

## Chapter Eight

# How Can Aesthetic Judgments Be True or False?

**Abstract:** In this chapter we are concerned with the epistemology of aesthetic assertion. I argue in support of a simple subjectivism: aesthetic assertions are reducible to true or false reports of a relationship between a perceiver **S** and an aesthetic item **x**. Aesthetic judgments are true or false in the sense that they are descriptions of personal (and subjective) likes/dislikes, but there is no independent natural order that makes one person's aesthetic interests and preferences better than others. For example, when **S** asserts that 'the painting is beautiful,' that '*The Horse Whisperer* is a good movie,' or that 'Taylor Swift is the best contemporary female vocalist,' **S** is ultimately describing a favorable (or unfavorable) relation between **S**'s own tastes (or values, preferences) as an existing mental state to item **x**. We normally grant that persons can describe what aesthetic items and experiences (truly) please them. Because persons have shared interests, values, and tastes, a viewer may believe that a certain audience will like/dislike an item **x**, and prescribe whether they should experience **x**. For example, **S** can judge whether a novel is intriguing, or a kind of ice cream tastes good, and make appropriate recommendations. Expert critics of an aesthetic medium (e.g., film, food, novels) tend to have more experience with that medium, and acquire a refined (or more discriminatory) taste, and make more informed judgments.

A number of interesting ordinary questions about the nature of aesthetic judgment can be asked. These questions include:

- (1) Can aesthetic judgments be true or false? Or are aesthetic judgments entirely subjective, and not true nor false?
- (2) Are some persons' aesthetic tastes better than others?
- (3) When **S** says, 'this painting is beautiful,' what is this sentence about? Is the speaker reporting that the *painting* is beautiful? Or does the speaker report her *subjective experience* when viewing the painting?
- (4) If aesthetic judgments are subjective, how can we assert something beyond our own personal points of view?
- (5) What is an 'aesthetic item' and what is 'art'?

In this chapter, we construct a theory about the semantics (i.e., speaker meaning) of aesthetic assertion.

## What is an Aesthetic Item (AI)?

The first step in introducing a theory of aesthetic judgment is to be clear about what an 'aesthetic item' is. I suggest the following definition:

An '**aesthetic item**' (AI) is something *x* (i.e., art or a natural item) that functions (or has a capacity) to bring about a rewarding (or satisfying, positive, desirable) aesthetic experience (e.g., sensuous or thought-provoking) to its percipient. What makes an item *x* an aesthetic item (for at least one person) is that it is positively valued for providing a rewarding aesthetic experience.

Examples of typical aesthetic items (AI) include the *public arts* (e.g., paintings, music, film, dance, literature, theatre, photography, sculpture, architecture, performance art, story-telling, comedy, comic strips, items in a museum), the *practical arts* (e.g., culinary arts, fashion, interior design, furniture design, quilting, crafted utensils, basket weaving, gardening), the *private arts* (any of above categories done for oneself without intended public attention), and items in the *natural environment* (e.g., 'the waterfalls are awe-inspiring,' or 'she is beautiful').<sup>1</sup> This definition of what constitutes an AI is 'functional' because it specifies a functional relation between an item *x* and its human percipient. The definition asserts that if *x* has the capacity (or functions) to provide an aesthetic experience for *S*, then *x* is an AI. This stipulative definition defines (for explanatory, clarification purposes) what people mean (or intend) when they assert that a particular item *x* is an aesthetic item. It proposes a single necessary condition for something to be an aesthetic item. The definition allows that any odd or novel items (e.g., a sculpture composed of shredded tires) is capable of being an AI. It is assumed that there is a subjectivity and relativity to what items are capable of providing an aesthetic experience.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is comparable to Monroe Beardsley's (1958) definition of an 'aesthetic object': "We can... group together disjunctively the class of musical compositions, visual designs, literary works, and all other separately defined classes and give the name 'aesthetic object' to them all..." (p. 64). Beardsley's definition reflects a primary concern at the time, with the 'public arts' (music, paintings, literary work). Historically there has been little aesthetic concern for items in the practical arts (food, fashion, quilting) or items in nature (waterfalls, mountains). This is especially true of food and drink items. Kant (1790) assumed that 'taste' that takes place in the mouth is unworthy of examination. He thought that because eating and taste are physical necessities for existence, gustatory taste was a lower function of sense perception, idiosyncratic and subjective. Times have changed. Recently food critics have flourished. In addition, there is now greater attention to the aesthetics of the natural environment. It was not until Ronald Hepburn's (1966) 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,' and the writings of Alan Carlson, and others, that objects in the natural environment are now considered as 'aesthetic items.'

### What is an Aesthetic Experience (AE)?

In defining an 'aesthetic item' as something that generates an 'aesthetic experience' for a person, the next question is what is an 'aesthetic experience'? This has often been the starting point for aesthetic theory. It is thought that if we can accurately define what an 'aesthetic experience' (AE) is, then we can determine what items  $x$  are 'aesthetic items' (based upon their providing an AE). I challenge this assumption, and reverse this strategy by defining AI first, and then loosely defining what an AE is. Based upon other theorists' extensive discussions of what an 'aesthetic experience' is, I believe that we are left with the following reward/disappointment definition:

An '**aesthetic experience**' (AE) is a mental state where one comes in contact with an object  $x$ , and  $x$  produces a feeling, emotion, or intellectual stimulation, where one is engaged with  $x$  in a way to have some release from practical concerns, where  $x$  is experienced as an object of appreciation. An aesthetic experience is 'unique' or 'stands out' from routine experience. Typical items of aesthetic appreciation include the experiences of the arts, nature, culinary food taste, olfactory scent, and tactile qualities. A *positive-AE* is a feeling of reward (or appreciation) when experiencing an item  $x$ . (A *negative-AE* is a feeling of disappointment (dislike, emptiness) when experiencing an item).

The first sentence of the definition is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience. That an object  $x$  produces a feeling, emotion, or intellectual stimulation, when one is engaged with  $x$  in a way to have some release from practical concerns, is vague, but there seems to be no other state-of-mind characterization that fits. An 'aesthetic experience' is a 'group resemblance' concept. A group resemblance concept is associated with entities that have a resemblance or a loose similarity, but there is no set of individual necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that define when an entity falls under that concept. Aesthetic experiences are various activities (e.g., perceptual, literary, or tactile) that (at least) semi-consciously stimulate one's feelings, emotions, or intellect.

This proposed definition of 'aesthetic experience' allows both *positive*-aesthetic experiences where there is a feeling of reward when experiencing an item  $x$ , as well as *negative*-aesthetic experiences where there is a feeling of disappointment. Some previous definitions of 'aesthetic experience' indicate that an aesthetic experience is always 'pleasurable' or 'rewarding' and this certainly isn't the case.  $S$  will have both positive and

negative aesthetic experiences. For example, S could attend a rock concert by one's favorite band, but the band's performance is unexpectedly lethargic and uninspired, and a negative and disappointed feeling is experienced. Positive AEs are characterized as being pleasurable, sense-arousing, intellectually stimulating, satisfying, exhilarating, or rewarding. Negative AEs are said to be unpleasant, tedious, uninspiring, or hardly enjoyable.

This AE definition also indicates that *not* all positive aesthetic experiences are *pleasant* (or happy) experiences. Some art may shock, or unsettle, disturb, or disgust us, but still offer a rewarding intellectual insight. Movies such as *Mississippi Burning*, about the murder of three civil rights workers in 1964, or *Brokeback Mountain* about a romantic relationship between two men in the American west, are not entirely pleasant. The movie *Eraserhead*, a 1977 surrealist movie written by David Lynch is lauded by the writer as a "dream of dark and troubling things." But for some viewers, *Eraserhead* is not a positive AE because it produces 'repulsion' rather than aesthetic 'reward.' Duchamp's *The Fountain*, which is no more than a ready-made urinal, wasn't displayed as a pleasant sensual experience, but to question certain intellectual presuppositions about what 'art' is.

