

# “Finding a place for beauty and aesthetics in a Christian worldview”

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## 1. Introduction

The past one hundred years have proven a hostile environment for questions of beauty and aesthetics. Philosophy has gone from a time when major figures in philosophy, including Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, devoted a considerable amount of attention to questions of aesthetics, to a discipline in which a few philosophers discuss a fragmented set of issues and questions grouped under the broad label of the philosophy of art. In the art-world, meanwhile we have moved from a time when artists attempted to embody balance, proportion and order to an era characterized by artists like Cy Twombly, whose work according one of his defenders manifests, “The implicit hand of a child in agony, a picture of manual impotence, of wanting to do well, but lacking the ability to do so.”[\[1\]](#)

There is, of course, much to recommend about the current era in art and philosophy but my goal this afternoon is to take a closer look at the decline of discussions about aesthetics and beauty in philosophy and to defend the claim that questions about aesthetics and beauty should play a more important role in efforts

to articulate and defend a Christian worldview.

Perhaps the best place to start is to say something about what I mean by aesthetics. To get a handle on the term we need to turn to David Hume. Hume uses the term 'taste' to refer to this capacity and the first thing to notice about discussions of taste is that it appears to be entirely subjective. Each of us, for example, may be said to have favorite flavors of ice cream or even favorite colors, by which we mean nothing more than that we experience a distinct sort of pleasure when we experience the sensation of tasting that flavor of ice cream or when we view our favorite color.

The problem this raises is that the claim that beauty is simply a matter of taste implies we have no reason to expect agreement on our judgments of beauty or artistic excellence. But isn't someone who claims that Britini Spear's voice is as beautiful as Rene Fleming's or someone who claims the screenplay for *Dumb and Dumber* possesses greater literary excellence than Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* wrong? Isn't it possible to make a mistake of aesthetic judgment? (One look at my junior high music collection convinces me this is clearly possible.)

So one fairly straightforward way to understand the central problem of aesthetics is to ask how we can account for the fact that judgments about beauty appear to be both subjective and objective. They seem to be based on the way we respond to something but they also seem to admit of error and achievement. How can we

explain why it makes sense to engage in the effort to improve one's appreciation or to recognize individual artists for their achievement?

Having explained what aesthetics amounts to, I would now like to explain why it has been so broadly neglected. The explanation I will offer relies on both the history of philosophy and the history of art.

## **2. Aesthetics and Philosophy**

Aesthetics has been sidelined in contemporary philosophy as a result of a one-two punch from its two main schools of thought, both of which have largely dismissed it. To see why, I will start with the continental tradition and Hegel's rejection of what he might call the universalist pretensions of Hume and Kant.

Both Hume and Kant defend the view that some works of art are, in fact, more beautiful than others, although they defend that claim in radically different ways. Hume argued that through education and experience, people of taste can come to acquire a capacity to reach agreements about which artists and artworks are the best. The result of this consensus, Hume proposed, is a "standard of taste" that can be used to ground claims about the relative aesthetic merits of different works of art or music or literature.

Kant, in contrast, begins his account by distinguishing between matters of taste and judgments of beauty. Taste, he argues, is nothing more than finding something agreeable. But we find things to be agreeable, he argues, as a result of our needs or as a result of contingent facts about us. So, for example, I find french fries tasty after a hard day of skiing because my body needs salt and I don't like the taste of brussel sprouts because I carry the gene that leads me to taste one of its proteins as bitter rather than sweet.

To judge something as beautiful, Kant says, is a different matter. Kant's account of our judgments of beauty is difficult to summarize but here is the core idea.

Kant thinks that what it means to be a rational being is, among other things, to be a being capable of perception, thought, belief, and imagination. But in order for that to be possible, we must be able to perceive the world by forming our experience in terms of concepts like the concepts of space and time. In the most common case, we form that experience because of the interests we take in the world around us. We must perceive that puddle has a certain shape if we are going to step around it and we must perceive that the other cars on the road exist in space and time if we are to avoid a collision. Kant argues, however, that in some cases we are able to form a unified experience in a way that is not grounded in our interests and he thinks that judgments involved in forming such a disinterested experience give rise to the judgment that something is beautiful.

Judgments of beauty, he argues, are disinterested (they are not the result of the satisfaction of our needs), universal (they imply that there is reason to expect other people to agree with us), purposive (we respond to its apparent design or organization -- without thinking that the design serves to fill a practical purpose or need), and necessary (the pleasure is a product of the cognitive capacities required for perceptual experience).

