

Aesthetics

Stephen Wright
Jesus College, Oxford
Trinity College, Oxford
`stephen.wright@jesus.ox.ac.uk`

Michaelmas 2016

Contents

1 Course Content	3
1.1 Course Overview	3
1.2 Concept Map	4
2 Course Admin	5
2.1 Website	5
2.2 A Note on the Reading List	5
2.3 Essays and Assessment	5
2.4 Tutorials	6
2.5 Doing Philosophy	6
2.6 Preliminary Reading	7
3 Tutorial 1 – Plato on Poetry	8
4 Tutorial 2 – Aristotle’s <i>Poetics</i>	9
5 Tutorial 3 – Fiction	10
6 Tutorial 4 – Representation	11
7 Tutorial 5 – Expression	12
8 Tutorial 6 – Defining Art	13
9 Tutorial 7 – Forgeries	14
10 Tutorial 8 – Hume’s <i>Of The Standard of Taste</i>	15

1 Course Content

1.1 Course Overview

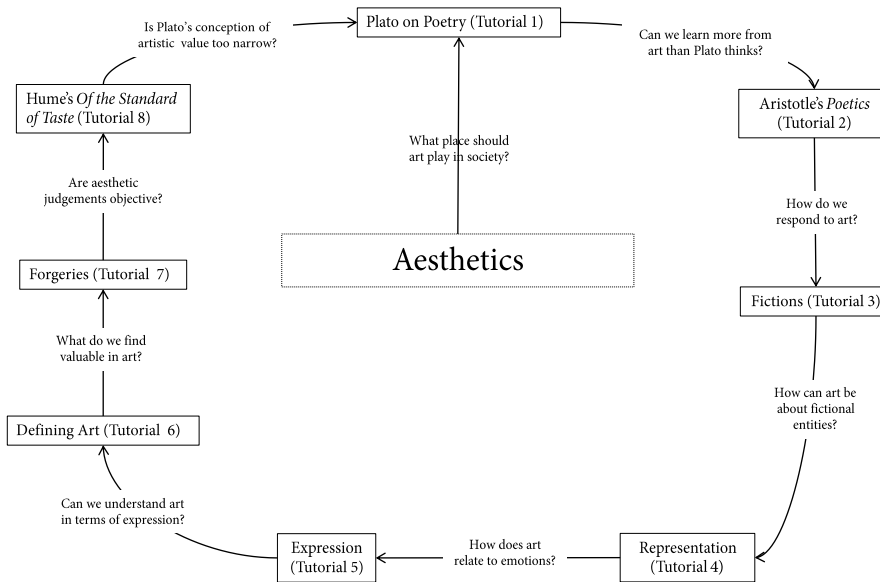
Week	Topic
1	Plato on Poetry
2	Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i>
3	Fictions
4	Representation
5	Expression
6	Defining Art
7	Forgeries
8	Hume's <i>Of the Standard of Taste</i>

During the *Aesthetics* course, we will think about some of the central questions that emerge from considering aesthetic concepts, such as art and beauty, in the world. There are connections between all of the areas that we will be looking at. The course will be divided between tutorials that will take a thematic approach, identifying a puzzle and considering different responses to it and tutorials that are organised around particularly significant theories developed by philosophers.

As with a lot of philosophy, our investigation begins with Plato, who had distinctive views on the place of poetry in the ideal state. As a response to Plato, we will then move on to consider Aristotle, who took an altogether more optimistic view of the impact of art and poetry. Both Plato's discussion and Aristotle's *Poetics* gesture towards interesting questions of how we respond emotionally to art that we know to be fictional. We will consider the question of emotions and fictions later. With that in hand, we will consider the sibling notions of representation and expression in philosophical aesthetics. Next, we will address one of the most obvious questions, concerning what art is and two connected issues of what the aesthetic experience consists in and whether or not aesthetic judgements can claim to be objective in any interesting sense.

