

# PHILOSOPHY LOOKS AT THE ARTS

*Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*

JOSEPH MARGOLIS

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# PHILOSOPHY

## LOOKS AT THE ARTS

*Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*

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## *Preface*

This anthology took form almost spontaneously, while I was at work on a somewhat more ambitious project, also in aesthetics. In a sense, it proved to be surprisingly easy to select a dozen prime papers, from a large literature, that would at once suggest the range and force and outlook of contemporary analytic philosophy applied to the problems of aesthetics. Ideally, I should have liked to have a paper from every one of the leading writers active in the field today. But there were all sorts of reasons—not having to do with merit only—why this was not possible. At any rate, I am pleased to think that the collection offered here has uses that go beyond the usual textbook considerations of “equal time” for all views, nodding in the direction of classical authors, and the tactful avoidance of difficult essays.

J. M.

University of Cincinnati  
July 23, 1962

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# INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY philosophy is often accused of a certain unbecoming levity. Many people, to come at once to cases, are nonplussed to find philosophers cheerfully waiving their professional right to decide issues of right and wrong and public policy. I remember discussing some poems with a very charming lady who deferred to me somewhere in our conversation with an "Of course, as an aesthetician, you probably don't think these poems very good." I am reasonably sure she took my answer—"In a way, my opinion doesn't count"—to be a nice attempt at tact. I was of course trying to say something about the professional competence of aestheticians and not to hide my view of the poetry. Had she suspected, however, she might (much as people do with a philosopher's interest in moral and religious issues) have expressed some concern about the seriousness and importance of philosophy, the professional duty and public responsibility of philosophers.

## I

Now, it is quite true that philosophers, at the present time, particularly those professionals associated with American and British universities, neither feel obliged nor qualified to decide the sort of issue mentioned. It is of

course important to say at once that these issues deserve attention, everyone's attention, even the philosopher's attention. But one must say also that, when he addresses himself, for instance, to the evaluation of poetry, the philosopher (also, the aesthetician, the chemist, the mathematician, the historian, the architect, the mortician, the lawyer, the priest) cannot be performing in his professional role.

One somehow concedes the restricted interests of nearly all academic disciplines except philosophy. And the hesitation to do so for professional philosophy very likely depends on a popular way of speaking of the writings of admittedly wise and informed men as "philosophy." Also, many of the authors who have had impressive visions of the good life or of good taste in art or of piety have had worthwhile things to say (sometimes embedded in these other contributions) for the distinctive enterprise of philosophy. And of course, many professional philosophers, certainly in the older tradition or, today, largely outside the orbit of Anglo-American philosophy, insist that they are making discoveries about goodness, beauty, reality, God. There is a certain grandeur in such claims, and philosophers who may be supposed to have given up these topics must look a trifle pale by comparison. But of course, these have their reasons for not pursuing such matters. And I think one may, in all fairness to the great variety of methods that philosophers use, generalize about their disinclination. I should say that all contemporary philosophers who subscribe to the programs of Anglo-American philosophy (not at all always in harmony one with another) would accept the maxim (associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein) that "all the facts are in."

This maxim does not mean that no new discoveries will be forthcoming. It means merely that philosophers, as philosophers, raise their questions in a context in which the facts (whatever they may be) are not themselves in dispute. In short, the philosopher acknowledges whatever the admitted facts of science may be, whatever counts as an eligible judgment of conduct, or whatever may be admitted to express someone's appreciation or evaluation of a work of art. The philosopher simply is not in a professional position to dispute these facts; they are of course all open to dispute, sometimes by other professionals, sometimes by the man in the street. But philosophical questions, whatever they may be like, presuppose, and are debatable only on the admission of, such data.

The upshot is that philosophy is "vertically" related to all the usual comments people make in all the usual roles they take. For instance, if you claim that Ingmar Bergman's film *The Magician* is a much better film than his *The Seventh Seal*, the philosopher will not be at all concerned to dispute or vindicate your judgment. He would be interested rather in what sort of reasons might eligibly be put forward in defense, what sort of reasons

another might advance against the judgment, whether there is a sense in which the dispute could be resolved, whether one or the other view could be taken to be correct. That is, if "all the facts are in," the philosopher's questions, such as they are, will be answered by a certain consulting of the facts conceded. He will not decide, say, which of two opposing opinions is justified but rather what we would mean by a justified opinion in the context given.

