PART II PAPER 11: AESTHETICS

SYLLABUS

Thematic:
Aesthetic experience; realism and anti-realism; imagination and originality; art and morality; the nature of art and ontology of art; understanding, interpretation and criticism; representation; artistic value.

Set texts:
Plato, Ion, Symposium, and Republic (Books II, III, X).

COURSE OUTLINE

Aesthetics can be seen as comprising two, overlapping, areas of enquiry: philosophical questions about beauty and aesthetic notions more broadly, on the one hand, and on the other, philosophical questions concerning art. One topic on this paper that falls clearly into the first category is that of aesthetic experience. In virtue of what, if anything, does an experience count as an aesthetic one?

Three broad families of questions on this paper fall into the second category. One such family of questions concerns the nature of art. This comprises questions of definition (Can necessary and sufficient conditions be given for something to count as art? If so, what are they?) and questions of ontology (What kinds of things are artworks? Are musical works abstract objects? Are paintings physical objects?).

A second topic is the evaluation of artworks. For certain kinds of properties, philosophers have been interested in whether they bear on an artwork’s artistic merit. Is originality a good-making feature of an artwork? Does the moral character of an artwork bear on its artistic merit?

A third topic comprises what might be called the interpretation, or understanding, of artworks. This is represented on this paper in three different kinds of question. First, a question traditionally pursued in the case of paintings and drawings: what determines what a picture pictorially represents? Is it that a painting depicts some object just in case it resembles it? Third, a question typically pursued in the case of literary and narrative arts: people often ascribe meanings, or messages, to such works. If this is ever correct, we can ask, what makes it the case that a work has a particular meaning, and not a different meaning, or none at all? Is it the intentions of the artist, or something else?

It has become increasingly common for philosophers to make use of the concept of artistic value, and to distinguish artistic value from aesthetic value. This topic examines this distinction.

The two remaining topics on this paper do not fall straightforwardly into either category. Realism and Antirealism deals with questions concerning the status of aesthetic and artistic evaluations, and hence relates to both art and aesthetic notions. Imagination and Creativity covers questions concerning the nature of these related, but distinct, phenomena, and also questions concerning the limits to what it is possible to imagine - is it possible to imagine something logically contradictory; is it possible to imagine something unethical being morally acceptable?

Students have the opportunity to address some of these topics by engaging with key works in the history of philosophy. Both Plato and Hume discuss themes in aesthetics as well as the philosophy of art. Plato is concerned in his dialogues with an analysis of beauty, with the educational value and dangers of art, and with the nature of artistic inspiration. Hume raises questions about the nature and status of aesthetic judgment, the role of the critic, and the relationship of art and morality.

Prerequisites
None

Objectives
Students taking this paper will be expected to:

1) Acquire a familiarity with some of the philosophical issues that are raised by the phenomena of beauty and art
2) Become familiar with some of the main positions that have been taken on these issues, and the arguments that have been advanced to support these positions.
3) To develop some skill in thinking and arguing clearly about these issues and positions.

Preliminary Reading

READING LIST
The set texts are required reading. Material marked with an asterisk* is important.

THEMATIC
Useful Collections of Articles
The following collections are particularly useful:

CAHN, Steven, and Aaron MESKIN, eds., Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). Referred to below as CAHN and MESKIN.


LAMARQUE, Peter, and Stein H. OLSEN, eds., Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Referred to below as LAMARQUE and OLSEN.

NEILL, Alex, and Aaron RIDLEY, eds., The Philosophy of Art (London: McGraw-Hill, 1995). Referred to below as NEILL and RIDLEY.

Aesthetic Experience


BELL, Clive, Art (New York: F. Stokes, 1913), ch. 1, sect. 1 'The aesthetic hypothesis'. Reprinted in NEILL and RIDLEY and in CAHN and MESKIN.


Realism and Anti-Realism
(i) Overview


(ii) Reading on Testimony


(iii) Reading on Faultless Disagreement and Relativism


(iv) Reading on Non-Cognitivism


Imagination and Originality
(i) Imagination


*WALTON, Kendall L., Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the
Representational Arts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Part I, sect. I.1 'Imagining'. Also available on Moodle.


(ii) Originality

*BODEN, Margaret A., *Dimensions of Creativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), ch. 4 'What is creativity?' Also available on Moodle.


Art and Morality

(i) Ethicism Debate


(ii) Imaginative Resistance


TOLSTOY, Leo, *What Is Art?* [Widely available in a variety of editions]

The Nature of Art and Ontology of Art

(i) Definition of Art


(ii) Ontology of Art


*STRAWSON, Peter, Individuals (London: Methuen, 1959).


Understanding, Interpretation and Criticism


*WOLTERSTORFF, Nicholas, 'Goodman's symbol theory'. Also available on Moodle.


*LOPES, Dominic M., Understanding Pictures (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 3. 'Goodman’s symbol theory'. Also available on Moodle.


(ii) Wollheim

*WOLLHEIM, Richard Painting as an Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), ch. 1 'What the spectator sees', pp. 46-79 only. Also available on Moodle.


Selected Writings about Wollheim’s Aesthetics


HOPKINS, Jim, and Anthony SAVILE, eds., Psychoanalysis, Mind, and Art (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), chs. 15 & 16 (papers by Budd and Walton).

Artistic Value


SET TEXTS

PLATO

PLATO, Ion, Symposium, and Republic (Books II, III, X)

Secondary Literature


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HUME


As well as the set text, anyone might benefit from reading Hume's *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion, On Refinedness in the Arts, and Of Tragedy*. These are widely available in a variety of forms e.g. reprinted in NEILL and RIDLEY.

Other relevant works by Hume include:


If you are not familiar with any background in Hume's ethics, the shortcut is to read the essay *The Sceptic*. The longer route is to read much of *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, especially noticing the concentration on the virtues (parallel to the virtues of the critic) and the tension between uniformity and diversity, which also informs the *Standard of Taste*. The self-standing *Dialogue* at the end of the *Enquiry* is useful here.

**Secondary Literature**