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel makes an important move away from both Hume and Kant's view that there is something universal about our judgments of beauty. First, he draws a distinction between natural and artistic beauty and then he argues that artistic beauty is superior to natural beauty. His argument for this centers on his claim that art is, "Born of the spirit and then born again." [*Aus den Geistes geborene und weidergeborene.*] The core idea is that artistic beauty is in some sense an intellectual or human product rather than a natural product. That is not to say that Hegel thinks natural and artistic beauty are essentially different. If you paint a field of daffodils, for example, your painting might be beautiful in much of the same way that the field is beautiful. But the fact that the painting is made by a human in an act of creation means that it is born of the spirit and therefore has a sort of importance that the field of daffodils must lack. This leads him to conclude that art expresses the spirit of particular cultures, as well as that of individual artists and the human spirit in general.

This move from Kant, who claims that judgments of beauty are universal and necessary since they are the product of the operations of human rationality and the cognitive structures required for having perceptual experience, to Hegel, who claims that artistic beauty is grounded in the historical spirit of the age, provides us with a key component of the move away from concerns about beauty within the world of art. But before we look at that, there is a second side to the story about how aesthetics came to be widely ignored in the discipline of philosophy, which can be found in the history of analytic philosophy.

Beginning with the rejection of British Idealism, with its roots in Hegel, analytic philosophy eventually grew into the school of thought commonly associated with the logical positivists, who rejected all normative language as meaningless.

According to the positivists, our thoughts about beauty are bereft of content since they can neither be empirically verified nor proven through logical demonstration. To speak of something as beautiful, therefore, is not to describe it but to express one's approval of it..

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, positivism was gradually replaced in the analytic tradition by a more traditional commitment to philosophical analysis and, as a result, normative claims were once again developed and defended by figures as prominent as John Rawls. What happened, then, to traditional questions of beauty and aesthetics within analytic philosophy?

Instead of reviving traditional questions about aesthetics and beauty, analytic philosophers came to embrace what has come to be known as the philosophy of art rather than aesthetics. The organizing goal of the philosophy of art is not to defend an account of beauty or aesthetic regard but rather to engage in the articulation and critical evaluation of the core concepts and assumptions found within the art world. In particular, the field has been dominated for many years by the task of providing a definition of what counts as art.

The central challenge facing efforts to provide an account of the concept of art is that during the twentieth century, art fragmented in a number of different directions and could no longer be restricted to an exalted set of objects that would be easily or immediately identified as art. The defining mark of contemporary art, it might be said, is that there are few, if any, internal constraints on what counts as art. This shift within the art-world led most people working on the philosophy of art to ignore questions of aesthetics and beauty. The absence of those concerns within the philosophy of art, it might therefore be said, can be said to result from a common commitment among analytic philosophers to insure that their accounts of the definition of art were consistent with the radical openness that had taken over that concept within the artworld.

In this way, concerns about beauty and aesthetics were dealt a one-two punch that led them to be widely ignored by philosophers. Thinkers arising out of Hegel

and the continental tradition replaced concerns about aesthetics and beauty with concerns about history and political power and thinkers arising out of the Vienna circle and the analytic tradition replaced concerns about aesthetics and beauty with the project of defining the concept of art for an artworld where concerns about universal standards of beauty had been marginalized. In order to complete the account of how questions of aesthetics and beauty fell out of contemporary philosophy, therefore, we must take a brief look at how artists came to reject aesthetics and beauty.

### **3. Aesthetics and the Art World**

In 1948 the artist Barnett Newman, who painted this version of the *Stations of the Cross*, which hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, characterized one of the driving motivations of twentieth century art by saying, “The invention of beauty by the Greeks and their postulate of beauty as an ideal has been the bugbear of European art and European aesthetic philosophy. The impulse of modern art has been to destroy beauty.”<sup>[2]</sup>

There is something right about that claim. For while the wide range of artistic movements that span the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Fauvism, Dada, surrealism, and abstract expressionism to pop art, conceptual art and various post modern fragmentations, stand in complex relations to one another, one consistent strand



running through them all is the cultivation of an anti-aesthetic sensibility. At best, beauty has come to be considered incidental to the value of art and at worst it has been thought to undermine its ultimate value.