The above definition of 'aesthetic experience' is wider than what is traditionally conceived. It allows that tactile sensations can be an AE. For example, the definition allows that while lying on a beach, the sensation of the sun warming one's skin, or the feel of a swim in a cool lake can be an AE. It also allows that a professional body massage can be an AE, where one can appreciate the artful skill of the hands of the masseuse and the physical sensations. As long as there are objects of appreciation that one has contact with, these mental experiences may qualify as aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Details: (1) The definition permits that a person can drink a cup of coffee on an ordinary morning, and state that 'the coffee tastes especially good this morning.' That a cup of coffee seems 'especially good' may be a function of the perceiver (e.g., taste buds are acute, or one is more attentive) and/or the composition of the coffee (e.g., superior blend of beans, or a just right mix of coffee, water, and cream). This positive AE of drinking coffee compares to an ordinary circumstance of drinking coffee barely thinking about it, while scrolling a computer screen. This isn't an AE. (2) Similarly, television shows can be the objects of aesthetic experience, but not always. Many times, watching television is a mindless routine amusement. (3) The definition excludes learning mathematics from a textbook as an AE because it is not normally 'experienced as an object of appreciation,' but as an 'object of motivated attention,' which aren't the same. (4) Watching a football game would not be an AE. A football game allows a release from practical concerns but typically is not experienced as an object (or performance) of sensual or intellectual appreciation.

Robert Stecker (2010) similarly allows a wide characterization of AE that includes 'mushroom hunting' as an example of an aesthetic experience (p. 48):

Some experiences... have a good intuitive claim to be aesthetic experience. Consider a morel hunting expedition. Morels are highly distinctive and especially delicious mushrooms that pop up briefly at the height of spring and are found in the woodlands where one can also see spring wildflowers and new foliage. The experience of searching for and finding these mushrooms is one in which one is immersed in a world of new growth, where one enjoys the sights, sounds, smells, and anticipating taste. The beauty is not sharply separate from the fact that one is foraging for one's dinner, indeed it seems to be enhanced by the pursuit. Hence, the practically oriented self can be very much present because the object of experience is valued both for itself and for other things to which it is a means.

### **More Characteristics of an Aesthetic Experience**

It has been widely recognized that what is peculiar to most aesthetic experiences is that it involves some element of *uniqueness, originality, or novelty* for the viewer. This seems to be true. The experience 'stands out' from routine experience. For example, most people are aesthetically engaged by a display of fireworks at a summer fair. In contrast, for a long-employed fireworks technician who frequently sets-up and lights the fireworks, the display will not be as unique.

In a similar example, the mountain sides on a landscape can have great novel beauty for visitors, but less so, for residents who are accustomed to this view. In a different circumstance, with the slow development of fog surrounding these mountains, this peculiar sight could generate an aesthetic interest, even among residents.

With respect to music, an element of *surprise* or *originality* often has a positive aesthetic impact. This is what propels many contemporary musical acts. Uniqueness and novelty can bring about artistic success.

But, in contrast, a high school band director will insist from her students, a strict fidelity to the composition of the piece as intended by the composer, *without added novelty*. The existence of numerous Elvis Presley impersonators also illustrates that aesthetic items are *not always* entirely *original*.

There are three additional conditions that have been suggested by theorists to describe what an AE is, but I believe that these conditions are optional, rather than necessary:

(1) an AE is 'sought for its own sake,' with no purpose for having an experience, except to have a positive AE.

(2) to have a proper AE, one shouldn't allow one's desires and bias to enter into one's experience of *x*, and to some extent one should be 'disinterested.'

(3) an AE should fully engage one's imaginative and cognitive faculties, so as to lose one's ordinary practical self.

The first condition seems false because we sometimes seek an AE with an intention to 'refresh ourselves' in order to be better prepared to resume our ordinary working lives. We can have 'goal-oriented' practical interests, other than just seeking an AE for its own sake. Also, we may undertake an AE as a means to discuss the experience with others engaging in an aesthetic community, or in ordinary conversation at social gatherings.

The second condition suggesting that one should have a 'neutral disposition' in experiencing an AI doesn't always seem right either. One appreciates the beauty of a bird because one has a favorable inclination and biased interest towards natural living things, or one appreciates a rock band because one has a predisposed interest in rock music.<sup>3</sup>

The third suggested condition (e.g., Goldman, 2006b, p. 334) about what constitutes an AE is quite extreme and describes only our most *extraordinary* aesthetic experiences. We may watch a play and be so involved with the fate of the characters and their words, that everything else is forgotten, but this surely isn't typical of all aesthetic experiences. We can simply enjoy the beauty of a sunset daily, without it being an experience of selfless absorption that fully engages our cognitive and imaginative powers, losing our practical self.

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<sup>3</sup> In defense of the intentions behind this condition, however, it can be said that (for example) when one is acting as a judge and critic of competitive performance, one's aesthetic judgment about the merits of a performance shouldn't be influenced by one's preexisting affections (or disaffections) for an artist. Critical aesthetic judgments as an evaluator or judge of an AI shouldn't be biased towards (or against) an AI for reasons unrelated to attributes of the AI. This condition is a *prescription* about proper judgment rather than a condition of having a genuine AE. In a televised dancing competition, *Dancing with the Stars* (2010), where viewers in the United States voted for their favorite dancer, there were well-publicized allegations that many voters favored Bristol Palin's performances and continued participation in the show, not exclusively for her dancing skills, but as a show of personal affection for Bristol (and support for the political views of her mother, Sarah Palin). This non-aesthetic favoritism (allegedly) occurred again with former presidential press secretary, Sean Spicer, appeared on the show in 2019. Such positive (or negative) aesthetic experiences, even if genuine, are said to be 'tainted' by factors not found in the AI.

These three brief criticisms of the above apparently auxiliary characteristics of AE, have been suggested by other theorists. Although there is some 'normality' in tastes, value, and cultural experiences, and persons often respond similarly to certain items, there is no distinctive introspective psychological state of mind that clarifies (or defines) what an AE is.<sup>4</sup> We are best served with the above stipulative disjunctive definition of what an 'aesthetic experience' is.<sup>5</sup>

### **Interlude**

We have so far discussed what 'aesthetic items' and 'aesthetic experiences' are. Critics are welcome to state their objections to the definitions. In the next section, we will list some familiar aesthetic predicates, and in the following section, we will observe how these predicates function in the epistemology of an aesthetic judgment.

### **Aesthetic Predicates**

From the above definition of 'aesthetic experience,' it has been emphasized that there are both 'positive' and 'negative' aesthetic experiences. Positive AEs are often characterized as being pleasurable, sense-arousing, intellectually stimulating, satisfying, exhilarating, or rewarding. Negative AEs are characterized as unpleasant, tedious, uninspiring, or hardly enjoyable. Typical predicates used in making aesthetic judgments and describing one's experience of particular aesthetic items (and their attributes) include:

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<sup>4</sup> Contrast a state-of-mind definition by Beardsley (1969): A person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable for being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated (p. 5). Beardsley later (1982) backs away from this necessary and sufficient conditions definition of AE and analyzes AE in terms of an aesthetic point of view, aesthetic value, and a disjunctive definition of 'art' (p. 299).

<sup>5</sup> Contrast a complex content-oriented approach to artistic 'aesthetic experience' as offered by Noel Carroll (2006). He regards the cognitive dimension of an AE as its primary locus of value. Carroll is concerned with the experience of 'public art,' as opposed to 'aesthetic items' in general, and offers a disjunctive definition of sufficient conditions for categorizing an aesthetic experience of art. He suggests that "a specimen of *experience is aesthetic* if it involves the apprehension/comprehension by an informed subject in the ways mandated (by the tradition, the object, and/or artist) of the formal structures, aesthetic and/or expressive properties of the object, and/or emergence of those features from the base properties of the work and/or of the manner in which those features interact with each other and/or address the cognitive, perceptual, emotive, and/or imaginative powers of the subject" (p. 89, italics added).

