Aesthetic Attitude Theory As a Factor in Art and Art Education

Timothy Hicks

The Plight of Essentialist Thinking: Common Denominators, Generalizations, 'Real' and 'True' Definitions of Art

Aesthetic Attitude theory is fundamental to *essentialist* thinking. Ideally it is a logical, internally coherent set of ideas about beauty, the imagination, and the art experience. Although such ideas are deemed *necessary*--in spite of essentialist beliefs that the character of art is presupposed by an aesthetic referent--they are not always *sufficient*. In short, we might say that aesthetic theory is reducible to two reciprocal but not always complementary conditions: (1) *the subjective conditions*, and (2) *the objective conditions* of the aesthetic experience as prerequisites to the possibility of art. The latter conditions reflect interests in the sublimity of *space* and *time* in relation to the art object as the proper substance for a noumenal world of appearances; that is, as the embodiment of spiritual and magical powers; as the manifestation of a cultural and environmental synthesis; and as the signification of life in anticipation of the mysteries it holds beyond the phenomenal world. The former conditions reflect the *aesthetic attitude* and are grounded empirically in the free interplay of the cognitive faculties where attending to objects for their *intrinsic value*, *inherent beauty*, or mere *pleasure* is the uninhibited focus of the percipient. The search for verification and validity of aesthetical ideas is metaphysical. Proof of the attitude theory's internal coherence involves the verification of many supporting concepts and propositions, the deduction of which may be summarized as a kind of definition of art.

The Problem with Definitions of Art

Traditionally, the generic definitions for *art* and *work of art* function in a bipolar relationship as the substance of aesthetic theory thereupon giving rise to the *art experience*. In their role, they extend and amplify empirical concepts and are separated only by environmental and cultural manifestations; i.e., intuitions that arise from observed phenomena and noumena, psychological and axiological data, all constituting the *matter* and *form* of aesthetic theory. Aesthetic attitude theory is, therefore, the primary vehicle through which philosophical and critical issues in the fine arts are broached. But there are many problems in verifying and validating a definition of art or work of art. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz explains: "The problem is to find the feature or features by which art can be distinguished from other forms of human activity."¹ He suggests, "It is easier to proceed *intuitively*, i.e. to

consider *typical* instances of art and describe their properties."² However, the nature of these difficulties is semantic.

The *word* art possesses enigmatic qualities: magical powers obscured and hidden well within numerous connotations and within the many interrelated conditions in which it occurs. It is generally a reference to all art, and is objectified through any work that resembles our definition. The *work* possesses content, form, autonomy, and signifies itself. But the *word* incites thoughts, ideas, and feelings--although not always clear--and its signification is determined by the philosophical and aesthetical definitions rendered to it. Interpretations, criticisms, and judgments of the work of art are consequently attempts to rationalize the correlation between the *work*--as an autonomous thing that exists in and of itself--and the *work* as the manifestation of ideas and imperatives presented theoretically in philosophical aesthetics. And so, when we use the *word* art, do we address a *thing* or an *idea*?--Are we ambivalent or ambiguous?

Such vacillating runs on all fours with the semantic difficulty of distinguishing between definitions that purport what all art ought to be, and those which define the peculiar qualities of a particular visual arts medium, as if such a definition stands *paradigmatically* for all art as well. The definitions that shape our understanding of *essentialist* aesthetic theory are controversial; in part, because paradigms and imperatives are often dogmatic and because words are insufficient when descriptions of the subjective conditions of the art experience are desired.