Once the matter is put this way, our confidence in philosophers may be restored. They are working seriously. In fact, their findings may have important implications for particular human endeavors. For instance, if it can be shown that, given the world we live in, goodness is not a quality that can be perceived in any sense resembling that in which redness can, certain attitudes regarding moral and political reform may very well be affected. Philosophers may be motivated by such possibilities. But the profession has its own clear sense of the sort of question it is prepared to entertain. And this is as it should be.

I have deliberately avoided characterizing *the* method of philosophy. There is no such creature. There is, rather, an impressive variety of methods, methods in fact that are more practiced and exhibited than fully formulated. But the prevailing methods, in the Anglo-American tradition, are generally described as *analytic*, which is to say, broadly, concerned with the sort of question already mentioned and implicitly committed to the maxim that "all the facts are in." The chief sources of this movement may be traced to the influence of such figures as Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and the Positivists. But merely to mention such a varied group of thinkers is to advise would-be readers to attend to a philosopher's method as it is actually being employed in the analysis of some question. Frequently, philosophers do not describe their own methods of working; and when they do, it is not unusual that their actual practice departs from their own account. Still, these descriptive efforts would have no point if philosophers did not in fact practice in relatively stable and clear-cut ways (think for instance of someone who might wish to formulate the rules of some traditional game, as it is actually played). Also, philosophers clearly dispute one with another, though, on demand, they might very well characterize their ways of proceeding in strikingly different, possibly even incompatible, terms.

## II

The essays in the present collection represent in a sense the most advanced thinking on the standard questions philosophers have raised about the arts. This is not to say that all (or any) of the papers included are invulnerable.

They are all of reasonably high calibre and they are all, so to say, on target. That is, they are all aimed at the very center of current philosophical disputes. To read them is to be correctly oriented to the trend of the most recent professional literature. This may be disputed, of course. But a number of these papers (for instance, those by Weitz, Wimsatt and Beardsley, Isenberg, Black) are, without any doubt, among the most discussed papers aestheticians have been interested in. The rest of the collection includes papers that have commanded considerable professional notice or are authored by philosophers who have been notably concerned with the problems of the field. So the collection is at once an introduction to a number of the most active professionals and the most actively debated questions in aesthetics.

All the papers may be broadly characterized as analytic. But it will be clear to the reader that various methods are being employed in the analysis of different questions. Not infrequently, these are dictated by the questions themselves. For instance, Weitz is interested in the very eligibility of a certain philosophical question, and Wimsatt and Beardsley are interested in certain proper limits of criticism. Weitz is therefore drawn to characterize the logical features of our use of terms, and Wimsatt and Beardsley are drawn to theorize about a professional activity. Or, thinking of the movement of so-called Oxford philosophy, or "ordinary-language analysis," we might say that Weitz's method derives mainly from Wittgenstein's own method, and Urmson's is associated with that of more recent leaders of the movement, say, J. L. Austin. But we should have to emphasize that it is already misleading to speak of "leaders" of this movement, except in the sense that, given not insignificant differences in philosophical method, certain writers among a group that work in fairly similar ways will have written the most influential papers among them. In any event, the best way of proceeding will be to compare the actual methods employed by our authors.

It is perhaps important to emphasize that philosophers quite regularly are forming methods of work at the same time they attack a particular question. There are analogies in other fields of course; one thinks for instance of the development of psychiatry. But philosophy is a uniquely reflexive enterprise. And because it is, as I have explained, only "vertically" related to other professional inquiries, one cannot simply speak of the accumulated findings of philosophy, as one can of the summaries in the chemical and physical handbooks. All of these findings are intimately related to the particular method particular philosophers have used. But as there is a certain virtuoso quality in pursuing a philosophical question that has

to do with the very invention of methods of work, one cannot properly "detach" the findings and discuss these alone.

There is a much greater sense, debating philosophical questions, of subtle shifts in method than there is in any other professional inquiry, which perhaps best explains a certain limbo air (not of neglect or oblivion) that hovers over the philosophical tradition. Because one has the feeling of arguments endlessly rehearsed, arguments that we have been assured again and again lie defeated. There is indeed a reasonable sense in which these arguments may be said to have been defeated, namely, by construing the issues in accord with this or that method of working and demonstrating errors or difficulties from a given point of view. But since the methods themselves are constantly shifting, one finds the arguments subtly revived, reinterpreted, and reassessed. What is important to notice here is not so much a certain fussiness about professional methods of work as the nature of philosophical findings themselves. In a word, the tradition preserves the sense of a kind of attack on a question. We have, so to say, St. Anselm's way of proving the existence of God and Kant's way of disqualifying it. Quite naturally, we ourselves become partisans of this or that method (sometimes, different ones for different questions) and we speak more bluntly of correct and incorrect analyses.

