

Aesthetic Investigations

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The Science of Aesthetics, the Critique of Taste, and the Philosophy of Art: Ambiguities and Contradictions

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Abstract: Aesthetics is the part of contemporary academic philosophy that is concerned with art, beauty, criticism, and taste. As such, it must address metaphysical issues (distinguishing works of art from other kinds of things), epistemic problems (the experience of beauty, the standards of critical judgment), and questions of value (the difference between good and bad taste). This makes it difficult to present a coherent account of the subject matter of aesthetics. In this article, I argue that this difficulty is the result of ambiguities and contradictions that arose in disputes about the relationship between the science of aesthetics, the critique of taste, and the philosophy of art in German philosophy during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. By reconstructing the history of these debates, I hope to shed new light on the origins of aesthetics as a discipline and to explain why its subject matter and status within philosophy are still so difficult to define.

I. INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics is the part of contemporary academic philosophy that is concerned with art, beauty, criticism, and taste. As such, it must address metaphysical issues (distinguishing works of art from other kinds of things), epistemic problems (the experience of beauty, the standards of critical judgement), and questions of value (the difference between good and bad taste). It is not always clear whether all these things really fit together or how to explain their

relation to one another, which may (partly) explain the marginal status of aesthetics within contemporary academic philosophy.¹

There are important discussions of the subject matter and methods associated with aesthetics in works of ancient and medieval European philosophy, though it is not clear that they can really help us understand aesthetics or its place within contemporary philosophy. Ancient and medieval philosophers simply did not recognize aesthetics as a part of philosophy, so it would be anachronistic to attribute to them any understanding of aesthetics at all. Consider, for example, Plato's discussions of poetry and painting in dialogues like the *Republic*. Plato is concerned in these dialogues with metaphysics, moral psychology, and pedagogy – though he did not recognize these subjects as parts of philosophy either.² Aristotle regarded rhetoric and poetics as productive sciences like agriculture or medicine. His *Poetics* explains how to compose and perform dramatic poems in the same way that agriculture explains how to grow crops and medicine helps to make a body healthy.³ The concept of beauty was also important for medieval philosophers like Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas, though their concerns were metaphysical and theological rather than aesthetic.⁴ For these philosophers, beauty was one of the names of God – along with goodness, light, love, and a host of others.⁵ It was also counted among the transcendentals by scholastic philosophers, who took everything God created to be one, true, good, and beautiful.⁶ Contemporary philosophers can and should study ancient and medieval theories of art and beauty, as well as treatments of these subjects in different philosophical traditions, throughout the world, from antiquity to the present. Yet they should not impose on them a framework that is not their own. Effacing the differences between them and treating them all as contributions to aesthetics, understood in the sense in which it is understood in contemporary academic philosophy, would be both anachronistic and imperialistic.

Instead of treating aesthetics as a kind of universal, perennial philosophy that encompasses everything anyone might have thought or said about art, beauty, criticism, and taste, at any time and in any part of the world, I think it is best to regard aesthetics as a part of a historically specific way of distinguishing and classifying the 'parts' of philosophy within the system of academic philosophy. 'Aesthetics' was first identified as a part of philosophy in Germany in the eighteenth century, though, even within this more specific context, we must be careful to avoid anachronism.⁷

When Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced aesthetics as a new science and a new part of philosophy in his dissertation in 1735, its subject matter was much more narrowly defined than it is today.⁸ Baumgarten also intended aesthetics to perform a very specific function within his philosophical system. The way he defined his new science and the role he assigned it turned out to be controversial, so the subject matter as well as the status of aesthetics were soon contested by other German philosophers. Kant

thought Baumgarten was wrong to suggest that aesthetics could be a science of the perfection of sensible cognition. He presented his own aesthetics as a critique of taste that was primarily concerned with feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Schelling, Hegel, and the German Idealists thought Kant was wrong to limit aesthetics to the critique of taste and rejected his emphasis on feeling. Instead, they advocated a more ambitious philosophy of art, with profound metaphysical implications. Their disagreements seem to have defined the terms in which academic philosophers from the nineteenth century to the present would understand aesthetics – for better or for worse.

It is my hope that, by reconstructing the history of the controversies surrounding the introduction of aesthetics as a new part of philosophy in Germany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we will begin to see how the science of aesthetics, the critique of taste, and the philosophy of art were initially presented as mutually exclusive alternatives, which were then conflated with one another, and later came to be consolidated into the part of contemporary philosophy that we still call aesthetics – despite the ambiguities and contradictions that arise from treating all of the metaphysical, epistemic, and value theoretical problems that aesthetics is supposed to address as if they belonged to a single part of philosophy. Understanding the controversies about the subject matter and status of aesthetics within philosophy may not clarify all of these ambiguities or resolve all of these contradictions, but they can help us appreciate the complexity and specificity of the conditions under which parts of philosophy emerge and systems of philosophy are articulated, so that we can avoid some of the anachronisms that make aesthetics seem as if it were a part of universal and perennial philosophy.

