CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Historical Underpinnings

It may seem surprising but it is widely believed that both the concept of art and the discipline of aesthetics didn’t exist before the eighteenth century. This supposed twin birth links these two concepts—art and the aesthetic—in ways that have profoundly influenced subsequent thought about both. I will say more about this influence in a moment. First we should ask whether the widespread belief is true. To put it more colorfully, were the twins really born at the suspected moment? Are they really twins?

The historical facts are complex. The existence of art—not the concept but items that might plausibly be thought to fall under the concept, such as paintings—date well back into human prehistory. By the time ancient civilizations flourished in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, India, China, and elsewhere art—painting, sculpture, poetry, music, architecture—existed abundantly and individual works were created that are as wonderful as any that have subsequently come to exist.

In the history of western thought about art and beauty (a concept closely related to aesthetic value), there is much that precedes the eighteenth century. For example, there are many discussions of beauty in ancient and medieval philosophical writings. There are also discussions of what we now think of as art forms: poetry, music, painting, architecture, and dance that also group these things together. Interestingly, discussions of beauty, on the one hand, and poetry, painting, music, etc., on the other, are distinct. While it is recognized in these writings that a painting or sculpture can be beautiful, they are not the
clearest examples of beauty or the most beautiful things. What links these art forms together in ancient thought is the fact that they represent other things and do so in a way that grips us emotionally. It was not even assumed that their capacity to do this is a good thing. Plato famously worried that the representation of reality in painting and poetry is unreliable and misleading and that the emotions they evoke corrupt the soul.

**Aesthetics versus the Philosophy of Art**

Several things happened in the eighteenth century that promoted the idea that the concept of the aesthetic and of art originate there. First, the study of the beautiful and the sublime in nature, art, and other human artifacts became a distinct philosophical topic, written about in works wholly devoted to that subject matter. These works focused not only on the features of objects that make them beautiful (sublime), but also on our reaction to these features and the properties of the human mind that make these reactions possible. They attempted to characterize the judgments that an object is beautiful and the kind of value being ascribed to objects by such judgments. The philosophical topic came to be called “aesthetics” in the eighteenth century, courtesy of Alexander Baumgarten in 1735. But writings on distinctly aesthetic topics go back to the beginning of the century.

Second, what is known as the system of fine arts also came into existence around this time. Although, as in ancient thought, one of the defining feature of the arts was the fact that they are representations, they were now valued in explicitly aesthetic terms. That is, they were considered paradigmatic objects of judgments of “taste” (a common eighteenth-century name for aesthetic judgments). They were evaluated for their beauty, independent of practical functions that other artifacts served. For the first time, perhaps, a group of objects were classified together in virtue of their aesthetic function. Deservedly or not, it is from this eighteenth-century source that several alternative conceptions of the subject matter of aesthetics have emerged.

One approach to aesthetics is to stick as closely as possible to the original eighteenth-century project as just described. However, the conceptual shifts that have occurred in the last three hundred years make it impossible to pursue exactly the same project. For one thing, to confine it to the study of the beautiful and sublime would now be regarded by most of us as too constricting. There are many artworks that are not well characterized by either predicate. There is the art of the grotesque, the horrifying, the morbid, and the shocking. There are ordinary objects in which, it could be argued, we take an
aesthetic interest but do not deserve to be characterized as either beautiful or sublime. These include all kinds of artifacts ranging from hair clips and tee-shirts to household appliances. Perhaps there are even aspects of nature of which the same is true. Consider a smooth, gray stone one might find on a beach. It is attractive to look at and touch, but not necessarily a beautiful object as is the delicate and colorful scallop shell one also discovers in the same location. For this reason (as well as others) the focus on beauty and sublimity has given way to an attempt to formulate a broader notion of the aesthetic, which then becomes the central focus of this approach. Underlying it is an assumption that there is a special sort of experience, or a special set of properties, about which we make a distinctive kind of judgment ascribing a unique sort of value, all of which fall under the concept of the aesthetic. Those who accept this assumption are in a position to explore the nature of the aesthetic (aesthetic experiences, aesthetic properties, aesthetic judgments, aesthetic values) wherever it occurs—nature, art, and artifacts.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, “aesthetics” gradually acquired a new meaning, namely, the philosophy of art. Two further ways of thinking about the subject matter of aesthetics derive from this long-standing tendency. One approach is guided by the thought that art is the most significant or the primary bearer of aesthetic value; it is the one kind of thing that is made chiefly with the intention to create aesthetic value, and, hence, the concept of the aesthetic is the key to understanding the nature and value of art. One might say that this approach adapts the eighteenth-century project into a philosophy of art. It sees art through the prism of the eighteenth-century system of the fine arts.