Speaking generally, there are two broad reasons for this, both of which bear the influence of Hegel. First, the ideal of beauty -- traditionally thought of as timeless, self-sufficient and set apart from the world -- has come to be seen as irrelevant to the broader goal of art, which can be found in its ability to confront people with the real world and the possibilities of change, something people living in the modern world are too desensitized to see. So the power of art is commonly thought to lie not in its beauty but in its ability to shock, unsettle, disturb, disconcert, and enrage.

Second, the idea that beauty was something set apart from our practical concerns has come to be viewed as an illusion. Artists now largely deny that judgments of beauty are, as Kant argued, grounded in a disinterested application of the universal categories of the understanding. Andre Breton, for example, condemned Matisse and Derain for producing art which he thought only served to please and reinforce the bourgeois assumptions and values which ought instead to be challenged. Such artists, he said, "Have passed into a tiny arena: their gratitude to those who make them and keep them alive. A *Nude* by Derain, a new *Window* by Matisse -- what surer testimony could there be to the truth of the contention that

‘not all the water in the sea would suffice to wash out one drop of intellectual blood.’<sup>[3]</sup> So, I would argue, there have been two broad currents at work in contemporary art: skepticism about the universal pretensions of aesthetic accounts of beauty and the desire to engage historical change through the power of art.

Historically, I would like to propose that this rejection of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns about beauty were realized in two distinct stages. The first stage came with the rise of formalism or a focus on the medium of painting which we can see quite clearly in a work like Paul Cezanne’s *Bathers*, which hung for many years in the entryway of the permanent collection of the MOMA. The primary reason it provides an introduction to a distinctly modern conception of painting can be found in the contradictions it contains.

For example, the mountains are painted with broad strokes that render them indistinct, a technique commonly used to make a feature of a landscape recede or disappear, but then at the top and the bottom Cezanne clearly outlines the mountains in a heavy, distinct black line, similar to those found in the bather’s legs, which makes the legs and the mountains appear almost on the same plane. He does this elsewhere with a number of conflicting dark and light patches. Black regions in a painting tend to recede into the shadows while white regions tend to lift off the surface toward the viewer. In the lower right part of the painting, there

is a white patch immediately behind the bather's left knee and as a white patch that highlights the grassy beach behind him. These thin white regions seem to serve no descriptive role. They serve only to subvert our expectations of space. Similarly, the patterns of land and water are interrupted where they come close to the bather's body making it harder to place the figure into the landscape. Even the bather's body is fragmented. Notice, for example, the way his lower right leg is twisted impossibly relative to his thigh or the way in which his feet are disproportionately large compared to his arms. The result of these contradictions is that we are inevitably drawn to the surface of the painting, to the regions of paint and their form and composition. More than attempting to capture a scene, Cezanne seems to direct our attention to the question of what a painting is supposed to be. This focus on the formal capacities of the medium of painting led artists away from a focus on beauty within the world since it led them to focus on the formal capacities of painting, which enables it to represent the world. Cezanne encourages us to pay attention to those formal features of painting by including a conflicting set of formal devices that draw our attention to the qualities of the painted surface itself.

The move toward formalism, however, is a move not away from beauty but away from the beauty of the natural world. For one thing, we might notice is that Cezanne's move here is perfectly consistent with Kant's analytic of the beautiful.

While Kant draws our attention to the unity or arrangement of our perceptual experience independent of our needs or interests, Cezanne draws our attention to the unity or compositional arrangement of the formal properties of a painting independent of the content that is represented. As a result, Kant is frequently thought to be an important intellectual precursor to formalism in art. (Clement Greenberg, for example, develops this connection between Kant and modern art in his 1960 essay, “Modernist Painting”.)

But if the first step is a move away from the world, the second step is a move away from beauty, a move I think can be seen quite clearly in the works of Robert Rauschenberg.

One place to start is with one of Rauschenberg’s earliest work, *22 the Lily White*, which he painted for human figure class at the New York Art Students League.

Once again, we see a work with number of contradictory visual cues. But in this case, the contradictions are even stronger. The jagged parallel lines provide conflicting indications of what counts as figure and what counts as ground and the numbers and symbols inscribed onto the canvas in a variety of conflicting orientations remove any sense of up or down. As a result of these conflicting visual cues, it becomes altogether impossible to resolve a single coherent image.

Rather than draw our attention to the form of the painted surface, Rauschenberg has achieved, I am tempted to say, a visually opaque surface. The surface of *22*

*the Lily White* has been worked in ways that make it impossible to construe the marks into any sort of image or expression.

