a living room, and I was thinking about all the things he could have hidden in it. All the tricks he could do with it. But rather than the all too common trick-a-second, blink and you've missed it kind of magic that is so often done today, he took a different approach – doing a slow, gentle, almost meditative sequence of effects in a story progression. I'm not going to try to describe it, I'm sure it'll be on his page on the official site: and if not, I'm sure it'll be on youtube. It was beautiful – it wasn't trying to say or do anything, other than “here's a bit of wonder I want to share with you.” I LOVED IT. As I walked out of the room after the segment ended, I noticed that I felt totally different. I wasn't exhausted and overwhelmed any more, I felt comfortable, and ready move

forward, and that, my friends, is the power of beauty.¹

Art and beauty surround us everywhere we turn. Think of how much time and money we spend decorating our homes. Think of our public buildings, so many of them filled with the sound of music and scattered with art pieces on display. Think of the internet, and how we are inundated with pictures and "icons" every time we turn on our computer. Think of our own clothing and the energy spent trying to make ourselves look attractive. Our moral reforms are often motivated by an aesthetic vision of a more beautiful life. Our political revolutions are driven by a passion for a new and more beautiful community. There is little in human existence that that is not shaped by our consciousness of art and beauty in some form or another.

Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

Why is this? Why are we drawn to the beautiful? Why do we think of one thing as ugly and another as lovely? Why do art, poetry, drama, film, story and so on have such a significant place in our experience? Is beauty just a pleasant stimulation of the senses, or is there something more going on? Why do we strive for excellence in life: not just an excellence of skill, but a form of life that is attractive? To explore these kinds of questions is to examine the philosophy of art, or "aesthetics."

Defining Aesthetics

Just as the term "epistemology" identifies the exploration of our understanding of knowledge, so "aesthetics" identifies the exploration of our understanding of beauty and the arts. The term itself was coined in 1735 by Alexander G. Baumgarten to name what he called "a new science of sensory cognition." Just as René Descartes in 1641 wrote his *Meditations on First Philosophy* as a systematic

1 <http://andydolph.com/2011/09/06/the-transformative-power-of-beauty/>

exploration of human reason so Baumgarten a century later systematically sought to explore, both in his *Reflections on Poetry* and in his unfinished *Aesthetica*, the special kinds of knowing gained through the perception of the senses (the term "aesthetics" is derived from the Greek word *aisthanomai*, meaning to perceive, feel, or sense). Scientific reason offers us access to "truth" of one kind. Does poetry, for example, also give us access to truth? And how does that happen? These were the questions Baumgarten sought to answer. And his exploration helped give birth to the formal discipline of aesthetics. The field of aesthetics is not as popular as other aspects of philosophy (such as ethics) and consequently the terms and questions of aesthetic discussion are not as clearly defined (at least in the West). Furthermore, the questions of our relationship with "beauty" and "art" are themselves difficult to articulate. As a result, it is difficult to establish a neat definition of aesthetics as a field of study. Nonetheless, for our purposes in this text, we may define the field of aesthetics, as it is understood today, as *the study of art and beauty and their place in human experience*.

The Questions of Aesthetics

Yet people were "doing aesthetics" long before the term was coined, and in places Baumgarten had never known. Plato and Plotinus dreamed of a pure vision of Beauty itself. Aristotle analyzed the structure of literary tragedy, examining how plot and poetry affect the human soul. Philosophers from India inquired about the factors that make a poem or a song what it means to us. Chinese philosophers debated whether the free expression of art was more helpful or more harmful to society. On and on the conversation developed throughout history. Some of the key questions regarding art and beauty explored throughout human history are:

- What *is* art? What do we call "art" and why? When is it appropriate to say of something, "that is simply *not* art"?
- What are the objects of beauty? Is there a difference between the beauty of nature, the beauty of the human form, or the beauty of a symphony? If so, what is that difference about?

- What is the function of art? What is art *about*?
- Does art imitate life in some way? Does the representation of a human form in a painting, or the representation of human life in a film act as some kind of symbol of our experience in some kind of significant way?
- What goes on when we create art? How are we *there* in our art? How do expression, intention, statement, culture, perception and so on combine in the act of artistic creation? What does all this say about the *meaning* of art?
- What makes "good" art good? What makes a masterpiece great? What qualities, features, or properties characterize excellence in the objects of aesthetic experience?
- Upon what basis can we make a claim to judge something (a work of art, a sunset, the human form) as "beautiful"?
- Is the free expression of art more helpful or harmful to society? Should it be censored, and if so, in what way?
- What is the relationship between what we call "art" and the institutions, practices, powers and cultures within which art is experienced and defined? How does culture affect the ways we understand and experience the beautiful?
- What is the origin of beauty? What is the end of beauty? Does beauty point to something greater? Is there a relationship between the Good, the True, and the Beautiful?

As fascinating as these questions are, we can only begin to explore a few of these questions in this text. Some philosophers in India categorized their reflection on art and beauty by means of an image of a tree. First there is the seed (the artist and the creation of beauty). A tree (the art form itself) emerges from the seed. Then the tree bears fruit (the experience of art by an audience). We will use this outline (slightly altered) in this chapter. We will explore aesthetics from five different points of view. First, we will look at aesthetics from the perspective of the *artist* and the *creation* of beauty (the seed). Then we

will consider the various *objects* of aesthetic experience and the *forms* of art and beauty which are associated with these objects (the tree). Third, we will examine art and beauty from the perspective of the *audience*: what it is like to *appreciate* art, how we perceive and evaluate the beautiful (the fruit). Fourth, we will widen our view to inquire about aesthetics from the point of view of the *culture(s)* within which art is created and experienced (the soil). Finally, we will ask about the *origin* and *end* of art and beauty: whether art and beauty point to something "larger."

The Artist and the Creation of Art and Beauty

Think of your creative moments. When you set aside some time to create, what happens? Let's say your medium of creativity is clay. Do you dive into the clay and play with it until something appears? Do you center the clay on a wheel, trying to improve your skill as a potter? Do you carefully form a sculpture in order to communicate some symbolic meaning? Would things be different if your medium were dance, or woodworking, or poetry, or cooking? What is involved in the creation of beauty? One way of exploring the meaning of art and beauty is to think like an artist. Philosophers who take this approach to aesthetics have explored a few interesting issues: the nature of expression, aesthetic intention, and the meaning of excellence and its relationship to beauty. We shall briefly consider each of these.

Expression

One of the most common ways of thinking about art is to see it as an *expression* of the artist. A musician is gripped by a feeling of grief over the death of a loved one and composes a "Requiem" expressing the pathos she feels. An architect pours out his sense of adoration for God by designing a cathedral. Even small and random acts of beauty--like a flower arrangement--can express the heart of "the artist." Expression runs deep in the human creative spirit.