Origins of Essentialist Aesthetics

"The ancient conception of art: art as production governed by rules, lasted from the fifth century B.C. up to the sixteenth century A. D. The years 1500 to 1750 brought a transition to the modern conception of art as the production of beauty. For some 150 years this definition went unchallenged until the year 1900 when doubts appeared whether the definition was as satisfactory as it seemed. By 1950 it was clear that it was not."³ In Plato's *Republic*, Book X, Socrates asks the question: "Which is the art of painting designed to be--an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear--of appearance or of reality?"⁴ Socrates' question is early evidence of the controversy between the dynamics of appearance and reality in the fine arts. To respond, we shall take *reality* to mean, *an imitation of things as they are*, and *appearance* to relate more subjectively as a matter of taste--our interest lies in the latter. Following essentialist thinking, the necessary attention under such conditions may be presupposed by finding a *common denominator* for the different activities of painting. Once this ingredient is found, we need to establish a purpose which renders this human activity necessary. That such a purpose is found necessary is determined by the sufficiency with which we understand the affects of certain cognitive states. The concepts of *Contemplation*, *Disinterestedness*, *Empathy* and *Psychical Distance* are cognitive states deemed necessary by essentialists; they form the ground to

the possibility of an *aesthetic attitude* and are, therefore, presuppositions to all matters of taste. To see truth or purpose in a painting requires proper preparation: a *necessary and sufficient cognitive state*. Such a mental predisposition is thus essential to answering Socrates' question. The following paragraphs offer a brief description of the range of these essentialist concepts:

Contemplation

Richard of Saint Victor, whose writings had a bent towards mystic theology, divides contemplation on epistemological grounds into six levels from the unintelligible free play of the imagination to contemplation of the supersensible--"that which is above reason and contradictory to it."⁵ Clive Bell and Roger Fry, on the other hand, see it as a *necessary and sufficient condition* to all matters concerning subjective representations of the aesthetic objects. Leo Tolstoy views contemplation essential to his revelatory theory of art as *religious perception*. C. J. Ducasse explains that when a person is listening to music with an interest in its "emotional import" he is engaged in *aesthetic contemplation*. He writes, ". . . listening with aesthetic interest to sad music acquaints the listener with the taste of sadness, but does not ordinarily make him sad." simply a sensuous experience "it is an imaginative experience." The taste of sadness that Ducasse mentions is an imaginal sadness: a sadness that is joyful rather than painful because sad music is *representational* not literal.

Empathy

The theory of empathy follows a deduction of various cognitive states which bring to view the psychological disposition of the percipient. Theodore Lipps, and Violet Paget, who used the pen name Vernon Lee, are the best known writers on the subject although they present different position. Lipps divides empathic acts into two types: (1) that of the contemplative self, a projection of self into the sensuously perceived object or "inner imitation,"⁸ and (2) that of the corporeal or sensual self, a projection of self through the real or actual movements and postures in a preoccupation with *sense-feelings*. Lee, on the other hand, focuses a major portion of her theory on the sensation of rising--as if "the mountain rises." Empathy, she concludes, is the result of a "*a tendency to merge the activities of the perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object.*"⁹ They differ in their interpretation of the German verb *sich einfülen* that means "*to feel oneself into.*"¹⁰ This is more akin to Lipps' theory of "empathy as a metaphysical and quasi-mythological *projection* of the ego into the object or shape under observation."¹¹ The other interpretation is fundamental to *sympathy* which is implied in Lee's theory, ". . . and turns it into a rather sympathetic, or as it has been called, *inner*, i.e., merely *felt*, *mimicry* of, for instance, the mountain's rising."¹²

Disinterestedness

Disinterestedness is traceable through the writings of Plato, twelfth century theologians (Aquinas and Richard of St. Victor), eighteenth century

British moralists (Lord Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Addison, Alison, Burke and Gerard), and the writings of Immanuel Kant, particularly the *First Moment* of his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*. British moralist, Archibald Alison writes, for example:

To perceive disinterestedly is to make one self a pure, unflawed mirror prepared to receive without distortion all the impressions, which the objects that are before us can produce.¹³