- 1) beautiful, pleasing, attractive, graceful, elegant.
- 2) ugly, dull, sluggish, boring, dreary.
- 3) engaging, fascinating, mesmerizing, absorbing, dazzling, awe-inspiring.
- 4) grating, plodding, stiff, deliberate.
- 5) amusing, novel, witty, delightful, cheerful, comical.
- 6) suspenseful, frightening, anxiety-provoking, stressful.
- 7) morbid, grotesque, shocking, horrifying.
- 8) harmonious, soothing, serene, tranquil, balanced, unified, delicate.
- 9) powerful, stirring, flamboyant, daring.
- 10) pretentious, insipid, crude.
- 11) thought-provoking, energizing, knowledge-producing.
- 12) distorted, gaudy, sentimental, mellow, melancholic.

The above list of 'aesthetic predicates' has no particular order to it. It just mentions some of the many terms that might be applied to paintings, sculptures, films, music, plays, and other forms of art, when judging the attributes and value of an AI. We will find additional examples of aesthetic predicates as we go along.

### **The Epistemology of an Aesthetic Judgment (AJ)**

We can now move to the epistemology of an aesthetic judgment (AJ). As stated above, the assertions 'the painting is beautiful,' 'the *Horse Whisperer* is a good movie' and 'Taylor Swift is the best contemporary female vocalist,' are all examples of AJ. There are other examples of AJs found in the literature such as 'The fall foliage is beautiful,' 'The opening of the symphony was elegant and graceful,' 'Mozart was a better composer than Barry Manilow,' and 'A swan is more beautiful than a cockroach.'<sup>6</sup>

Here are some of the theoretical questions that we wish to answer: Are aesthetic assertions primarily about the (subjective) experiences of humans, or are they assertions about the (objective) properties of painted canvasses, sounds, written verse, and items in the natural environment? Is aesthetic value intrinsic to the perceiver, or is aesthetic value an extrinsic physical property of an AI waiting to be discovered by a perceiver? Is a person's aesthetic judgment a function of one's physiology and cultural environment, or

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<sup>6</sup> Many examples of aesthetic judgments found in the philosophical literature are about 'beauty'. A theory of 'beauty' was the dominant philosophic interest for two thousand years (until the 18th century) whereby 'beauty' was thought to be an objective property of an AI. It was not until German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762) coined the term 'aesthetics' that a broader area of issues developed. For a detailed history of Aesthetics, see George Dickie (1997).



does an item *x* possess properties that make an aesthetic judgment capable of truth or falsity? Can an AJ simultaneously be an assertion about one's aesthetic experience *and* the nature of the AI? What sort of reasons can be offered in support of a subjective AJ? Are some AJs more respected because they are backed by well-rounded expert experience? Should we heed the advice of scientists and environmentalists who advocate the preservation of a natural phenomenon (e.g., a large quartzite rock formation) as being aesthetically valuable?

### **Can Aesthetic Judgments Be True or False?**

We can best respond to the above questions and develop a coherent aesthetic theory by first replying to the questions suggested at the beginning of this chapter:

When *S* says that 'this painting is beautiful,' what is this sentence about? Is the speaker reporting that the *painting* is beautiful? Is the speaker asserting that there are properties in the painting which make it objectively true that the painting is beautiful? Or does the speaker report her *subjective experience* when viewing the painting?

An aesthetic realist will respond that the aesthetic judgment 'this painting is beautiful' is about the *painting*, and that the particular painting has the property of 'beauty' that emerges from its base physical properties. According to the realist, there are objective perceivable properties that explain why one can make a true or false assertion about the painting having beauty.<sup>7</sup> An aesthetic subjectivist, on the contrary, believes that 'this painting is beautiful' reports a *subjective experience*, and is about whether the painting satisfies one's interests and tastes.

This latter hypothesis, endorsed here, can be termed 'subjectivism,' which contends that an AJ is ultimately reducible to a straight-forward report of one's own

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<sup>7</sup> Contemporary aesthetic realists include Marcia Muelder Eaton, Jerrold Levinson, Phillip Pettit, Nick Zangwill, Eddy Zemach, among others. These theorists hold that aesthetic judgments possess an objective truth value in virtue of a reality that exists independent of perceivers. Most often, they posit the existence of 'aesthetic properties' that are needed for the possibility of aesthetic knowledge. 'Aesthetic properties' were originally hypothesized by Frank Sibley (1959). Aesthetic properties are thought to be higher-order perceptual properties that emerge from the lower-level physical properties of an AI, that are directly experienced rather than inferred, and that elicit a positive (or negative) aesthetic experience for ideal (i.e., attentive, knowledgeable) viewers. I deny the existence of aesthetic properties, but a critique is outside of the scope of this chapter. See chapter twelve for reasons why the concept of 'property' should be avoided.

subjective experience regarding the perception of an AI. The speaker is primarily understood as asserting a *relationship* between the speaker's perceptual experience and the AI. But in fully explaining this subjectivist position, there needs to be an account of how an AJ can assert something beyond just a report of one's own likes/dislikes, and how some aesthetic tastes can be more refined, and perhaps better, than others.

Fundamental to the subjectivist aesthetic position, is the belief that an aesthetic judgment is determined by a contingent connection-- a cultural-causal-physiological connection between an object *x* and *S*'s feeling of aesthetic reward (or disappointment, indifference) toward *x*. A sincere aesthetic judgment *describes* whether a person enjoys (or dislikes) *x*. Generally, people are reliable judges of their own feelings and aesthetic experiences, and persons are generally honest in stating when an AI is rewarding or disappointing. Persons can *know* what aesthetic items truly please them. An aesthetic judgment expresses the taste (standards of value) of the perceiver, and allows the perceiver to indicate what qualities the perceiver likes or dislikes in an AI. From a subjectivist point of view, aesthetic judgments are *true or false* in the sense that they are *descriptions of actual subjective evaluations*.

### **The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Value**

The assertion of 'what is valuable' with respect to an aesthetic item is subjective. Without sentient creatures, there would be no assertions about aesthetics and about what items are rewarding to the senses, emotions, and the intellect. Judgments of aesthetic value reflect personal passions, but don't express a belief with a truth value. *If aesthetic tastes were a matter of natural perception and had a truth value, then tastes shouldn't vary any more than eyesight varies.* But far from being a natural receptivity, aesthetic tastes in fact vary widely, both across the globe, and among perceivers in the same society. It is very conceivable that **S1** can find *x* beautiful but that **S2** finds *x* ugly. **S1** might enjoy a riveting storyline of a movie, while **S2** finds it exhaustingly intense and overwrought. Some spectators may be unmoved, or even displeased with features of an *x* that pleases a majority of persons. Personal evaluations of aesthetic value are subjective.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In a survey by Bourget and Chalmers (2023), it was found that 44% of philosophers believe that 'aesthetic value' is objective and 41% believe it to be subjective.

## The Subjectivity of Taste and the Role of Experience

That aesthetic taste is subjective, and relative to individuals and cultures seems obvious to most of us. What supports this view? The following propositions from the physical sciences, social sciences, and ordinary perceptual observation provide strong evidence for affirming the subjectivity of taste:

(1) The **cultural base** for liking/disliking: Cultural experience is often dominant in determining aesthetic tastes. Many people enjoy the kind of music (e.g., rock, country, classical) that they grew up with as children and adolescents. According to Capaldi (1996, p. 6) and Korsmeyer (1999, p. 89), cultural factors largely frame our food preferences. While there are genetic physical reasons for why most persons like sweet and salty things, one's culinary taste for particular foods are largely inculcated by culture and learned by experience.

