

A Conceptual Analysis of the *Aesthetics* (Draft)  
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The term *aesthetic* can be understood as a philosophical discipline attending to the knowledge or understanding acquired through sensual experience (i.e. feeling, imagination, beauty, and the arts). Paradigmatically, this term distinguishes itself primarily from natural science, on the one hand, which relies on methodology as its source of knowledge and rational logic, on the other, which generally seeks the cohesion of abstract ideas. This distinction is significant as traditional definitions of aesthetics have often been referred to as ‘the science of beauty’. This may be justifiable given the more theoretical aspect of science. However, as I will try to make evident, aesthetics should be distinguished from the methodological component of the natural sciences. Syntagmatically, this term has been understood in the following triptych; The true (metaphysics), the good (ethics), and *the beautiful* (aesthetics). This paper will move through the diachronic to the synchronic use of the term aesthetics.

### I. The Trajectory of Aesthetics

#### *Etymology*

The word ‘aesthetic’ is a derivative of the Greek word αἰσθησις, *aesthesis*. In its classical use the semantic range of the word covers the English equivalents of *sensation, perception, appearance, mind, and knowledge* (Liddell and Scott). The term is closely related to intellectual understanding as it is informed through the senses. This is demonstrated through its use in relation to σωμα, *body*, which can be contrasted with the intelligence of νοῦς, *mind (TDNT)*. In the Septuagint (especially in Proverbs), this term frequently translates the Hebrew word *da’at*, rendered *knowledge* or *understanding*, and, given the context, should not be divorced from notions of *wisdom*. In the New Testament the term occurs only in Phil 1:9 with the verbal form found in Luke 9:45. Both instances use the term in an overlapping but nuanced relationship with γνῶσις, *knowledge*. Louw and Nida place this usage within the category of ‘capacity to understand’. This brief etymological survey demonstrates that the term αἰσθησις was used to talk about the understanding humans received which was based upon sensual experience.

#### *Modern Origins*

Though the idea of sensual perception continued to be engaged through the medieval period, the English use of *aesthetic* only gained currency through the Enlightenment. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term carried much of its Greek content. With Enlightenment philosophers attempting to map out rules and limits of knowledge via reason there emerged the need to account for received knowledge that did not lend itself to consistent models of reason (i.e. empirical verification or abstract logic). Philosophers came to recognize that the source for these forms of knowledge were often related to the arts, or those things considered beautiful. Beauty should not be equated with aesthetics, rather, beauty becomes a fundamental category for understanding aesthetic knowledge. This notion of *beautiful* assumes a judgment, ‘*this* is beautiful in distinction to *that*’. This judgment, however, could not be reduced to the accepted canons of reason and so became referred to by some as the philosophy of *taste*. This represents an important tension. Most Enlightenment philosophers recognized the value

of beauty, and therefore the need for some intentional way of approaching and recognizing it. However, they could not neatly reconcile it with their philosophical structures. This tension continues in the present as David Hart refers to it as the ‘most restless’ of the transcendentals and Hans Urs von Balthasar states that beauty and aesthetics exhibit a ‘forgetfulness’ in crossing prescribed boundaries.<sup>1</sup> This leaves no small task in clarifying its conceptual content. Indeed a primary point to be made is aesthetics unyielding relationship to particular material forms in contrast to inappropriate attempts at abstraction. This tension follows from modern philosophy’s tendency to appropriate methodology employed in the natural sciences (Gadamer). Scientific methodology of this sort assumes a position of objectivity which rejects the subject’s prejudices. In this model, method assumes the responsibility of results. Human input can only ‘taint’ the findings. This method also assumes that the object of inquiry lends itself to the type of scientific inquiry adequate for other tasks. In this light it may be asked whether the principle of anatomic dissection can account for the understanding evoked in an artistic presentation? Key to understanding aesthetics is the *relationship* between the subject and object in the experience of the beautiful. I will explore this relationship through the use of two related images. The images to be developed are that of ‘beast’ and ‘priest’. These images will be used to address the subject-object relationship of sensual perception in aesthetics.

## II. Beauty as the Beast

Beauty is, of course, a notoriously elusive term. This, however, does not diminish our ability to say something about it. As already mentioned, beauty implies judgment and judgment implies content (object) and interpretation (subject). This is a value laden, subject-object relationship. Beauty relates not only to judgment (perhaps better referred to as recognition) but also desire. Beauty evokes. What does this imply? This implies that the subject-object relationship is not one way. The object of aesthetic attention is neither static nor neutral. This also assumes that the subject is able to receive from the object. This is a question of boundaries. How the subject positions the object determines the potential of the relationship. A doctor anaesthetizing his or her patient greatly affects the influence of mutual effect between them. The object of beauty then can be imaged as the beast, or more particularly in this account, the bull.