II. THE SCIENCE OF AESTHETICS

I have already mentioned that Baumgarten introduced aesthetics as a new science and a new part of philosophy for the first time in his dissertation, which he defended at the University of Halle in 1735 and published in 1736.⁹ Most of Baumgarten's *Reflections* are devoted to the elaboration and defence of the definition of poetry that he presents at the beginning of his dissertation. There he says poetry is 'perfect sensible discourse'.¹⁰ Poetry is a 'discourse' because it involves 'a series of connected series of words which designate connected representations'.¹¹ It is a form of 'sensible' discourse, because the representations that are connected with one another in poetry are 'received through the lower part of the cognitive faculty' and are, as such, 'sensible' representations.¹² Sensible discourse is perfect, according to Baumgarten, when the representations it contains 'favor the apprehension and awakening of sensible representations' – in other words, when they command our attention and enliven our faculty of sensibility.¹³ Baumgarten says that the rules for perfecting sensible discourse are contained in the science of 'philosophical poetics', but in the closing paragraphs of his dissertation he notes that this

science presupposes another science, since it depends on the ‘lower cognitive faculty’ of the poet and, thus, on ‘sensible cognition’.¹⁴ Baumgarten proposes to call the science of sensible cognition ‘aesthetics’, in keeping with ‘the Greek philosophers and Church fathers’, who ‘have already carefully distinguished things perceived and things known’.¹⁵ Logic would be the science of philosophical truths known through the higher cognitive faculties of understanding and reason, while aesthetics would be the science of things perceived through the lower cognitive faculty of sensibility. The task of this science would be to ‘improve the lower cognitive faculties, and sharpen them, and apply them more happily for the benefit of the whole world.’¹⁶

Baumgarten continued to develop and elaborate his new science of aesthetics in works like his *Metaphysics* and *Philosophical Letters*, and in the two volumes of his *Aesthetics* that he was able to publish before his early death in 1762.¹⁷ A systematic treatment of Baumgarten’s new science was also presented in the three-volume *Foundations of All Beautiful Sciences* by his former student and friend Georg Friedrich Meier, who managed to publish his *Foundations* even before the first volume of Baumgarten’s *Aesthetics* appeared. There are many curious and noteworthy features of these works, but, for now, I would like to emphasise that they all call aesthetics a science. In the *Reflections on Poetry*, Baumgarten identifies aesthetics as both ‘the science which might direct the lower cognitive faculty in knowing things sensibly’ and ‘the science of perception’.¹⁸ In the *Metaphysics*, he describes aesthetics as ‘the science of knowing and presenting with regard to the senses’.¹⁹ In the *Philosophical Letters*, he says aesthetics is the ‘science’ that contains ‘the foundations of all of the beautiful sciences, presented systematically’.²⁰ In the *Aesthetics*, Baumgarten defines aesthetics as ‘the science of sensible cognition’.²¹ Finally, in the *Foundations*, Meier calls aesthetics ‘the science . . . that concerns sensible cognition and its general characteristics’.²² Neither Baumgarten nor Meier explain what it means for aesthetics to be a science in any of the works they devoted to the subject. Still, their conception of science is consistent with the definition Baumgarten provides in his *Acroasis Logica*, where science is said to involve ‘certain cognition from things that are certain’.²³ This definition is perfectly consistent with medieval and early modern conceptions of science, which often stressed the certainty and demonstrability of scientific knowledge. Yet it would seem, from the ‘Prolegomena’ to the first volume of the *Aesthetics*, that Baumgarten expected some philosophers to regard a science of aesthetics with suspicion. Anticipating their objections to his new science, Baumgarten argues that the subject matter of aesthetics is different from and presupposed by poetics, rhetoric, and criticism; that sensible cognition is worthy of study; and that the lower cognitive faculty of sensibility should be cultivated rather than suppressed. Taken together, these arguments are meant to demonstrate that a science of aesthetics is both possible and necessary.

The most important objections Baumgarten anticipates concern the sub-

ject matter of his new science. He thought philosophers would reject aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition, because of a peculiarity of the Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalism that was prominent in Germany at the time. Elaborating on the new standard of truth that Descartes had proposed in his *Discourse on Method* and *Mediations on First Philosophy*, namely, the clarity and distinctness of ideas, Leibniz and Wolff had argued that sensible cognition was necessarily confused and that intellectual cognition was defined by its distinctness. Wolff thought sensations could be rendered clearer and more distinct through analysis, which would identify and distinguish the properties of an object and the predicates contained in its definition. Yet he still used the confusion and distinctness of sensible and intellectual cognition to distinguish the lower and higher cognitive faculties in his empirical psychology.