The final approach claims that such an adaptation is a distorting lens through which to look at art. Art is too complex and valuable in too many ways to be grasped exclusively through the concept of the aesthetic. This approach sees art as something that has existed almost as long as humans have, as something that fulfills many functions and has been conceived in diverse ways. Hence “aesthetics,” understood as the philosophy of art, has to be freed from an exclusive concern with art as a bearer of aesthetic value! Rather than being an adaptation of the eighteenth-century project, this approach thinks of the philosophy of art and “aesthetics,” understood as the study of aesthetic value, as distinct, and, at best, overlapping disciplines or subject matters.

This book will examine all three conceptions of the discipline of aesthetics, but let me say up front, that it is aligned with, and will argue for, the last approach. To avoid confusion, we will use “aesthetics” to refer to only the study of aesthetic value and related notions such as aesthetic experience,
aesthetic properties, and aesthetic judgments. Given this usage, aesthetics is one thing, the philosophy of art is another, though this is not to deny that some conception of aesthetic value will play an important, but not defining, role in the philosophy of art.

The book will offer an introduction to both aesthetics as just defined in Part I and the philosophy of art in Part II. Interestingly, once we distinguish between aesthetics and the philosophy of art, the first approach mentioned above, considered as a conception of aesthetics, is perfectly consistent with the third approach. What is at odds with the latter is the second approach.

Aesthetics

The Concept of the Aesthetic

It is plausible that countless things possess aesthetic value in some degree. Among these are artworks and natural objects, but also many everyday objects such as our clothes and other adornments, the decoration of our living spaces, and artifacts from toasters to automobiles, packaging, the appearance of our own faces and bodies, the artificial environments we create, the food we eat, and so on indefinitely. Is it really true that all these things share this value in common, and if so, how should it be characterized?

To illustrate the diversity of views about the nature of the aesthetic, consider a meal at a restaurant. Such an occasion will appeal to us, particularly to our senses, in a variety of ways. First, the restaurant will create a setting, an ambience, in which we experience the meal, by the way it is decorated, the amount of light provided to the diners, the seating arrangements, and so on. An order (someone’s meal) will provide a variety of looks, tastes, smells, textures, to some extent presented sequentially (the different courses), to some extent presented simultaneously (the different parts of a single course). Does such a meal possess aesthetic value? Does it provide an aesthetic experience, and does that experience potentially take in everything mentioned thus far? Which properties of the occasion and of the food are aesthetic properties? Are the tastes and textures of the dishes aesthetic properties of the meal? Are any of the judgments we make about it aesthetic judgments? that it is good, that the dishes compliment each other, that this is spicy, and that tastes of ginger (or is gingery).