This approach to aesthetics was especially dominant in the West through what is known as the

"Romantic" movement, especially influential in the nineteenth-century. The novels of Victor Hugo, the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the music of Johannes Brahms, or the paintings of J. M. W. Turner are all representative of this movement. For the Romantics, expression--and in particular the expression of strong feeling--was at the center of art. Good art (for example, what a Romantic might identify as "beautiful" music) was art that originated in an artist who feels strongly and who communicates those feelings in an expressive manner. Painters with this approach might be less concerned with the precise representation of objects and more driven to release ones feelings in the act of producing the painting. Art critics (people who evaluate art and help decide what art should be recommended for museums, awards and such) of an expressivist leaning tend to interpret art in terms of the life-history, the sincerity and the expressive depth of an artist. Art, for the Romantic, is not about the form of the product or the perception of the audience; it is about the expression of the artist.

Others have sought to develop an expression-oriented approach to art in a way that broadens the perspective beyond the artist. Author Leo Tolstoy, for example, saw art as an expression of feelings by the use of symbols or means that evoke similar feelings in others. In his view, the quality of art is determined by the skill with which these feelings are communicated. Here it is not just the passion and sincerity of the artist that is in view. but also the success of the artist's expression *to* someone else. Here is what Tolstoy himself says:

Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications. To take the simplest example: a boy having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf relates that encounter, and in order to evoke in others the feeling he has experienced describes himself, his condition before the encounter, the surroundings, the wood, his own light-heartedness, and then the wolf's appearance, it's movements, the distance between himself and the wolf, and so forth. All this,, if only the boy when telling the story again experiences the feelings he had lived through, and infects the hearers and compels them to feel what he had experienced, is art. Even if the boy had not seen a wolf but had frequently been afraid of one, and if, wishing to evoke in

others the fear he had felt, he invented an encounter with a wolf and recounted it so as to make his hearers share the feelings he experienced when he feared the wolf, that also would be art. And just in the same way it is art if a man, having experienced either the fear of suffering or the attraction of enjoyment (whether in reality or in imagination), expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble so that others are infected by them. And it is also art if a man feels, or imagines to himself, feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage, or despondency, and the transition from one to another of these feelings, and expresses them by sounds so that the hearers are infected by them and experience them as they were experienced by the composer.

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling--this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them.

Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious Idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetic physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and humanity.²

Over the decades of the twentieth century philosophers of aesthetics have developed an expression and feeling-oriented approach to art with ever greater nuance (see, for example, the writings of R. G. Collingwood). Our aim here is simply to see that one way of explore art and beauty from the point of view of the artist is to see aesthetics as the expression of emotion.

Intention

But don't artists do more than express emotion? Think again about your own creative moments. What are you doing when you are creating? What do you hope to accomplish by your creative work? Some artists create not in order to express, but as a means of persuasion. With this in mind, composers write trumpet fanfares to inspire armies into battle. Francisco Goya's prints of "The Disasters of War" were drawn in part to express his own protest of the violence of his day in hopes that others might share his concern and be moved to action. Other artists create in order to make a statement about the way things are. Thus, for example, medieval architects designed cathedrals as models of the relationship of

2 Leo Tolstoy, "What is Art" in *The Portable Tolstoy* (NY: Penguin, 1978), 836-37.

heaven and earth. Other artists explore technique and form as they create. Many impressionists, for example, explored color, light, light and appearance through the technique of pointilism. It appears, then that our artistic activity may involve much more than emotional expression. Perhaps, then, aesthetic production is less about *expression* and more about *intention*, what we hope to accomplish through our creativity. It is one thing to look at a work of art as a spectator and talk about "what I appreciated" or "what I got out of it." It is another thing entirely to ask what the artist was trying to do with this work.

On the one hand this approach to aesthetic creation can be understood as simply an enlargement of the expression approach to art viewed from the perspective of the artist. Instead of seeing aesthetics as emotional expression, we see art as the expression of a viewpoint, or the expression of a desire for change. Yet this way of looking at it still sees art as something that "comes out from within." Another way of seeing artistic production is to see it as a way that the artist engages with others. Creativity is not merely an *ex-pression* of a self (emotion, idea, hope . . .) to others. Rather aesthetic creative also serves as a means by which the artist negotiates his or her relationship with others. I speak my mind to society through a poem, "placing" myself in society. I attract others to products and purchases through advertizing art, trying to make changes in the behavior of society. I *intend* to do something with this artistic production.

The concept of intention helps broaden our understanding of the activities of the creative process. But it also leads to other problems. If we view art not as the expression of emotion, but as the intention of a creator articulated through line, color, sound, and so on, this would mean that our evaluation of art--particularly of the quality and meaning of art--must involve a careful analysis of the life, history, and culture of an artist. And that gets a bit complicated. First, we have to ask *how much* we must know of a dancer's background in order to appreciate his or her performance of a dance. And then we must consider our own cultural influences as we understand the artist. And after all that we may

find ourselves asking just how important it is. Do we have to know the ins and outs of Michelangelo's life in order to appreciate beauty of the Sistine Chapel? Some philosophers of art have dubbed this concern with the background and intention of an artist the 'intentional fallacy,' suggesting that it is wrong-headed to claim that the value of a work of art is necessarily connected to an artist's intention.³ Those who spoke against the focus on intentionality argued that it was not the background and psychology of the artist, but the work of art itself that should be examined when we evaluate art. Thus, the function of this debate was to point us from aesthetic creation to the aesthetic object. We will be exploring this perspective below.

Excellence and Beauty

There is something else about the creation of art we have not examined. Some artists create to express. Some create to communicate. Some create to change. But in many--perhaps a great many--artists, there is the desire simply to create and to create *well*. Think once again about your creative moments. When did it go well? What was that like?

On the one hand we master the techniques required for artistic creation: the correct swing of a hammer with the chisel, the choice of the right word in a poem, the ability to leap on the points of our toes in a ballet. That is a matter of skill. And the development of the proper skills is a component of any art. But *excellence* and particularly *Beauty* seem to refer to something else, perhaps something more than mere technical mastery. But what is that something more?

Consider the art of Japanese calligraphy, called *shodo*. While the history of penmanship in the East has evolved much like that of any culture, Japanese calligraphy has developed a special association with cultural and philosophical aesthetics (especially associated with the Zen tradition of Buddhism). For example, a student of *shodo* may be given a sheet of paper, some ink, and a brush.

³ See W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsly, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, 3rd edition, edited by Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 367-80.

There is one chance (no erasing or changing) to write a word or a phrase. You simply let your mind become centered and then express, move, create, and discover in this simple act of writing. Is it art? Is it spiritual practice? Yes.

When we look at art and beauty from the perspective of the artist, we already discover a wide range of elements involved in understanding aesthetics. Is art expression of an artist? Is it the acting out of an intention? What does it mean to strive for excellence in art? What is the relationship between aesthetic creation and Ultimate realization? Perhaps all of these are present to some degree in the aesthetics of human creativity.