An idea of how all of this fits together is given below:

1.2 Concept Map



Obviously, there are more connections than I've been able to diagram here. There are also more ways of approaching the course than the one that I've set up. Understanding these connections and relations that hold between different parts of the course is an important part of completing the course properly. We'll be thinking about these during tutorials, but it's important to think holistically about a course like the *Aesthetics* course. Doing so will enhance your understanding and deepen your thinking; which is crucial for the exam.

2 Course Admin

2.1 Website

I'll post the materials for these tutorials on my website as we go along. They can be downloaded at:

www.stephenwrightphilosophy.com on the right-hand side of the page under the 'Aesthetics' link.

2.2 A Note on the Reading List

For each class I've identified two different types of reading. Readings marked as required are exactly that – they're readings you just have to do. Some of these are hard, but don't worry, we can discuss anything that you don't understand in tutorials. After this, there are some further readings. These you will want to look at in your own time, possibly after the tutorial (or maybe before) and they will help develop your thinking on these subjects further. For the purposes of the tutorial essay, however, I'd like you to focus particularly carefully on the readings that I've identified as required for the class. This is *not* to say that all of the readings for each week will be relevant to every essay for that week. You'll have to use (and develop) your judgement for working out what is and isn't useful in each case. But it is to say that you should read those required readings particularly carefully because I'll be expecting you to know about them in advance of the tutorial.

† denotes required reading.

* denotes background reading.

Lastly, don't be shy about asking me if you find any of the readings hard to get hold of. If you can't find any of the readings, I'll either email you a PDF of it or else replace it on the reading list with something that can be found or sent.

2.3 Essays and Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour unseen examination, which you will take along with your other Finals examinations. There are, however, weekly essays that must be written before each tutorial. If your other course requirements enable you to claim an exemption from writing essays in any particular week, then you must let me know about this in the week before you come to write the essay (so if you're claiming an exemption from an essay in 7th week, then you must let me know this by the end of the tutorial in 6th week.)

Exemptions aside, you are required to write and submit an essay of around 2,000 words each week. This needs to be written and emailed to me (address above) at least 24 hours in advance of

the tutorial. I'll read them and comment on them and get them back to you before the tutorial starts. During the tutorial, I won't get you to read out your essay, but you should have it with you, because the material that you've developed will be relevant to the questions that we'll be thinking about and you're warmly encouraged to use the content of your essays in discussion.

2.4 Tutorials

In tutorials, we'll be talking about four things:

- (1) The readings that you've been looking at.
- (2) The essay that you've written.
- (3) Anything that you're particularly keen to discuss.
- (4) A set of questions on the subject that I've prepared.

Different tutorials might give different weight to each of (1)-(4) and that's absolutely fine. In some tutorials we might discuss your essay less, or you might have fewer questions occurring to you in other tutorials. If nothing obvious emerges, then we'll work through a set of pre-prepared questions that I'll have put together on the topic of the tutorial. I'll give you a copy of these at the end of the tutorial and at the end of the course, I'll make a copy of the course outline with all of the questions available. But I won't tell you what the questions will be in advance. The reason is that you will ultimately be assessed by an unseen examination and this will test your understanding and your ability to think on your feet. One of the best ways to prepare for this is to confront questions that you haven't previously seen and think your way through them, with some support, advice and guidance. That's what having an unseen question sheet in tutorials simulates. After the tutorials, you can use the questions to structure your own revision, if you wish. The questions won't be a comprehensive list of everything that might come up and they won't all be essay questions. Some will simply test your understanding. But working your way through them would be a good way to start your revision when the time comes.

2.5 Doing Philosophy

During your time doing philosophical work, you'll want to read things that aren't on the reading lists. And it's really important that what you read is good quality. It's very easy to waste a lot of time and energy in philosophy reading stuff that just isn't helpful. If you read stuff from poor sources, you're liable to wind up confused or misinformed. You want to be reading things that are written by people who have, at the very least, more philosophical experience than you. In the case of several sources, though, there's no filtering or checking to make sure that this is the case. Obviously, the reading lists provided by the faculty are a great place to look. But even they don't contain *everything*. With that in mind, here are some guidelines for you to get you started. As always, do get in touch and ask me if you find yourself in any doubt at all.