Curiously, Baumgarten accepts the Leibnizian-Wolffian distinction between confused sensible cognition and distinct intellectual cognition; yet he does not conclude from this distinction that there can be no science of confused sensible cognition or that the goal of scientific inquiry is to render confused sensible cognition more distinct through analysis. Instead, Baumgarten insists that confused sensible cognition has its own perfection, which is different from the perfection of distinct intellectual cognition. In the *Metaphysics*, he associates this perfection with extensive clarity – a concept he had introduced to distinguish the perfection of poetic representation from the perfection of logical representation in his dissertation. The idea is that, while logical representations become clearer through analysis, which renders their predicates more distinct, poetic representations become clearer when they are combined with additional confused representations, which makes them clearer by increasing the number of connections they have with other representations without making them any less confused or more distinct. In the *Reflections on Poetry*, Baumgarten indicates that extensively clear representations are more poetic than other representations, while, in the *Metaphysics*, he suggests that extensively clear representations are ‘stronger’ and ‘livelier’ than other cognitions.²⁴ Baumgarten abandons the concept of extensive clarity in the *Aesthetics*, where he identifies beauty as the perfection of sensible cognition. ‘Beauty’, Baumgarten says, ‘is the perfection of sensible cognition as such.’²⁵ He goes on to argue that the ‘universal’ beauty of sensible cognition consists of the beauty of appearance, order, and signification, though both volumes of the *Aesthetics* that Baumgarten managed to publish are devoted to the beauty of appearance, which concerns ‘the agreement of cognitions among themselves.’²⁶ The two volumes describe the richness, greatness, truth, clarity, and life of beautiful sensible cognition, which, according to Baumgarten, ‘comprise the perfection of every cognition, insofar as they are in agreement with one another in a representation.’²⁷

The implications of Baumgarten’s claim that confused sensible cognition possesses its own perfection, which is different from the perfection of distinct intellectual cognition should not be underestimated. The Leibnizian-Wolffian

philosophy had suggested that sensible and intellectual cognition were essentially continuous with one another and only differed in degrees of clarity and distinctness.²⁸ Wolff was also confident that the confusion of sensible cognition could be resolved through logical analysis.²⁹ By declaring that sensible and intellectual cognition differed not only in degrees of clarity and distinctness, but also in their respective perfections, Baumgarten dissolved the continuity between the lower and higher cognitive faculties that had been an essential part of his predecessors' rationalism. The result is a dualism of sensible and intellectual cognition and of aesthetics and logic – the two kinds of cognition and the two sciences differ in kind and not merely in degree.³⁰ To be sure, Baumgarten's dualism is qualified by his insistence that sensibility is the 'analogue of reason' and that aesthetics is the 'art of the analogue of reason'.³¹ This suggests that the lower and higher cognitive faculties are similar, despite their differences. Like reason, sensibility gives rise to a kind of cognition that is defined by the degree of its clarity and distinctness. And while it possesses a lower degree of distinctness than intellectual cognition, sensible cognition is no less valuable than intellectual cognition – Baumgarten emphasizes this point repeatedly in the 'Prolegomena' to the *Aesthetics*, where he stresses that both kinds of cognition can be cultivated without detriment to sensibility or reason.³²

Clearly, Baumgarten does not think we have to choose between the sciences of aesthetics and logic, despite the differences in the faculties and the kinds of cognitions with which they are concerned. On the contrary, he thinks that both sciences should be pursued, so that the sensible and intellectual cognition with which they are concerned can both be brought to a state of perfection. Yet it can be argued that he opens the door to the much stronger form of dualism that the pre-critical Kant advocates in his inaugural dissertation *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible Worlds*. In his inaugural dissertation, Kant denies the analogy between sensible and intellectual cognition, insisting that they do not differ in degrees of clarity and distinctness, but rather in their origin – the faculties of sensibility and the understanding – as well as in their objects – *phenomena* and *noumena* – and in the way they represent those objects – 'as they appear' and 'as they are', respectively. The pre-critical Kant thinks these distinctions are so important that he presents his inaugural dissertation as a 'propaedeutic science . . . which teaches the distinction between sensible cognition and the cognition that derives from the understanding', so that everything associated with the faculty of sensibility, sensible cognition, *phenomena*, and appearances can be excluded from the science of metaphysics, which he understands as 'the philosophy which contains the *first principles* of the use of the pure understanding . . .'.³³ Baumgarten never would have accepted such a radical distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition, or the exclusion of sensible cognition from metaphysics that Kant insists upon. However, it is one possible consequence of the claim that sensible and intellectual cogni-

tion are different in kind and have separate perfections, which is central to Baumgarten's distinction between aesthetics and logic.³⁴

III. THE CRITIQUE OF TASTE

Although he used Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* as a textbook in his lectures for forty years, and radicalises Baumgarten's distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition in his inaugural dissertation, Immanuel Kant is a harsh critic of Baumgarten's aesthetics. Kant articulates this critique in his published works; in his lectures on logic, metaphysics, and anthropology; and in handwritten notes and fragments, known as *Reflexionen*, from both the pre-critical and critical periods. And while the objections he raises against Baumgarten's new science are remarkably consistent throughout his career, Kant's own views on aesthetics changed dramatically shortly before he published the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in 1790.

Kant's critique of Baumgarten's aesthetics during the pre-critical period is nicely summarised in a footnote to the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Kant acknowledges that his own use of the term 'aesthetic' derives from Baumgarten, he is careful to distinguish his own 'Transcendental Aesthetic' from the Baumgarten's new science. Kant defines the 'transcendental aesthetic' as 'a science of all principles of *a priori* sensibility', which identifies the pure forms of intuition – space and time – as both *a priori* principles of a science of metaphysics and *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience. He objects to Baumgarten's use of the term, because he thinks Baumgarten conflates aesthetics with 'that which others call the critique of taste'.³⁵ The difference between aesthetics and the critique of taste is important, for Kant, because he thinks Baumgarten's hope 'of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles and elevating its rules to a science' is 'futile'.³⁶ Kant denies that there could ever be a 'science' of taste, since 'the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed . . .'.³⁷

