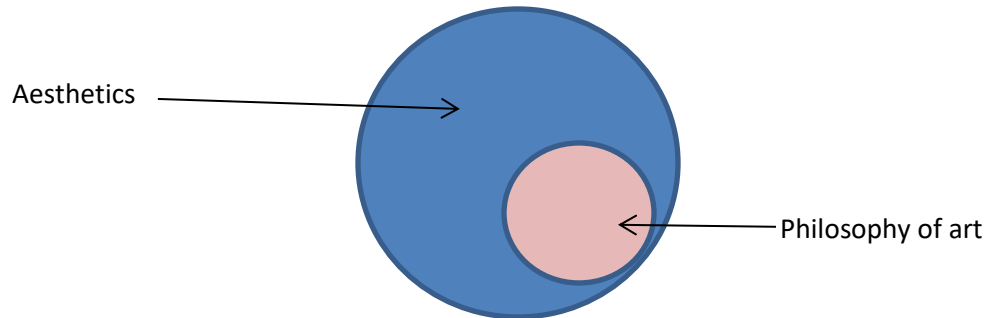


## Aesthetics

These definitions are just a starting point for discussion; they are not the final word on each topic.

Aesthetics is not only about art. The **philosophy of art** is considered to be part of aesthetics, but aesthetics as a whole is concerned with beauty, taste and art.



Aesthetics is an example of **value theory** in philosophy, which also includes moral, social and political philosophy, and other areas where evaluation or judgement is an integral part of the philosophical activity.

**Aesthetic** comes from the Ancient Greek word *aisthetikos* meaning sense perception (from *aisthanomai*, “I feel”). Art, nature, people, ideas and things can be said to have **aesthetic value**.

**Beauty** is a feature of an object (objective) which is pleasurable to perceive (subjective).

**Taste** is an individual’s subjective preferences.

**Art** is an arrangement of elements designed to affect the senses and emotions.



There are **three branches of art**:

- 1) Visual arts: painting, sculpture, architecture
- 2) Performing arts: theatre, dance, music, film
- 3) Literary arts: novels, poetry, plays

**Fine art** is art made primarily for aesthetics. It is distinguished from **decorative** or **applied art**, which also serves a practical function (e.g., pottery, woodwork).

## Philosophical History

**Plato** (428-347 BC): art (poetry) is imitation/mimicry (*mimesis*) of nature and as such is lower than ignorance. Lacking *summetria* (good proportion/ratio of parts) is associated with lacking beauty. In contrast to this, there exists beauty, which is: a Form; has some relationship to the good; therefore, has a status above some other Forms.

**Aristotle** (384-322 BC) 'Poetics': Tragedy evokes fear and pity. Catharsis is the purification and purgation of emotions. Art plays a role in the regulation of the body. Chief forms of beauty are *summetria*, order and definiteness, also functional beauty ('On the Parts of Animals').

**Plotinus** (204-270): beauty chiefly applies to the senses of sight and hearing; and symmetry is not the only essential aspect of beauty (a beautiful object is not just something composed of beautiful parts).

**Augustine of Hippo** (354-430): distinction between creations of God and creations of artists (the goal of art was assumed to be *mimesis*). Even natural beauty is just a reflection of God's beauty, which is supremely beautiful.

**Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804): beauty is the pleasurable *effect* which is the result of our understanding and imagination in *free play* with each other. Enjoyment is: sensation -> pleasure. Beauty is: sensation -> reflective contemplation -> pleasure.

**Friedrich Schiller** (1759-1805): beauty is a property of the object itself; it is an *appearance* of freedom and autonomy.

**Georg Hegel** (1770-1831): the purpose of art is the creation of beautiful objects; beauty *manifests* the freedom of the spirit. Thus, art is the means by which we can contemplate the truth about ourselves.

**John Keats** (1795-1821): *negative capability* was a phrase used by Keats in 1817 to describe how artistic beauty and truth can include philosophical confusion and uncertainty. It has since been used by poets, philosophers and psychologists to describe truth and beauty that encompasses mystery, illogic and philosophical impurity.

**Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900): in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche asserts that Athenian tragedy is the apotheosis of art because of how it transcends pessimism and nihilism through passion and joy. He says this is accomplished through the union of the dichotomous Apollonian and Dionysian elements: the Apollonian representing order, intellect and differentiation; the Dionysian representing chaos, passion and the unconscious.

**Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976): criticises the "aestheticisation" of art – he is against philosophical aesthetics and is for the true "work of art" as a phenomenological experience, i.e., the direct experience of art. It is not anti-aesthetics, because he thought that oppositional movements are trapped in the logic of that which they oppose. Nor is it Heideggerian aesthetics, which he would see as an oxymoron. It is post-aesthetic, but not "aestheticism" (art for art's sake). For him, art reflects an historical community's values and informs their sense of what is and what matters (ontological historicity).

## Art and morality:

- 1) **Aestheticism:** art for art's sake (art is for enjoyment)

**Oscar Wilde:** "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."

- 2) **Aesthetic moralism:** the message behind the masterpiece

**Ludwig Wittgenstein:** aesthetics and ethics are one and the same.

**Kant:** beauty is a symbol of morality.

- 3) **The morality of the artist**

## How does Aesthetics affect our lives?

Aesthetics affect our appraisal of others (e.g., people perceived as attractive are assessed by others as being kinder and more competent).

Organisations use marketing to manipulate us into judging their product more favourably.

Aesthetics affects our motivations and choices (our tastes).

We use it to manage our emotions and to feel good, e.g., reading a book or magazine, watching a TV show or movie, listening to music.

We attend performing arts events: bands, plays, musicals, operas, dance performances. We attend art galleries and museums to see visual art.

## Questions for discussion:

- What is art? What is not art? What is the highest form of art?
- Is art just mimicry of nature, or is it something more?
- Does beauty exist in the object, in the subjective experience of the viewer, or both?
- Does appreciation of beauty require reflective contemplation, or is it indistinguishable from enjoyment?
- Does art have anything to do with freedom? Does it require freedom in its composition, is it an element of artistic expression, does art express freedom?
- What role does aesthetics and aesthetic value play in our everyday lives?
- Are art and morality separate? Is there such a thing as immoral art?
- Does criminal/anti-social behaviour by the artist affect the value of the art? Is the art still beautiful? Can the art be separated from the artist?