Some good places to start your reading are:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu> is an excellent resource. It gives you an overview of some of the topics that we'll be working on and also comes with a useful bibliography, all of which is of an appropriate quality for you to be using.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> is another excellent on-line philosophy encyclopedia. Like the Stanford Encyclopedia, its entries are reviewed before they are published and also have useful suggestions for further reading.

Philpapers at <http://www.philpapers.org> is an online collection of philosophy articles that can be searched by category. There are some excellent articles on here and the site is a useful way of finding things to read. This site requires some caution, though. Unlike the above two, anyone can add their papers, regardless of whether or not they have actually been published in journals, or are ever going to be! As a rule of thumb, if you can't see publication details for a paper on this site, then proceed with caution. This notwithstanding, it is an excellent and important source.

Google Scholar at <http://scholar.google.co.uk/> is a relatively recent research tool and one that's extremely useful. The best thing that you can use Google Scholar for is finding papers that are relevant to what you've been reading. If you run a search for a paper that you've just read, Google Scholar will help throw up any papers that have cited the paper you searched for. This is extremely useful for helping you figure out where to go next. As with PhilPapers, however, there's no quality filter, so if you are in any doubt about what you've found (as with any of the above resources) feel free to ask me first. Lastly, note that this *is* an acceptable use of Google's resources, where searching for philosophers or themes and then reading what you find absolutely is *not*. Likewise, stay off looking for things on Wikipedia.

2.6 Preliminary Reading

There are a few ways of getting started on the *Aesthetics* course. The course is, in many ways, disconnected (in terms of its subject matter) from the material you will have looked at for Prelims and probably likewise disconnected from the content of other FHS papers. With that in mind, a general overview of a few areas can be a particularly useful thing to have. Here are some suggestions, to get you started:

Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), (2013) *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* London: Routledge.

Noel Carroll (1999) *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*.

Sebastian Gardner (1998) 'Aesthetics' in A.C. Grayling (ed.), *Philosophy 1: A Guide Through the Subject* Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 585-627.

(If you would like to read this, but are unable to get hold of a copy of the book, then please email me for a PDF.)

3 Tutorial 1 – Plato on Poetry

We'll begin our investigation into philosophical aesthetics by looking at Plato's discussions of poetry and painting. As we will see, Plato takes a dim view of both poetry and painting. We'll be concentrating primarily on the arguments as they appear in Plato's famous work *The Republic*, but we'll also have a look briefly at the discussion in the *Ion* dialogue and think about how these compare. We'll think about exactly why Plato's discussion is so hostile to both poetry and painting and think about what might be said in its defence.

† Plato. *The Republic* Books II, III and X.

† Plato. 'Ion' in John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (1997) Hackett: Indiana. 937-949.

† J. Tate (1928). "'Imitation" in Plato's Republic' *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1):16-23.

* Elizabeth Belfiore (2006). 'A Theory of Imitation in Plato's "Republic"' in Andrew Laird *Ancient Literary Criticism* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

* James O. Urmson (1982). 'Plato and the Poets' in J.M.E. Moravcsik and Philip Temko (eds.), *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts* Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, reprinted in Richard Kraut (ed.), (1997) *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays* Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield pp. 223-234.

* J. Tate (1932). Plato and 'Imitation' *Classical Quarterly* 26 (3-4):161-169.

Question: Was Plato a philistine?

4 Tutorial 2 – Aristotle’s *Poetics*

In this tutorial, we will think about Aristotle’s discussion of poetry and tragedy in the *Poetics*. We’ll consider the notion of *katharsis* in Aristotle’s work and the role that it plays as well considering the palusibility of the notion. In thinking about Aristotle’s *Poetics*, we’ll think about the main aims of Aristotle’s project and how far Aristotle’s comments in the *Poetics* about poetry and imitation can be seen as a response to Plato’s comments, encountered in tutorial 1.