Does a meal have aesthetic value? The fact is that some would say of course, while others would say, of course not. J. O. Urmson (1957) belongs to the former camp, since he thinks that aesthetic value results from pleasure caused by the way things appear to the senses. Hence, a judgment that food is good based on the way it appears to the senses is an aesthetic judgment.
All the senses are potentially involved in the judgment. Taste and smell are obviously involved, but the visual appearance of food is important, as is texture which is discerned by the sense of touch activated in chewing. Even the sense of hearing enters the picture as when eating crispy or crunchy food. Imagine what it would be like to eat a raw carrot and hear nothing. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant (1952), one of the most influential philosophers on the aesthetic, while he might admit that a restaurant’s decor could be an object of aesthetic judgment, would deny that the tastes, textures, and smells of food are aesthetically valuable. They are merely agreeable or disagreeable. Kant would say that the pleasure of food is pleasurable sensation (which may be consistent with Urmson’s idea that it is pleasure derived from the way food appears to the senses, the way it tastes, smells, looks, and so on). But this is not aesthetic pleasure, which should be distinguished from the agreeable for Kant, and the judgment that the food is good is not an aesthetic judgment. Rather, Kant insists that aesthetic judgments are disinterested because, he thought, we are indifferent to the existence of what is being contemplated, caring only for the contemplation itself. The judgments of agreeableness are interested because we care whether the objects of such judgments exist.

Kant and Urmson disagree about the characterization of aesthetic experience, but agree that aesthetic judgment has its basis in such experience, which, when the judgment is positive, is some sort of pleasurable experience. Others locate the basis of aesthetic judgments more in the properties of objects than the experience they cause. If food is an aesthetic object, it is because of the tastes and textures we discern, or the relations among them, rather than the experiences the properties might cause.

Aesthetic Value
Several further questions about aesthetic value must be considered. It is often said that when we think something is aesthetically good, we value it for its own sake or as an end, rather than for something else it brings about or as a means. It is true that, when we listen to music, we are likely to focus on the music, whereas as when we go shopping, we are more likely to focus on what we can do with potential purchases. Of course, to say this is to oversimplify. We may well focus on the design of an article of clothing, examining it on its own “merits,” and, on the other hand, we may wonder whether the music would be good to dance to, or suitable for a certain occasion.

There is, however, a more serious challenge to the idea that we value the music for its own sake. Should we really say this of the music or the experience of listening to it (if either)? If what is crucial to aesthetic value is an
experience, perhaps we should say that it is valued for its own sake, in which case the music itself would seem to have a kind of instrumental value.

This challenge concerns the way we value objects of aesthetic judgments. There is another, equally important question about the objectivity of this value. In the eighteenth century, aesthetic judgments were called judgments of taste, and we seem to be torn about what constitutes taste. We feel both that there is such a thing as good and bad taste and that there is no disputing judgments of taste; to each their own. This mild form of schizophrenia is reflected in the views of two of the most important eighteenth-century writers. Kant takes aesthetic judgments to be subjective and thus they do not make truth claims, but he nevertheless thinks that they claim universal assent. David Hume (1993), who wrote a little earlier in the century, also thinks that judgments of taste have an essentially subjective aspect, being “derived” from sentiment or reactions of pleasure and displeasure, yet he argues for an (intersubjective) standard vindicating good taste over bad. Can one really have it both ways, as Hume and Kant at least appear to want?

This question applies to even the most standard example of the subjectivity of taste. Consider taste in food. We allow to each their own preferences. You may not like lobster at all, and that is just fine. If you do like it, but insist that it should be boiled to a rubbery consistency, we are tolerant of your idiosyncrasy but look on it as just that. Yours will never be the standard of taste among lobster eaters. In this case, if we can talk of a standard, it is a contingent, intersubjective, probably culturally relative one.

When we evaluate works of art, is there a similar standard, and is it more or less contingent, more or less relative to the taste of a group?

