
The Baumgarten Corruption

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Philosophy

I came to Philosophy from Mathematics as a research student in the 1960's because of my interest in many of its central questions, because of its concern with logical analysis and argument, and because I assumed that Philosophy, like Mathematics, is a subject : amenable to the systematic pursuit of knowledge. The histories of the two subjects have many important people in common : Zeno, Plato, Descartes, Leibnitz, and Bertrand Russell. I loved paradoxes and riddles and the dismantling of sophistries. I started in the peripheral territory of Philosophy of Science and moved on to Metaphysics, Mind and Epistemology. Soon Wittgenstein loomed larger than any one else. I read and concurred with Stanley Cavell's description of the later Wittgenstein as confessional, which may be paraphrased thus :

Metaphysical speculations are illusions of a metaphorical imagination, and their critiques are phenomenological remarks.

This brought me to my first professional crisis. For if this account was true, and I have never heard it argued otherwise, then Philosophy is not like Mathematics at all. It does not proceed to develop and accumulate arguable theses. It does not seek and find knowledge. It presides over a storehouse of perennial riddles. It proposes and disposes of Aunts Sally. I could see that the process was illuminating and testing. I could see that there might be spin-off skills of conceptual analysis, which one might apply in debunking Astrology, for example. I could see that the riddles provided plenty of material for examining undergraduates in examinations. But I could not see how Philosophy could be made suitable for genuine research.

When I voiced some of these concerns to my tutors and professors my alarm was only increased. I was advised not to treat Philosophy itself as an object of enquiry. Doubt the existence of tea cups, time and other humans; but never query Philosophy. I shuffled off to the peripheral subject of aesthetics to lick my wounds. My interest in art is as old as my interest in mathematics and somewhere down the line I anticipated scope for throwing light on the relationship between these two subjects. I started by accepting the *status quo* notion that fine art was the pursuit of aesthetic significance, whatever that may be, and resolved to get a clearer idea of what this might mean.

Philosophical Aesthetics

Philosophy is ambivalent about aesthetics. It seems to hold a traditional place for it alongside Metaphysics and Ethics, going back to classical Greek times. But in modern times aesthetics has languished in a marginal condition. Anthony O'Hear, for example, does not even mention it in his Penguin guide to contemporary philosophy; while Anthony Flew enters the following comments about it in his Pan Dictionary of Philosophy : "contemporary aesthetics has... a strong analytical flavour... (with) closely focused essays (but) has not yet found a wholly assured place. Nevertheless, we are surely right to consider aesthetics as central and as philosophical as metaphysics or ethics. If the literature does not carry this conviction perhaps it is Philosophy's fault. I waded in, full of enthusiasm."

Almost immediately I made a strange discovery. I found that if you take any representative book in the field (I took Richard Wollheim's *Art and its Objects*), you will find that threaded through its otherwise abstract arguments about generalities there will be a more or less liberal sprinkling of particular art examples which the author introduces any way of illustration. We can call the complete set of such examples in a given book or essay the *paradigm sample* of the author. This set will serve to define by implication the author's idea or definition of art. This is important evidence, because modern philosophers generally renounce the explicit act of defining art. And, what invariably emerges from the paradigm sample of any author in this field is that the intended idea of art is the well known notion of fine art. But what is strange is a further observation that I made : if you systematically go through the book and substitute the author's examples of fine art with arbitrary items of imagery and communication which are clearly not fine art, such as billboard advertisements, instruction manuals, newspapers, tv shows and so on...the essential arguments of the author remain unaffected.

Therefore, what seems to all concerned to be a theory of fine art appreciation turns out to be about communication in general. Such concepts as meaning and intention are put through the logico-semantic mill, unravelled and dissected until standard paradoxes are conjured up to befuddle the brain. But there is no clue here on, say, beauty.