In other words, Kant thinks a science of aesthetics is impossible, because judgements of taste are based on empirical principles, rather than *a priori* rules. Similar arguments can be found in a number of Kant's *Reflexionen* and in the transcripts of his lectures from the 1770s, where he often uses the distinction between science and critique to explain the difference between logic and aesthetics. Kant maintains that logic is a science because it is based on *a priori* principles, while aesthetics is merely a critique, since judgements of taste are derived from experience.³⁸ This way of distinguishing science and critique is difficult to reconcile with Kant's 'critique of pure reason', which he calls 'a special science', and whose object, 'pure reason', contains 'the principles for cognizing something absolutely *a priori*'.³⁹ Yet it seems that Kant could never accept the possibility that aesthetics could be a science,

even after he claimed to have discovered *a priori* principles of judgements of taste. In the third *Critique*, where he declares that ‘the judgment of taste rests on *a priori* grounds’, Kant still insists that ‘there can be no science of the beautiful, only a critique’, because ‘if the former existed, then it would be determined scientifically, i.e., by means of proofs, whether something should be held to be beautiful or not; thus the judgment about beauty, if it belonged to a science, would not be a judgment of taste’.⁴⁰

Kant’s reasons for denying that there could be a scientific proof that something is beautiful in the third *Critique* are based on a new conception of aesthetics that he introduces at the beginning of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’. There Kant maintains that judgements of taste are different from cognitive and moral judgements, because they are aesthetic. In this context, ‘aesthetic’ means that the ‘determining grounds’ of judgements of taste ‘cannot be other than subjective’.⁴¹ Kant goes on to argue that ‘any relation of representations . . . even that of sensations, can be objective (in which case it signifies what is real in an empirical representation); but not the relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation’.⁴² This means that judgements of taste are aesthetic because they are concerned with purely subjective feelings of pleasure and displeasure. The differences between this conception of aesthetics and Baumgarten’s are worth noting.

Baumgarten defines aesthetics as the science of sensible cognition. Kant himself had appropriated this conception of aesthetics for the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ in the first *Critique*, though he limited its scope to include only ‘principles of *a priori* sensibility’ – the pure forms of intuition, space and time. Yet, in the third *Critique*, he insists that aesthetics is not concerned with sensibility but with feeling. Not only does Kant emphasise the difference between sensibility and feeling that he draws in the passage I have already quoted, but he also says sensibility is objective, because it corresponds to what is real in empirical representation, while feeling is subjective, because it refers only to the way the subject is affected by a representation. He goes on to sharply distinguish agreeable sensations from the feeling of aesthetic pleasure in the pages that follow. Kant defines the ‘agreeable’, as ‘that which pleases the senses in sensation’, but he denies that aesthetic pleasure is the same as agreeableness or that it is grounded in sensation, because sensible representations are always ‘related to the object’ – they constitute the content of our cognition of objects.⁴³ Aesthetic pleasure is a feeling that is ‘related solely to the subject, and does not serve for cognition at all, not even that by which the subject cognizes itself’, so it cannot arise from a cognitive faculty like sensibility.⁴⁴ Nor can it be related to an object in any way. Instead, in one of the more curious passages in the third *Critique*, Kant argues that feelings of aesthetic pleasure are actually grounded in judgements of taste, because, in judgements of taste, the imagination and the understanding stand

in a relation of ‘free play’, in which each faculty is active, and they harmoniously interact, without being determined by the concepts that are necessary for cognitive and moral judgements.⁴⁵ The animation and enlivening of the faculties through free play is the source of the feeling of aesthetic pleasure.

An interesting consequence of the subjectivism of Kant’s new conception of aesthetics is that he rejects the concept of aesthetic perfection. Kant had often employed this concept in his lectures on logic, metaphysics, and anthropology during the 1770s, where he followed Baumgarten and Meier in distinguishing between the aesthetic and logical perfections of cognition – though he also modified their distinction in interesting ways. In the transcript of one of his lectures on logic from the 1770s, for example, Kant argues that the aesthetic perfection of cognition is subjective, while the logical perfection of cognition is objective.⁴⁶ In the same transcript, he asserts that aesthetically perfect cognition ‘has an effect on our feeling and our taste’, though he also says that aesthetic perfection ‘is a perfection according to laws of sensibility’, which suggests that he had not yet distinguished sensibility and feeling as clearly as he would in the third *Critique*.⁴⁷

In the same transcript, Kant indicates that aesthetic and logical perfection are mutually exclusive, so that ‘one has to sacrifice some logical perfection if one wants to attain an aesthetic perfection, and one has to give up some aesthetic perfection if one wants to attain a logical perfection’.⁴⁸ This is similar to a claim Kant makes in the first *Critique*, where he argues that the ‘bright colors’ of examples and illustrations ‘paint over and make unrecognizable the structure of the system, which yet matters most when it comes to judging its unity and soundness’, though, in the first *Critique*, he associates examples and illustrations with ‘aesthetic clarity’ and the conceptual articulation of the structure of a system with ‘logical clarity’, rather than aesthetic and logical ‘perfection’.⁴⁹