In the chapters on the aesthetic that follow, we will attempt to evaluate various conceptions of the aesthetic. Questions about the way we value aesthetic objects and the objectivity or subjectivity of that value will also be discussed below. We will begin in chapter 2 by taking a detailed look at aesthetic appreciation in a particular domain: nature. This will supply many concrete examples and a variety of views about what ought to be appreciated in nature: views about which experiences and which properties of natural environments are crucial to this appreciation. This will lay the groundwork for and motivate a more theoretical evaluation of conceptions of aesthetic experience, aesthetic properties, and aesthetic value in chapters 3 and 4. At the end of this book, in chapter 13, we will return to the topic of environmental aesthetics by examining the way we appreciate certain artificial environments: buildings and their surrounding sites. We reserve this discussion until the end because many, though by no means all, of these buildings
are artworks, and to understand our appreciation of them, it will be useful to have the resources provided by the chapters on the philosophy of art.

The Philosophy of Art

The topic of Part II is the philosophy of art. Here we move beyond issues of the aesthetic and of value, but without leaving those issues behind entirely. We do so because artistic value is not confined to aesthetic value. We have to explore what other properties of works contribute to their value as art, and what conception of artistic value this leads us to. We also have to investigate a whole new set of issues.

Central Issues

Aesthetics, at least as set out above, is primarily a topic within value theory. In contrast, the philosophy of art deals with issues from a wide spectrum of philosophical topics: metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, value theory, and the philosophies of mind and language.

As I conceive of the philosophy of art, there are five central issues. One issue concerns the value of art as art. Not every valuable property of a work is part of its artistic value or its value as art. For example, most people don’t think that a work’s monetary value is part of its artistic value. Similarly, the fact that a work has sentimental value for me because it was present at a significant moment in my life does not enhance its artistic value. So how do we distinguish artistically valuable properties from other valuable properties? Are the artistically valuable properties among the defining properties of art? Are there properties that a work must have to be artistically valuable?

We have already mentioned that one way people answer these questions is through an aesthetic conception of art. This approach identifies the artistic value of art with its aesthetic value. If we can settle on a conception of the latter kind of value, we have a simple and neat way of distinguishing artistic from nonartistic value in art. Aesthetically valuable properties would be properties a work must have to be artistically valuable.

However, we have also noted that the aesthetic conception of art has come under strong criticism, and this applies to its theory of artistic value. Some doubt that appeal to aesthetic value is sufficient to explain the cultural significance of art. In recent years philosophers of art have explored the cognitive value of art: the role of art in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. They have inquired into the ethical evaluation of art. There has also been a great deal of work on art and the emotions. We ascribe value
to art that moves us in various ways. What sort of value is this? The nature and kinds of artistic value is explored in chapters 11 through 13. Chapter 11 presents two contrasting theories of artistic value and argues in favor of one that makes such value more contingent, more plural, and less unique than the rival approach. Chapter 12 focuses on the ethical value of artworks and ways this can interact with a work's aesthetic value. Chapter 13 returns to a theme with which we began this book: environmental aesthetics by examining the value of architecture and the artificial environments it creates. Both chapters 12 and 13 offer further support for the conception of artistic value defended in chapter 11.

A second issue is raised by the question: what is art? Most commonly, one attempts to resolve it by providing a definition of art. A definition attempts to identify the essential nature of art, or at least principles of classification for distinguishing art from nonart. Traditionally it searches for characteristics that all artworks share and nonartworks lack. Again, the aesthetic conception of art has a neat answer: something is art if it is made to create significant aesthetic value (or a significant aesthetic experience). However, this is an answer that has carried less and less conviction as art has developed through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. We have countless examples of items put forward as art that aim for something other than aesthetic satisfaction: ready-mades such as *Fountain* (a urinal) selected for its very lack of aesthetic interest, a crucifix immersed in urine, pop art replicas of soup cans, hamburgers, Brillo boxes, varieties of conceptual art such as a postcard series recording the mundane aspects of life, specifications of geographical locations, lint scattered across a gallery floor, a bisected cow, or a naked person hanging from hooks over a city street. Some of these works may have an aesthetic payoff, but appreciation of it requires so much contextualization that those looking for a straightforward aesthetic pleasure would do better to ogle a new-car lot.