This contrast between meaning in art and aesthetics in art may be clearly illustrated by a great example of art theory outside Philosophy, namely the work of that most respected methodologist of art history, Erwin Panofsky. He reasons, quite rightly, that the contemporary viewer's feelings and impressions about a renaissance painting when looking at it are no guide to determining the meaning of the picture. Rather, that task is one of pure historical research, involving the proper analysis of ample and collated documents to establish the symbolism of

the time together with specifics of the commission. But here is the rub. Such meaning will just as well reside in a crude work as in a fine one. Therefore, meaning is not peculiar to fine art, and may even be not necessary. So those elusive matters of quality, which Philosophy avowedly and specifically seeks in 'art' as opposed to mere communication, go by without trace in such analyses.

The main difference between the concerns of Panofsky and philosophy in this matter, however, is that Philosophy is supposed to be about what is fine in art. Not only that, but there seemed, and still seems, to be a blissful ignorance of this global logical error. And so at first, this strange discovery appeared to be a dramatic find; but after a while I sensed that this error of logical typing, a generality posing as a particularity, is more of a clue to the real problem than an end in itself. I decided to file the observation away as the following dual principle :

A typical essay in contemporary philosophical aesthetics (a) implies a fine art definition of art, but (b) applies to wider and different definitions of art.

My attention then drifted to a more debatable line of attack. I began to think what I now suggest - for here my case enters the present tense - that it is the very idea of fine art that is the problem. I should explain at this point that my thoughts have always been directed at visual art in particular but I do not regard this as a serious loss of generality in my arguments. On the contrary, to generalise the concept of art by compounding the diverse fine arts rides in the face of important differences between them, which I will touch on later. Furthermore, what troubles me is the notion of fine art in a contemporary context; now and throughout the 20th century. The term seems to me to become problematic only in the age of modernism. There has always been ambiguity in the epithet 'fine', a potentially misleading combination of social and aesthetic meaning. In some times past and in some places, it is reasonable to suppose that the social fine and the aesthetic fine were in unison. Quality street had quality art. There is no mystery in this, so long as we do not forge a necessary link in our minds on this purely contingent association. In our own age, however, the fine of our senses, and it would seem that the two meanings have gone their separate ways.

The trouble with this otherwise acceptable divorce is that the ambiguity is exploited so that one kind of fine can be made to masquerade as another, and one kind of value steal the clothes of another.

On the face of it, contemporary visual fine art may seem to defy definition, because theories and practices are numerous and conflicting. Nevertheless, ostensive definition does exist in the canon, which is firmly headed by the official cosmopolitan collections of modern art. In the course of the century, at great expense and in full public view, this canon has grown by successive innovatory

additions, consolidating all the while towards a fixed fact. If this repository of artefacts and its attendant documentation has philosophical weaknesses it must face up to them and cannot resort to rewriting itself. The books are cooked, with the irreversibility of a hard-boiled egg.

What troubles me is this : to call the art of this canon 'fine' and to devote philosophical focus to it implies that it is a quality of art, when in fact it is most definitely a kind of art. The canon records a severely exclusive purpose known as modernism.

Art

My favourite definition of art is that given by the Philosopher George Dickie, who used Duchamp's urinal to illustrate his institutional definition of art, which I paraphrase thus :art is whatever is exhibited in the appropriate galleries. Dickie's definition is something of a terminal addition to that timehonoured gamut of competing formulae : mimesis, symbol, expression, formal innovation, social comment, and so on. Clearly, Dickie does have in mind that well known notion, fine art. Moreover, his institutional definition does seem to me to have the merit of reliably mapping the widespread educated idea of art. Picasso is in, Escher is out - you know the one?