(2) A **cultural relativity** of tastes in liking/disliking: The 1988 American film *Bird*, produced and directed by the acclaimed film maker and actor Clint Eastwood (b. 1930), was a story about the life and music of jazz saxophonist Charlie 'Bird' Parker. The film received a lukewarm reception by American audiences, but was very well-received by European audiences. Does one of these audiences have better taste than another? Does the film have features that should have been better appreciated by American audiences?

(3) The **physiological** bases for liking/disliking: Some people naturally dislike the scent of some perfumes enjoyed by other people in their culture. Some people have a natural heightened sensitivity (and dislike) for loud music. With respect to food, drink, and the sense of taste, some persons like broccoli and others do not-- for some persons broccoli tastes bitter because of genetics and the state of their taste buds (*Science Daily*, 2006).

4) The phenomena of **changing personal tastes** for liking/disliking: Young people tend to favor kinds of movies that are consistent with their age, and peer-likes. With respect to literary taste, David Hume (1757) remarks that with novels and literary works, "A young man whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man in more advanced in years... At twenty Ovid may be the favorite author, Horace at forty, and perhaps Tacitus at fifty... We choose our favorite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humor and disposition." The novelist, Michael Cunningham (b. 1952), best known for his novel *The Hours* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1999, admits his fondness for the famous novelist C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) when Cunningham was a young man. But with more experience, Cunningham now feels less of a positive experience with Lewis' works, and views the novels as appropriately appreciated by younger persons. Are younger tastes and judgments in error, or does changing tastes imply a subjective phenomenon?

(5) **Conflicting reasons** for liking/disliking: When viewing a raucous rock-band **x** in a live concert, it can be agreed that the band's instruments are loud, the notes are chaotic and disjointed, and that the singer shrieks his vocals. These are *physical properties* of the band's performance, and these properties are *not in dispute*. For **S1**, he likes the physical properties of **x**, and attends their concerts and purchases their music. For **S2**, her AE of **x**, is of dislike, and doesn't attend another concert. For **S3**, he is repulsed by **x**, and finds **x** not worthy of appreciation. For **S4**, there is indifference towards **x**. Does one of these perceivers have good taste, and others have bad taste, or do they just have different tastes? Is there a (single) true or false judgement in these conflicting opinions?

(6) Examples of **idiosyncratic preferences** for liking/disliking: Some persons prefer listening to the banjo instead of listening to the piano. Some persons like to wear dark clothes, and others prefer wearing bright pastel colors. As an ingredient, some persons like raw onion, some like fried onions, and some prefer no onions on their food.

To repeat, cultural experience and relativity, physiological differences, changing tastes, conflicting reasons, and idiosyncratic preferences, all imply that taste is subjective.

### **The Speaker Semantics of Aesthetic Judgment**

With the above examples that illustrate the personal subjectivity of tastes, we can consider what is being said when different persons assert what appear to be 'contradictory' aesthetic judgments. We can observe that one musical rock band **x** may be 'good' for some, and 'bad' for others, and 'the film *Birds* was mundane to some, and intriguing to others,' and 'some people like sushi, while others do not.' Are these sets of persons asserting *contradictory* aesthetic judgments?

According to the aesthetic subjectivism outlined above, the persons are *not asserting contradictory judgments*. There is no contradiction in these assertions because there are two different assertions being made:

**S1** likes AI.

**S2** dislikes AI.

The judgments *conflict*, but don't contradict. A sincerely asserted aesthetic proposition *describes* whether a person enjoys (or dislikes) **x**. Each of these two assertions can be objectively true, as expressing a relationship between **S** and an AI. It is conceivable that **S1** finds a particular digital art painting beautiful (and likes it) and **S2** finds the same digital art painting chaotic (and dislikes it). On the other hand, it often happens that

aesthetic judgments *coincide* (i.e., two persons 'like' an AI), upon a coincidence in taste (based upon similar physiology, cultural experience, interests, and preference).<sup>9</sup>

### **Are Some AIs Better? Are Some Persons' Tastes Better Than Others?**

Despite the inherent subjectivity of aesthetic value, taste, and judgment, is there something more to the 'correctness' of an AJ than a report of one's own tastes, and the contingent coincidence of individual tastes? Are there not better paintings (and artists), better clothes (and fashion designers), better novels (and writers), better films (and filmmakers), better food (and chefs)? Aren't there art critics, fashion critics, literary critics, film critics, and connoisseurs of food, that have better developed tastes than most of us? If aesthetic judgments are ultimately subjective, how can we (and expert critics) assert something beyond one's own idiosyncratic point of view?

### **David Hume on the Status of Taste: Standard of Taste is Set by Critics**

These questions about the status of 'taste' were addressed by David Hume in the essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757). Hume believed that aesthetic judgments were subjective, and come from one's personal sentiments (e.g., feelings, values, and emotions). Tastes express 'sentiments' and are devoid of truth value. But Hume noticed too, that there are better authors, artists, musicians-- their works and performances are better. In particular, Hume says that we don't believe that there is an 'equality' of musical genius.

In ordinary thought, we grant that a painting by a famous artist is often better than that of a child's primitive drawing in grade school. A play performed on Broadway in New York City is typically better than one performed by a small community theater group in one's small hometown. How can we explain these better aesthetic items, better artists, and more developed tastes?

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<sup>9</sup> This explanation of aesthetic judgment allows that we can be 'in error' when making an initial aesthetic judgment. For example, it allows self-correction, where one can say that 'I thought that I liked the band, but after listening to them again, I don't like them all that much.' Or one can say that 'I enjoyed the movie when I first saw it, but now that you point out its flaws, it makes less sense than what I initially thought, so I wouldn't recommend it to others.' In other cases, there are items that persons may not initially enjoy, but having an open mind to new experiences, may come to appreciate. Persons have an ability to cultivate an interest in items that are unusual, exotic, or promising, and make changes from initial judgments.

Hume's answer to the question of better taste, was to propose that it is a competent critic with wide experience of an artistic medium that is better able to gain perception (or attention) to what things are beautiful or are in good taste. Hume says that a "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment .... cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character, and the joint verdict of such, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (p. 241). According to Hume what is aesthetically valuable is determined by a survey of the views of critics that have a broad experience in discriminating the qualities possessed by objects. Critics demonstrate the principles of having a 'delicacy of taste' to better appreciate an aesthetic item. These include:

- 1) Having commitment to detail.
- 2) Practice at observing aesthetic items of a certain kind.
- 3) Comparison of the different varieties of a kind.
- 4) Being free from prejudice.
- 5) Having good sense, thinking, and consistency.

According to Hume, a critic can achieve a delicacy of taste by satisfying these principles. Hume says that it is 'a joint verdict of critics' not the physical properties of an AI that set the true standards of taste. Aesthetic judgments are subjective in representing one's sentiments (feelings, values, emotions), but conflicting judgments can be reconciled, or compared to those of a critic who acts in accordance within the 'delicacy of taste' principles. Taste requires comparing items, as a kind of empirical investigation about what items produce strong positive AE. Hume's explanation of a descriptive component in aesthetic judgments is that there is a 'true standard of taste' established by experts. But when asking 'what persons are reliable critics,' Hume admits, is an embarrassing question. Few people are qualified to be genuine critics because of various deficiencies.

But there are very apparent problems with Hume's principles of a 'correct' or 'true' standard. One problem is how does a person in practice, free oneself of all prejudice? As indicated, tastes are in part mediated by our past cultural experiences. Hume's appeal to the verdict of ideal critics as a 'true standard of taste' leaves open the question of *why* audiences should defer to the verdicts of experts. Richard Eldridge (2014) says Hume is just 'wrong' (p. 196). Overall, Hume's theory about aesthetic judgment doesn't provide a satisfactory account of the ordinary descriptive components in aesthetic judgments.