The Aesthetic Object and the Form(s) of Art and Beauty

So much for the seed. But what of the tree? What emerges from creativity, from our aesthetic endeavors? Philosophers often call the object of our appreciation--or the embodiment of aesthetic activity--the "aesthetic object." The song, the dance, the painting, the poem, the architectural structure, all of these can be labeled aesthetic objects. But what makes a painted canvas an "aesthetic" object (art) while a painted porcelain cylinder is called a kitchen utensil (a mixing bowl)? On the one hand it is difficult to identify an aesthetic object apart from consideration of its production (how it is created), its appreciation (how we perceive objects), or its context (the factors that shape the way objects are appreciated). And yet philosophers have wondered if there might be something about the very character of aesthetic objects themselves that makes us want to give them a special category and treat them as "art" or "beauty." Just what is the *object* we appreciate as beautiful and why is it *aesthetic*?

What is an Aesthetic Object?

In Homer's *Iliad* (written around 800bce) there is a famous section in which the shield of Achilles is described in detail. The metalwork on the shield portrayed the sea, the sun, and the stars. It displayed cities and people and fields and gods. In the midst of this description Homer states that it was

all of gold and that "herein was the great marvel of the work."⁴ However we understand the word "marvel" here in this passage, the description--and this particular sentence included in the description--appear to indicate that Homer wished his readers to catch something of the aesthetic qualities of this shield. What this means is that as early as Homer, the earliest of the Greek epic poets, we find descriptions of aesthetic objects. Another aesthetic object in the *Iliad* is Helen of Troy, considered the cause of the Trojan war. She is specifically described as "beautiful."⁵ Prehistoric paintings in the caves of France depict animals, human forms, and abstract designs, all of which have been described as not simply pictorial recording, but objects of art. Likely they were not only produced as objects of art, but also *enjoyed* as such. Anthropologists speculate that vocal singing and expressions of rhythm could be as old as the human race. Perhaps beauty and art are as old as humanity.

Greece and Rome are well known for their architecture and their sculpture. The walls of many of their finer homes were painted with frescoes, and the ancient "games" were not only presentations of sports, but of the arts as well. In the medieval period the patronage of the arts in the West was exercised especially by the Church. Some of the finest European medieval art is housed in the cathedrals and chapels of Italy and France. As medieval became modern, the patronage of the arts passed from the ecclesial to the civil and economic powers. Wealthy citizens financed the construction of museums and theatres to display "art" to the public. Modern philosophical reflection on the arts, naturally, was directed toward the objects collected in museums and performed on the stages of the modern opera houses and symphony halls.

Furthermore, by the eighteenth century another dimension of beauty was gaining philosophical attention in the West: nature. Attention to the skill of imitating nature, developed in the Renaissance, stimulated a greater appreciation of nature itself. This appreciation, in turn, facilitated an artistic and

4 Homer, *Iliad*, XVIII.548.

5 See, for example, *Iliad*, III.130.

philosophical interest in the beauty of nature itself. Philosophers, following the lead of Immanuel Kant, sometimes use the term "sublime" to describe the kind of aesthetic experience we have of nature (particularly with regard to its vast and almost frightening character).

Since the start of the twentieth century, our Western conception of an aesthetic object has been challenged from nearly every corner. Urinals are displayed in art museums. Concerts are given in which the entire performance is silence or random sounds. Our every moment is filled with sounds and sights produced by professional in "commercial art." People travel far and wide to visit primitive tribes and to encounter their dress, their utensils of life, and their rituals as aesthetic experiences.

So what is an aesthetic object? An ornamented shield, a young woman, a sculpture or a building. A painting, hanging on the wall of a museum, or a symphony performed in a grand hall. Nature can be an aesthetic object, as when we behold the vast and powerful sea and are moved with awe. Perhaps many things can be considered aesthetic objects, even a urinal.

Harmony

So then what makes an object *aesthetically* significant? Are all views of nature beautiful, or only some? Why are some view-lots sold for a much higher price than others? Is it just a matter of cultural pressures? If so, then why do the valued views lots in Brazil and Kenya look a lot like the ones in the United States? On the one hand we can say that beauty is only in the "eye of the beholder," that an aesthetic object is simply anything that gives me a certain kind of pleasure or anything that society tells us is worth spending money on or putting in a museum. We will address these claims soon. But for now, let's look a little more closely at the object itself.

Beauty is something that emerges from the natural character of objects at hand. Think of the composer who writes with a certain orchestra in mind (the strong oboist, the weak brass section), or the wood-sculptor who is attracted to a particularly knotty piece of maple, or the beautician who prepares to give somebody a "full makeover." When humans create beauty, we work with the potential of the

materials before us. Part of our appreciation of beauty is that we find it present in the midst of the very flaws of the objects we admire. But at the same time, some objects (sculptures, songs, novels, people, landscapes, and so on) appear beautiful to us "as is." While part of beauty lies in what is made from the flaws of the material of life, there are some objects, experiences, and such that we simply experience as beautiful. At times (or, shall we say, to a certain extent) beauty dwells in the very character of an object and of the materials and skills that combine to make that object (whether left "as is" or constructed).

But what is this "something" present in an object that makes it beautiful?

Music styles have changed a great deal over the centuries. They differ from culture to culture: different scales, different instruments, different patterns of creation and performance. Yet within each culture and era, neither complete randomness nor absolute rigidity is regarded as a model of beautiful music. The fact that random music is occasionally performed serves as the "exception that proves the rule": art (and other beauty as well) exhibits form. Similarly, our appreciation for nature has changed over time, and different features of nature are noticed more by one culture than another. Nonetheless, throughout time and location, human beings have regarded a basic symmetry of appearance, a basic harmony of elements, as central to the nature of aesthetic value.

Many philosophers have explored the characteristics of aesthetic objects over the centuries. Aristotle spoke of order, symmetry, and definiteness as qualities of beauty. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74 ce) spoke of integrity, proportion and clarity. The Renaissance period was consumed with the notion of proportion. Japanese aesthetics has drawn attention to the pathos of things, to a simple austerity, to the worn features of age, to the profoundness of grace. These features are not merely characteristics of "good art," but also are reflective of our perception of the aesthetic character of reality. Modern art broke many assumptions about representation and form in art, yet even in so doing it was exploring these values through violating them. More recently, American philosopher Monroe Beardsley has presented three "general canons" for judging aesthetic value: rules of aesthetic criticism that also tell us

something of the aesthetic objects we evaluate. He identifies these canons as unity, complexity, and intensity. What can we learn from this history? While it is not easy to specify, philosophers who explore beauty from the point of view of the object suggest that there are features of things (paintings, landscapes, people) that make them beautiful. Beauty may just be a part of the way things are. And perhaps this beauty may have to do with some kind of harmony of elements present in the things of life.