However, Dickie's definition delivers a neat *reductio ad absurdum* of the educated concept of art. For, according to his formula, in contemporary art, unlike (say) contemporary transport, anything goes. Does Dickie notice this ? Apparently not. Philosophers are after all wedded to paradox. But mathematicians get excited. They scent discovery in the air. This is how, according to legend, mathematics as we know it got started, springing into existence from the loins of Greek philosophy in the 6th century BC, with an argument from absurdity; about, as it happens, the square roots of unsquare numbers. What mathematicians do when faced with paradox and absurdity in a conclusion is to reason that therefore some or all of the premises must be wrong. In our case, the paradox that art can be anything, it is the fine art model of art which is the faulty premise. The problem with it is quite simply that the idea of contemporary fine art has the locus of a social distinction, not an aesthetic criterion of quality or value.

At other times and in other places there are plausible economic explanations for expecting artistic excellence to be the reserve of a social elite, and to serve its purposes and messages, but not here and now, not since the growth of manufacture and mass communication changed civilisation so drastically. Fine art may once have been a quality of art but is now, and has been for a century or so, a clearly demarcating type of art. We should see that fine art, circumscribed by its own particular goals, styles, institutions, and contexts, is just one of many

distinctive kinds of art : such as packaging, advertising, fashion, movies, tv, scientific illustration, street architecture, and so on. As with all kinds, fine art has its own purposes and practices from which the conventions and the standards are derived by and within which quality evaluation makes sense. Thus to call any kind of art fine is a misnomer. One might add that in so far as fine art in modern times has striven to differentiate itself in appearance and purpose from mass/popular commercial art it has been driven into some very quirky corners. Fine is in danger of meaning not.

If, as the Philosopher has, you attach your idea of art to the institutions of gallery art and if gallery art should wither almost without trace under the impact of modern culture then your idea of art must wither with it, as it surely has. To remedy such a predicament it is necessary to start again and cast out the very assumptions on which the whole sorry theory is based; namely, the fine art model of art. The thing to do is to firmly insist that art is all art, with all styles, all purposes, all creeds, and all qualities. This is to give art a descriptive meaning not prescriptive. In making this move we unravel a great mystery, we break a spell, we heal a friend, we return to earth. We detach an ingrained and confused pursuit of quality from its tortured grip upon a highly special, not to say highly suspect, case of art. We separate the question of quality from the meaning of art. The word now works to denote, as a value-free concept of universal human significance, a most basic and important subclass of artefact. The word now answers to this simple question : is it, by any stretch of the imagination, an image or an ornament ? If so, then it is of the genus art.

This is surely how an Anthropologist or an Archaeologist classifies items from another society. this is a graven image, this is a plough, this is a boat... The questions of kind and the questions of quality do not get confused. If we were to approach our own society and subsocieties in this frame of mind the scales would fall from our eyes. We would realise in a flash that by the descriptive definition of art, we are up to our eyes awash in art. Our former notion of art shrinks from being a false universe to just another player in the real world. In our ardent desire to pursue the matter of aesthetics this wider view of the concept sets us free. We are at last released from that ascetic diet of 'challenging' formal innovations served up in white walled shrines, whose flavour and decorum more readily suggests aesthetic nemesis than a banquet of the senses. Now our theory is free to acknowledge the full scale and range of ornament and image-making in this or any other society, warts and all.

That is to say, art is not essentially unique, original, rare, expansive, beautiful, moral, spiritual, painterly, expressive, difficult, challenging or any other attribute. It is not a quality at all, it is a category. Art is a vital and basic type

of diverse human activity which we distinguish from other basic types, such as writing, agriculture and transport. Art is a non-linguistic cognitive modality of all humans in all societies and sub-societies in all places at all times. Thus, the images of Lascaux, the murals of Egypt, the reliefs of Assyria, the sculpture of Greece, the altar pieces of renaissance Europe and so on... all belong to the concept of art for the simple reason that they are all images. They have nothing else in common. The aims and values of societies are numerous and varied and ever-changing, but a picture, as we know, can be worth a thousand words in all manner of contexts. This is the cognitive definition of art.