### Questions about Taste

That professional critics in their domains of aesthetic interest will have a better (i.e., more refined, and discriminatory) taste towards an AI is successfully explained with Hume's principles. A critic has practice at observing and comparing AIs of a certain kind, and their different varieties. For example, when tasting food, if S has much experience eating sushi, having traveled extensively in Japan and familiar with the standards of connoisseurs, we would grant that S has a better sense of taste for sushi than most of us. The expert appreciation of an AI allows critics to interpret and evaluate an AI at the same time. Experts suggest how to attend to the objective properties of an AI and suggest why these properties should be valued by the viewer. Since critics do not intend to exclusively describe their own values, tastes, and preferences, *they must also be talking about the objective properties* of an aesthetic item and in a positive review, the tendency to produce a rewarding experience.<sup>10</sup>

However, in granting a very reasonable basis for why some persons have better tastes, this doesn't mandate that a person must agree with (or adopt) the aesthetic tastes and judgments of others. For example, a cubist painting by a highly regarded artist will not be aesthetically rewarding to everyone. The subjectivist theory denies that there is a strong normative (viz. prescriptive) component to aesthetic assertions.

This is in sharp contrast to the strong view of aesthetic normativity (and aesthetic realism) as suggested by Immanuel Kant (1790) who claimed that:

... when (a man) puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Thus, he says the *thing* is beautiful; and ... he *demand*s this agreement of them... it is not open for men to say: Everyone has his own taste. This would be equivalent to saying there is no such thing as taste, i.e., no aesthetic judgment capable of making rightful claim upon assent of all men (p. 52).

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<sup>10</sup> With respect to the objective properties of items in nature, Alan Carlson (2009) maintains that persons with scientific knowledge are better qualified to assert whether a natural aesthetic item should be valued. Carlson's contention is illustrated with an example from an Associated Press release in June 2010. In that month, a 1.7 billion-year-old quartzite rock formation outside Baraboo, Wisconsin (USA) was scheduled to be bulldozed for highway expansion. (The quartzite rock formation is sandstone squeezed and crystallized over time, making it dense and less susceptible to erosion). Instead of its destruction, consultants and geologists were called in to help determine the value of the rocks. The site was spared from destruction. Geology students now frequently visit the area to study the outcrop's historical and scientific significance.

Although Kant believes that aesthetic judgments are subjective in the sense that they are a felt subjective response to the pleasure, reward, or satisfaction that a positive aesthetic experience provides, he believes that everyone should share the same positive experience when engaging with an AI. There are other authors who share Kant's strong sense of normative rightness (or objectiveness) to account for an assumed descriptive component in aesthetic judgments. For instance, Stephen Davies (2006) says the following:

People differ in their tastes and judgments. Despite all this, we expect a degree of uniformity and *objectivity* in aesthetic assessments... This suggests that, despite their wide-ranging diversity, aesthetic preferences are *not* regarded as *purely subjective*. (p. viii, italics added).

Kant and Davies both *deny* that aesthetic judgments are attributable to subjective reports. According to them there are properties intrinsic to an aesthetic item that persons should observe or respect. We have argued that this view is false. Also, there is no associated normative demand that others *should* adopt our tastes and appreciate the details of items that we appreciate.<sup>11</sup> Most often we are tolerant of other persons' tastes. Taste preferences are not important enough to demand universality.<sup>12</sup>

### **What is 'Art?'**

The question of what is 'art,' and what items qualify to be called 'art' has been a lively topic of debate since the early 1950s. Precipitating this debate were articles by Morris Weitz (1956), Paul Ziff (1953), and William Kennick (1958) that argued that 'art' can have no necessary and sufficient conditions definition, loosely following Wittgenstein's belief that 'art' is a group resemblance predicate, like 'game.' Another set

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<sup>11</sup> But as Alan Goldman (1995) notes: "... there is a natural quest for consensus in aesthetic judgments. The feeling of unity with others who share taste in cultural matters can be a powerful social force... consensus is arrived at freely, not under the constraint of rules or principles. Cultural agreement is similar to moral agreement in building a sense of community according to common values" (pp. 15-16).

<sup>12</sup> B.R. Tilghman (2004) comments: "Diversity in taste and appreciation is sometimes to be valued. To be sure, there are occasions in which agreement, or at least some measure of it, is important, the selection of civic monuments and art for public places are obvious examples. Nor should we forget what is at stake for married couples when it is a matter of interior decoration and appropriateness of clothing. There is, nevertheless, one very important reason for seeking aesthetic, especially artistic, agreement. It can connect us with our own history and culture, and in addition, it can connect us personally with one another so that in our shared appreciation of art we can appreciate not only the works of art, but one another" (p. 259).



of events that fueled this active question, was the introduction of avant-garde art. For example, Marcel Duchamp in 1915 introduced 'readymade art' whereby an ordinary artifact-- a snow shovel, is named *In Advance of a Broken Arm* and displayed as art. Dadaism, a cultural movement in the early twentieth century, involved the visual arts, literature, and theatre. It was conceived to be 'anti-art' intended to be offensive, in protest of bourgeois values.

Since the 1960s, it has been debated whether 'art' can be defined, and if so, does this definition take the form of an individually necessary and jointly sufficient form, or does it take the form of a 'disjunctive definition' (that often includes a necessary conditions)? Within the debate, there have been theorists who promote an 'aesthetic' definition focusing on the properties of items and their functional affect on persons; and there are 'institutional' and 'historical' theories that focus on an item's successful institutional and historical placement in public displays. In response to this debate, I tend to agree with something from each of three theories and introduce a **hybrid** (aesthetic-institutional-historical) definition of 'art': **x** is 'art' if:

- (1) **x** is a physical entity (e.g., artifact, performance, literary work) created by humans, or natural item(s) displayed and arranged by human(s) with the intention of promoting a positive (rewarding) aesthetic experience to oneself and/or others;
- and (2a) **x** functions to generate a positive (or rewarding) aesthetic experience for at least one person who experiences it, or (2b) **x** receives some degree of positive public support and/or institutional or historical respect from an audience for being something that has been created with the capacity to promote a rewarding aesthetic experience.

Conditions 1 and 2a are necessary and sufficient for **x** to be 'private art' (e.g., putting a self-created clay vase in one's bedroom). These conditions require that for **x** to be is 'art,' that it be something created, arranged, and displayed by a human to provide a rewarding aesthetic experience for at least one person (e.g., its creator). Some critics scorn the concept of 'private art' because it allows a poorly written self-published novel to be a work of 'art' when only the author enjoys the book. But this rather odd result is of more

concern to the artistic elite and aesthetic realists than to ordinary consumers of 'art.' (From a public perspective, the novel might be just called 'bad art').

Conditions 1 and 2b are necessary and sufficient for  $x$  to be an instance of 'public art.' These conditions are the sense of 'art' in its most usual sense. This includes publicly available instances of paintings, sculptures, music, movies, dance, and the like.

This proposed hybrid definition is 'antirealist' because it presumes that there are no mind-independent physical properties that make an item an instance of art. Instead, we initially identify something as art because it has similar characteristics to items that are already understood as art. We categorize  $x$  as 'art' according to prototypes or exemplars. For example, suppose we are introduced to several people with musical instruments. Suppose they claim to be a 'punk rock band' and follow-up with a raucous set of music (or noise). We can then ask, are they artists and their performance 'art'? Their narrative that they are a punk rock band and their following performance satisfy condition 1, because we understand it to be a kind of music (and capable of producing a rewarding experience). Condition 2a is satisfied assuming the members of the band like its own music. Whether condition 2b is satisfied is contingent upon audience acceptance, and comes in degrees of success, from a small community audience to global recognition.