By the time he published the third *Critique*, it seems that Kant had purged even these last vestiges of the concept of aesthetic perfection from his critical philosophy. Kant explains his reasons for rejecting this concept most clearly in a remark included in the unpublished ‘First Introduction’ to the third *Critique*, where he argues that perfection is ‘an ontological concept’ that pertains to ‘mere completeness of the many, insofar as together it constitutes a one’, which is the same concept ‘as that of the totality (allness) of something composite’.⁵⁰ As such, the concept of perfection ‘has not the least to do with the feeling of pleasure or displeasure’, which is to be identified with ‘the representation of a subjective purposiveness of an object’.⁵¹ Kant defends the same view in § 15 of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful’, where he declares that ‘the judgment of taste is entirely independent from the concept of perfection’.⁵² His defence of this claim rests on the premise that ‘the judgment of taste is an aesthetic judgment, i.e., one that rests on subjective grounds, and its determining ground cannot be a concept, and thus not a concept of a determinate end’.⁵³ ‘Thus’, he concludes, ‘by beauty, as a formal

subjective purposiveness, there is not conceived any perfection of the object as a supposedly formal but yet also objective purposiveness . . .'.⁵⁴ In neither of these passages does Kant consider the possibility that aesthetic perfection could be a perfection of cognition rather than a perfection of the object, even though Baumgarten clearly understood aesthetic perfection in these terms, and Kant himself had described it in these terms in his lectures. Yet it would not have made a difference if he had – the subjectivism of Kant's new conception of aesthetics, and the distinctions he draws between aesthetic and cognitive judgements, would have led Kant to reject cognitive conceptions of aesthetic perfection just as decisively as he excluded ontological conceptions of perfection from aesthetics in the third *Critique*.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART

Kant's third *Critique* was read with great interest by the German romantics and idealists, who found it inspiring as well as challenging. They objected to the subjectivism of Kant's aesthetics, its emphasis on feeling, and its cursory discussion of the fine arts. Yet they soon began to appropriate and transform Kant's critical aesthetics in much the same way that Kant appropriated and transformed Baumgarten's new science. It is through this process of appropriation and transformation that Kant's critique of taste comes to be supplanted by the philosophy of art.

The idea of a philosophy of art can be traced back to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). In that work, Schelling treats the philosophy of art as the third part of a philosophical system that is divided between transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of nature. These two parts of philosophy are distinguished by the principles they take as their starting points – transcendental philosophy begins with the subjective self-consciousness of the I, while the philosophy of nature begins with the unconscious objectivity of nature. The philosophy of art constitutes the third part of this system, because Schelling regards the work of art as the embodiment of the free, conscious activity of the subject in the unconscious, objective material of nature. Indeed, he thinks that art is the primary way in which we come to know 'the absolute' – the unity that contains within itself the opposition between subject and object, consciousness and the unconscious, self and nature, and negates their difference.⁵⁵

Schelling continues to develop this conception of art in a series of lectures that he delivers in Jena (1802-1803) and Würzburg (1804-1805) shortly after the publication of his *System*. In these lectures, Schelling argues that art is worthy of philosophical reflection, precisely because 'a true construction of art presents its forms as forms of things as they are in themselves, or as they are within the absolute'.⁵⁶ While most of the lectures are devoted to discussions of music, painting, sculpture, and poetry as different 'forms' of

art, Schelling also distinguishes the philosophy of art from aesthetics and the critique of taste more explicitly in his lectures than he had in the *System*. In the ‘Introduction’, for example, he argues that the philosophy of art ‘can by no means be compared with anything that has existed up to the present under the name of aesthetics, theory of the fine arts and sciences, or any other designation’.⁵⁷ While he acknowledges that in Baumgarten’s ‘most general principles . . . there still inhered at least the trace of the idea of the beautiful as that archetypal element appearing in the concrete and reflected world’, he also thinks that, after Baumgarten, aesthetics

‘has acquired an ever more definite dependency on the moral and the useful, just as in psychological theories certain phenomena have been explained away more or less like ghost stories or similar superstitions, until Kantian formalism, following upon all this, bore a new and higher view, though also a host of artistically empty doctrines of art’.⁵⁸

Schelling does not elaborate on his remarks about Kant in this passage, but presumably he thinks Kantian formalism leads to ‘artistically empty doctrines of art’ because it limits itself to merely subjective judgements of taste and denies the possibility of the ‘complete and totally objective view of art’ that Schelling seeks to present in his philosophy of art.⁵⁹ Aesthetics and the critique of taste are inadequate, for Schelling, because they fail to see that art reflects ‘the inner essence’ of philosophy – the search for the absolute.