The Norms, Symbols, Rules and Qualities of Beautiful Composition

But there is something *between* the artist and the work of art that we have not yet discussed (perhaps we can think of a "sprout" between the seed and the tree). What occupies the artist as he works? Certainly there is attention to skill and to the concrete details of the material he shapes. Perhaps there is an internal vision of some ideal he wishes to create. But between the dream and the material there is a language of form and symbol, a "vocabulary" and a "grammar" of aesthetic norms which guide his creation process. A composer, for example, knows that the use of minor scales and a slow rhythm are likely to communicate sadness to a piece of music. She knows the kinds of sound each instrument can produce, and the ways that her culture expects these instruments to be played. She also knows the technical procedures by which music is written: measures, notes, rests. She also is aware of the practical norms of her craft. She is hoping that her piece--a Requiem in honor of her deceased loved one--will be performed in public. Consequently, she must keep the composition within a certain length, for she is aware that in this culture an audience is only socially able to listen to a musical piece of such-and-such a length. There are political norms about music, ethical norms about music and even religious norms about music, all of which shape the way she composes this Requiem. There are also musical norms she must keep in mind: the standard form of a Requiem, the elements to be included in such a work, the ways of putting sounds together that are pleasing to her expected audience, and other similar expectations. Many of these norms are further specified in terms of "rules" for composition, rules which she learned (explicitly or implicitly) in her years of training.

The composer then takes this language of music and selects, interprets, or even violates it at times, creatively inserting her own creative personal dimension to the piece. She may wish to express her feelings, to communicate her opinions, to confront her audience, or to explore the techniques of music. In the end, she combines personal, social, and universal norms to create a work of art, an aesthetic object that, once created, speaks both "from the artist" and also "from itself" as an aesthetic object which, to a greater or lesser degree, exhibits the proportion, grace, and harmony of a beautiful piece of music. When we look at art from the perspective of the aesthetic object we see the presence of a harmony of form that embodies beauty. When we look between the artist and the art we see the social, material, and more general aesthetic norms: the symbolic language that shapes the ways that art is creatively produced.

The Appreciation of Art and Beauty

The fundamental forces of the universe (like gravity, electricity, nuclear forces and so on) at their most basic level govern relationships between things. Like charges repel and opposite charges attract. In the world of chemistry we learn about different kinds of bonds, ways that different chemicals navigate their own joining or separation. If we turn to psychology or sociology we can also learn about social bonds: how we develop (or avoid) intimate relationships. Attraction, whether physical, chemical, or social, is a force. One entity is drawn, through the power of attraction, into relationship with something else. Ever fall in love? Beauty is a powerful force, and aesthetic appreciation is a special form of this force of attraction. Thus we now shift our view toward the perspective of the spectator or the "audience": the person or people who appreciate the aesthetic object. The tree of the aesthetic object produces the fruit of aesthetic appreciation on the branches of our experience. When we gaze out at that spectacular view, when we soak ourselves in the rich textures of a piece of music, when we are drawn by the face of another person, what goes on in us? What do art and beauty *do* to us?

Pleasure and Aesthetic Emotions

If I were to ask you what happens when you experience beauty, perhaps one of the first things you might say is that you experience pleasure. The sounds of the music, the colors of the fall leaves, the shape of the face, gives you satisfaction. Your senses are stimulated and pleased by this encounter with the beautiful. Thus, one way of looking at the nature of art, from the perspective of the audience, is to see aesthetics simply as the stimulation of particular kinds of pleasure. Some philosophers would argue that "to say that a painting, a poem, a play, or a piece of music is good is just the same thing as saying that it pleases us."⁶ The ancients spoke frequently about the dual function of the arts: "to please and to instruct." Certainly our experience of pleasure is a common feature of aesthetic appreciation.

But just what *is* this aesthetic pleasure? What differentiates our experience of beauty from any other experience of pleasure: say a tasty meal, an enjoyable conversation, or a shot of some drug that stimulates the pleasure center of the brain? To explore this question is to examine the nature of human emotions, a topic that is much too large to summarize here. Nonetheless, this much can be said. Most human emotions (fear, anger, joy, and so on) arise in light of appraisals we make of situations and their significance for our primary concerns. When I was a toddler, I had no fear of rattlesnakes. I would have been attracted to their movements and their sounds. Only later, when I learned to appraise the sights and sounds of rattlesnakes in terms of their significance for my concerns (endangering my safety), did I develop a spontaneous experience of fear at the characteristic sight and sound of a rattler. Thus my fears, my loves, my hopes, my angers in life tend to be oriented around the fulfillment of my immediate pleasures and more fundamental concerns.

Aesthetic emotions--as *aesthetic* emotions--tend to operate slightly with a different character. On the one hand, we see that beautiful body and we are drawn to it. We long to possess it. We long for the pleasurable fulfillment of a relationship with that person. Perhaps this is mere lust, perhaps it is

⁶ See Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2005/1997), 3.

falling in love. No matter here. But compare that experience to the simple appreciation of the beauty of another. What is it like just to marvel at the beauty of another, apart from any need to possess or feel any other kind of pleasure? Here you are drawn *to* the aesthetic object but not for yourself, but rather simply because of the character of the other. Think of that time you looked out the window and captured an unexpected view of the sunrise (or rather, were *captured by* the view). Your experience of that view has less to do with your fulfillment than with the raw appreciation of the object itself. This feature is often present in aesthetic experience. Whereas most emotions tend to be subject-oriented, aesthetic emotions tend to be object-oriented. I remember once spending a half-hour in front of Georges Seurat's famous painting "On a Sunday Afternoon." I'm not sure that "pleasurable" would be the right term for that experience. I was simply captivated by the painting. I was lost in appreciation: of its technique, of its structure, of its beauty. Philosophers sometimes speak of the "disinterested" character of aesthetic experience. Is aesthetic experience disinterested? Is it the disinterested character of aesthetic experience which makes the experience aesthetic? What is the relationship between our personal engagement in an object or experience and its aesthetic nature? Philosophers have debated these questions at great length. True, we could perhaps say that aesthetic experience is an experience of some form of pleasure. But whereas some philosophers see this as a reduction of aesthetic experience to the biology of human existence, others regard aesthetic pleasure as something much more.

How Do We Perceive (and Judge) the Beautiful?