The hybrid definition has the virtue of allowing for 'failed art' if both conditions 2a and 2b are not satisfied. Suppose a creating artist is genuinely disappointed with his film as well as the audience. If the work generates a positive aesthetic experience for only a few persons when it was intended to be an acclaimed film, condition 2b fails. What constitutes failed art is measured from both a personal and public perspective.<sup>13</sup>

### **Example Cases that Support the Hybrid Definition**

The hybrid definition of 'art' is suggested to precisely define (and explain) what people generally mean (or intend) when they assert that a particular item  $x$  is a work of art. The definition is understood as a stipulative definition for what should count (or measure) as being 'art.' In order to test whether a definition of 'art' correctly measures what is art, we need to consider various questions and problems related to art (as part of a

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<sup>13</sup> For alternative definitions of 'art' see Dickie (1974, 2004), Levinson (1979, 1993), Beardsley (1982), Zangwill (1995), Gaut (2000), Stecker (2000, 2003), Anderson (2000), Eaton (2000, 2004), Iseminger (2004), Dutton (2006), and Longworth & Scarantino (2010).

conceptual analysis). Below, I present fourteen concerns that are intended to bring out an *agreement* in definition of the *tacit conditions* of what counts as 'art.' We can understand what people mean by the concept of 'art' if they agree that the principled definition helps them explain their intuitions in example cases. The hybrid definition provides intuitively acceptable answers to various puzzles found in the literature:

(1) **Does 'art' need to be an artifact?** Does art need to be created by a human? For example, is a piece of natural driftwood found by the sea, and displayed on one's fireplace mantelpiece, an instance of art? Can the paintings painted by a chimpanzee become art, if they are put on display? The answer from the hybrid definition is that 'art' may be an arrangement and display of any kind of *x* with a capacity to generate aesthetic experience. The driftwood displayed in one's home and the chimp's paintings can be appreciated as 'art' based upon their display. Art is always arranged and displayed by a human, but its composition need not be artifact(s). 'Art' generated by AI is a new *x*.

(2) **Can an artifact *x* which is *not* created with the intent of providing aesthetic experience, become an instance of art?** The answer is yes: Condition 1 requires that *x* be created by human(s) and *displayed* by human(s) with the *intention* of promoting a positive aesthetic experience to oneself and/or others. As examples, African facemasks and European sculptures originally intended to frighten evil spirits, created with no aesthetic intent at all, are often displayed for aesthetic purposes, and thus become art.

(3) **The problem of lost paintings:** A talented painter creates a series of paintings, but being a perfectionist, is dissatisfied with her works, and hides them away in her closet, not to be seen by anyone else. Soon after her death, a fire destroys her house including all of the items in her closet. Were these unseen items instances of art? Since conditions 2a and 2b are not satisfied, the paintings cannot be counted as 'art' even if the paintings would have been considered magnificent by most persons who might have viewed them.

(4) **The necessity of intentional display:** An art museum presents an odd exhibition of contemporary objects (furniture, ceramics, metalwork, glass, and consumer products) that are intended to inspire, please, and confound. Among the displayed items are a toaster, a vacuum cleaner, and lawn chairs. Suppose a janitor working on a maintenance project unrelated to the exhibition, inadvertently leaves an ordinary stapler on a display table.

On a given day, before the error is noticed, patrons admire the aesthetics of the stapler. Has the stapler become an instance of art? The answer is no. Condition 1 is violated.

(5) **Can functional items become art?** An early model Corvette car, originally used for travel, has been purchased and restored by a proud new owner, and put on display at a well-attended antique car show. Is the Corvette now an instance of art? Yes, assuming that there is substantial aesthetic appreciation for the Corvette, it is an instance of public art, even if the car is functional.

(6) **Are famous avant-garde items really art?** Is avant-garde art, such as the visual display of ordinary readymade artifacts, or a film that displays irrationality, vulgarity, cruelty, and the unthinkable, really works of art? Yes. Even if famous works didn't present a positive emotional and sensual experience, they challenged intellectual presuppositions about art (e.g., that art must provide a positive sensual experience, an item must originate as an artifact created for aesthetic experience, art must satisfy the tastes of the artistic elite, etc.). The intent of the placement was to shock and confound, and not to be perceptually pleasing. Works of avant-garde art have been driven with interests in providing a sense of irony and humor. Avant-garde art has provided a rewarding intellectual experience for a multitude of people, including art critics.

(7) **Is illegal graffiti art?** Is the illegal spray-painting of urban buildings with graffiti an instance of 'art'? According to the hybrid definition, in most situations illicit graffiti is not art. In most cases, it can be assumed that condition 1 is violated, because often the perpetrator does not have the intention of promoting a rewarding aesthetic experience to oneself or to others. The designs are often intended to mark gang territory. In most cases, illegal graffiti does not receive substantial positive public support or critical respect from its audience for promoting a positive aesthetic experience. But there are exceptions, such as the famous graffiti of artist Banksy.

(8) **Is a stuffed angora goat an instance of art?** From Noel Carroll (1999): "Suppose we come across, as we might at a garage sale, a stuffed angora goat wearing an automobile tire around its middle and standing on a canvas" (p. 208). Should we chalk this up a random assemblage of articles, or should we identify it as an artwork? The answer to this question depends on whether condition 1 in the definition of 'art' is

satisfied. Certainly, if someone was to come upon this item at a garage sale, aesthetically admire it, purchase it, and put it on display in one's own backyard as an artistic item, then it would come to have the status of (at least) private art.

**(9) Can there be art where there is no artistic tradition, and no cultural appreciation?** From Noel Carroll (1999): "Suppose a Neolithic tribesman finds himself lost in a valley with pretty stones of different colors. He arranges some of them in a way that stirs visual pleasure for him. Also, suppose that no one in his tribe has ever done this before-- maybe no living creature has ever done this before. Nevertheless, isn't this an artwork, indeed an abstract artwork?" (p. 235). The answer implied from the hybrid definition concurs with Carroll's suggestion that the stones are art, even if the isolated tribesman has no concept of 'art,' and there is neither cultural tradition nor exemplars of art. The human arrangement of the stones for aesthetic purposes allows conditions 1 and 2a to be satisfied and the tribesman's stone configuration counts as private art.

**(10) Can a homeowner claim that her professionally painted house make it a 'work of art?'** A homeowner can assert anything, but a house typically isn't an item of art. The dwelling is not created with the intention of promoting an aesthetic experience; but is created for a practical function. Only if a house was specially built with artistic intent could it be art (although many homes have certain artistic ornaments). Similarly, we can say that a functioning toaster is visually pleasing and complements the aesthetics of a kitchen, but in a typical setting, the toaster is not art.

**(11) Are items of the practical arts (e.g., high fashion clothes, connoisseur food, sophisticated interior design, designer furniture, exotic quilts, etc.) instances of art?** Even though these items may be created to have a practical function as well as an aesthetic function, these items can sometimes satisfy the hybrid definition. If the item is created for public display (e.g., in a clothing fashion show) or critical evaluation (e.g., a food tasting contest), then condition 1 is satisfied, and the items may be considered art.

**(12) Is a crude comic strip found in a student newspaper an instance of art?** On many college campuses, there are student newspapers (or websites) which publish amateur comic strips, with themes created by students. Most often the strips are intended by their creator to provide entertainment or grounds for thought. But some comic strips

are of such poor quality, that it may be asked, are these items 'art'? According to the hybrid definition, these strips are indeed art in virtue of their publication in an institutional medium, satisfying condition 3 (and assuming the initial two conditions are satisfied). The creator of the strip and the editor of the student newspaper may be accused of 'bad taste' and of promoting 'bad art' but this is another matter.