There are many levels at which a bull may be appreciated. These levels indicate the boundaries in which the subject has access to it and, in turn, the bull has access to the subject. First, someone may wear or eat the bull. In this case, the life of the bull has ended. However, the feel of the leather and the taste of meat may evoke an appreciation of the animal and what it has to offer. In this instance the relationship is largely predictable, almost scientific. Feed and care for the bull in the appropriate way and it will consistently produce the type of effect desired. The relationship is determined by the subject. Second, the subject may attend a rodeo. Here the majesty of the bull can be witnessed in its irreducible form and movement. The bull’s dense energy presents itself as almost visible outside its skin. The subject can, undoubtedly, appreciate and even be

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 20; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* vol.1 *See the Form* (trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 34.

moved by the beauty of such a display. However, the subject remains on one side of the fence with the bull on the other. Though mental conflict or joy may result, the subject remains in control of the object's proximity. The subject may turn their back with no imminent consequences. Finally, the subject may climb over the fence and stand inside the ring with bull. The subject *sees* nothing new in the creature, but *perceives* its *presence* in an entirely different manner. Something happened in the crossing of the fence. The presence of the object fills mental senses in a way that the prior, removed object, could not. Now, what the *bull does* has a direct effect upon the subject and, just as importantly, what the *subject does* has an effect on the bull. The relationship becomes mutual, though unequal. However, in contrast to scientific assumptions, the subject cannot *control* the procedures. The subject must instead understand how to *relate*. The subject is forced to recognize their limitedness and as well as their situatedness. What the subject does affects the aesthetic relationship. In this way we can begin to understand the terror of beauty and its uncontrollable nature. In this image, beauty should not be equated with 'pretty', but with the ability to move our senses by the presence of its *form*.

This image demonstrates one key point regarding the role of aesthetics. The various levels of relationship between the bull and the onlooker demonstrates that there are legitimate and accessible sources of knowledge that *cannot* conform to rigorous scientific methodology. This does not negate science, but it attempts to appropriately position it. Perhaps it is possible then to locate aesthetics alongside natural science and philosophical reason as legitimate sources of knowledge. These pursuits should not be taken as compartmentalized, but as mutually informing. How then does aesthetics cohere as a discipline? How does one relate to, perhaps even evaluate, the bull? This will taken up in the following image.

### III. Beauty and the Priest

If aesthetics can be understood, at least in part, as the recognizing the role of sensual forms as part of human perception and knowledge then the image of priest may be helpful to understand the role of the subject in aesthetics. For priests of the Torah, boundaries were ultimately a matter of life and death. The boundaries range from those set by God in creation (Gen 1); those given for the land of Israel (Num 34); those given for the arrangement of the camp (Num 2); those given among the Levites (Num 3); those given to the dimensions and internal boundaries of the Tabernacle (Ex 25-27). These boundaries were *not* to isolate but precisely the opposite. These boundaries were given to *facilitate* the relationship between God and humanity and between humans. For this reason priests addressed a dizzying array of 'breaches,' the crossing of boundaries. These breaches included the ethical, the physiological, the sacrificial, and spiritual. In the of crossing boundaries *something happened* and it was to this reality that priests were called to be responsible.

For the priests not every breach was the same. Leviticus offers a complex account of the various consequences and solutions to breached boundaries. Some breaches simply required the person to stay outside camp until evening (Lev 15:6) while others carried the possibility of death (Lev 20:9). The priests were called upon to identify the implications

breached boundaries. They were to do so given the world's ontological reality, namely the presence of a holy God.

This image is useful for a number of reasons. First, it offers an account of understanding the material expressions of the world that are not based upon empirical science. The priestly epistemology follows from an understanding of the created order. This means that material expressions within the created order have appropriate and inappropriate relationships. As the prophets showed, these relationships were not fixed in static structures but reflected a transcendent category of holiness. In this light it is not a far stretch in noting art's historical relationship with notions of sacred and secular. Aesthetics attempts to map the contours of the material world as it impacts our emotions and intellect; as it moves us. As priests facilitate the presence of holiness, aesthetics attempts to recognize the presence and effect of beauty.

The image of priest also resonates with the qualitative nature of aesthetics. Aesthetics creates tension with the idea of the neutral and passive observer. Beauty is understood in relationship, in the investment of both the subject and object. In the Pentateuch, the priest is no passive authority figure but moves vulnerably in the reality of transcendent holiness. In this way the priest observe when fences should be established for the protection from holiness. Not everyone should climb in the ring with a bull. In aesthetics the ongoing task is identifying and evaluating how expressions of art and beauty impact our metaphysics and epistemology. Can tragedy be beautiful? Is 'pretty' deceptive? Should some art be censored? Current aesthetic theory has stalled at this point as no accepted 'ground' of truth is available from which to establish ethics. This does not diminish from putting forward the image of 'priest' as potentially fruitful for further reflection.

#### IV. Conclusion

I presented the concept of aesthetics as the philosophical attempt to explore the manner in which sensual experience informs our understanding. This definition offers continuity with the term's etymological origin, as well provides continuity with most current attempts at defining the term. In its current usage aesthetics functions with the guiding, though ambiguous, category of beauty. Part of understanding beauty is understanding that it exists in the irreducible relationship between the subject and the aesthetic form. This perceptual relationship comes into tension with, and therefore can be understood in contrast to, the methodology of natural sciences which assumes static material and reproducible results. Evoking the images of beast and priest I presented aesthetics as the active, value laden relationship between subject and object. This relationship recognized various boundaries of accessible presence. These images also assumed that neither the subject nor the object were passive or static but that both were gratuitous, creating something more than the some of the parts. These images unfortunately become difficult to systematize, much less offer a criteria for an interpretive method. These images indicate a legitimate epistemology. Alongside empirical science and rational logic comes aesthetic experience. This in turn may inform the broader categories of metaphysical/ontological assumptions as well as ethical actions.

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