So, as one might suspect, some of the papers herein included have been taken to be both definitive and absolutely wrongheaded. The point of including them is simply that they represent particularly forceful positions that would need to be considered in the contemporary setting for the questions of aesthetics; also, the alternatives one might be able to formulate will be positions in the same sense. So philosophy (and aesthetics, in particular) progresses by illuminating the strength or weakness of such positions seen from the vantage of others that embody distinctive as well as similar methods of working. This of course is not to say that philosophers cannot be found to have made blunders, given even their own particular way of working. And it is not to say that the criticism of one position seen from the vantage of another (employing a somewhat different method) may not be compelling.

### III

Aesthetics, as a discipline, begins approximately with Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. There are interesting and worthwhile disputes about the arts among the ancients, of course, and Kant himself was heavily indebted to

both English and Continental writers who preceded him. But it was Kant, as a major philosopher writing somewhat derivatively about taste and genius and the beautiful and the sublime, who gave a sense of philosophical importance to aesthetics and who set certain of its central questions. It is, I think, also, a professional cliché (and a true one) that, until relatively recent years (with important exceptions), treatises in aesthetics "rounded out" philosophical systems, and professional discussions were led by people not especially well-informed about the arts. Also, it is nothing more than honest reporting to say that professional philosophy has, in the past, been rather suspicious of the credentials of specialists in aesthetics.

All of this, however, has changed. The reasons are themselves worth noticing. Possibly, the single most important factor was the founding of the American Society for Aesthetics and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1942). What the *Journal* and the Society made possible was a sense of a repertory of fairly precisely formulated questions of an analytic sort and a sense of a continuing, responsible exchange on these questions. The result has been—I think no one would deny it—that philosophers of the first ranks have interested themselves in these and that methods enjoying the greatest philosophical respect have been brought to bear on the repertory. In fact, it is now not at all uncommon that younger philosophers of promise apply their most recently acquired techniques to questions of aesthetics first. Other sub-disciplines of philosophy, notably the philosophy of science, have also had to make their way slowly as distinctive endeavors (though not perhaps with quite the doubtful air that one remembers attached to aesthetics).

It was fashionable, only a few years ago, to speak of the "dreariness" of aesthetics. Today, all important questions have clustered about them a range of positions of striking deftness and force. Aesthetics now exhibits the same sense of a repertory of alternatives that one associates, say, with the questions of perception theory. And the pattern of debate in perception theory is probably as fair an index of the characteristic behavior of the profession as any that might be supplied.

As a matter of fact, aesthetics is enjoying a certain vogue among professional philosophers. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this is the impression that there are clean-cut questions that deserve to be investigated that are also not quite picked-over yet. The repertory of positions for, say, the question of sense data extends about as far back as philosophy itself. But in aesthetics, at the present fortunate moment, we find at once lively philosophical dispute of a high order and a relatively slim repertory to be mastered. The combination is irresistible. But also, it turns out that if one reviews ranges of standard philosophical issues from the vantage of detailed

analyses of questions in aesthetics, strikingly new possibilities present themselves. For example, a theory of language, originally formulated for scientific statements, may be richly informed by a study of fiction and metaphor; the nature of moral judgments may be clarified by turning from considerations of duty and permission to considerations of appreciation; unsuspected problems concerning descriptive statements may appear if one seeks to distinguish between describing and interpreting poems and paintings. And on the mention of such questions, it is at once obvious that issues of the greatest philosophical importance are at stake.