But can aesthetic appreciation be *reduced* to an experience of pleasure? Is aesthetic experience merely a stimulation of pleasure (however self- or other- oriented, however interested or disinterested)? What goes on when we experience beauty and then proclaim it to be beautiful? And here we face ourselves with the important question of how to account for the phenomena of aesthetic experience itself. This was such an important question that Immanuel Kant in 1790 devoted one of his three primary philosophical explorations to this question. His first exploration (called a "Critique") had to do

with knowledge and Truth. His second had to do with practical reasoning and the Good. His third was an exploration of the aesthetic judgment of Beauty and the Sublime. Some of Kant's predecessors suggested that human beings possess a separate inner faculty for the perception of beauty (called "taste"), just as our external eye mediates our perception of color. Other predecessors, such as David Hume (1711-1776), saw aesthetic appreciation as a matter of a sense or "taste" for the beautiful but did not see taste as an innate faculty but rather as a cultivated personal and social ability. He saw no difference between our appreciation for beauty than our preference for warm baths and dry martinis. Others, however, emphasized the normative demand that aesthetic judgments appear to make. These philosophers pointed to the realities of our experience. We grab the arm of someone, pull them outside and proclaim, "Just look at that view! Isn't it beautiful!"

Kant sought to reconcile the concerns of these different perspectives. How can judgments which by their very nature point to the feelings and experience of the perceiver (and are therefore "subjective") expect such universal assent by others? Human beings seem to evaluate beauty characteristically. Beauty pageants, Musical awards, Artistic commissions have been a part of the bulk of human history. If beauty is merely "in the eye of the beholder," why are we so powerfully and universally affected by the beautiful? Kant sees the possibility of universal subjective evaluation in the fact that all humans share the use of both reason and imagination. He suggests that in our appreciation of beauty both reason and imagination are joined in a free exercise that enjoys their harmony apart from the determination of some rational conclusion. Since our evaluation of beauty refers to our own experience, it is a matter of subjective assessment, yet because we hold our use of mental operations in common with the rest of humanity, we have the capability to urge everybody universally to experience what we have experienced ("Just look at it?").

While Kant explored the experience of the aesthetic object as a form of pleasure, other philosophers have emphasized other dimensions of the aesthetic experience. German philosophers G.

W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) both emphasized the value and importance of art less as a communication of pleasure and more as a communication of understanding. For these--and other--philosophers, the most significant aesthetic experience has less to do with our sensory satisfaction and far more to do with a profound grasp of the way things are communicated in a manner unavailable to science or philosophy proper. We mentioned that the ancients of art as "pleasing and instructing." Some philosophers emphasize the "pleasing" function of art and others the "instructing" function.

Needless to say, just as a loose network of personal, social, and universal symbols and norms mediates between the artist and the work of art, so also a similar network mediates between the completed work of art and the person who appreciates the art (we could think of a "bud" mediating between the tree and the fruit). Consequently, if we are to view aesthetics from the perspective of the audience we must recognize that the person who, for example, hears the Requiem processes his experience in terms of his own personal encounters with sadness, his own understanding of the mechanics of music, and his own identification with the appreciation of form and harmony more generally.

As we explore art and beauty from the perspective of those who appreciate the aesthetic object, we find a number of aspects present. We experience beauty as a kind of pleasure, and yet as a pleasure perhaps different than other kinds of pleasure. Kant, for example, suggests that aesthetic experience stimulates a unique interplay of our mental operations. And yet aesthetic experience also involves not merely pleasure but "instruction," or shall we say "enlightenment." As we experience the masterpieces of art history we come in touch with some of the finest statements of Truth, albeit spoken in a manner unlike we might find in a philosophy text. Also, just as a language of the aesthetic is used to produce art, so the same language (though not necessarily understood precisely as the artist may have understood it) is used to appreciate art. All of this is part of the experience of those who appreciate art

and beauty.

Society and the Context of Art and Beauty

We have so far, following the lead of Indian aesthetic reflection, examined the seed, the tree, and the fruit of aesthetics. Yet we must take one more step and explore the soil from which art and beauty arise. Artists do not begin their work in a vacuum, but are shaped by their culture. What is considered (or approved) as art is influenced by the social structures within which we live. Historically and globally speaking, art has played a central element in the education of many, and has also been censored from many others. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Western philosophical discussion of aesthetics has been increasingly pressed to consider the place of culture and cultural institutions with relationship to the arts. We will look at two issues here: (1) the discussion of art, morality and society and (2) the relationship between art, beauty, and the institutions of art.

Art and morality

Beauty is a powerful force. It is said that someone would swim the deepest ocean to follow a beautiful person. Music has inspired the best--and at times, the worst--in us as human beings. Books, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, have had a significant influence on social movements and political history. In our post-enlightenment Western culture we have fiercely defended the free expression of the arts. But is that a wise position? Doesn't complete freedom of the arts lead to the degeneration and ultimate collapse of a culture? Shouldn't we impose greater censorship over artistic expression? Or is the censorship of the arts a violation of human freedom, a freedom which should be defended at all costs?

Plato recognized the power of the arts. The arts were part of the curriculum of every young Athenian. Plato understood that they provide great pleasure and that while doing so they model alternative courses of feeling and life. He had concerns, however, about the courses of life to which their plays and songs and poems might lead the Greek youngsters. Plato advocated a strict censorship of the arts for the sake of maintaining the strength of the culture. Plato's recommendations have been

followed repeatedly in Western history: both Nazi Germany and communist Russia placed severe restrictions on the development of the arts. But, as I said above, for the most part Plato's voice is not welcomed in the West today. And these are not issues of Western culture alone. Debates about censorship are probably as old and as wide as humanity.

Debates arise not only about the censorship of the arts, but also about our support of the arts. Should the government fund the arts? Is this a wasteful and unnecessary use of government money or are the arts something that is vital to our national health? Below are two examples of a debate in ancient China. In the first example Mo Tzu (479-438bce), a philosopher-warrior who sharply criticized the Confucian establishment. In this example he argues that the support of music does not serve the aim of bringing benefit to the state and the people. In the second example, Hsun Tzu (313-238bce), a Confucian administrator, argues for the importance and value of maintaining the arts. Their debate is about the place of "music," but since poetry, dance, drama, and literature were, in those days, all caught up in music, it is best to see their discussions as regarding the place of the arts more generally.⁷

Mo Tzu - "Against Music"

It is the business of the benevolent man to promote what is beneficial to the world, to eliminate what is harmful, and to provide a model for the world. What benefits men he will carry out; what does not benefit men he will leave alone. Moreover, when the benevolent man plans for the benefit of the world, he does not consider merely what will please the eye, delight the ear, gratify the mouth, and give ease to the body. If in order to gratify the senses he has to deprive the people of the wealth needed for their food and clothing, then the benevolent man will not do so. Therefore Mo Tzu condemns music not because the sound of the great bells and rolling drums, the zithers and pipes, is not delightful; not

⁷ These examples are taken from David E. Cooper, ed. *Aesthetics: The Classic Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 45-54.

because the taste of the fried and broiled meats is not delicious; and not because lofty towers, broad pavilions, and secluded halls are not comfortable to live in. But though the body finds comfort, the mouth gratification, the eye pleasure, and the ear delight, yet if we examine the matter, we will find that such things are not in accordance with the ways of the sage kings, and if we consider the welfare of the world we will see that they bring no benefit to the common people. Therefore Mo Tzu said: Making music is wrong!