And moralist Joseph Addison wrote: "The man of polite imagination is one who can look upon things without any desire for possession."¹⁴ Jerome Stolnitz credits Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury with being the "first philosopher to call attention to disinterested perception."¹⁵ And Kant, who takes disinterestedness to be the subject of his First Moment, writes: "Taste is the faculty of judging an object or a method of representing it by an entirely *disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction."¹⁶ While a disinterested satisfaction is paradoxical, it is also a metaphor for the kind of attitude requisite to the possibility of an art experience. In the First Moment, Kant writes that "satisfaction is the good and the pleasant is bound up with interest;"¹⁷ i.e., the satisfaction which determines the judgment of taste is [thus] disinterested." a particular satisfaction inhibits our ability to experience the full intensity of the emotions imported by the art object. *Disinterestedness* is a necessary condition to minimizing *aesthetic bias*: those aesthetical ideas and prejudices which tend to colour our judgments of taste.

Psychical Distance

Edward Bullough, author of the theory of '*Psychical Distance*' as *a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle*, does not use the term disinterestedness but his explanations of Distance require the same form of attention. For example, as an aesthetic principle Distance may be achieved by:

. . . putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical actual self . . . by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the 'objective' features of the experience, and by interpreting even our 'subjective' affections not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon.¹⁹

Bullough parallels Distance with our ability to objectify qualities of an experience concomitant with projecting ourselves vicariously into the phenomenon itself. By "putting a phenomenon out of gear with our practical self," he uses the concept of disinterested attention; by interpreting our being not as our own but as belonging to the phenomenon, he borrows from the concept of empathy; and through association of the former with the latter, contemplation is possible. Although Distance effectively employs

disinterestedness, empathy and contemplation, it differs, slightly, in that it is not concerned with an analytic of the cognitive faculties but with maximizing aesthetic sensitivity and art appreciation.

Anti-essentialist Claims

W. B. Gallie explains that the nineteenth century doctrine "art is essentially imagination has dominated philosophical aesthetics for the last hundred and fifty years and during this period the vocabulary and the presuppositions of artistic and literary criticism . . . has been profoundly affected by this Idealist doctrine."²⁰ Whether *imagination* or any other ingredient is characterized essential to the stability of a definition of art, most--if not all--writing on the aesthetics of *art* and *nature*, particularly nineteenth and early twentieth century writing, was essentialist. *Anti-essentialism* is thus a twentieth century phenomenon with published articles and books dating back to the late twenties, yet having a more substantial impact from the fifties to the present.

In 1956, anti-essentialist Morris Weitz asks: "Is aesthetic theory, in the sense of a true definition or set of necessary and sufficient properties of art, possible?"²¹ Two questions comprise the one Weitz asks: (1) can art be defined, in the sense of one ubiquitous, real, or true definition? and (2) are necessary and sufficient properties antecedents to the truth or falsity of any definition of art? While Weitz acknowledges "theory has been central in aesthetics and is still the preoccupation of the philosophy of art" and that "its main avowed concern remains the determination of the nature of art that can be formulated into a definition of it."²² he admonishes:

Aesthetic theory--all of it--is wrong in principle in thinking that a correct theory is possible because it radically misconstrues the logic of the concept of art. Its main contention that "art" is amenable to real or true definitions is false. Its attempt to discover the necessary and sufficient properties of art is logically misbegotten for the very simple reason that such a set and consequently, such a formula about it, is never forthcoming.²³

In his 1958 article: *Does traditional aesthetics rest on a mistake?* W. E. Kennick, points to two mistakes he believes are the fault of traditional aesthetics. The first mistake occurs in the aesthetician's compulsion to reduce the complexities of art and aesthetic concepts to simple, no-nonsense real and true definitions. The first mistake he claims is "the assumption that, despite their differences, all works of art must possess some common nature, some distinctive set of characteristics that serve to separate art from everything else"²⁴ There are two parts to the second mistake: (1) "Criticism presupposes Aesthetic Theory."²⁵ That is to say, ". . . responsible criticism is impossible without standards or criteria universally applicable to all works of art,"²⁶ and (2) ethics and morality--as criteria for standards of critical

judgment and taste, or as denominators of good and bad art--are based on extrinsic evaluations. Susanne K. Langer also points out that: "... for a long time, philosophers hoped to find the true quality of meaning by collecting all its various manifestations and looking for a common ingredient. They talked more and more generally about "symbol-situations," believing that by generalization they might attain to the essential quality which all such situations had in common."²⁷ And Monroe C. Beardsley expresses the problem this way:

There is one valuable--but inadequately appreciated--contribution that aesthetics has made to the growth of 20th century philosophy in general. Its generic concepts, art and work of art, have served as paradigm cases for most of the forms of waywardness to which concepts are subject: they worked overtime as horrible examples."²⁸

The Essentialist Fallacy and Its Impact Upon Essentialist Thinking

What Kennick considers fundamentally a *mistake*, and Weitz, *all wrong*; what Langer describes as *misguided*, and Beardsley *condemns*, W. B. Gallie terms the *essentialist fallacy* and asserts:

The [the idealists] presuppose, that is, that whenever we are in a position to define a substance or activity we must know its essence or ultimate nature--this by methods that are entirely different from those used in the experimental and mathematical sciences or in our commonsense judgments about minds and material thing. . . . I believe that they are vitiated through and through by the "essentialist fallacy."²⁹

The *essentialist fallacy* deems common qualities contradictory to reason. But in spite of this, Gallie asks, should nineteenth-century idealist aesthetic theories, be consigned to oblivion? While such theories seem doomed to failure, he suggests essentialism is nonetheless a tough captivating doctrine and that philosophers have championed the cause of anti-essentialism "only to slip back--as soon as their philosophic interest flags or their acquaintance with relevant scientific procedures is defective--into unmistakably essentialist habits of thought."³⁰ He adds:

For essentialism is not only deep-rooted in men's thought habits--or linguistic habits; as it penetrates different departments of human thought it works on these, at first stimulating them but eventually blunting or distorting them in markedly different ways. This is why the abandonment of essentialist habits of thought in mechanics did not lead automatically to the abandonment of them in other parts of physics, or biology, psychology, and the political and social sciences.³¹

Given the above explanation, it is plausible that *our ability to clarify associations is subordinate to our ability to make them.*³² Our *thought habits* enable us to make associations, but our ability to clarify or make distinctions among these associations is restricted by our *linguistic habits* and by language in general. For example, the illocution: "This is a work of art!" is literally an associative claim. But if clarification is desired--for instance to: "What is a work of art?"--again as pointed out above, ordinary language suddenly seems ill-equipped to handle the numerous connotations of the word art. The problem this time, however, is with the *emotive, tacit, ineffable, supersensible, and non-empirical*, all of which are *non-literal*, but highly valued associations known to baffle even philosophers. There are, therefore, two sides to the empirical events that make up each aesthetic experience; one, *literal* and the other, *non-literal*. The task of defining art is useless without a reference to both, and the theorist or philosopher must find words to express that which is not only seen, as an outer experience but *felt*, as part of the inner self. The dilemma is therefore deep-rooted in the paradoxical task of transposing a non-literal side of the phenomenon into one that has objective validity--and to do this without loss of substance. The dilemma Gallie exposes has more to do with representing the language of feelings and emotions than necessary and sufficient conditions or common denominators. More importantly, he acknowledges the apparent unavoidable trap that finds its way into the language and thoughts of those who seek to disclaim the significance of essentialism in offering alternatives--"only to slip back into essentialist habits of thought."

Kennick states also that those who seek moral and ethical evaluations of art in the art object "may be looking in the wrong place, but clearly they are right in assuming that there must be something to find."³³ He continues:

They are not looking in the wrong place so much as they are looking for the wrong thing. The bases of responsible criticism are indeed to be found *in* the work of art and nowhere else, but this in no way implies that critical judgments presuppose any canons, rules, standards or criteria applicable to all works of art.³⁴

This tendency towards oversimplification, the reduction of ideas to simplifying formulae (e.g., common denominators, ingredients, generalizations, etc.) by the aesthetician, philosopher, critic, and even the artist, according to Kennick, "should not be scrapped merely because they fail to do what they are designed to do."

