

# AESTHETICS

## Beauty and taste

Aesthetics first began in the eighteenth century and currently consists of two major parts: the philosophy of beauty and the philosophy of taste. While the philosophy of art is indeed a part of aesthetics, aesthetics touches on much more. Not only does aesthetics focus on the value and nature of art; it also involves the reactions to natural objects that then become expressions in language—thus, objects are deemed beautiful or ugly. But these terms are incredibly vague, which leads to the questions: How and why does one consider something to be beautiful or ugly?

## TASTE

During the eighteenth century, the concept of taste emerged as a response to the rise of rationalist thought. Instead of the rationalist perspective on beauty, which claimed that we make judgments of beauty through using the principles and concepts of reason, theories of taste began to emerge from British philosophers who mostly worked in empiricism.

### Immediacy Thesis

These theories, referred to as the immediacy thesis, claim that judgments of beauty have the immediacy and straightforwardness akin to sensory judgments and are not, or not mainly, brought about by other types of principles. The immediacy thesis states that we do

not conclude through reason that something is beautiful; instead, we “taste” that it is beautiful.

While a rationalist might object to this theory by stating that there is a big difference between finding a meal excellent and finding a play to be excellent, the theory of taste states that a play is more complicated, and so it involves more cognitive work, which includes applying various concepts and principles. Therefore, determining the beauty of something like a play is not immediate and cannot be a matter of taste. The theory of beauty is immediate, unlike the earlier ideas that were based on rationalist thought, and that when it comes to judging whether a play is beautiful, it simply cannot be a matter of taste because this action requires more cognitive processes and is not immediate. According to Hume, taste is unlike the five external senses. Rather, taste is an internal sense, meaning it depends upon existing operations in order for beauty to be perceived.

### Disinterest

During the time the theory of taste was developed, a popular idea among philosophers was that of egoism, meaning one takes pleasure in an action or trait in order to serve a self-interest. However, those who believed in the theory of taste argued that the resulting pleasure from beauty is actually disinterested, meaning it is not self-interested. People are able to judge something as beautiful or not beautiful without serving their own interests. Philosophers believed that determining virtue works in a similar way. Kant questioned this notion that both virtue and taste are disinterested. Kant's view, which is the current view, was that while taste is disinterested, the pleasure that comes from determining whether an action is morally good must be interested because that judgment represents a desire to perform that action.

## THE AESTHETIC

The immediacy thesis and the notion of disinterest relating to beauty can then be applied to “artistic formalism,” the idea that the properties that make something art, and determine whether it is good or bad, are formal (meaning they are only capable of being understood through hearing or seeing).

The aesthetic experience can be described as the study of specific states of the mind, such as attitudes, emotions, and responses. In 1757, philosopher Edmund Burke published the famous treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. This piece is one of the most significant written works in aesthetics, and introduces two very important terms (among many) to describe the aesthetic experience: *sublime* and *beautiful*.

### Philosophical Definitions

**SUBLIME:** Judging something as *sublime* originates in one's feelings toward nature, and in the indication of being fragile and alone in this world, which does not belong to us and resists our demands. **BEAUTIFUL:** Judging something as *beautiful* originates in social feelings (particularly romantic feelings), and in one's hope to be comforted through love or desire.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART

The philosophy of art plays a key role in aesthetics. There are various elements within the philosophy of art, including the questions of what art is, what should be judged, and what the value of art is.

### What Is Art?

How one defines art is a persistent question throughout the philosophy of art, and its meaning constantly evolves. From the days of Plato to around the eighteenth century, a central component to art's definition was the role of representation. However, as romanticism began to grow in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, art shifted away from representation and toward expression. As the twentieth century approached, there was yet another shift toward abstraction and appreciating the form. Toward the later decades of the twentieth century, even abstraction was abandoned, and philosophers of art argued that art should not have a tight definition. This idea, known as the “de-definition” of art, was created by philosopher Morris Weitz, who had based his work on that of Wittgenstein.

### Judging Art

When you see *Hamlet*, are you judging Shakespeare's manuscript? Are you judging the actors' performance? Do you judge every part of the production, down to the costumes? Are different things judged based on different sets of standards? These questions arise for all types of art—music, painting, drawing, etc.

### Value

There are two ways to value art: intrinsically and extrinsically. Those who believe art has an extrinsic value appreciate art as a way to express a recognized moral good and to educate the emotions, while those who believe art has intrinsic value believe that art is valuable in and of itself. According to Leo Tolstoy, who took an extrinsic approach, art's value shared the value of empathy. Others, such as Oscar Wilde, took an intrinsic approach, believing in “art for art's sake.”