† Aristotle *Poetics* (any edition).

* Malcolm Budd (1996). *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry, and Music* London: Penguin Books Chapter 3.

* Stephen Halliwell (1995). ‘Introduction’ in Stephen Halliwell (ed.), *Aristotle’s Poetics* Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Question: What is Aristotle’s notion of ‘katharsis’ and what role does it play in his discussion of tragedy and poetry?

5 Tutorial 3 – Fiction

In this tutorial, we'll think about a particular paradox. Fictitious artworks, particularly (though not exclusively) films, can bring about what seem to be emotional responses. Thinking about Anna Karenina's sad story, it seems that the story might bring me to feel sad or pity for Anna. But at the same time, I know that the story is fictitious—there's *actually* nothing to be sad about. And that makes my feeling sad seem irrational. We'll think about whether or not I really *do* feel sad about Anna Karenina's story and whether or not this is as irrational as it might seem.

† Colin Radford (1975). 'How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 49:67-80.

† Kendall L. Walton (1978). 'Fearing Fictions' *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1):5-27.

† Eva Schaper (1978). Fiction and the Suspension of Disbelief. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1):31-44.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry at:
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/fict-par/#H1>

Richard Eldridge (2003). *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Chapter 8.

* Tamar Szabó Gendler (2008). 'Alief and Belief' *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10):634-663.

* Gregory Currie (1990). *The Nature of Fiction* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

* Colin Radford (1977). 'Tears and Fiction' *Philosophy* 52 (200):208-213.

Question: I know that Anna Karenina's story is fictional, but I seem to feel sad for her nonetheless. Is my response an emotional one? Is it a rational one?

6 Tutorial 4 – Representation

It's pretty clear what van Gogh's famous painting *Sunflowers* is a picture of. It's a picture that represents a vase of sunflowers. In some cases it's clear what the artwork represents. In others it's less clear. We'll have a think about what makes a painting (or some other work of art) a representation of something. An immediate suggestion is that van Gogh's painting represents some sunflowers because it resembles some sunflowers. But there are worries about this—other things more closely resemble sunflowers than van Gogh's painting. So what is representation? This is the question that we'll be concerned with, looking at a variety of approaches to this puzzle.

- † Nelson Goodman (1968). *Languages of Art* Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Chapter 1.
- † Richard Wollheim (1998). 'On Pictorial Representation' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (3):217-226.
- † Robert Hopkins (1995). 'Explaining Depiction' *Philosophical Review* 104 (3):425-455.
- * Robert Hopkins (2009). *Picture, Image and Experience* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- * R.G. Collingwood (1938). *The Principles of Art* Oxford: Oxford University Press Chapter 3.
- * Richard Wollheim (1980). *Art and Its Objects* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- * Dominic Lopes (1996). *Understanding Pictures* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Question: In what sense, if any, does resemblance make for representation.

7 Tutorial 5 – Expression

A common thought is that art is involved in the expression of emotions. One approach to understanding what art is appeals to the idea of expressing an emotion. Nowadays we talk about the idea of art expressing an emotion a lot. But this immediately prompts the question of what it is to express an emotion. Unless we can say what it means for art to express an emotion, it's hard to see how we can make any sense of a notion of art in terms of expression can get off the ground. With that in mind, in this tutorial, we'll have a look at what it means for art to express an emotion.

- † Stephen Davies (2006). 'Artistic Expression and the Hard Case of Pure Music' in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics* Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- † R.G. Collingwood (1938). *The Principles of Art* Oxford: Oxford University Press Chapter 6.
- † Derek Matravers (2003). 'The Experience of Emotion in Music' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (4):353-363.
- * V. A. Howard (1971). 'On Musical Expression' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 11 (3):268-280.
- * Derek Matravers (2007). 'Musical Expression' *Philosophy Compass* 2 (3):373-379.
- * Ismay Barwell (1986). 'How Does Art Express Emotion?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45 (2):175-181.
- * Nelson Goodman (1968). *Languages of Art* Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Chapter 2.