Now if the rulers and ministers want musical instruments to use in their government activities, they cannot extract them from the sea water, like salt, or dig them out of the ground, like ore. Inevitably, therefore, they must lay heavy taxes upon the common people before they can enjoy the sound of the great bells, rolling drums, zithers, and pipes. In ancient times the sage kings laid heavy taxes on people, but this was for the purpose of making boats and carts, and when they were completed and people asked, 'What are these for?' the sage kings replied, 'The boats are for use on water, and the carts for use on land, so that gentlemen may rest their feet and laborers spare their shoulders.' So the common people paid their taxes and levies and did not dare to grumble. Why? because they knew that the taxes would be used for the benefit of the people. Now if musical instruments were also used for the benefit of the people, I would not venture to condemn them. Indeed, if they were as useful as the boats and carts of the sage kings, I would certainly not venture to condemn them.

There are three things people worry about: that when they are hungry they will have no food, when they are cold they will have no clothing, and when they are weary they will have no rest. These are the three great worries of the people. Now let us try sounding the great bells, striking the rolling drums, strumming the zithers, blowing the pipes and waving the shields and axes in the war dance. Does this do anything to provide food and clothing for the people? I hardly think so. . . .

If the gentlemen of the world do not believe what I say, then let us try enumerating the various duties of the people of the world and see how music interferes with them. The rulers and ministers must

appear at court early and retire late, hearing lawsuits and attending to affairs of government - this is their duty. The gentlemen must exhaust the strength of their limbs and employ to the fullest the wisdom of their minds, directing bureaus within the government and abroad, collecting taxes on the barriers and markets and on the resources of the hills, forests, lakes, and fish weirs, so that the granaries and treasuries will be full - this is their duty. The farmers must leave home early and return late, sowing seed, planting trees, and gathering large crops of vegetables and grain - this is their duty. Women must rise early and go to bed late, spinning, weaving, producing large quantities of hemp, silk, and other fibers, and preparing cloth - this is their duty. Now if those who occupy the position of rulers and ministers are fond of music and spend their time listening to it, then they will not be able to appear at court early and retire late, or hear lawsuits and attend to affairs of government, and as a result the state will fall into disorder and its altars of the soil and grain will be in danger. If those who occupy the position of gentlemen are fond of music and spend their time listening to it, then they will be unable to exhaust the strength of their limbs and employ to the fullest the wisdom of their minds in directing bureaus within the government and abroad, collecting taxes on the barriers and markets and on the resources of the hills, forests, lakes and fish weirs, in order to fill the granaries and treasuries, and as a result the granaries and treasuries will not be filled. If those who occupy the position of farmers are fond of music and spend their time listening to it, then they will be unable to leave home early and return late, sowing seed, planting trees, and gathering large crops of vegetables and grain, and as a result there will be a lack of vegetables and grain. If women are fond of music and spend their time listening to it, then they will be unable to rise early and go to bed late, spinning, weaving, producing large quantities of hemp, silk, and other fibers, and preparing cloth, and as a result there will not be enough cloth. If you ask what it is that has caused the ruler to neglect the affairs of government and the humble man to neglect his tasks, the answer is music. . . . Therefore Mo Tzu said: If the rulers, ministers, and gentlemen of the world truly desire to promote what is beneficial to the world and

eliminate what is harmful, they must prohibit and put a stop to this thing called music!

Hsun Tzu, 'A Discussion of Music'

Music is joy, an emotion which man cannot help but feel at times. Since man cannot help feeling joy, his joy must find an outlet in voice and an expression in movement. The outcries and movements, and the inner emotional changes which occasion them, must be given full expression in accordance with the way of man. Man must have his joy, and joy must have its expression, but if that expression is not guided by the principles of the Way, then it will inevitably become disordered. The former kings hated such disorder, and therefore they created the musical forms of the odes and hymns in order to guide it. In this way they made certain that the voice would fully express the feelings of joy without becoming wild and abandoned, that the form would be well ordered but not unduly restrictive, that the directness, complexity, intensity, and tempo of the musical performance would be of the proper degree to arouse the best in man's nature, and that evil and improper sentiments would find no opening to enter by. It was on this basis that the former kings created their music. And yet Mo Tzu criticizes it. Why? . . .

When one listens to the singing of the odes and hymns, his mind and will are broadened; when he takes up the shield and battle-axe and learns the postures of the war dance, his bearing acquires vigor and majesty; when he learns to observe the proper positions and boundaries of the stage dance and to match his movements with the accompaniments, he can move correctly in his rank and his advancements and retirings achieve order. Music teaches men how to march abroad to punish offenders and behaving with courtesy and humility are based on the same principle. If one marches abroad to punish offenders in accordance with the way learned through music, then there will be no one who will not obey and be submissive. Hence music is the great arbiter of the world, the key to central harmony,

and a necessary requirement of human emotion. This is the manner in which the former kings created their music. And yet Mo Tzu criticizes it. Why? . . .

The gentleman utilizes bells and drums to guide his will, and lutes and zithers to gladden his heart. In the movements of the war dance he uses shields and battle-axes; as decorations in the peace dance he uses feather ornaments and yak tails; and he sets the rhythm with sounding stones and woodwinds. Therefore the purity of music is modeled after Heaven, its breadth modeled after the earth, and its posturings and turnings imitate the four seasons. Hence through the performance of music the will is made pure, and through the practice or rites the conduct is brought to perfection, the eyes and ears become keen, the temper becomes harmonious and calm, and customs and manners are easily reformed. All the world becomes peaceful and joins together in the joy of beauty and goodness. Therefore I say that music is joy. The gentleman takes joy in carrying out the Way; the petty man takes joy in gratifying his desires. He who curbs his desires in accordance with the Way will be joyful and free from disorder, but he who forgets the Way in the pursuit of desire will fall into delusion and joylessness. Therefore, music is the means of guiding joy, and the metal, stone, stringed, and bamboo instruments are the means of guiding virtue. When music is performed, the people will set their faces toward the true direction. Hence music is the most effective means to govern men. And yet Mo Tzu criticizes it! . . .

How can one understand the spirit of the dance? The eyes cannot see it; the ears cannot hear it. And yet, when all the posturings and movements, all the steps and changes of pace are ordered and none are lacking in the proper restraint, when all the power of muscle and bone are brought into play, when all is matched exactly to the rhythm of the drums and bells and there is not the slightest awkwardness or discord - there is the spirit of the dance in all its manifold fulness and intensity!

A few good questions are raised in midst of this debate, questions which bridge our discussion of art

and beauty and our discussion in chapter 8 regarding the just and best ordering of society. How do the arts function in society? Are we at a greater risk of social collapse when we fail to support economic ventures or when we fail to support the arts? Should we see the arts as a vehicle of managing the populous, or is that a dangerous step toward dictatorial manipulation? Do you support National Public Radio? Should the government support it?