This hostility to aesthetics and the critique of taste is also evident in a series of lectures that Hegel delivered on the philosophy of art in Heidelberg (1818) and Berlin (1820-1821, 1823, 1826, 1829-1830). Although Hegel’s lectures were delivered under the title ‘Aesthetics, or Philosophy of Art’ (*Aesthetischen sive philosophiam artis*), and this title was subsequently given to the volumes of Hegel’s collected works that were published by his former student, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, on this subject in 1835, Hegel himself found the title inappropriate. In the published text, Hegel notes that the subject matter of his lectures will be ‘the spacious *realm of the beautiful*’ and, more precisely, ‘art, or, rather, *fine art*’.⁶⁰ He explains that ‘for this topic, it is true, the word Aesthetics, taken literally, is not wholly satisfactory, since “Aesthetics” means, more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling’, which

‘had its origin as a new science, or rather as something which for the first time was to become a philosophical discipline, in the school of Wolff at the period in Germany when works of art were treated with regard to the feelings they were supposed to produce, as, for instance, the feeling of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, and so on’.⁶¹

Because the ‘unsatisfactoriness, or more accurately, the superficiality’ of this conception of aesthetics was so apparent, Hegel mentions that ‘attempts were

made after all to frame others', including 'Callistics', though these were similarly inadequate, since they did not sufficiently distinguish between beauty – *kalos*, in Ancient Greek – and the beauty of art.⁶² Hegel allows the title 'Aesthetics' to stand, since names are matters of indifference and the term had become conventional in the preceding century; yet he insists that the beauty of fine art is a matter of special interest for philosophers. According to Hegel, fine art is something 'free' and 'self-conscious', meaning that it is self-determining and self-comprehending. That is why Hegel thinks the beauty of fine art is something 'higher than nature'.⁶³

Natural phenomena are determined by external causes, rather than an internal principle, so nature is not free in the same way as art. Hegel also thinks art is capable of expressing a kind of truth that cannot be found in nature, since nature is not self-conscious. The 'truth' of art is, for Hegel, the comprehension of the whole that art contains within itself. Religion and philosophy are also capable of expressing this kind of truth, but they do so intellectually. Art is special, and has a certain priority with respect to religion and philosophy, because the truth of art appears, and is first comprehended, through the senses. In his lectures, Hegel will even define art as the 'sensuous appearance' of 'the idea', where 'appearance' refers to the manifestation of truth and 'the idea' is the unity of the whole that is comprehended through the senses in art.⁶⁴ And though he famously says that, in his time, 'thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art', so that 'art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past', he credits art with elevating human consciousness to the point where it is capable of religious insight, philosophical speculation, and, indeed, absolute knowledge.⁶⁵

In addition to their shared interest in art, Schelling and Hegel also employ similar conceptions of philosophy in their philosophy of art. Both affirm that the philosophy of art is a 'science' and that it is 'critical', but they also defend a holistic conception of philosophy that goes far beyond anything Baumgarten or Kant would have recognized. In the 'Introduction' to *The Critical Journal of Philosophy* (1802-1803), which they co-edited, Schelling and Hegel argue that 'the possibility of essentially distinct yet equally true philosophies' is not worthy of serious consideration, because 'philosophy is but one, and can only be one', since 'reason is but one; and there cannot be distinct reasons . . . for reason, absolutely considered, and reason when it becomes object for itself in its self-cognition (and hence philosophy) is again just one and the same thing . . .'.⁶⁶

While Schelling acknowledges that there are 'many philosophies' and 'various philosophical sciences or philosophical theories' in the 'Introduction' to his lectures on the philosophy art, he still insists that there is ultimately 'only *one* philosophy and *one* science of philosophy', because 'there is actually and essentially only *one* essence, *one* absolute reality, and this essence, as absolute, is indivisible, such that it cannot change over into other essences by means of division or separation.'⁶⁷ The only way for there to be particular

philosophical sciences, like the philosophy of art, is for ‘the *one* and undivided whole of philosophy’ to be posited under special determinations that Schelling calls ‘potences’ (*Potenzen*).⁶⁸ He explains that these ‘potences’ refer ‘to the general proposition of philosophy concerning the essential and inner identity of all things and of all that we are able to discern and distinguish in general.’⁶⁹ While they posit that essential unity of all things, as the ‘general proposition’ of philosophy requires, potences present different views on that unity, so that it can be understood as God, nature, history, or even art.⁷⁰ Schelling maintains that ‘philosophy emerges in its most complete manifestation only within the totality of all potences’, so the philosophy of art is not complete or self-sufficient; yet its content is, in the end, no different from that of any other ‘potence’, since art is just one of the ‘determinations’ under which philosophy tries to comprehend the absolute unity of all things.⁷¹

Hegel defends a similar conception of philosophy in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was published just a few years later. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel presents a ‘science of the experience of consciousness’ that proceeds through the various ‘shapes’ (*Gestalten*) in which consciousness appears to itself.⁷² In a manner reminiscent of Schelling’s ‘potences’, Hegel understands each of these ‘shapes’ to be particular determinations of the absolute. The *Phenomenology* culminates in a chapter on ‘absolute knowledge’, which is nothing other than the complete comprehension of all the different determinations of consciousness and self-consciousness that have preceded it. Art is one of the ‘shapes’ that Hegel discusses in the chapter immediately before the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*. In fact, Hegel credits art with ‘engendering’, or ‘giving form to’, the external shape in which the absolute appears to itself for the first time.⁷³ Hegel expands upon this view in the ‘Introduction’ to the lectures on aesthetics, where he argues that fine art is worthy of ‘science’ and ‘philosophy’ precisely because it is one of the ways in which the absolute appears and through which it can be comprehended.⁷⁴

V. AMBIGUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

The account of the differences between the science of aesthetics, the critique of taste, and the philosophy of art in German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century that I have proposed here is brief and schematic. There are important figures and works that it does not mention, the way it reconstructs philosophical debates is too broad and general, and it proceeds without evaluating the merits of the claims and arguments being advanced by the different parties to the dispute. Still, I think it shows that philosophers during that time were asking important questions about the subject matter of aesthetics – is it concerned with sensible cognition, judgements of taste, feelings of aesthetic pleasure, or the nature of art? – as well as its status – is it a science, a critique, or a philosophy? And they were engaging in debates about these questions that define the ways in

which aesthetics will be understood in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. It should also be noted that the outcome of these debates is not entirely satisfactory, because, instead of resolving their disagreements through the exchange of reasons, by demonstrating the veracity of truths and refuting falsehoods, later philosophers begin to conflate the science of aesthetics, the critique of taste, and the philosophy of art with one another. A lengthier and more detailed history would be necessary to recount all the complex ways in which their differences are obscured by different philosophers, in different places and times, and in different institutional contexts, over the course of the last three hundred years. But I think the schematic account I have provided is sufficient for us to identify several of the ambiguities and contradictions that have plagued aesthetics since its inception.

The ambiguous status of aesthetics in contemporary philosophy is, I think, partly a result of the controversies surrounding its origin. Debates about whether aesthetics is a science, a critique of taste, or a philosophy of art may seem old fashioned now, since many analytic philosophers in the twentieth century were either indifferent to or explicitly rejected the systematic ambitions of nineteenth century German philosophy, including its need to define the method and status of philosophical inquiry. Even when analytic philosophers shared the interests of their German predecessors in ‘scientific’ philosophy, they often understood ‘science’ in very different ways.⁷⁵ Still, debates about the nature of science, and the scientific status of philosophy were central to the origins of aesthetics. And it is helpful to know why philosophers like Baumgarten, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel took the positions they did on these issues.

Baumgarten thinks aesthetics is a science because it provides knowledge of its object – sensible cognition. Kant is consistent about denying the possibility of a science of aesthetics, and identifying aesthetics with the critique of taste, though he does so for very different reasons at different times in his career. Before he published the second edition of the first *Critique* in 1787, Kant denies that aesthetics could be a science because he thinks judgements of taste are empirical and lack *a priori* principles. After 1787, when he claims to have discovered *a priori* principles of judgements of taste, Kant denies that aesthetics can be a science because its principles are merely subjective – they concern subjective feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Schelling and Hegel reject the claim that aesthetics is an empirical or subjective critique of taste, because they insist that art contains objective, philosophical content. Indeed, they see art as a particular determination of the absolute, which is the ultimate object of all philosophical inquiry. To the extent that philosophers can comprehend the absolute through art, they think it is appropriate to identify the philosophy of art as a kind of philosophy. None of these three views have been conclusively demonstrated to be true, nor have any of them been decisively refuted, but they still persist, in different ways, in contemporary philosophy.

Disagreements about the subject matter of aesthetics are, perhaps, more difficult to ignore than debates about its status. Few contemporary philosophers accept Baumgarten's original conception of aesthetics as a science of sensible cognition, perhaps because the Platonic distinction between the sensible and the intellectual no longer has a great deal of currency in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology. Still, there have been noteworthy attempts to revive Baumgarten's original conception of aesthetics in recent years, which suggest that aesthetics need not limit itself to art, beauty, or taste, but can engage with a broader range of problems in perceptual psychology.⁷⁶ Kant's conception of aesthetics as a critique of taste is more popular among contemporary philosophers, though relatively few contemporary philosophers believe there are *a priori* rules for judgements of taste. Nevertheless, some contemporary philosophers defend a view that resembles Kant's pre-critical aesthetics, David Hume's reflections on the standard of taste, or Edmund Burke's quasi-physiological explanation of taste.⁷⁷ In these accounts, experience provides helpful instruction, but not universal and necessary laws, for judgements of aesthetic value. Even fewer contemporary philosophers think of art as a determinate form in which the absolute appears, though many think art remains a worthwhile object of philosophical inquiry – more so than beauty or taste, which privilege sensation and feeling in ways that neglect the “intellectual activity” and “conceptual enterprise” involved in art.⁷⁸ Again, the philosophers who advocate making sense perception, judgements of taste, or works of art the object of aesthetics do not really argue with one another – they do not try to prove that their views are correct or that others are incorrect. Instead, they pursue different research agendas that do not overlap, and, as such, do not come into conflict with one another. That is all well and good, if one's goal is to pursue specialized academic research, present one's work at conferences, and publish articles in scholarly journals. Problems only arise when one is trying to formulate a coherent account of aesthetics as a discipline, defend particular views of its subject matter, and justify the methods it employs.

I suspect that aesthetics is not unique in experiencing these problems. Historians of philosophy could almost certainly discover similar ambiguities and contradictions in logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, and the rest of the subdisciplines recognized by contemporary academic philosophy. One of the benefits of studying the origins of aesthetics, and the controversies about its subject matter and status, is that it provides a model for understanding how philosophical systems are ‘really’ articulated – how their parts are distinguished from one another, the kinds of objections to which those distinctions are subject, how these disputes are managed within the discipline, and which views become institutionalised over time. On all of these subjects, I think the history of aesthetics is instructive and even, perhaps, exemplary.

