

COLLEGE GUILD
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PHILOSOPHY

Unit 6 of 6

Politics to Aesthetics

We are nearing the end of the part of our course describing the five main branches of philosophy and how they relate to each other. Aesthetics (pronounced “es-THET-ics”) is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste, along with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Philosophical scholars in the field define aesthetics as “critical reflection on art, culture, and nature”. It comes from the Greek meaning “perceptible by the senses”.

1. Name as many categories of art as you can think of.

2. List the categories of art that you love or gravitate toward. Why does this kind of art appeal to you more than any other?

We’ll start with a philosopher by the name of G.W.F. Hegel who saw a political connection to aesthetics. He argued that we wouldn’t have the political institutions that we have today if humans did not start out making art. Hegel outlined his grand theory in university lectures, which has been collected through notes by his students into Hegel’s “Lectures on Fine Art.” Hegel’s philosophical approach is historical and developmental meaning that in order to understand his aesthetic theory, we must also be art historians! Therefore, we will be looking at several art pieces to see if his claims hold up.

In his lecture, Hegel states this about art: *Art has in fact been the first instructress of people.* (#50).

3. What other branch of philosophy is associated with Hegel’s grand theory of art and in what way?

In his lectures, Hegel defines the universal need for art as: *man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self.* (#31)

What in the world does Hegel mean here?! In order to best understand him, think back to when you were a young child. Do you remember how everything was fascinating, sometimes terrifying and exhilarating at the same time? Hegel brings in the example of a child playing outside to illustrate his point:

Even a child’s first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an intuition of something that is his own doing... (“30-31).

We can understand Hegel to be referring to our wonder and curiosity that entice us to learn more about ourselves and the world around us. This is illuminated in children at play. We figure things out or “think” in the most elementary fashion through our senses, such as by seeing and hearing. We also learn and differentiate ourselves through specific actions that put us in a position of power over the natural world, such as throwing and reconfiguring objects in the world to our liking.



'Skipping Stones' by Masscreation from *Deviant Art*

4. What are some things you did as a child to establish yourself as an individual with control over the natural world?

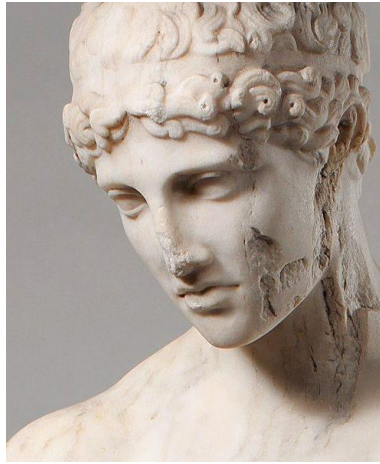
Stacking stones in front of us is a way in which we can see the final product as our own creation rather than a natural feature of the landscape. As Hegel would say, we come to “recognize again [our] own sel[ves]” through this interaction with the natural world”, and the sense of “spiritual consciousness” develops.



This is why Hegel explains early art—what he called **Symbolic Art**— as using a lot of heavy materials such as stones and metals. By bending and molding the most inflexible materials in the world, we established ourselves as agents and doers who cannot be reduced to being controlled by the whims of the natural environment or our genetic makeup. As Hegel says, *Art lifts [human beings] with gentle hands out of and above imprisonment in nature.* (#31).

5. Can you think of other examples of art that would fall into Symbolic Art for Hegel?

Hegel then moves onto a period he terms **Classical Art**, which he believes was exemplified by Greek sculptures of mythological gods and people. Below is the piece, *Marble statue of a youth (1 century A.D.)*, a Roman copy of the Greek original.



6. Take a moment to examine the above piece. What do you see? What is the sculpture doing in this picture?

7. How is this type of art, Classical Art, different from Symbolic Art?

Hegel found the creation of human shaped sculptures as important because it is when art reached a certain level of self-awareness. It was the moment when art moved away from depicting the supernatural, things beyond human comprehension such as terrifying and awe-inspiring gods and demons or abstract shapes. Creating such mythologies was our way of working out our relationship as *humans* to the world around us. Finally, the shape or form of the artwork matches the subject matter of the art – humans!

The above sculpture is in a moment of contemplation. The sculpture is not simply posing, but looks like it is deep in thought. What does this pose remind you of? Below is a clue:



The sculpture is modeling the way we contemplate and look at art objects today! Have you ever been to an art museum or simply saw a sculpture in a park or painting on the side of a building and paused to study it?