(13) **How do museums determine what is art?** Richard Eldridge (2014) offers this plausible answer: "Many national museums of fine art such as the Louvre, the Prado, and the Hermitage evolved out of royal collections that were quite haphazard. Paintings and sculptures shared space not only with pots, but also with gems, headdresses, taxidermic specimens, fans, musical instruments, and other curios-- anything in which a king might take a passing interest. Somehow, historically and socially, it all gets sorted out, more or less, though without sharp or definite boundaries. Scholars catalogue collections, curators mount shows, and, more latterly, investors finance film productions, and government organizations support performance art. A conception of art with very rough edges is, in the long run, formed simply by accretion." (p. 178). This suggests that many items are candidates for providing aesthetic experiences when arranged and displayed.

(14) **How do we *identify* 'radically new' works as potential instances of art?** In most cases, an item presented to be public art follows in some tradition and we understand the tradition. But the hybrid definition of 'art' doesn't *identify* what radical and controversial new items should be appreciated. For radically new items, such as the initial presentation of Duchamp's *The Fountain*, or Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, or Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, these items were accepted as art in virtue of *narratives* that explain why the items should be appreciated as art. Noel Carroll (1999) states, "These narratives- which may be recounted in manifestos, gallery handouts, interviews, lecture demonstrations, critical reviews... enable the viewer to understand where the artist is coming from... when an artwork is challenged or likely to be challenged, our response is not a definition, but an explanation... we try to explain why the candidate is an artwork" (p. 254). The hybrid definition of 'art' cannot be used to identify what items *should* be appreciated as potential instances of public art. The definition isn't intended, nor is it capable, of picking out an item as an instance of art, outside of a social context.

(15) **Are videogames ‘art’?** In an essay “Games and the Art of Agency” (2019), C. Thi Nguyen says that games are a distinctive art form specifying particular modes of agency for players to adopt. We can take on ends temporarily for the sake of the experience of pursuing them. Nguyen states likewise Grant Tavinor (2009) argues that computer games are a kind of art because they are a kind of fiction; Berys Gaut (2010, 140-51, 224-43) treats computer games as a new form of cinema: digital interactive cinema. Dominic Lopes (2010, 103-20) treats computer game art as a type of interactive computer art, as one might find in a museum. Based upon the hybrid definition, and observations of these authors, it seems true that some videogames can be classified as ‘art.’

### **Are there Borderline Cases of ‘Art’?**

The hybrid definition of ‘art’ is a precise technical definition (or explication) of the conditions that capture what ‘art’ is, as the concept is used in ordinary languages. On this *definition*, there may be *some borderline cases* of whether *x* is ‘art’ or not (e.g., initial museum collections, graffiti). But most times, *x* falls under this definition, or it doesn’t. However, from *S*’s subjective perspective, whether some *x* is art, will have borderline cases, since ‘art’ is a group resemblance concept. ‘Group resemblance concepts’ are characterized by *borderline cases* where the term’s application (in context) may be somewhat indeterminate. According to empirical psychologists, group resemblance concepts are mental representations whose structure encodes a statistical analysis of the properties that most of their members (or extensions) tend to have. Entities that fall under a group resemblance concept are associated similar to prototypes or exemplars. What is appreciated as ‘art’ varies among individuals as well as among societies and cultures. In this *evaluative sense* of what is art, there *are borderline cases*.

Some philosophers such as Gaut (2000, 2005) are preoccupied with definitions that account for what may be called ‘borderline cases’ of art. An account of borderline cases of art is thought to be a criterion for assessing the adequacy of a definition of ‘art.’ But the hybrid definition isn’t intended to *evaluate* what is (or should be) appreciated as ‘art’ nor does it identify borderline cases (as evaluated by persons and societies).

### **Why Critics of an 'Art' Definition are Wrong**

With the introduction of the hybrid definition of 'art' and explanation of its application using examples, we are now in position to understand why skeptics about the achievement of an informative conditional definition of 'art' are in error. One such critic is Roger Scruton (1994) who claims that "There is no definition of art that will explain why a Rembrandt portrait falls under the concept, and a rotting fish does not... Call anything art: for art is not a natural kind" (p. 439). Although Scruton is correct that 'art' isn't a natural kind concept, he is wrong that there is no definition that will explain why a Rembrandt portrait is art. The proposed hybrid definition makes a reasonable distinction between art and non-art. It explains what art is, as we normally use this concept. If there are items that we would normally call art that are not covered by this definition, or if the definition is too wide, and allows items to be art that we wouldn't normally call art, then these are counterexamples, and the definition would need modification. Can a rotting fish be art? If arranged and displayed in accordance with the hybrid definition, it is conceivable that a rotting fish could be a prominent object in an artistic display.

The arguments of Morris Weitz (1956) and Berys Gaut (2000), express a concern that since particular artistic items have evolving (and sometimes contradictory) properties, then there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying instances of art. Weitz claims that 'art' is an open concept, and that "New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge, which will demand decisions on the part of those interested, usually professional critics, as to whether the concept should be extended or not" (p. 15). Gaut (p. 28) suggests that if 'art' is a group resemblance predicate (or 'cluster' predicate), and we identify and categorize art into genres, according to prototypes or exemplars, then it is only possible to define 'art' (and its proper extensions) with a rough disjunctive definition of the various items' qualities. He claims that it is impossible to provide individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a work of art because 'art' admits of various different sufficiency conditions, but there are no non-disjunctive necessary conditions. It is thought that the diversity and evolving creativity of items that are called



'art' is far too great for these items to be described by a single essential condition(s) definition.<sup>14</sup>

The response here is that just because it is true that instances of art are identified as 'group resemblance' items, and that there is no way to immediately identify emerging radical art items, this doesn't imply that a conditional definition of 'art' isn't possible. Weitz is clearly wrong: professional critics and artists do not decide whether the *concept* of 'art' should be extended or not. Instead, they decide whether *x* provides a rewarding aesthetic experience and whether *x* deserves aesthetic appreciation. The *concept* of 'art' (and its hybrid definition) remains the same. Artists may expand items *x* that are deemed 'art' (and fall under the concept) but this doesn't affect the concept or definition.

Gaut has alleged that a sufficient disjunctive set of properties of objects, performances, and so, define the extensions of the concept of 'art.' But Gaut certainly gives inadequate attention to the importance of a perceiver.<sup>15</sup> As Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) rightly argued, when defining 'art' we do not examine extensions of what are called 'art,' and find properties that are common to them all, but rather we acknowledge that the conditions of what constitutes 'art' is determined by personal aesthetic interests and cultural practices.

With a discussion of the fundamentals of the semantics and epistemology of aesthetic judgments now completed, and a definition of 'art' proposed, we are in a better position to consider more detailed questions about taste. In the following section, we consider the concept of what is 'bad taste.'

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of a disjunctive definition (for group resemblance terms) is discussed in chapter six. Roughly, a disjunctive definition, as assumed by Gaut, has a definiens composed of conditions that are associated with the proper extensions of a definiendum, but none of these conditions need be necessary, but some combination of conditions is sufficient to for an item to fall under the concept.

<sup>15</sup> Gaut maintains that possession of each of the following ten properties counts towards something being an artwork: having positive aesthetic properties, such as beauty, grace, or elegance; expressing emotion; being intellectually challenging, having formal complexity or coherence; being able to convey complex meanings; exhibiting an individual point of view; being original; being the product of a high degree of skill; belonging to an established artistic form; and being the product of an intention to make an artwork.

### **What is 'Bad Taste' and Who has Bad Taste?**

It has been said that for some great aesthetic items, a positive aesthetic judgment has almost universal assent. Other times it is said that that some persons have 'bad taste' if they should enjoy something more questionable. Hume lauded the music of Bach, as opposed to lesser artists, and mentions the wide admiration of the poet Homer. Goldman asserts that 'Mozart is better than Manilow' (2006a, p. 311). Some critics claim that anyone who likes the rock bands Styx, Journey, or REO Speedwagon have bad taste, because they allege the vocals of these bands are whiney, and the lyrics are simple. Some persons confidently assert that 'The Beatles were a better rock band than Motley Crue.'