The Institutions of the Beautiful

In this past century artists and philosophers (particularly in the West) have questioned the very definition of art, and questioned it deeply. And in doing so they have challenged the institutions that collect and present art. Must a painting represent something in order for it to be considered fine art? Must an orchestra have just this particular collection of instruments in order to produce a symphony? Aren't items of ordinary life (like Marcel Duchamp's urinal-Fountain) works of art? What do museums or music halls accept? Why? As we explore the nature of art, we are forced to think about the institutions that surround the world of aesthetics. At the same time, broader streams of thought have encouraged us to think in similar directions. G. W. F. Hegel spoke of art less as a phenomena of individual expression or perception and more as a phenomena of human evolution. Following Hegel's lead, we began to think of "art history." We began to explore the development of art and the institutions of art as a development of human culture. Similarly, following the lead of Karl Marx many have begun to look at aesthetics in terms of the economic forces that shape our experience of the art and beauty.

One way of understanding things is to see art merely as a mode of exploration and expression, a mode which can be used either to support or to confront the established political order. This is the approach of many Marxist thinkers in the West. Yet in the Soviet Union there developed a formal school of "Socialist Realism," a school of thought which--in connection with the Soviet government--exercised a significant control over the pursuit of the arts in communist countries. In both of these forms Marxist aesthetics urges us to ask the question, "To what purposes [and particularly to what

social purposes] is our art used?" The Marxist is ever vigilant to remind us that all our life--even our life of art and beauty--are what they are in the context of conflicts of economic forces. And everything we do--even our appreciation of beauty--is a stance somewhere in the conflict. More broadly, consideration of the role of culture and institutions in aesthetics has drawn attention to the shape of our perception of art and beauty. We have learned that our perceptions of nature, and consequently our very experience of the beauty of nature, have changed through history because of our technological developments. We have also seen how the shift of artistic patronage from church to museum to commercial enterprises have shaped our understanding of art and beauty. We have seen how the development of technologies (like photography, film, and the internet) have changed the materials of our art, and have opened up new ways of understanding art itself. The field of aesthetics has become increasingly global; sensitivity to the creative productions of other cultures has challenged and enriched our perspective of the arts and beauty. We have only begun to explore the rich and complex soil in which the seed of artistic creativity is planted.

The Origin and End of Beauty

We have now wandered through many of the trails and paths down which the philosophical discourse about aesthetics travels. But what does all this mean for the practice of philosophy as a *love of wisdom*? How does our broader understanding of art and beauty affect our relationship with the details of life? A few reflections must suffice.

The Beauty of Everyday Life

The first point is to acknowledge the significance of beauty in our lives. But to do this we must not only recognize the place the arts have in our everyday lives, but we must expand our understanding of the aesthetic. And we shall not be alone in doing so. Monroe Beardsley writes of the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, for example, that given the Stoic understanding of life as a conformity with reason, it is not surprising to find him "likening the beauty, or orderly arrangement, of objects to the

rational order of the soul, and suggesting that the delight in beauty is connected with the virtue that expresses itself in an ordered life."⁸ What, then, is a beautiful life?

A beautiful life is one that is informed by a vision of beauty. We surround ourselves with the beautiful. Most of it (at least in the wealthier West) is purchased beauty. Our homes, our furniture, our clothing, and our vehicles are acquired not merely for their functionality, but for their aesthetic pleasure. Part of maturing into adulthood and living on our own is gaining a sense of what we want our "home" to be like. And this is, in part, an aesthetic vision. Do you have a beautiful home? What makes it that way (or what *might* make it that way)? But now take the Stoic step: what might a beautiful *life* look like? Consider your use of time, your relationships, your speech and demeanor. Beauty can--and does--shape the vision not only of the way we arrange our furniture, but also the way we arrange the virtues we hope to embody in every encounter of every day. How might you cultivate a vision of beauty for your home, for your life?

Furthermore, as we have mentioned, beauty is a powerful force. A vision of beauty not only gives us a sense of the arrangement of the elements. To adopt a vision of beauty is also to place in front of us a model that becomes a strong attractor, motivating us to act. Think of national revolutions. People risk unimaginable dangers and undergo tremendous sacrifices because of their hope (read: aesthetic vision) of a new society. They can "see it" and so they fight for it. The motivational value of aesthetic vision is well known by self-help specialists. We also see it in political slogans. Visualize world peace.

An aesthetic dimension is present in every area of our lives. Your thoughts, your feelings, your relationships with others, your self-care or your treatment of nature, everything can be art. Just as the vast pictures from the Hubble telescope and the microscopic images of fractal patterns in human cells

⁸ Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1975/1966), 70.

and mineral crystals all reveal the overwhelming beauty of nature at its largest and smallest, so human life itself--in the smallest and in the largest matters--can embody a grace, a harmony that may be truly considered a work of art. We have developed "institutes" to train us in the art of painting. Now it is time for those institutes which train us in the art of living.

Aesthetic Value

Something else we find when we explore art and beauty is the vague and central place of *value*. The beautiful is something to which we are attracted, which we value. Indeed this gravitational impulse toward the beautiful--toward Beauty--may point to something that can re-order our lives. Let me explain by talking about a philosopher we have explored earlier in this text: Charles S. Pierce.

In his later years, Charles Pierce began to see a connection between Logic (the study of the True), Ethics (the study of the Good), and Aesthetics (the study of the Beautiful). As he saw it, human reasoning was a particular kind of action, the act of thinking. As such, reasoning was subject to human control. We can choose our patterns of thought. Logic identified those patterns of thinking which would most likely lead to a knowledge of the way things are. Logic, then, defined those actions which we ought to perform in order reach this given end. But discussion of the *ought* is a matter of ethics. So logic is really a subset, or is grounded in, ethics. Ethics is that branch of philosophy which evaluates the value of human choices and actions. Moral analysis considers which actions or courses of life are admirable, valuable, worth choosing and pursuing: in short, which actions are most truly attractive. But discussion of what is *attractive* is a matter of aesthetics. So ethics is really a subset, or is grounded in aesthetics. Aesthetics determines what is attractive, valuable, beautiful, worthwhile, admirable in and of itself. What this means is that our reasoning and our behavior are most fundamentally rooted in--and must give reference to--value.

We have seen this again and again. Beauty pulls us. We can't explain it but we can't avoid it. It is deeply subjective and yet we draw everybody around us into it. Beauty speaks to us of value. It is

value at its most basic. It is personal pleasure, it is social norms, it is the pattern of the universe.

Philosophers of religion have spoken of a "problem of evil" considering how one can believe in a loving God in light of the profound evil which is present in the world. Perhaps we have discovered, in this chapter, a "problem of Beauty." How do you explain a world that is not just surviving, but is also amazingly beautiful?