The seemingly strange turns art has taken over the recent past is only one of several reasons why some way of reconceptualizing seems urgent. The mere variety of art forms, and the vagueness of the boundaries between such things as art and craft and art and entertainment, is another equally compelling reason. Among those who reject traditional approaches to defining art (such as the aesthetic definition), consensus has wavered between those who claim that art cannot be defined and those who think it can if we look in less obvious places. This debate is surveyed in chapter 5.

The third issue concerns the ontology of art. What type of object is an artwork? This question should not be confused with the question: what is art? At least one way of answering the latter question is to identify a set of
properties shared by all artworks and by no nonartworks. However, if all artworks belong to a type of object, it hardly follows that no nonartworks belong to that type. Consider a candidate answer. Artworks all belong to the type: physical object. Obviously if this answer were correct, there would be many nonartworks that belong to this type of object too. It also shouldn’t be assumed that the question—what type of object is an artwork?—is the right question to ask because the question presupposes that there is one type of object that all artworks fall under, and this is far from obvious. Paintings may be one type of object, novels a different type. The issue is to identify the relevant type or types.

But why? If it is fairly easy to see why one might want a definition of art, it is not so obvious what makes the ontological issue compelling. There are two reasons why we should care about answers to such questions. First, it’s just puzzling what kind of thing art is. Consider a piece of music such as Mozart’s clarinet concerto or the Beatle’s “Yesterday.” It is not a physical object, since there is no object one can uniquely point to and say, “That is the concerto.” Nor is it a specific event such as a performance that occurs over an identifiable stretch of time for the same reason. Yet it is not something that exists simply in someone’s mind, since no mind, not even the composer’s, has a privileged possession of it. So what is it? Second, the way we answer this question has profound consequences for most other issues involving the philosophy of art: questions about the value as well as the meaning of artworks. We can’t ignore this issue, which is the topic of chapter 6.

A fourth issue derives from the fact that artworks typically mean something, in a very broad sense of that term. For example, many works of art are representational, that is, they use the medium of an art form to represent aspects of the actual world, or of fictional worlds, or of both at once. Yet this is clearly done in quite different ways in different art forms. In two-dimensional visual art, the chief, though not the only means of representation, is depiction. This is something very different from the linguistic representation found in literature, or even the three-dimensional mode of representation found in sculpture. Is there a useful general theory of representation available for understanding these different modes of representation, or does each need its own account? In addition to being representational, many works of art are expressive of moods, emotions, attitudes, and other mental states. Is this another way that artworks are meaningful? There are several competing accounts of expression in art, which anyone interested in this topic needs to sort out. Representation is the topic of chapters 8 and 9 and expression is discussed in chapter 10.
Meaning and understanding are correlative notions. If artworks are meaningful, they are the kind of thing in need of understanding. So it is not surprising that a fifth issue concerns what it means to understand artworks. A good chunk of this issue involves providing a theory of interpretation. Artworks are among the things commonly in need of interpretation, and we come to better understand and appreciate such works by interpreting them. However, I would argue that not all understanding of art is interpretive. Whether interpretive or not, there are a number of important questions about artistic understanding. Are there right and wrong understandings (interpretations)? Is there one right one or a plurality of acceptable interpretations of a work? What role does the artist’s intention play? These and other questions will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

Central Approaches
So far we have been talking about the issues central to the philosophy of art. Before concluding this chapter, we should say something about different approaches.

One approach is essentialism. An example of this was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter as the aesthetic conception of art. According to this view, art is essentially something made to provide significant aesthetic experience, and the fact that art has this essence is internal to the concept of art. This approach also sometimes provides an essentialist conception of the value of art. The value of an artwork as art is a function of the aesthetically valuable experience it provides to those who understand it.

The aesthetic conception of art is not the only essentialist conception. What all these conceptions have in common is that they claim that the sort of properties that makes something an artwork and gives it value as art are unchanging and that they can be known a priori by anyone who possesses the concept of art. Hence these features of art are independent of the varying contexts in which works are created.