What fails to do one thing may do another. The mistake of the aestheticians can be turned to advantage. The suspicion that aesthetics is not nonsense is often justified. For the idea that there is a unity among the arts, properly employed, can lead to the uncovering of similarities which, when noticed, enrich our commerce with art.³⁶

Concluding, he submits, "there is . . . a fruitful and enlightening search for similarities and resemblances in art that the search for the common denominator sometimes furthers"37 Notwithstanding, the predicament with common denominators is real. The difficulty, Maurice Mandelbaum explains, is that:

While we may acknowledge that it is difficult to define any set of attributes . . . which can serve to characterize the nature of art, . . . it is important to note that the difficulties inherent in this task are not really avoided by those who appeal to the notion of family resemblances.³⁸

Whether similarities, or Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblances* (an anti-essentialist position), the attributes which *all* works of art have in common--fleeting as they may be due to the nature of our thought and linguistic inhibitions in a phenomenal world--are always there for the verification and validity of aesthetic theory--but not without controversy.

Three Problems with Implementing Aesthetic Theory for Art Education

Problem 1. At the basis of all aesthetic theory is the problem of verification--the same holds for the fine arts and most importantly for art education. Simply stated, art cannot be verified--clearly this is a difficulty for art education as well. Only those qualities in the aesthetic experience that we know but cannot effectively put into words are verifiable, and only that with which we so vicariously attach ourselves is valid--therefore, the aesthetic experience is *valid for the percipient only*. Ineffable qualities and a noumenal world of experiences demand a different form of communication. Hence, to verify an aesthetic emotion, the task is to transpose our innermost feelings using mere words and to do so in a manner that will enable others to share, with equal or even greater intensity, that emotion. Metaphors and other forms of figurative language have traditionally provided words more befitting the problem. But metaphors and their referents are neither literal nor can they be verified. In the fine arts, for example, the *artistic* imagination is the vehicle through which feelings are transposed and the *medium*, a transcription of those emotions--but still no verification because *the aesthetic experience is a subjective experience* and cannot be verified for the community (culture, race, religious sect, etc.). Consequently the design of aesthetic curricula for children or adults may involve the whole class but must objectify the *individual*.

Problem 2. Definitions fail to adequately represent the art experience. A definition of aesthetics for art education would likely fare no differently although, historically, the role of aesthetic concepts and definitions could be construed as one *really big* attempt to define art--notwithstanding, mainly philosophers and aestheticians made such attempts. Aesthetic theory is surrounded by controversy much of which is due to a reduction of tenable principles to oversimplified definitions. Unquestionably, we need to know the purpose of aesthetic theory for art education, but is pursuit of a definition the

proper objective? It is to the principles of aesthetic theory that we attribute centuries of insight and illumination. Only with aesthetic principles: presuppositions to the possibility of art, do we have the tools to implement aesthetic appreciation into the art education curriculum.

*Problem 3. Philosophobia:*³⁹ A reference to art educators who regard reading aesthetic theory as an act of academic suffering--in some respects, they are correct. Only the problem is not going to vanish. To seek affirmation of our definitions of art, we must *read* aesthetic theory. The move from art education to philosophy may seem imposing but we cannot teach what we do not know, and we should not depend entirely on models and metaphors to supplement what we should be doing ourselves--reading! Aesthetic theory is philosophical and those aestheticians who are not philosophers (Bullough, for example, who is a psychologist), have very strong backgrounds in philosophy. Philosophical aesthetics is rich with ideas, concepts, and definitions all constituting a language of referents set in a logical schema. No one book can adequately prepare us for this type of aesthetic discourse; there are, however, many books and hundreds of scholarly articles in journals. Reading such materials may be augmented with courses in general philosophy and aesthetics, and through dialogical interaction with colleagues interested in aesthetic concepts.