Incidentally, a millennial and multicultural account of art history encounters an interesting and fundamental polarity of image versus ornament. It is not just that there is an ideological schism, as between Islam and Christendom on this dichotomy. You might say that the geometry of depiction is simply incompatible with the geometry of decoration, though some of the most entertaining artists have played with combining the two. What is interesting is that these two opposing goals of picture and pattern have coexisted for too long to say which came first or which succeeds which. Not the least affront committed by Western art theory is the way ornament is written out of history, as if it never happened, or as if it were a lower form of life. We certainly cannot allow this myopia to continue. So let us lose no time supplementing that millennial list of images employed in my argument just now with some examples of ornament : an Islamic mosaic, a Celtic mirror engraving, a Maori carving, a Japanese screen and so on.

How should a history of art which takes in this list of images and ornaments past or foreign proceed to the here and now ? This question should be child's play, akin to those simple conceptual questions should be child's play, akin to those simple conceptual quizzes of the type : complete the following, or spot the odd one out. But the official answer has long been and still is the crazy non-sequitur of 'modern art'. This is like telling a history of transport which disqualifies motors along the way and ends up in study of dressage as exemplary modern transport. It is surely just as absurd as this to tell a history of art which trails off into the usual shaggy dog story of contemporary fine art - which runs through so many Parisian and New York isms before declaring itself dead, sometime in the 20's the 60's or the 80's. When future archaeologists unearth our civilisation they will find a dazzling art in worship of motor cars and comic book heroes; while what we in the 20th century have seen fit to call 'modern art' will emerge from the rubble, if at all, only as an obscure and minor sideshow.

The real history of art should read as follows :..... after oil paint came printing, and then several centuries later photography, followed in our very own

century by a media explosion ! The means and the **output of contemporary image-making** may have changed the experience of **being human** out of all recognition, but it is still the same old diverse cognitive **modality**.

But wait a moment. What happens, I hear you **wonder**, to the question of quality in all of this ? Surely the whole point of **calling a Picasso art** and a pin-up not art is to make a quality distinction ? My **response to such a question** is to insist that 'art' must name a category not a quality. We can answer with descriptive freedom that one is modernist art and the other is **pornographic art**. That they are both art, however, as opposed to (say) **writing**, is clearly not in doubt. Questions of quality and moral values, of course, **can and do apply within** all kinds of art, but by the same token they are not **settled in advance** for any kind. Debate on these questions can proceed all the **more swiftly**, or more accurately, can only proceed at all, if descriptive labels are **not nailed** to prescriptive prejudice. The prescriptive use of 'art' is built on **philosophical quicksand**. The prescriptive use of 'art', like other emotive terms of even **greater social import**, is not so much a mistake as a strategy deployed by **judgements** that have no justification. Those who peddle it invariably forget or **deny the relativity** and subjectivity of taste, and predictably end up **confusing quality with kind**.

How else, for example, can you explain the **selection of contents** in those worthy national collections of 20th century art, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Tate Gallery in London, **which may well have trawled the cream** of their kind but whose kind is **highly particular**, if not most peculiar ?

As mentioned earlier, I use 'art' in the manner of a school- child's time-table; that is, to denote something visual, as opposed to **verbal**, aural, oral, culinary, tactile, kinaesthetic (muscular), and so on. I **recognise that this word** is also used in the wider sense of 'the arts', and it is **true that** what I have been saying about visual art has parallel applications in the **other arts**. The case of 'serious music' (Schoenberg to Berio), for example, is **strongly similar** to that of 'modern art'. On the other hand there are acute **differences** to beware of. Thus, 'popular music' has so many points of similarity with 'serious music' that any history of music, analogous to the history of art, **which excludes popular music** can be easily undermined. Do they not both entertain **ticket-paying audiences** in concert venues with vocal and instrumental performances of rhythms and harmonies ? But in the case of visual art, parallels are **less simple**. Earlier on I introduced Escher into my arguments to counterpoise Picasso because Escher's art is a famous case of non-modernist art in modern times **which in almost every respect other than its non-modernism bears comparison to gallery art**. However, the bulk of typical contemporary visual art functions in **ways quite unlike gallery**

art. I have in mind advertising, packaging, fashion, tv, cinema, video, magazines and the styling of consumer goods. This is what occupies our pictorial and ornamental intelligence. This is what we idolize. This is the actual art on our time, as opposed to whatever we might wish it to be.