Beauty and the Beyond

We have not yet explored the connections between aesthetics and religion. Western philosophers of aesthetics tend not to speak of such matters a great deal these days (indeed for many, "aesthetics" is only a field which analyzes the arts. Even "Beauty" is a term largely left behind). Nonetheless, such connections have been made by many throughout our history and our planet. We can only glimpse at a few as we conclude this chapter.

In a well-known dialogue (*The Symposium*), Plato writes of Socrates, who in turn recounts how his own own mentor, the woman Diotima, explains to him about love. She explains how one's thought progresses from thinking about the beauty of a single person to the question of what makes any body beautiful. And after meditating on this for a while, one moves to thinking about the beauty of not merely bodies but souls as well: what makes individuals beautiful inside and out. And from this one is led to think not only of individuals but of laws and institutions. And then from there to learning and knowledge. What makes not only people and society beautiful, but what makes an *idea* beautiful? Finally, as you can imagine (think of Plato's cave story) one is finally led to contemplate the very nature of Beauty itself. Diotima asks Socrates about this final step, "If, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call *his*, she asked me, an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?"⁹ For Plato, the contemplative pursuit of aesthetics leads one inevitably face to face with

9 Plato, *Symposium*, 211e.

the Ultimate. Plato's ideas communicated in the *Symposium* were developed even more fully by a philosopher of the 3rd century ce, Plotinus.

In medieval Western philosophy, the connections between aesthetics and religion were explored on a number of fronts. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274ce), for example, spoke of our "beatific vision" of God. By this he was describing the absolute fulfillment of human happiness. Just as any particular beauty gives a measure of pleasure to the one who experiences it, and a greater beauty gives greater pleasure, so the ultimate fulfillment of the human desire for happiness must be in our encounter with the Ultimate and Infinite Beauty, the person of God. Aquinas also spoke of reality as being an *anologia entis*, an analogy of being in which God's being is complete and rich and full, and our being and the being of the world is received from that fullness of God. Thus, simply by being, all that exists is analogous to God and consequently reflects the beauty of God in that being. Later, empiricists like the Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671-1713), and idealists like Hegel also saw important connections between the world of the aesthetic and the divine.

In the East aesthetics and religion were often intimately connected. Thus the training of an artist was often connected in Hindu, Confucian, or Buddhist circles, with religious education. In one Hindu writing, we read about the gods declaring drama to be a sacred text, because it is such a good tool for religious education. The seed, tree, fruit analogy of Rasa was a way of understanding the self-manifestation of Brahman and the self-realization of Atman. We have already spoken of Japanese calligraphy and we could develop at length the notion of the martial arts as both art and spirituality. In any case, the point is made. In much of the world, through much of history, Beauty touched the Beyond.

With this in mind, we will close with a piece of writing by Hélène Cixous (b. 1937). Cixous is a French feminist philosopher (some call her a post-modern deconstructionist) who uses stories, theatre, essays and other genre to communicate her thoughts. She often experiments with genre itself, playing

with words and forms to open up new ways of thinking for the reader. In this excerpt, "The Last Painting or the Portrait of God," she talks about painting, and writing, and a bit about God.

Painting and writing - they are just that, hoping absolutely, they are what we might call *sunflower life*, to borrow an image from Van Gogh or from Clarice Lispector: 'Almost all lives are small. What enlarges a life is the inner life, are the thoughts, are the sensations, are the useless hopes . . . Hope is like a sunflower which turns aimlessly toward the sun. But it is not "aimless."'

What enlarges a person's life are the impossible dreams, the unrealizable desires. The one that has not come true. And these hopes, these desires are so strong that at times one falls, and when a person falls, she sees, she is once again turned toward the inaccessible sun. Why does the flower have a fragrance that is not for anyone, and for nothing . . . ?

Like hope. Hope aims at hope itself.

And the painter? Paints from hope to hope. And between the two? Is there despair? Nonhope. Between-hope. But straightaway, hope arises. What I love is the painter's dissatisfaction, what a wonder: a furious Monet burning thirty canvasses. Destroying his 'overworked' canvasses.

Seen by us, these canvasses were 'beautiful.' Seen by him, they are obstacles on the path to the last one.

His dissatisfaction is hope. Hope for the impossible. To turn oneself once again toward the sun is an act of faith. Writing the sun is as impossible as painting the air. This is what I want to do.

When I am finished writing, when I am a hundred and ten, all I will have done will have been to attempt a portrait of God. Of the God. Of what escapes us and makes us wonder. Of what we do not know but feel. Of what makes us live.

Journal Assignment 13.1

The Art and Beauty of My Life

In this assignment you will reflect on your own experience of art and beauty and what they have meant to you.

You, the Artist

First, think of yourself as an artist. When and where have you been creative in your life? What kinds of things have you done that might be considered art or crafts or some kind of aesthetic activity? Or perhaps you would rather describe how the aesthetic dimension is present in ordinary activities of your day. Either way, think of yourself as artist for a moment. What do you tend to do when you are creative? What are you doing when you are being creative: expressing emotion, making a statement, playing with techniques, communicating something to others? How do you relate to the goal of excellence? Is there some area of life in which your creativity borders on Japanese calligraphy? What is it like for you to be creative?

Your Works of Art

Now think about the works of art that surround your life. What art hangs on your wall? What kind of furniture decorates your home or room? What about your clothes, your accessories, the background on your computer? What music do you listen to? Would you consider it "beautiful"? What are the masterpieces of literature and film you treasure? Why do you treasure them? What do they communicate to you? What aspects of nature or the human form attract you? Why? What other things or events would you consider "aesthetic objects" in your life? What makes them aesthetic for you? What makes these different than those things and events you might consider ugly? Is there anything about the form or character of the aesthetic objects themselves that makes them beautiful or excellent

or something like that?

Your Appreciation of Art and Beauty

Now look at your own appreciation of beauty and art. What happens to you when you appreciate something? Compare your appreciation of quality art or a spectacular view to your enjoyment of good tasting food. What is similar or different between the two? Can you describe the sense of pleasure you experience when listening to your favorite music? Now think about your own times of evaluating aesthetic objects. Remember those times when you showed someone a sunset, or a song, or a building and said "Look at that! Isn't it beautiful!" Or think about your own interaction with dog shows, Grammy awards, Pulitzer prizes and the like. You have your own opinions. Where do they come from? How do you evaluate beauty and the arts?

Society and More

Now think about the institutions that shape your own experience of aesthetics. What do you think about the freedom of the arts in this culture today? Do we have too much or too little freedom? Should the government (federal, state, local?) support the arts? Why or why not? What institutions have shaped your own encounter with and experience of creativity and beauty? How has the development of technology influenced your own creative expression and experience?

Finally, think a little about your *life* as art and beauty. What would a beautiful life look like for you? Why? What is valuable and why are value and beauty connected? What do you think: does beauty point to something Beyond? If so, how, and what might that mean for our daily life?