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NOTES

¹To be sure, other factors also contribute to the marginalisation of aesthetics. See Ribeiro 2014.

²While Nickolas Pappas recognizes the anachronism of attributing an ‘aesthetic’ theory to Plato, he thinks Plato can still be described as ‘seeking to discover the vocabulary and issues of aesthetics’. See Pappas 2017.

³Aristotle 1984, 4624, 4965.

⁴Umberto Eco rejects this view, and defends the concept of a medieval aesthetics, in Eco 2002, 1-3.

⁵Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 55.

⁶See Gracia 1992, 113-120. See also Aertsen 1991, 68-97.

⁷Although they remain classic studies of the origins of aesthetics, I regard Croce 1922 (1901) and Baeumler 1967 (1923) as deeply anachronistic. The chapter on aesthetics in Cassirer 1951 (1932) is considerably more accurate. Recent studies like Beiser 2009, Buchenau’s *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment*, Guyer 2014, and Grote 2017 are, in my view, far superior to earlier treatments of the origins of aesthetics. For my own view, see McQuillan 2015, 101-133.

⁸Baumgarten 1954.

⁹Baumgarten 1954.

¹⁰Baumgarten 1954, § 9.

¹¹Baumgarten 1954, § 1.

¹²Baumgarten 1954, § 3-§ 4.

¹³Baumgarten 1954, § 7-§ 8.

¹⁴Baumgarten 1954, § 9, § 115.

¹⁵Baumgarten 1954, § 116.

¹⁶Baumgarten 1954, § 115.

¹⁷Baumgarten 2013.

¹⁸Baumgarten 1954, § 115-§ 116.

¹⁹Baumgarten 2013, § 533.

²⁰Baumgarten 1983, 69.

²¹Baumgarten 2007, Bd.1, § 1.

²²Meier 1976, Bd.1, § 2.

²³Baumgarten 1973, § 2.

²⁴Baumgarten 1954, § 27; Baumgarten 2013, § 532.

²⁵Baumgarten 2007, Bd.1, § 14.

²⁶Baumgarten 2007, Bd.1, § 18.

²⁷Baumgarten 2007, Bd.1, § 22.

²⁸For an overview, see McQuillan 2017, 149-159.

²⁹See Wolff 2003, § 17-§ 18.

³⁰This dualism is apparent in Baumgarten 1954, § 115-§ 116.

³¹Baumgarten 2013, § 533, § 640; Baumgarten 2007, Bd.1, § 1.

³²See, for example, Baumgarten 2013, § 7-§ 9.

³³Kant 1992b, § 8.

³⁴See McQuillan 2019, 57-58.

³⁵Kant 1998, A20/B35.

³⁶Kant 1998, A21/B35.

³⁷Kant 1998, A21.

³⁸See, for example, Kant 2005, 30, 209. See also Kant 1992a, 530.

³⁹Kant 1998, A11/B24.

⁴⁰Kant 2000, § 12, § 44.

⁴¹Kant 2000, § 1.

⁴²Kant 2000, § 1.

⁴³Kant 2000, § 3.

⁴⁴Kant 2000, § 3.

⁴⁵Kant 2000, § 9.

⁴⁶Kant 1992a, 30.

⁴⁷Kant 1992a, 32.

⁴⁸Kant 1992a, 31.

⁴⁹Kant 1998, Axvii-Axviii Note that the word translated by Guyer and Wood as ‘clarity’ is actually *Deutlichkeit*, which is usually rendered as ‘distinctness’. Kant’s reference to aesthetic distinctness is novel and rather confusing, especially because, in the *Blomberg Logic*, he follows Baumgarten in maintaining that aesthetic perfection ‘is sensed only in confused concepts, and it loses its value just as soon as the concept is made distinct (*deutlich*)’. See Kant 1992a, 36.

⁵⁰Kant 2000, 37.

⁵¹Kant 2000, 38.

⁵²Kant 2000, § 15.

⁵³Kant 2000, § 15.

⁵⁴Kant 2000, § 15.

⁵⁵Schelling 1978, 229-230. See also Schelling’s correspondence with Fichte in Vater and Wood 2012, 45.

- ⁵⁶Schelling 1989, § 24.
⁵⁷Schelling 1989, 8.
⁵⁸Schelling 1989, 8.
⁵⁹Schelling 1989, 5.
⁶⁰Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 1.
⁶¹Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 1.
⁶²Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 1.
⁶³Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 2.
⁶⁴Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 10, 12, 36-41.
⁶⁵Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 11.
⁶⁶Di Giovanni and Harris 2000, 275.
⁶⁷Schelling 1989, 14.
⁶⁸Schelling 1989, 14.
⁶⁹Schelling 1989, 14.
⁷⁰Schelling 1989, 14.
⁷¹Schelling 1989, 14.
⁷²Hegel 2018, § 5.
⁷³Hegel 2018, § 702-§ 703.
⁷⁴Hegel 1975, Vol. 1, 2-25.
⁷⁵See, for example, Russell 1914, 3-32.
⁷⁶See, for example, Nanay 2016, 1-8.
⁷⁷See, for example, Kivy 2015, 1-21 and
Korsmeyer 2010, 10.
⁷⁸Danto 1983, 1-2.

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