From a subjectivist position, it is believed that claims of 'better' and 'bad' taste often involve instances of *different* tastes. Consider the judgment that ranks items, such as 'The Beatles were a better rock band than Motley Crue.' This assertion makes a tacit reference to a mixed paradigm of what makes a 'good' rock band (e.g., originality, strong vocals, strong stage presence, subtlety, lack of subtlety, innovative instrumentation, well-groomed appearance, exaggerated appearance, etc.). What constitutes a good rock band is a loose set of values about what experiences satisfy one's perceptual, cognitive, and emotional capacities in a favorable way. That there are persons who perceive the lyrics, stage style, and vocals of the Beatles as being rather simple and bland, but greatly enjoy the antics and sound of Motley Crue illustrates how aesthetic disagreements can occur.

It might be objected that it is true (independent of what any person believes) that 'The Beatles were a better band than Motley Crue' when comparing the number of records sold, historical cultural influence, and so on. But this is an empirical assertion about the popularity of the band, rather than an aesthetic judgment about the merits of the bands. The fact of greater popularity doesn't indicate that persons with a normal perceptual system will prefer, or more highly rank the Beatles.

Another issue associated with taste involves judgments that require some technical background knowledge about an artistic item. For example, if one asserts that 'the operatic singer was chronically out of tune throughout the whole performance' this judgment can be true or false, as a report about the quality of the singer's voice. Such an assertion usually implies that the perceiver didn't enjoy the performance. But because a

singer is chronically out-of-tune, and a perceiver disliked the performance, this doesn't imply that *everyone* disliked the performance. Suppose that there was a person who (in fact) enjoyed the out-of-tune performance? What should we say about this person? We could say one of three things, all consistent with a subjectivist view of aesthetic judgment. The first is that perhaps the perceiver perhaps lacks practice and comparison of operatic vocalists. A novice hearing her first opera might be moved by the performance and enjoy the performance. A second possibility is that the person has a physiological problem. Perhaps she is tone-deaf. Persons can have non-standard perceptual equipment, such as bad hearing, eyesight, and so on. A third response, suggested by Hume and others, is that we just ignore the perceiver. Hume (1757) says that in some cases "no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment... to be absurd and ridiculous" (p. 231).

In sum, if there is such a thing as 'bad taste' it involves either (a) a lack of experience by the percipient, or (b) a physical deficiency in sensory apparatus, or (c) is the product of an unexplainable idiosyncratic preference. In many cases, the assertion that someone has 'bad' taste is just an occasion to tease someone who has 'different tastes' than one's own and is done half-jokingly. If someone says that anyone who likes the raspy-voiced English singer Joe Cocker has 'bad taste' this person might just be implying that the singer doesn't suit the speaker's own taste.

## **Conclusion**

We have presented a subjectivist aesthetic theory about the nature of aesthetic judgment and taste, that allows that an aesthetic judgment (AJ) can be *true* or *false* in the sense of being *a description of one's own likes/dislikes*. We grant that persons can reliably report their own aesthetic experience and that persons are generally honest in reporting what items satisfy their interests, tastes, and values. But an AJ can be false. People sometimes lie. For instance, an aesthetic judgment would be false if a particular man who very much enjoys Broadway show tunes, denies this in a social situation, for fear of being ridiculed because such affection might be judged as not masculine.

It has been argued that 'experience' (i.e., practice and comparison) of aesthetic items in a domain allows a critic to have a discriminatory (or refined) appreciation for an AI, and a more fulfilling aesthetic experience of those items. Experienced critics will discuss the pieces of, and the overall structure of a work, and offer an interpretation, and an evaluation. In cases of complex works (or exhibitions), critics will attend to the objective properties of the items and describe what features should be valued by the perceiver. Critical interpretations do not aim at truth but attempt to enhance the viewer's appreciation and experience of an AI.

Disagreements in aesthetic judgment are not always explained by a lack of experience or attention by one of the disputants. Experienced parties can be equally informed and attentive to the characteristics of an aesthetic item, but have different values, or weigh the characteristics differently, which results in a different overall aesthetic experience.<sup>16</sup> When making aesthetic judgments, peer groups with similar interests can engage in reasoned debates about why an aesthetic item *x* has merit and demerits for an overall aesthetic experience (good or bad). Persons can support their aesthetic judgment with reasons about why certain aspects of an AI are pleasing and state the embraced values that the AI satisfies. Persons can make a judgment about an AI without directly experiencing an item, because one can often determine whether we might enjoy a movie or not, based upon the reliable testimony of friends, or from the opinion of a trusted critic.

The enjoyment of art is often a social experience. When viewing a painting in an art gallery, one might enjoy discovering and pointing out to others, the hidden details of a painting, the distribution of symbols that it contains, or to commend how the painter has achieved a skill of making the canvass appear three-dimensional. Conversations occur in

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<sup>16</sup> For example, at the movie-review website Rottentomatoes.com, the film *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) directed by Oliver Stone and starring Michael Douglas had a 56% approval rating by public viewers, with professional film critics similarly divided on the movie's worth. Keith Cohen of the Kansas City Film Critics Circle says, "the film speaks to the human condition, and shows that it is time, rather than money, that is the most valuable asset in life." The film is applauded as a "well-oiled and flawlessly executed cinematic event that lives up to lofty expectations." Another critic, Frank Wilkins, a film critic for ReelTalk Movie Reviews completely dismisses the movie as "an unfocussed mess teetering between revenge tale, family drama, coming of age story, morality tale, pointed satire and nostalgic remake." Both the public and critics offer conflicting views about the same movie, but there is no inconsistency here. People report what they genuinely like and dislike in a movie.

friendly social discussions, where we seek to share our interests and tastes, and sustain our distinctive personalities. Richard Eldridge (2014) states that having a personal point of view and free personality, rather than just perceiving the physical properties of an aesthetic item feels exhilarating (p. 199). Ted Cohen (1993) remarks "Some works connect me with many people, including sometimes, considerable varieties of people. Thus, *The Simpsons* and some Marx Brothers movies connect me with both very young people and some widely varying kinds of people my own age and older" (p. 153). Robert Stecker enjoys Shakespeare's poem *Sonnet 73* which is about the waning of life, beauty, and perhaps passion in growing old (2010, p. 66). Stecker enjoys how the metaphors are realized in concrete or evocative images. For example, Shakespeare symbolizes the speaker's youth as dead ashes. Stecker says that "The poem begins as wryly amusing but turns into something very moving" (p. 67).

In sum, the epistemic background for making an aesthetic judgment includes the contingent conditions of 1) the range of one's background familiarity with items similar to an AI, 2) one's personal inherent interests, values, and preferences, 3) one's emotional status and attentiveness when judging an AI, 4) the physiological state of one's senses, and 5) one's willingness to honestly state to oneself (and to others) whether (or not) *x* is rewarding as an AI. This is the sociological-physiological-psychological-philosophical conclusion from the conceptual analysis of an aesthetic judgment.<sup>17</sup>

Aesthetic judgments are not an investigation of the properties of painted canvasses, sounds, and words written on a page. Unlike empirical judgments, an aesthetic judgment is not true or false based upon the independent objective facts about the physical characteristics of an item. While many of us will agree that 'J.K. Rowling wrote brilliant novels about the character Harry Potter' and that 'a swan is more beautiful than a cockroach' these assertions are not objectively true, except as *reports* about our tastes and values.

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<sup>17</sup> Some philosophers will object to this paragraph and the entire structure of this chapter. It is claimed that analytic philosophy primarily seeks to *justify* various judgments about what art is. Philosophy isn't an explanatory science. In response, I argue that analytic philosophy *should* be reoriented to *social scientific explanation*. Analytic philosophers should try to inform laypersons about how to understand various epistemic assertions, including aesthetic assertions.