With due caution in transposing our argument, we may nevertheless gain from forays into other territory. The case of visual art may be the most exasperating of the arts and so some relief may be gained from looking at comparable arguments which have gained a firmer foothold in our minds. The word 'culture', for example, has a parallel life to 'art'. It too has a conflict of two basic and opposing meanings, the prescriptive versus the descriptive. It too originated as a generic term but was bent in high society to convey a spurious value-judgement. In the struggle to rescue 'art' from nonsense we can be guided by what has happened to 'culture'. The prescriptive meaning has been firmly pushed back by the efforts of sociologists in favour of the descriptive meaning of 'culture'. The prescriptive meaning has been firmly pushed back by the efforts of sociologists and anthropologists in favour of the descriptive meaning of 'culture', which has wide currency now, and refers to everything that a given people do and the way that they do it, especially in contrast to the way other people do it.

I leave these parallels and differences for the reader to explore. More importantly here, we must register the fact that 'art' also has a much broader meaning yet, a meaning which is very important. Namely, art as opposed to nature. This meaning includes anything and everything to which humans have given form in contrast to the phenomena of the natural universe. This is the etymological root of 'art', stemming from a reference to handiwork, as was appropriate in former times. But today this meaning must extend to manufacture and machines and is unambiguously signified by 'artefact'. I shall return to this deep distinction in a while, but let us first give an account of the troubled meaning of 'aesthetic'.

The Baumgarten Corruption

The state of intellectual dereliction which I have been describing, in which quality is confused with kind and in which nonsense prevails in our theories of art, may be regarded as a specifically modern condition. It has grown up with the industrial age, and it is convenient to think of it starting life about 1750 when a minor German Philosopher A.G. Baumgarten coined a corrupted Greek word 'aesthetic' to refer to the study of what was already known as Taste, as in 'good taste' as opposed to mere taste; i.e., discriminating appreciation of the good in art. The root meaning in Greek, by utter contrast, had signified all things perceived by the senses, as opposed to conceived by the intellect : *aestheta kai noeeta*, percept versus concept. The Greek meaning is a division of knowledge.

Today we recognise the same fundamental cognitive fault line running between 'concrete' and 'formal', and similar terminology.

The major German Philosopher Immanuel Kant was on hand to deplore Baumgarten's act of verbal and conceptual vandalism, but to no avail. The Baumgarten corruption spread from German to English, and from philosophy-speak to general educated parlance. What had been the name for a basic epistemological distinction, something which you might expect Philosophers to guard carefully, was turned into the label for a specious science of Taste.

We all speak Baumgartean now and so not surprisingly we cannot make sense of aesthetics. In our minds it has become a shadowy ghost notion variously confused with religion, ethics, riches, and social status. Kant had warned that there could be no such Baumgartean science of Taste with reasons equivalent to the adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But in any case, the ensuing speculation on the good in art has proved to be a strange pursuit, as the quarry was destined to metamorphose at every opportunity, starting with classical ideals and ending in a state of fully reduced modernism. This is a journey which began in an 18th century aristocratic devotion to beauty and ended in an alliance of investors and artocrats affirming the most excruciating anti-art ever devised.

Today the dictionary gives three meanings for *aesthetic*. The first is the Greek original and may be taken as synonymous with *sensible*. (as opposed to reasonable) The dictionary declares this meaning obsolete, and yet it lives on precisely in 'anaesthetic' and 'kinaesthetic'. Obsolete or no, this is the only meaning which survives genuine philosophical appraisal. The second and third meanings refer respectively to beauty and to art, both derived from Baumgarten's corruption. Significantly enough, Chambers dictionary associates one with affectation and the other with pretence. We have looked at the pitfalls of a prescriptive notion of art above, so now we turn to beauty.