Question: A work of art expresses sorrow only if it induces sorrow in its audience.' Is this correct? If so, why? If not, what's wrong with it?

8 Tutorial 6 – Defining Art

The question of what is art and what isn't art is one of the core questions in philosophical aesthetics. In this tutorial, we'll think about some different characterisations of art and consider what there is to be said for and against them. We'll look at theories that define art in terms of the way people (would) respond to it and theories that classify art as a matter of something like a family resemblance. On a higher level than this, we'll think about how we would go about formulating a definition of art and what the usefulness or attraction of such a theory might be.

- † George Dickie (1969). 'Defining Art' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (3):253-256.
- † Jerrold Levinson (1979). 'Defining Art Historically' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (3):232-250.
- † Richard Wollheim (1992). 'The Institutional Theory of Art' in Wollheim *Art and its Objects* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 157-166.
- * Paul Ziff (1953). 'The Task of Defining a Work of Art' *Philosophical Review* 62 (1):58-78.
- * Maurice Mandelbaum (1965). 'Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (3):219-228.
- * Arthur Danto (1964). 'The Artworld' *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (19):571-584.

Question: What is the institutional theory of art? Is it correct?

9 Tutorial 7 – Forgeries

Han van Meegeren sold around \$60 million of imitation Vermeers to various art collectors. Van Meegeren's work resembled Vermeer's, but it wasn't Vermeer's. Forgery represents an interesting philosophical puzzle. In what sense does this devalue van Meegeren's work? More generally, why are forgeries less valuable than original artworks? In this tutorial we'll think about what the differences between original works of art and forgeries are and consider what this shows us about the value of artwork.

† Nelson Goodman (1968). *Languages of Art* Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Chapter 3.

† Colin Radford (1978). 'Fakes' *Mind* 87 (345):66-76.

† Mark Sagoff (1978). 'Historical Authenticity' *Erkenntnis* 12 (1):83-93.

* Nelson Goodman (1978). 'Reply to Sagoff' *Erkenntnis* 12 (1):166-168.

* Sherri Irvin (2007). 'Forgery and the Corruption of Aesthetic Understanding' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37 (2):283-304.

* Tomás Kulka (2005). 'Forgeries and Art Evaluation: An Argument for Dualism in Aesthetics' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39 (3):58-70.

Question: Is it irrational to place a higher value on an authentic work of art than an indistinguishable replica?

10 Tutorial 8 – Hume’s *Of The Standard of Taste*

In this tutorial, we David Hume’s famous essay *Of the Standard of Taste*. A lot of people think that disagreement about matters of taste somehow can’t be wrong. The idea is that I’m entitled to my judgement about a work of art and you’re entitled to yours and we can happily disagree without either of us being *wrong* in any real sense. According to Hume, this is mistaken. Only a false critic, Hume claims, would rank Ogilby above Milton in terms of poetry. There are thus objective standards according to which we can rank art. We will consider the kinds of things that might ground an objective judgement about a work of art.

- † David Hume (1965). *Of the Standard of Taste, and Other Essays* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- † Noel Carroll (1984). ‘Hume’s Standard of Taste’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (2):181-194.
- † Jerrold Levinson (2002). ‘Hume’s Standard of Taste: The Real Problem’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (3):227-238.
- * Peter Kivy (1967). ‘Hume’s Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 7 (1):57-66.
- * F.N. Sibley (1968). ‘Objectivity and Aesthetics’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 42:31-54.
- * Michael Tanner (1968). ‘Objectivity and Aesthetics’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 42:55-72.

Question: What is a ‘standard of taste’ and is there such a thing?