This destruction of the picture plane becomes even more evident in his later combines, like *Canyon*, where he attaches real objects to the surface and perimeters of a painting. The painting has ceased to be a picture plane or window through which we seen an image and it has become a surface or a table on which one might place an object. This is perhaps the clearest in *Monogram*.

In many of his other works, Rauschenberg continues to play with the boundary between art and the real world. In *Bed*, for example, he marks and frames his sheets in a way that pushes a real object across the boundary and into the world of art and in *Erased DeKooning* he uses an eraser to pull a work of art back across the boundary and into the real world. By playing with this boundary, Rauschenberg draws attention to the fluidity of the boundary between art and the world and he draws attention to the way in which that boundary is defined not by intrinsic features of the art object by the sorts of regard or attention that visual cues imbedded in the object encourage us to take. By manipulating those cues, Rauschenberg presents us with objects that seem to vacillate between being real and being art. The objects he has created are, in other words, intentionally ambiguous and their ambiguity draws us even further away from more traditional concerns about beauty and aesthetics.

The upshot of Rauschenberg's move is that artists came to adopt an entirely open view about what can count as art. For if the essence of art lies in the form or character of our attention or regard, then anything can be a candidate art object since anything can be presented to us as an object of aesthetic consideration. This led contemporary artists to adopt a concept of art that was so open that when analytic philosophers of art arrive on the scene after their hiatus with positivism, they were forced to abandon traditional concerns about beauty and aesthetics. In the next section I will explain why I think it is a mistake for Christian philosophers to follow suit.

#### **4. Why are questions about beauty and aesthetics important for a Christian worldview?**

There is, of course, a fairly simple answer to this question. If the goal of developing a Christian worldview is to identify, articulate, and defend the connections between one's faith and one's understanding, then one issue we ought to consider is the human aesthetic response to art and natural beauty. Clearly questions about beauty and aesthetics have a place in a Christian worldview. But what I want to do now is explain why I think those questions are especially important. I will divide my claims into three areas of concern and I will identify two topics of interest in each area.

I will begin by arguing that questions of aesthetics should matter to us as artists and appreciators of art. I have two reasons for thinking this is true.

First, in the absence of a concern about beauty or standards of aesthetic excellence, the activity of making and appreciating art threatens to lose its point.

We can see this in at least two ways. First, to use a common line of attack against ethical relativism, in the absence of objective standards it makes no sense to talk of achievement or improvement. But what is the point of doing the hard work of making or appreciating art if it makes no sense to think you are achieving something?

One way of putting this concern in way that is more specific to the world of art would be to say that in the absence of standards or a conception of beauty anything becomes an equal candidate for aesthetic appreciation. But if that is true, then what is the point of being an artist? To illustrate this point I'd like to appeal to two artists who recognized that an entirely open concept of art (i.e., a concept of art that lacks internal aesthetic standards for what counts as beautiful) threatens to lead to the death of art. The first example of this can be seen in Duchamp's *Fountain*. Although often used to illustrate the rise of ready-mades or found objects, Duchamp once explained that he submitted it as a prank partly out of frustration with the indiscriminate acceptance of anything as art. During an interview he explained, "A point which I very much want to establish is that the

choice of these ‘readymades’ was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction to visual indifference and the total absence of good or bad taste... in fact, a complete anesthesia.” When the exhibition refused to display it, *Fountain* was picked up by Alfred Stieglitz, who displayed it in his gallery, in an effort to draw attention to way in which photography was still struggling to be accepted as an artform. When he sold the gallery he threw the toilet out on the curb. So at least part of what is odd about the current world of art is that they have effectively fetishized a prank that was originally a protest against the indiscriminate acceptance of anything as art.

Another ironic example of the artworld fetishizing a work that was originally a protest the failure of discrimination can be found in the work of Piero Manzoni entitled *Artist’s Shit* which is literally 90 cans of his own excrement which he initially sold for the symbolic amount of \$61,000, the same amount that would cost if it were solid gold. (It is worth much more now, despite the fact that at last count, 47 of the cans have subsequently exploded.) Manzoni died at the age of 29, within two years of completing this work, which has, perhaps, led to their becoming part of the permanent collection of several prominent museums, despite the fact that he clearly expressed to many of his closest friends that his goal was to taunt the gullibility of the artworld. Manzoni was protesting precisely the same dynamic within the artworld that worries me. After the institutional acceptance of



the piece, if you are Manzoni, you might wonder, “Geeze, if they will literally accept my excrement as art, what’s the point?”