Actually, this overview could have effectively been summed up in the words of Jerome Stolnitz(1961) who wrote: "*The meaning of a philosophical concept is often less important than its dialectical functions*"⁴⁰ Regardless of impending disagreement, the dialectical function of aesthetic discourse is its verification. In closing, I will share this sudden insight that came upon me one morning about 4:00 a.m. while I was perched in bed reading an article on aesthetic attention:

Every time I read a new concept or theory or definition about art, it has the sobering affect of making me feel that I knew very little all along. It leaves me curiously apprehensive that much of what I do not know about art, may be found in what I have not read.⁴¹

End Notes

¹Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, "What is Art? The Problem of Definition Today," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 11 (1971)138.

²Ibid, 137.

³Ibid (In the interest of space, this quotation is paraphrased).

⁴Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4 ed. trans. B. Jowett, M.A., (London: Oxford University Press 1892):472.

⁵Richard of Saint Victor, *Selected Writing on Contemplation*, trans. Clare Kirchberger (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1957): 151-52.

⁶C. J. Ducasse, Art and the Language of Emotions, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22 (1964):111.

⁷Robin G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (London: Oxford Press 1938): 148.

⁸Inner imitation, perhaps less formal than *aesthetic imitation*, describes the necessary ingredient for aesthetic empathy; i.e., as distinguished from *voluntary imitation* which Lipps attributes to empathy without an aesthetic referent.

⁹Vernon Lee [Violet Paget], *Empathy*, in Morris Weitz, *Problems in Aesthetics*, ed. (New York: 1959):758.

¹⁰Lee, 760.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Jerome Stolnitz "The Origins of Disinterestedness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961): 138.

¹⁴Joseph Addison, *Spectator* no. 409, in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, ed. Green (New York: 1856) VI, 140, in Stolnitz, 143.

¹⁵Stolnitz, 132.

¹⁶Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951): 45.

¹⁷(See Kant's *First Moment*: S1, S2, and S3): 37-45.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Edward Bullough, "Psychical distance As a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 5 (1912): 89.

²⁰W. B. Gallie, "The Function of Philosophical Aesthetics," *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 57 (1948): 302.

²¹Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 27.

²²*Ibid.*, 27.

²³*Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁴W. E. Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* 57 (1958): 319.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*, 325.

²⁷Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), 54.

²⁸Monroe C. Beardsley, "On Art and the Definition of Arts: A Symposium; The Definitions of Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961): 20.

²⁹W. B. Gallie, 302.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 302-3.

³¹*Ibid.*, 302.

³²"The mind has a tendency to associate the ideas corresponding to types of events that have always been observed in close succession: consequently, whenever the idea of the first type of events is present to the mind, it evokes the idea and expectation of an event in the second type." *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Antony Flew (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979):27-8.

³³Kennick, 327.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, 323.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965): 223.

³⁹*Philosophobia* is a word that I feel expresses the fear some art educators have (myself included at one time) of studies in philosophy and philosophical aesthetics. I prefer this term to the double noun hyphenated construction of "Philosophy-Phobia" which has seven syllables. *Philosophobia* (phi-los-o-pho-bi-a)--from Gr. *philos*, loving; Gr. *sophos*, wisdom or knowledge; and Gr. *phobos*, fear--has one less syllable and is,

rhythmically, a little easier to enunciate. See *Websters New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged*, 2nd. (1983), s. v.(s) "Philosopher and Phobia."

⁴⁰Jerome Stolnitz, "The Origins of Disinterestedness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (1961): 140

⁴¹Timothy O. Hicks, *Confessions and Hallucinations at 4:00 a. m.*, from note card no. 49 written by the author, 2 February 1991.