One alternative to this sort of essentialism is contextualism. Contextualism is the view that the central issues of aesthetics can only be satisfactorily resolved by appealing to the context in which a work comes into existence: the context of origin or creation. What makes something art does not depend on a static essence, but on a relation a given work bears to other works. Hence, contextualists believe that a satisfactory definition of art must be relational. Contextualists also claim that the very identity of a work—what distinguishes it from other works and from all other objects—depends, in part, on the context in which it is created. Thus, two distinct works might look or sound exactly alike but be distinguished by facts about the contexts
in which they originate. Further, reference to this context is equally crucial for fixing the meaning of works and to their understanding. It is essential for a proper assessment of their artistic value. Hence, all of the central issues of aesthetics are resolved by appeal to the context of origin of the work.

Constructivists also deny that art has a fixed essence, but in addition they believe that context of origin does not pin down the artwork once and for all. Hence, constructivism is always incompatible with at least some of the theses held by contextualism as well as with essentialism. For constructivists, what occurs after an artist makes an artifact is at least as important for the creation and meaning of an artwork as the context of origin. For many constructivists, the evolving culture shapes the work at least as much as the artist does. Art is the product of culture, for these theorists, as much or more than it is the product of creative individuals, and insofar as it is the product of individuals, they include critics and interpreters as well as artists.

Constructivism comes in different versions. I distinguish two such versions here. Moderate constructivists claim that artworks undergo changes as they receive new interpretations, as they enter new cultural contexts, or conceptual environments. Furthermore, these changes are not peripheral ones that occur around a stable core fixed by the work’s origin. The distinction between core meanings and peripheral ones is rejected. Hence works are things that are much more in flux than they are thought to be under contextualism, and there is a consequent difference in views about the understanding and value of art. Some moderate constructivists claim that the boundary between properties that belong to artworks and properties that do not is indeterminate. Interpretive properties are imputed to works rather than discovered in them.

Radical constructivists believe that works are created, not merely altered, in the process of interpretation. Of course, this raises the question: the interpretation of what? The answer cannot simply be the interpretation of the created object, since an interpretation must begin with some object it is directed at, and the created object is an end product, not in existence until the interpretive activity is complete or at least well under way. There must be an object that initially prompts and guides the interpretation, and this must be different from the created object. Hence for radical constructivists, there are always three objects involved in art interpretation: the initial object, the interpretation, and the created or subsequent object.

There is a fourth approach to the philosophy of art that is gradually emerging, though at this point, it does not offer as clear a program for resolving its central issues as the three approaches just mentioned. This last approach is based on an appeal to the multifaceted discipline known as cognitive sci-
ence, which includes the area of computer science known as artificial intelligence as well as cognitive and evolutionary psychology, the philosophy of the mind, linguistics, and neuroscience. The basic thought underlying this approach is that there are certain features of the human mind and body—its evolution, its cognitive or perceptual structure—that shed light on art, our concept of it, its value for us, its ability to represent or express that is independent of context of origin of particular artworks or the changing cultural context in which they are received. However, since cognitive science is young, there is little in the way of firmly established theory one can appeal to. Instead, there are still mainly competing hypotheses, and anyone who appeals to cognitive science is making bets on which of these will turn out to be the winners.

As we explore the issues mentioned above, the debate among these very different approaches will emerge more sharply.

Note

1. The claim that the concept of fine art has its historical origin in the eighteenth century was first made by Paul Oskar Kristellar in “The Modern System of the Arts,” Journal of the History of Ideas 12 (1951), 496–527; 13, 1952, 17–46. This article has been enormously influential. James Porter challenges both the claim that the concept of art has its origin in the eighteenth century and that the system of fine arts that did appear at that time was primarily organized by aesthetic criteria in “Is Art Modern? Kristellar’s ‘Modern System of the Arts’ Reconsidered,” British Journal of Philosophy 49 (2009), 1–24.