Beauty

Philosophy abandoned beauty in favour of art. Thus Edmund Burke's essay on the sublime and the beautiful, contemporary with but uncontaminated by Baumgarten's corruption, and much admired for a while, was to have no Philosophical heirs within the Western mainstream and is now mostly forgotten. His aim was to elucidate the experience of beauty by, among other things, determining what principle unites the many and varied objects which excite us in this way. All the objects which Burke cites by way on illustration of his arguments are, in complete contrast to Philosophy now, items of natural form rather than works of art. Though Burke's sample of objects befits the taste of a young 18th century gentleman soon to take up a life-long and brilliant career in the British parliament, they nevertheless serve his general purposes. Among

other things, he provides a lovely counter-argument to the age-old and recurrent theory that visual beauty inheres in certain geometric proportions. He concludes with a mathematical proposition of his own : that beauty is small and smooth.

While this seemingly silly thesis would fall just as quickly to counter-example as the doctrine of proportions, it has to be said that modern mathematics has breathed much life and meaning into smallness and smoothness, meaning which Burke perhaps could never have imagined, yet which seems to support his theme. I am thinking of that whole branch of mathematics going under the label of *optimal form* which studies minimal states and equilibria. Balance, economy, and elegance are all conditions traditionally associated with beauty, and now we have an elaborate and far reaching mathematics of such ideas, which finds that the forms of nature on every scale answer to optimal equations. At the same time, those contrasting ideas of the great and the rough which Burke associates with the sublime in nature have also found contemporary mathematical expression in the even more recent theories of *catastrophe* and *chaos* (both misnomers, by the way) and *fractals*. It is not too far-fetched, I think, to say that here is where one should look for ideas.

Also parked outside the confines of modern philosophical aesthetics awaiting rediscovery we find Ananda Coomaraswamy. He wrote about classical Indian art at the beginning of this century and was untouched by the declining theory of art I have been describing. For him, and for the tradition he writes about, beauty was legitimate purpose of art, to say the least. Though he suffers from the fault of devoting his philosophical efforts on the subject of beauty exclusively to the realm of art, as opposed to nature, what he has to say on the subject is well worth reading. Coomaraswamy gives voice to a number of perennial truths of the subject which might serve us as axioms when struggling to rebuild a theory. Here are seven :

It is very generally held that natural objects...and works of intentional art can be classified as beautiful or ugly. And yet no general principle of classification has ever been found.

Art is good which is good of its kind.

Civilized art is not more beautiful than savage art.

We must admit the relativity of taste.

Beauty may be discovered anywhere.

The vision of beauty is spontaneous...cannot be achieved by deliberate effort.

There are no degrees of beauty.

Coomaraswamy was a major interpreter of Indian culture to the West, and was especially keen to stress those values missing from our, by contrast,

alienated view of nature. His thoughts on beauty quoted above were mostly formulated with art in mind, but they do extend very well to the appreciation of nature. And, where Burke's suggestions point us towards a geometry of the objects of beauty, Coomaraswamy reminds us that beauty is also only ever a state of mind in the spectator. The dreadful corollary of the subjectivity and spontaneity which Coomaraswamy postulates as axiomatic, is that we can also fail to see beauty when it stares us in the face.

My own inclination at this juncture is to say that the philosophical preoccupation with the good in art has proved itself to be a trap and should now be more than counterbalanced in favour of a turn to nature. It is not just that, say, a patch of ground left long enough alone invariably results in greater beauty than any act of gardening can achieve, it is also the worry I have that we neglect the logic which subordinates art to nature. And what is more, in the great industrial lunge to replace as much of nature within our grasp as we can with tarmac, brick, concrete, corrugated iron, paint and so on it has become increasingly difficult for the majority of folk to witness nature. Might we forget that by comparison with the inordinately great and minutely small organisation of things in nature, the most sophisticated artefacts are but crude toys ?