The second argument I have that is based on our concerns as artists and appreciators can be found in what I will call the importance of aesthetic realization. To make this point I will draw on Kant’s distinction between independent and dependent beauty. Free beauty is simply a matter of something’s formal relationships, whether it be the relationship between the trees and a stream in a landscape or marks of paint on a canvas. Dependent, beauty, however, is where the pleasure we take is aesthetic, since it is devoid of any sensual, practical or reasoned interest, but does depend upon attending to a work in terms of particular determinate concepts. Abstract art, on Kant’s account, might count as freely beautiful, but representational works might count as cases of dependent beauty.

My argument here would be that we should be careful of emphasizing the meaning of a work at the expense of its aesthetic excellence. A good example of this might be to look at the work by Barbara Kruger. The question here is whether her work does more than merely illustrate the meaning of her political message. Emphasizing the meaning of an artwork in the absence of aesthetic standards eliminates the important kind of interpenetration that can result from the interaction between a work’s meaning or content and the aesthetic experience that

the work affords us. Contrast Kruger's work with Goya's *The Third of May 1808*. There is a clear goal here to confront us and to condemn the harshness of war. But Goya shapes that response through the artistic excellence of his work. The composition guides us from the faceless row of soldiers, along their converging muskets to the brightly lit central figure. His use of paint shapes our cognitive response. Notice how the lighting alone emphasizes the individuality of the central figure in contrast with the mass of ranked soldiers and when we look closely at the closest prostrate figure we can see how Goya's smears the paint to blot out his individuality. It's an amazingly powerful experience of the cruel obliteration of individual life. So my argument here would be that in the absence of clear standards of aesthetic excellence there is a threat that art will lose its point and its value.

The second area of concern relates to our lives as Christians. I have two basic lines of thought that are admittedly underdeveloped and unclear. First I would argue that an experience of beauty is essentially decentering. The basic character of our regard for an object of beauty involves not simply the recognition or judgment that something is beautiful; it is rather that something shifts or changes in the basic form of our attention. The values or concerns that guides our attention are clearly outside us. The way I think this relates to a Christian worldview is this. According to our faith we do not stand at the center of the world. The

importance of our experience of beauty, to once again appeal to Kant, is that when we experience beauty, we cease to stand even at the center of our own world or our own experience. We cede the center to the work that stands before us.

The second reason why I think that questions of aesthetics ought to be important to us as Christians can be found in the unique way that art enables us to experience and engage a wide range of contradictions. Think, for example, of the following question that arises from a Christian worldview: How do we reconcile the wickedness, fallibility and nobility of humankind; how do we make sense of love, forgiveness and mercy in light of that reconciliation, and how do we make sense of human experience in light of those aims? I fear that this will sound utterly mysterious, but art is often motivated by a concern to explore human experience in light of precisely this sort of conflict. And so I would argue that one reason why Christians have reason to value beauty and art lies in the fact that art enables us to give physical form to the antimonies that characterize a commitment to one's faith. It doesn't simply illustrate one's beliefs; rather, it enables us to engage the conflicts that arise out of that faith. To state just one example, I think that the second movement of Henryk Mikolaj Górecki's 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony, which is based on a novena that was scratched into the wall of a Gestapo jail, enables us to address the problem of moral evil by providing a vehicle through which we can

experience the role hope might play in our experience of grief over human tragedy.

Finally, I would like to turn to our work as philosophers. Why should philosophers care about aesthetics? While this is the question and area that initially motivated my paper this afternoon, I am clearly over any reasonable time limit and so I'll keep this part brief. I think there are at least two areas of contemporary interest to philosophers that would do well to think about the place of aesthetics and beauty in human life. The first area involves human nature and human emotions. How do we explain both our capacity for creating and appreciating aesthetic objects and how do we explain why those acts play such an important role in so many aspects of human life? What role do the emotions play in that capacity?

The second area involves our accounts of value. One of the basic questions raised by the challenge of scientific naturalism is to understand how values figure into the world of facts. Aesthetic values, as Kant recognized, are puzzling in a number of ways. One important issue will be to determine whether our metaethical accounts of value can make sense of these quintessential human concerns.

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[1] Arthur Danto, “Cy Twombly” *The Nation*, October 31, 1994.

[2] Barnett Newman, ‘The Sublime is Now’, 1948, as excerpted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 573.

[3] Andre Breton, *Surrealism in Painting*, 1928, as excerpted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 445.