Also, we may notice very strong evidence that contemporary aestheticians are reasonably well-informed about the arts. As a matter of fact, they obviously research the arts and the activities of professional critics, connoisseurs, and historians. The result is that where Kant (and countless others) analyzed "the judgment of taste" in his closet, contemporary aestheticians study Wölfflin, Berenson, Panofsky, Tovey, Blackmur, Richards, Matthiessen. Consequently, for the first time, in a sense, it pays people interested in the arts and outside professional philosophy to look in regularly on aesthetics. The point is that the aesthetician's questions have become the questions these other activities—art, criticism, appreciation—themselves closely suggest. The aesthetician is now interested in reviewing, in his special professional way, the implications of the actual world of art. And his remarks have come increasingly to be focussed on quite definite and "middle-sized" features of activities in that world. There is, for instance, a fair reason for someone interested in music to learn what professional philosophers have to say about the "logical" relationship between a musical notation and different performances of the same piece. And there is a reason for someone interested in literature to learn what may be said about the "logic" of figurative language.

#### IV

The collection of essays offered here is, inevitably, a sample. I take it to have, however, strategic importance. In twelve selections, it is intended to combine the widest representation of the most influential and active aestheticians of the analytic sort, papers that have attracted the greatest interest in professional circles, the freshest and most recent and most characteristic work of the philosophers represented, the greatest possible range of problems, minimal duplication, presentation of forceful and readily formulable positions close to the heart of particular problems, positions that are

not merely odd or easily overthrown, statements enjoying relative autonomy, and items that have not been collected in previous anthologies. Necessarily, I have not included many important papers. But within the limits imposed, I believe the collection ranks very well on all the scales that had to be considered.

The only way to avoid possibly distorted impressions of the finality and importance of the papers included is to provide, as I have with each selection, a bibliography of the relevant literature and an introductory statement that at least suggests the kinds of questions one might wish to press in each area of investigation. In fact, given the conception of philosophical progress sketched above, a position of genuine interest is bound to be ringed about with alternatives. To understand these is to understand the ways in which a philosophical question is "answered."

One naturally comes to ask, however, what is the point of philosophical answers? It is difficult to say. Not because there is no point, but rather because it makes itself felt at a certain level of abstraction and because its special value is perfectly obvious there. One has to think first of professional and nonprofessional talk going about its business: critics interpreting poems, for instance, or spectators at the ballet turning to express their appreciation. One has to think then of critics using their authority to approve and disapprove of certain ways of working or certain works of art, of spectators judging one another's taste and declaring for or against criteria of preference. Inevitably, one reaches for comfortable generalities about what a work of art is, what the critic does, what constitutes taste, what beauty is. We are at once plunged into philosophical speculations. Answers of some sort are required to put our entire conceptual frame in order.

The trouble is that the answers come thick and fast. They are generated from vastly different points of view. They seem to rise and fall at an alarming rate. Yesterday, Croce held the field; today, he is an Example of what to avoid. Sartre tells us calmly that a work of art is not real; Susanne Langer says it is a symbolic form; Stephen Pepper says it is a nest of objects; Paul Ziff says it is not different from a physical object. And we wonder whom we are to believe.

The questions become philosophical questions. But the contributors are not necessarily philosophers. R. S. Crane turns from criticism to theorize about the nature of a poem. Wimsatt speculates about the proper bounds of criticism; Richards offers a theory of language; Panofsky defines the description and interpretation of a painting. Aesthetics, possibly more than any other branch of philosophy (except perhaps the philosophy of science, which makes an interesting parallel), gathers its contributions from a great



many amateurs of philosophy. And this is worth our notice, because it suggests how quite spontaneous these philosophical questions are. No one imposes them; they arise simply from the interplay of our original talk about works of art.

But there are obvious dangers in these amateur contributions. Think of A. C. Bradley's suggestion that a poem has a distinctive kind of existence; or of Wellek and Austin's definition of a literary work as a "structure of norms"; or Roger Fry's insistence on an aesthetic emotion; or Tolstoy's division of real and counterfeit art. Philosophers are performing a service, then, seeking to sort out, in accord with prevailing professional standards, the answers to essentially philosophical questions posed by art itself. They are attempting to exhibit the relative strength and weakness of alternative positions on persistent questions, proposed by amateurs and professionals, that have caught the eye of everyone seriously concerned with the arts.

I submit that philosophers too have contributed to the confusion. But clarity is always relative to the present moment. And at the moment, analytic philosophy has its own striking views of the questions that have been asked. The entire tradition has been canvassed and answers precipitated piecemeal that have become the focus of new disputes. Here is the point of the present collection and the point of philosophical answers as well. Because here we have important specimens of the actual views that are leading professional aesthetics. And that means, simply, here we have the most recent handling of the old philosophical questions, provided by commentators who know the older answers and the latest methods for providing answers.