It is a long way from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the upper slopes of a Himalayan mountain. I give this as the distance and difference between Philosophy and beauty. The Philosopher has followed the cult of high art all the way from genteel revivals of Greek ideals, through waves of systematic bodily decomposition, to its final assemblage of inscrutable artefacts at the official cosmopolitan galleries. The rock climber, by contrast, camped out in some high uninhabited valley, can pause a while on a fine day from thoughts of sport and be struck by the beauty of such a landscape. It is a sad fact that today we are obliged to travel so far from civilisation to encounter so much wilderness. When the Apollo astronauts described their close encounters with the Moon, an encounter with what most of us would suppose to be among the bleakest of sights ever to meet human eyes, they were clearly moved by a great beauty and tried to convey as much in words. Of course such things are almost ineffable. But the main point is surely this : they encountered a very large piece of ancient natural form in pristine condition.

And so we have firmly returned to the ground of our subject, that fundamental distinction of artefact vs nature. The philosophical urgency here is that in our present environmental crisis it is precisely the artefact which despoils and poisons the nature. Art, as in 'visual art', adequately defined, that is generically, is a subclass of artefact, namely the class of all artefacts which address our pictorial and/or ornamental intelligence. Visual art has sometimes been used, both

in ornament and imaggery, to imitate, intimate, mimic or idealise natural beauty, but often is otherwise engaged. The built, the farmed, the planned, the regulated, the managed environment is an artefact and there is now a great and growing international reaction to its destructive effects on nature.

The environmentalist arguments have centred on health and safety, quite rightly, along with arguments about material loss of various other kinds, such as genetic. Material threat calls for material opposition. And yet there is clearly a place in this frame of mind for the arguments from beauty; along the line of, what sort of life is it if you cannot see and hear the nature for the artefact? At the most basic level of concern, and as it directly connects with the cognitive approach to aesthetics presented here, consider the blunt facts of how we live in sound polluted days and light-polluted nights without often noticing this.

Fortunately, no matter how artificial the environment is made it is still possible to encounter nature as opposed to art without travelling to remote places. For example, even the gutter of a suburban street may give a sudden show to surprise you one day, say after some heavy summer rain has organised a scattering of builders' debris into a miniature landscape of meanders and alluvia. And there's bound to be a cranny in the masonry some where nearby with a cluster of 'weeds', which if left well alone may surpass, as Ruskin once observed, the finest works of art.

Verdict

Well, to sum up. Philosophy is guilty of failing to investigate and repudiate the bogus theories of art and aesthetics which have held sway throughout the 20th century. Indeed, Philosophy has participated in their promotion. These theories have foisted a particular taste in art upon us in the name of the good in art. This taste has metamorphosed convulsively from Greek poses to official items of the modernist canon. The theories generate absurdities such as : Pollock is a great artist; Escher is not an artist; 20th century art is what you find in galleries; aesthetics is primarily about fine art. The theories began by pursuing beauty in art and ended by pursuing an art without beauty. The theories insinuate that a universal significance attaches to their use of 'art' when actually tying this word down to the antics of artworld. Those antics, however entertaining they may be on occasion, provide only a highly specific and non-exemplary kind of art by contemporary standards. Philosophy has therefore abandoned beauty, nature and art. Far from elucidating an important and universal faculty of human consciousness it has signed up to a theory of art in modern times whose epistemology resembles the papal astronomy of mediaeval times, but without either some facts of nature or a bible to curb it, an arbitrary authority.

Meanwhile, we are left with a real problem of knowledge to heal. How do we stop knowing that Picasso is the greatest artist of the 20th century and start noticing that the 20th century has put out the stars over our heads and drowned the warbling of birds? Ironically, the Greek meaning of 'aesthetic', which philosophy corrupted, is just the meaning relevant to the problem. We have to come, quite literally, to our senses.

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