

Art and Truth

The relation between art and truth. Three conceptions of the relation: 1. neo-classicism, 2. the analytic-empirical view, 3. the romantic theory of art. Kant on the relation of art and metaphysical truth.

Main reading

If you are not familiar with Kant's or Schiller's aesthetics, then you should read:

- I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), §§1-9, §§23-4, §§27-8, §§43-50, §§59-60. These sections include Kant's i) preliminary analysis of pure judgements of taste, ii) theory of the sublime, iii) discussion of fine art, and iv) theory of beauty as the symbol of the morally good.
- R. Scruton, *Kant*, ch. 6.
- D. Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's 'Critique of Judgement'*, chs. 1 and 4.

Further reading – art & truth:

- J. Passmore, *Serious Art*, chs. 6-7. Analytical, empiricist examination of the claim that art can possess truth.
- J. Stolnitz, 'On the cognitive triviality of art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, 1992, 191-200.
- M. Eaton, *Basic Issues in Aesthetics*, pp. 65-72.
- P. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics*, Introduction and chs. 2-3.
- A. Sheppard, *Aesthetics*, ch. 8.
- R. Hursthouse, 'Truth and representation', Essay Six in O. Hanfling ed., *Philosophical Aesthetics*.
- R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, ch. 13.
- C. Bell, *Art*, pt. I, ch. 3, 'The metaphysical hypothesis'.

Further reading – Kant:

- J.-M. Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, ch. 1. Discussion of Kant's aesthetic theory as background to the romantic or 'speculative' theory of art.

Essay question

In what sense, if any, can truth be ascribed to works of art?

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- 1) The neo-classical theory of art: art is connected to truth via its triple features of i) mimesis, ii) beauty, iii) moral significance.
- 2) The 'analytical-empirical' view: there is no single, essential connection of art with truth.
- 3) The romantic theory of art:
 1. Art reveals metaphysical truth (has metaphysical content, plays a metaphysical role).
 2. Metaphysical theory is necessary to elucidate art.
 3. Art reveals metaphysical truth which is inaccessible to philosophy.

Kant's aesthetic theory

For Kant metaphysical truth is involved in **aesthetic experience** in three ways:

(1) Judgements of taste presuppose a principle that refers to the supersensible *qua* a unity of freedom and nature (the Antinomy of Taste): 'the basis that determines the judgement [of taste] lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be considered the supersensible substrate of humanity ... as the sole key for solving the mystery of this ability [of taste, is] concealed from us even as to its sources, we can do no more than point to it ... [we must] look beyond the sensible to the supersensible as the point [where] all our a priori powers are reconciled' (*Critique of Judgement*, §57).

(2) The experience of beauty intimates the transcendental truth that the natural world is such as to 'fit' our minds (with beauty we are 'at home' in the world): 'the purposiveness of nature for our cognitive powers and their use ... is a transcendental principle ... judgement must think of nature ... according to a *principle of purposiveness* for our cognitive power ... This harmony of nature with our cognitive power is presupposed a priori by our judgement ... we may regard *natural beauty* as the *exhibition* of [this] concept ... [aesthetic judgement] alone contains a principle that judgement lays completely a priori at the basis of reflection on nature' (*CJ*, Introduction V and VIII).

(3) The experience of the sublime involves apprehension of the metaphysical truth that we enjoy independence from and superiority over nature: 'though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognise our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be endangered by nature outside us'.

Art is of necessity beautiful (and so cannot be sublime), but not merely so: (i) Art is produced by *genius*, which is that '*through which* nature gives the rule to art'. (ii) Art embodies *aesthetic ideas*: '[B]y an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.' (iii) Aesthetic ideas express '*rational ideas*' (hell, heaven, moral goodness, love etc.).

For next week, if you wish to read ahead:

- P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821).
- F. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793-95), Letters 3-6, 12-15 and 27.
- J. G. Fichte, 'On the spirit and letter in philosophy' (1794), in D. Simpson ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*.