

Philosophy 3363: Aesthetic Experience and Judgment

UC: Ways of Knowing, Creativity and Aesthetics

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This course is an upper level introduction to aesthetic theory. Although aesthetics is a field of philosophy that throughout much of the twentieth century has focused on theory of the arts, traditionally aesthetics also deals with such general notions as aesthetic experience, aesthetic qualities (beauty, ugliness, etc), aesthetic judgments, and aesthetic value. Although no particular knowledge of the arts will be presupposed in this class, in studying aesthetics it is very helpful to have an interest in at least some of the arts and their history. It is also not necessary that you have a background in philosophy. However, some familiarity with the history and methods of philosophy would be beneficial. The student will develop a basic familiarity with important topics in aesthetics including a familiarity with the major positions and arguments from prominent aestheticians. The student will also be able to demonstrate the ability to use inter/multidisciplinary approaches for understanding several complex issues.

The course will begin with the question of whether the arts have an essential characteristic or set of characteristics that justify treating them as a separate and unified practice. We can ask whether there is a general category of human activity justifiably demarcated as “art” as there is a general category labeled “science.” We will note how the modern “system of the arts” came into existence in the eighteenth century and the organizing idea that the arts have a common essence or character. Theorists have been looking for that essence ever since. The classical Greeks and subsequent thinkers for 1500 years found the essence to be representation or a certain type of representation. Thinkers and artists of the nineteenth and twentieth century found the essence of art to lay in emotional expression. Other twentieth century thinkers and artists have thought that a primary focus on the perceptual form of a work of rather than its content was what distinguished art. Failure to agree on an essence, or even if there is such a thing, led in the late twentieth century to debate about whether art can be defined at all.

Equally important conceptual questions need to be asked about the central concepts involved in the understanding of art: representation, expression and form. There are also many questions concerning the fundamental concepts of aesthetic theory, such as, what is an aesthetic response? Does an aesthetic response to a work differ from understanding it, merely perceiving it or reacting emotionally to it?

Finally, recent aesthetic theory has broken away from exclusive emphasis on the arts and has begun to pay attention to nature, investigating such questions as whether nature calls for a different form of appreciation than in the arts. Questions about the aesthetics of nature are particularly important because of the practical role that the aesthetic value of nature plays in environmental issues.

Texts: Aesthetics (Oxford Readers). Eds. Patrick Maynard and Susan Feagin
Oxford University Press.

Assignments: There are four major assignments for this course that will constitute all of your graded work. Each will form a fourth of your grade. I will carefully explain just what I expect from each of these assignments.

1. Critical Reading Notes
2. Final Exam
3. Mid-Term Exam
4. Final Term Paper - Writing and analytical skills will be developed with assistance from your humble professor.