Hegel reiterates: *For man's preoccupation with artistic objects remains purely contemplative, and thereby it educates, even if at first only an attention to artistic portrayals in general, later on an attention to their meaning and to a comparison with other subjects, and it opens the mind to a general consideration of them and the points of view therein involved.* (#30-31)

Classical art is when art makes the shift from simply differentiating ourselves from nature—as a way of leaving our mark so to say—to becoming an investigative tool to examine the inner life of the human, our deepest thoughts and emotions that characterize us as the conceptual thinkers that we are today.

The third and final period that follows Classical Art for Hegel is **Romantic Art**. Romantic art for Hegel refers to the era of art exemplified by painting and music. Below is a portrait at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



Juan de Pareja (1606–1670) by Velázquez (Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez)

- 8. How is this depiction of the human, in painting form rather than in sculpture form, have a different effect on the viewer? Look back on the sculpture above and the portrait here. Please compare and contrast.**

Hegel states: *A person's own subjective inwardness, the life of his heart, the soul of his most personal feelings are not revealed in the sightless figure nor can such a figure convey a concentrated expression of the inner life, or of spiritual movement, distinction from the external world or differentiation within. This is the reason why the sculptures of antiquity leave us somewhat cold.*" (#797)

Hegel's view is that there are limits to what models of the human body by themselves can express. After looking at Greek sculptures, they "leave us somewhat cold" or start to look hollow or lifeless because the sculptural medium does not allow for the play of light and depth that paintings can express. Because paintings are two-dimensional, they can make use of linear perspective that adds depth to the artwork that sculpture simply cannot capture. This depth in painting and its use of color better capture the inner life of the individual.

Now back to the portrait above!

- 9. Who do you think is being portrayed? Based on what you see, what social status do you think this person had?**

If you go to art museums, there is usually a label with the artwork that will give some basic information about the art piece. This is what the label reads at The Metropolitan Museum of Art where the piece is housed:

“Velázquez painted some of his most vibrant and animated portraits while in Italy from 1649 to 1650. This one was most likely executed in Rome during the early months of 1650 and was first exhibited in March of that year. The subject, Juan de Pareja, was the artist's enslaved assistant.”

10. How do you feel knowing this individual was enslaved based on the way the subject is depicted? Did you expect this answer about the subject's identity?

It also states on the label:

“According to one of the artist's biographers, when the portrait was first put on display it ‘received such universal acclaim that, in the opinion of all the painters of different nations, everything else seemed like painting but this alone like truth.’ Months after depicting his sitter in such a proud and confident way, in 1654 Velázquez signed a contract that would liberate Pareja from bondage. From that point forward, Juan de Pareja worked as an independent painter in Madrid.”

This is where aesthetics and politics intersect for Hegel. As exemplified by the case with Pareja, painting taught us not only how to see humans in general, but the individual human being as well.

In the portrait, Pareja wears simple, but elegant clothing. It is not ostentatious like that of a wealthy elite or royalty; he dressed up for his portrait to be drawn. We can gather from this that Velázquez aimed to focus on Pareja as his artistic and refined assistant rather than solely as his slave. Pareja's clear, forward gaze directly confronts the viewer. His right hand rests at his waist maintaining his straight, confident posture. From all this we can gather that he is unashamed of his standing as a slave for he is dignified regardless of the status society subjects onto him. By framing the enslaved Pareja in the light of a proud human being, the painting challenged regular social conventions that saw “Moors” like Pareja as unworthy of recognition and rights.

11. Think of any art piece that you've seen anywhere that made you rethink or reconsider something. Write about the piece and your reaction to it!

12. Do you think Hegel's theory on art is accurate? What are some weaknesses and strengths to his argument?

Congratulations on finishing the Philosophy Unit on the five main branches of philosophy! We hope that you have a better understanding of what each branch stands for and how they all relate to form the foundation of the growing tree of philosophy. Seeking “love of wisdom” is not a skill acquired overnight. Sometimes it takes wrestling with the answers and the willingness to question even your own answers.

13. Which branch of philosophy was your favorite and why? Did you relate to one particular philosopher?

14. Do you consider yourself a philosopher? Why or why not?

Thank you for all your thoughtful responses. We welcome your feedback on this course.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes