

## **STUDY SESSION 5**

### **ETHICS AND AESTHETICS**

#### **5.1** **Introduction**

This study session introduces you to Ethics and Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy and a theory of value. Our concern, therefore, will be to expose you to the meaning, nature and scope of ethics and aesthetics. You will be learning about the various branches of ethics and aesthetics, as well as appreciate the theories that make up the evolution of these branches of philosophy. This study session will also examine some of the problems which these branches aim to address and further show the social and personal significance of ethics and aesthetics.

#### **5.1.1** **Learning Outcomes for Study Session 5**

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

1. Define Ethics and Aesthetics;
2. Show the relationship between Ethics and Morality;
3. List the types of Ethics;
4. List the theories of Aesthetics; and
5. State the significance of Ethics and Aesthetics.

#### **5.2 The Meaning of Ethics**

The word, ethics, comes from the Greek word, *ethos*, which means character or custom.<sup>1</sup> The etymology of ethics suggests that its basic concerns are the character, attitudes and conducts of individuals and groups and the social rules or customs that govern or limit human conducts. As a branch of philosophy, ethics is defined in various ways by moral philosophers. The ancient scholars, such as Socrates and Plato characterized ethics as that branch of philosophy that teaches us how to live a good life, a life of virtue. In this sense, ethics is a reflection on our character so as to determine right and wrong behaviour. Ethics is also defined as the “philosophical study of morality”,<sup>2</sup> that means it is an attempt to examine the meaning, nature and principles of morality with the philosophical tools of critical analysis and conceptual clarification. It is equally conceived as “the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law”<sup>3</sup>. As a philosophical or systematic study, it investigates the general guidelines with which human conducts are judged to be good or bad. In essence, ethics is a critical examination of normative standards that individuals, groups or societies employ to assess the status of human conducts in the society or institutions.

The idea that ethics is the study of morality suggests that the subject matter of ethics is morality. What then is morality? Morality “refers to the person or group’s standards of right and wrong or good and bad”<sup>4</sup>. It is a set of principles that regulate our conducts in the society. When we reflect critically on our own moral standards or the moral standards of the society or institutions, we are beginning to do ethics. For instance, as human beings, there are certain actions that we avoid because we consider them as morally reprehensible actions and immoral. Those who indulge in those actions are reprimanded and sometimes punished. Some of these actions include murder, lying, cheating, dishonesty, adultery, embezzlement of

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<sup>1</sup>Robert C. Solomon, *Morality and the Good Life*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p.3

<sup>2</sup> R. S. Downie, *Rules and Values*, (London: Methuen & co. Ltd 1971), p.1

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Omeregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos, Nigeria: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1993), p.4.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Shaw & Vincent Barry, *Moral Issues in Business*” (Thomson: Wadsworth, 2004), p.4

public funds. On the other hand, there are some actions which the society approves of as moral and those who perform those actions are considered respectable and morally good people. Such actions include kindness, fidelity, love, truthfulness, honesty, etc. We grow up to see some of these moral distinctions as practised in the society and culture. We accept some of the actions as the custom demands. Accordingly, the custom becomes the moral standard for distinguishing the wrong from the right. In other times, we refer to our conscience as the determining standard for our conducts. We also appeal to the laws in the society and equally to our religious standards for the justification of our actions. Yet, these standards of moral judgments are neither sacrosanct nor self-justifying. They require critical examinations; Ethics helps us to critically examine these standards of morality in order to have a more enlightened approach to our conducts and social relations. It prescribes ideal normative standards for regulating human conducts.

### 5.2.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Ethics comes from which Greek word?

### 5.2.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Ethos

## 5.3 The Scope of Ethics

Ethics is a core branch of philosophy. It is concerned with extremely important issues in human life; this is precisely because it directs our attention to human morality and to values that are fundamental for human meaningful existence and cohabitation. By focusing on human morality and values, it shows us the ways to conduct ourselves, in every aspect of

human commitments, so that we live a good life, a life of well-being, fulfillment and happiness.

A society propelled by ethical precepts is a much disciplined one. A disciplined society is a morally healthy and fit society. If the members of a community adhere to moral codes of conduct, the community would most likely experience peace and harmony, and people would have a sense of belonging and therefore see it as a matter of *duty* to make sure that justice reigns supreme. In fact, the life of society, in the normal atmosphere, is, indeed, the training ground of morality. Our moral ideas develop in association with those of other people and are being constantly criticized and modified by the opinions of others.<sup>5</sup> It becomes rather problematic for members of any society to do away with morality or throw morality to the wind. This act can be very detrimental to any society. In other words, a nation that wants to be great (with regard to development and progress) must encourage the integration of the fundamental moral principles in every sector of the society. In a society where ethics is the basic foundation of human relations, individual members and the state consider it as a matter of duty to ensure a sense of justice, honesty, discipline, tolerance, obedience, patriotism and loyalty as well as check corruption.

Any society without ethical standards is an undisciplined or an immoral one. An immoral society is one that is ravaged by malpractice or corruption. It means the members of such a society have lost the sense of self-control and patience. As a result, all the manifestations of indiscipline would take their toll, such as corruption, dishonesty, greediness, fraud, selfishness, neglect of duty, disregard of others, etc. If this situation should become the order of the day, with time, the entire list of vices above would eat deep into the fabrics of the society, permeating all its institutional structures. As a result, the society becomes sick. All

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<sup>5</sup> William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1948) p. 239.

the organs of such a society cannot function properly. Life will become extremely difficult to live because of insecurity (of life and property). Individuals will be demoralized and unhappy; lack of peace and self-fulfillment will become the order of the day. Thus, the country cannot make any headway in terms of meaningful development and progress. Such immoral society would epitomize the Hobbesian state of anarchy and disorder where the life of men was nasty, brutish and short.

The empirical sciences are descriptive in nature, but *Ethics*, as a normative science, is prescriptive. This is because it prescribes norms, standards and principles which guide human actions or activities. Again, while the social sciences deal with “*what is*”, Ethics deals with “*what ought to be*”. Ethics tries to find out how people “ought” to behave. Although Ethics is actually concerned with the way men “ought” to behave, it mainly aims at providing moral answers to the numerous ethical questions arising out of human existence.

Moral evaluation and moral judgment are inevitable in ethics. People's actions are evaluated from a moral point of view. Moral evaluation thus enables us to judge people's actions as good (reward) or bad (punishment). *Moral judgments* are, very often, based on moral principles. It is also advisable to always back up our moral evaluations with justifiable reasons. This will guard against making moral judgments in vacuum. But one important question is: what makes an issue a moral issue? About this matter, Barcalow remarks: Moral issues arise most fundamentally when the choice people face will affect the wellbeing of others either by increasing or decreasing it, causing either benefit or harm.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that the decision to eat eba or amala does not affect the *wellbeing* of others. Therefore, it does not constitute a moral issue. However, the decision to sell drug represents a choice that affects the wellbeing of others. Therefore, it constitutes a moral issue. The state of

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<sup>6</sup> E. Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues*. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company. 1994. p. 4.

*wellbeing* involved may be physical or psychological. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there is no clear-cut demarcation between *moral* and *non-moral issues*. There are people who claim that even if it is only the agent's wellbeing that is involved, it constitutes a moral issue – a broad view. After a thorough research, Barcalow came to the conclusion that any form of behaviour you can think of can be classified as morally prohibited, required or permitted.

### **Sub-divisions of Ethics**

Ethics has three major sub-divisions. These are descriptive ethics, meta-ethics and normative ethics. Let us examine them.

#### **Descriptive Ethics**

Descriptive ethics is a branch of ethics that describes the views, beliefs and principles of ethics. It explains moral beliefs and practices that are discussed in ethics. It describes the moral positions that are held by the individuals, groups and societies. For instance, “stealing is prohibited in the traditional African society” or “Joseph believes that abortion is morally good” is an example of descriptive ethics.

#### **Meta-ethics**

The basic concern of meta-ethics is the analysis of the concepts, language and principles used in ethics in order to determine their actual meanings, connotations and implications. It involves a critical analysis of the nature of morality and moral concepts such as good, evil, duty obligations, moral, immoral, principle, and so on. The analytic philosophers believe that philosophy is about clarification of concepts. Accordingly, they maintain that the fundamental preoccupation of ethics is clarification of ethical concepts. Interestingly, conceptual clarification of ethical concepts is necessary in ethical analysis. This is precisely because the concepts need to be understood for their proper applications. So, meta-ethical

analysis helps to shed more light on the ethical matters and moral claims. This is necessary because it is not impossible for two people to disagree without knowing that their dispute is due to their misunderstanding of the concepts in question.

Meta-ethics asks questions such as what does it mean to classify an action to be good or bad? What does the concept, “moral goodness” entail? What is the difference between right and wrong? In response to these questions, moral philosophers or ethicists have devised different theories. Thus, meta-ethical theories include, Naturalism, anti-naturalism, emotivism, prescriptivism and intuitionism.

### **Normative Ethics**

Normative ethics is an aspect of ethics that deals with the standard norms or principles that regulate human behaviour. In normative ethics, moral philosophers make moral judgments and determine what correct moral principles are. It is also in normative ethics that conscious attempts are made to “discover some acceptable and morally defensible view concerning what kinds of acts are good and what kinds of acts are right, and why”<sup>7</sup>. It raises questions such as: what are the adequate moral principles for guiding human conduct? Which moral norms or standard of conducts are worthy of acceptance and for what reason? By responding to such questions, moral philosophers prescribe principles or norms of conduct. The moral principles are employed in making moral judgment about specific human conduct.

Simply put, the difference between moral judgment and moral principle is that moral judgment is about specific human action while moral principle is about human actions and character. The relationship is that correct moral judgment is based on ideal moral principles.

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<sup>7</sup> Elliot Sober, op. cit. p.389

In making moral judgment scholars employ some normative criteria. Some of the criteria include the consequences of an action, the intention of the moral agent and the nature of the action itself. The moral philosophers who see the consequence of an action to be the criteria of moral judgment argue that it is the result of an action that determines the moral rightness or wrongness. They maintain that one of the most common characteristics of wrong action is that it leads to bad result and one of the most common features of right action is that it leads to good result.<sup>8</sup> Those who accept this kind of view are called consequentialists. All consequentialist theories are referred to as teleological theories. Teleology is from the Greek word, *teleos*, which means, *end, purpose*. So, it is the *end* or *result* of an action that determines its moral status. No action is right or wrong in itself. An example of consequentialism or teleologism which says an action is right if it yields the greatest benefit for the greatest number of the people is utilitarianism. Other teleological theories include ethical egoism and hedonism.

There are other theories that reject consequentialism. They are called deontological theories. Deontology is from the Greek word *deon* meaning *duty*. Deontological theories hold that the rightness or wrongness of human actions is determined by motive or intention of the agent. If the intention is right then the action is right. If it is good then the action is good. The most popular deontological theory is Immanuel Kant. It holds that actions should be assessed in terms of motives or intentions of the moral agent. This is referred to as motivist's theory of Kant or categorical imperative. The other deontological theories include command theory or natural law theory, virtue ethics, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Regan (ed), *Matters of Life and Death*, (New York: Random House Inc 1980), p.16



As a normative discipline, the function of ethics is not limited to clarification of concepts or postulation and criticism of theories. It also has a practical and social function through which it responds to our existential needs.

### 5.3.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List the subdivisions of ethics

### 5.3.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics, and Meta-Ethics

## 5.4 Ethics and Morality

As used in everyday language, the distinction between the terms “ethics” and “morality” is not always made clear. Used in the context that shows similarity and differences at various times, it shows the extent to which ethics is deeply rooted in morality. Historically, the term “ethics” comes from Greek *ethos* which means the customs, habits and mores of people. “Morality” is derived from Latin *mos, mor, mores or moralis* which denotes basically the same; it was introduced by Cicero as an equivalent to the Greek *ethos*. For the sake of clarity we assume as a standard definition that morality means the customs, the special *dos* and *don'ts* that are shared and widely accepted as standard in a society or community of people — accepted as a basis of life that does not have to be rationally questioned. Ethics on the other hand is the philosophical reflection upon these rules and ways of living together, the customs and habits of individuals, groups or mankind as such. In ancient Greek philosophy the question was to find how to act well and rightly and what personal/individual qualities are necessary to be able to do this. Ethics therefore encompasses the whole range of human action including personal preconditions. The aim was to identify and to practically realize

“the (highest) good” in life — which means that you have to evaluate what is “good” as regards content: what life is a good life and what is not? As opinions concerning the question what makes a good life differed more and more in modern times, ethics had and has to face the question how the resulting conflicts of interests and values could be solved peacefully and justly without taking the part of one side or the other. And this leads to the question of what is morally right; moral rightness and “good life” become separate issues. Whereas questions of “good life” are tied to an evaluation of what is good and are answered in the form of recommendations on how to achieve that goal, norms or principles of moral rightness generate imperatives.

Morals and morality are about personal behavior, ethics is more grandly philosophical. However, linguistic use constrains the philosophical use and helps to blur the distinction: one can have a single ethic, as in "a strong work ethic" or "an ethic of selfishness," but if we talk about a single moral, we have shifted a bit in meaning to the realm of Aesop and Uncle Remus, as in "the moral of the story". In the singular, a moral is a lesson to be learned about a single principle of right and wrong, and an ethic is a single guiding principle that affects your criteria for determining what is right and wrong.

The distinction is best illustrated by the contexts in which these terms are used. When we disparage someone's behaviour, we say that person has "low morals"; we would never say that a drug dealer has "bad ethics". Ethics as a branch of philosophy is studied in universities and theological seminaries.

#### 5.4.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

State the etymology of morals

#### 5.4.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Mos/Moralis/Mores

### 5.5 The Morality of Human Action

The first question that confronts us here is: what are moral issues? Moral issues are about human conducts. Non-human actions are not usually subject to moral examinations. Moral conduct refers to human actions or action of moral agents that can be judged to be right or wrong using moral standards. They are actions that are voluntarily carried out by the moral agents and they affect the life of other people in the society. For instance, when earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and hurricanes ravage cities, kill people and destroy infrastructures, they are not regarded as moral actions. Such occurrences cannot be said to be morally good or bad. It will, therefore, be inappropriate to ask if it is morally right or wrong that hurricane killed people or that a dog bit Mr. X. Again, consider a child at the mother's back who stretches out her hand and draws down a crate of egg on another woman's head without the prior knowledge of the two women. The child cannot be said to have performed an immoral act. It can be said that it is bad that she broke the woman's eggs on which her daily meal depends. But "bad" is used here in a non-moral sense.

In essence, moral actions are: (1) purposive or consciously performed, (2) they are voluntary or carried out of free choice, and (3) they affect or tend to affect the well-being of the people in the society, either by increasing the benefit or decreasing harm that would accrue to them. There is however a debate on whether an action is moral when only the well-being of the moral agent performing the action is at stake.

There is also the question of what makes a particular action right or wrong? To this question, there are myriad of opinions. One opinion maintains that it is God that determines the action that is right and the one that is wrong. This view is known as the divine command theory. It insists that an action is right or wrong precisely because God says that it is. This implies that murder is not intrinsically good or bad. Its moral status is commanded by God.<sup>9</sup> Scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine are good proponents of this position.

Another opinion is that the moral status of an action is determined by the society that one inhabits. This view is called ethical relativism. It argues that morality is relative to place and times. This means that there is no single standard of morality that is uniformly applicable to all men in all places and at all times and circumstance. Different societies or cultures, at any time or epoch, determine the moral worthiness of any conduct.

This view is also a view that each individual constructs his or her morality. The argument here is not that “each of us decides for ourselves how we should live”. Rather, the idea is that we make our actions right or wrong by deciding what standards to adopt. This idea is part of the version of the philosophy of existentialism<sup>10</sup> espoused by scholars like Jean Paul Sartre. It means, therefore, it is the individual and not God or society that makes the action right or wrong. This view is referred to as moral individualism or subjectivism.

The views discussed above are classified under the theory called conventionalism. Conventionalism in ethics holds that an action is said to be right or wrong because someone (God, the society or individuals) says or believes that it is so. The implication of the theory is that actions like murder are not intrinsically bad; what makes it wrong is because someone says or believes or feels that it is. The view is faced with lots of objections.

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<sup>9</sup> Elliot Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing co., 1991), p.388

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.389. See also, A. Agulanna, “Ethics and the Human Conduct” in *Issues and Problems in Philosophy*, Kolawole A. Owolabi, Ed. (Ibadan, Nigeria: Crovacs: Networks, 2000), p.149.

Conventionalism seems to remove objectivity of truth from morality. In their belief, instead of moral truth, we have moral opinion. The problem with the moral opinions is how to explain the reason “why certain things are held by men all over the world and at all times as morally wrong”. Furthermore, the views make ethical discourse to be unworthy of pursuit in the sense that it will be difficult to provide a moral standard that can be used to assess the individual standards of morality.

There is an opposing view which holds that an action is right or wrong independent of anyone’s opinion. There are two versions to this view. One is moral realism. It maintains that there is an objective ethical truth that is independent of anyone’s view. Ethical realism insists on the truth that is universal but admits exceptions. The other version is ethical absolutism. Absolutism in ethics means that there is a moral standard that is applicable to all men, at all times and in all circumstances. Moral absolutism indicates that the moral principles are indisputable and admit no exceptions. Absolutism in ethics faces serious problems. It gives no room for moral conversations. Such principles would not recognize the complexity and fluidity in human existence.

What seems to be more acceptable is moral universalism. To argue that moral principles are universal is to agree that they give room for exceptions. It means that some principles of moral law can be set aside so as to promote some higher values in a society. For instance, the moral principle that enjoins respect of human life prohibits killing human beings. Nevertheless, there are situations where killing is morally justified such as in a situation of self-defiance, war, capital punishment, etc. it can be morally justified if a soldier commits heroic suicide so as to save his comrades or the nation. In other words, morality is neither relative nor absolute, but universal.

### 5.5.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What are the properties of moral actions?

### 5.5.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

(1) Purposive or consciously performed, (2) they are voluntary or carried out of free choice, and (3) they affect or tend to affect the well-being of the people in the society.

## 5.6 Ethics and the Practical Moral Issues

The function of moral philosophy does not solely rest on the “critical scrutiny of right and wrong” nor do moral philosophers consign their intellectual inquiry to the realm of “eternal verities or of scientific methodology”<sup>11</sup>. It also gives us “moral guidelines concerning what to do and how to treat others”. It equally gives “practical knowledge about how we ought to live”<sup>12</sup>. Accordingly, it investigates particular moral issues such as the issue of whether abortion is morally justified or whether euthanasia (mercy killing) is morally acceptable? In the case of abortion, it raises the question whether fetus is a person that has right of existence. This means that in moral philosophy, we go beyond theoretical speculations to finding pragmatic answers on how to live a good life. For instance, it helps us to classify and identify the appropriate punishment to antisocial behaviour. Through this, it helps to regulate the moral agents in the society from falling into abysmal anarchy and chaos and thereby controlling social contradictions.

Furthermore, every profession has one form of morality or the other guiding it. This is usually referred to as professional ethics. For instance, in medical ethics, “Hippocratic Oath” is a guide to medical doctors in their duties. A medical doctor has the power and opportunity

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<sup>11</sup> James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study*, (Chicago: Henry Co. 1952)

<sup>12</sup> James Rachel (ed) *Moral Philosophy: Collection of Philosophical Essays*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. viii

to “inject killer substance into the veins of his patient. However, it is a sense of morality that could prevent the medical doctors from doing a thing like this”.

In politics, ethics provides grounds for interrogating the politics of the government. It is morality that could make the government to avoid making destructive laws. It helps to regulate the relationship between the leaders and the citizens. It imposes responsibilities and duties on the citizens and the government. It defines the responsibilities of the government to the citizens and the duties and obligations of the citizens to the state.

In addition, ethics inculcates the virtues of trust, kindness, care, fidelity, hospitality and truthfulness to the people. It helps to avoid antisocial and repressive behaviour like stealing, fraud, cheating, lying and so on. It promotes love, peace and unity in homes and institutions. Ethics is a tool for deciding theoretical issues and also settling and resolving practical disputes and concerns in the society.

### 5.6.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Since every profession has one form of morality guiding it, what form of ethics guides the medical profession?

### 5.6.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Hippocratic Oath

## 5.8 What is Aesthetics?

The German philosopher, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced the term “aesthetics” in A. D. 1753, but the study of the nature of beauty had been pursued for centuries. In the past, it was chiefly a subject matter for philosophers. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, artists have

also contributed to the study of aesthetics. There are various approaches to the study of aesthetics. This has made the subject difficult to define.<sup>13</sup> Objectivists agree that there exists essential attributes or constituting elements that are objectively discernible and which could be termed “ugly” or “beautiful”. Aesthetics is one of the branches of philosophy and a science that studies the regulations and laws that govern the occurrence of beauty in nature.

The term “aesthetics” is understood to include *all studies of the arts and related type of explanation* from a physical i.e., scientific or other theoretical standpoint. The “arts” are taken to include the traditional forms such as music, literature, landscape, architecture, sculpture, dance, painting, and other visual arts. More recently, additions such as photography, films, earth-works, performance and conceptual arts, the crafts and decorative arts, contemporary technical innovations and other cultural practices including works and activities in the field of popular culture have been added as belonging to the arts.

Aesthetics could be seen as the *theory of the development of beauty*. Beauty itself is an objective phenomenon. Beauty is the combination of objects, qualities that are harmoniously blended together to give pleasure to the senses. Man creates and initiates the greatest beauty in nature. Man tries to perfect creation through beauty. When we look at nature, we cannot but observe beauty, harmony, order and purpose. This fact suggests therefore that the creator of nature must be imbued with beauty to be able to create the beautiful that is found in nature.

In conceiving the definition and scope of aesthetics, Karo Ogbinaka states that aesthetics is derived from the Greek word *aesthetikos*, which means *perceptive*. It is the branch of philosophy that deals with the standard criterion of value judgement such as in the arts, beauty, or the beautiful, goodness, and phenomenon. What is the standard for the evaluation of beauty? At what level is a description considered adequate? etc., are questions in

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<sup>13</sup>G.O. Ozumba, “Aesthetics and Education.” In A.F. Uduigwomen and Karo Ogbinaka, ed. *Philosophy and Education*. (Lagos, Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers Ltd., 1999), p.61-70



aesthetics. Aesthetics is therefore related to the study of value, human values for judgement, and assessment. Ogbinaka points out further that

Aesthetics is also called philosophy of arts. It therefore attempts to provide a distinguishing definition of works of arts, thereby trying to assess the essential, formal, genetical, emotional, attitudinal, psychological, ethical, expressional, etc., properties or elements a work of art ought to have, or otherwise for its evaluation.<sup>14</sup>

### 5.8.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What Greek word is Aesthetics derived from?

### 5.8.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Aesthetikos

## 5.9 The Scope of Aesthetics

Aesthetics does not cover the study of beauty alone. It also appreciates ugly phenomenon. Aesthetics is concerned with essence and perception of beauty and ugliness. It also deals with the questions of whether such qualities *are objectively present* in the things they appear to qualify, or whether objects are perceived by a particular mode, the aesthetic mode, or whether the objects in themselves have special qualities – aesthetic qualities. It also seeks to know if there is a difference between the beautiful and the sublime.

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<sup>14</sup>Karo Ogbinaka. *A Window into Philosophy*, (Lagos: Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers Ltd., 1995). P.61

Now, beauty and ugliness are value-laden words that are often subjectively defined. That is why we hear the phrase “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”. Yet it is argued by some that there are objective criteria for determining what is beautiful and what is ugly. This is probably the propelling factor behind beauty pageants.

### 5.9.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What does aesthetics as a study cover?

### 5.9.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Beauty and Ugliness

## 5.10 Problems in Aesthetics

One major problem in aesthetics is the problem of the definition of art. This is because art expresses the beautiful. We do point out that those who interest themselves in aesthetics fall into two categories. These are artists with a leaning towards philosophy and philosophers with a taste for art. The meaning of art has undergone series of changes and modifications. In ancient Latin (ars) and Greek (texun) both mean craft or specialized form of skill like carpentry, smithy or surgery. Thus, the Greeks and Romans had no conception of what we call art that is different form craft.

In Medieval Latin, as in the early modern English, art meant any special form of book learning such as drama, logic, magic or astrology. The Renaissance established the old meaning of arts as craft. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a separation began to take plac; in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the separation has gone as far as to establish a distinction between the *fine* art and the useful arts. By the wording here, we mean not delicate or highly skilled art but “beautiful” arts.

This brings us to another problem that has generated much heated debate, i.e., *whether ugly should be treated as an aesthetic category*. This is not surprising. Whenever the word “aesthetics” is used, it always conveys the image of beauty. *The pleasure theory of art* (a derivative of hedonism) does not agree that ugly has anything to do with aesthetics since ugliness does not give pleasure. Another concern that has been expressed by aestheticians is: *should art be a representation of life or a product of the artist’s imagination?* By “representation”, we mean that the artist captures what he experiences, what he *sees* in such a way that it is actually a *replica* of the original. The writings of Plato in the *Republic* influenced aestheticians that advocate for the artists’ representation of the natural world. Plato believed that reality consists of *archetypes* or *forms*, beyond human sense experience, which are models for all things that exist in human experience. The objects of such experiences are exemplars or imitations of those forms. The philosopher tries to reason from the object experienced to the reality it imitates. On his part, the artist copies the experienced object or uses it as a model for the work. This therefore means that the artist’s work is an imitation of an imitation.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *impressionist school* began to challenge the traditional view of art. The French impressionists such as Claude Monet denounced academic painters for depicting *what they thought they saw* instead of *what they actually saw*. The 20<sup>th</sup> century impressionists were more concerned with expressing their own psyche than with representing objects in the natural world. They argue that art is *intuitive*. Therefore, the artist should be allowed the freedom to explore his imaginations. Rather than depict the ugliness he perceives, the artists could use his artistic medium to portray what ought to be.

### 5.10.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What kind of person shows interest in the study of aesthetics?

### 5.10.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Artists with a leaning towards philosophy and philosophers with a taste for art

## 5.11 Theories of Aesthetics

We shall first look at the function of art and artistic appreciation. From these, we shall deduce the social significance of aesthetics. These are the *pleasure theory*, *the play theory*, *the communication theory*, *the expression theory*, *imitation theory*, and *art as experience*. We shall discuss a few for our purposes.

**Art as Imitation:** this is the oldest theory of art. It dates back to the ancient Greek period of Plato and Aristotle. This theory holds that art imitates something:

Painting and sculpture depicts object and people. Music imitates human moods and emotions. A painting grows out of the desire to make likeness of people and things. The theatre imitates man in action: comedy imitates people, and tragedy is an imitation of some of the events of real life.<sup>15</sup>

**Art as Play:** this theory originated from Immanuel Kant, in his critique of Judgement that makes a distinction between arts and labour. It is argued that this theory is related to the pleasure theory as well as the notion that art is a means of escape from life. The notion of art as a play suggests that art is simply a way of releasing excess energy since energy needs expression of some sort.

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<sup>15</sup>Marvis Weitz. *Problems in Aesthetics*. (London: Macmillan Company. 1970), p.385

**Art as Communication:** many scholars see this function of art as highly indispensable. It argues that the need to communicate is the motivating factor of artistic impulse and the aesthetic response. This theory finds root in the mystical views that art is a form of ideal.

**Art as Expression:** this is closely linked to the communication theory. This states that there is a message that the artist wants to relay. This can only be done through artistic medium. Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher, for example sees *art as intuition* that is expressed. It is argued that art has its own peculiar language that aids the artist to express his emotions. In present day life, we see that this is still prevalent. Writers, singers, and painters, etc., have been seen to communicate their thoughts, feelings about a particular policy decision through their works and this has been seen to have tremendous impact on the society in which they live. In Nigeria, the acclaimed musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, was known to have used his music to express his dissatisfaction with governmental decisions as well as the happenings taking place in his country, which of course were judged by him as rather unfair. His song “*Teacher don’t teach me nonsense*”, for example, agitates for an exemplary life style from leaders.

### 5.11.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List three Theories of Art

### 5.11.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Art as Communication, Art as Imitation, and Art as Play

## 5.12 Social Significance of Aesthetics

This issue is important because often times, matters of aesthetics have been treated with triviality. Perhaps this is due to the generally mistaken assumption that aesthetics is of no

serious importance to man. At best, we can only derive certain pleasure from it. That is why we go to the theatre simply to relax and cool the nerves. This therapeutic function alone portrays the significance of aesthetics to the society. What is the societal importance of aesthetics?

The view that aesthetics is of no serious benefit to mankind is certainly a display of intellectual ignorance. It merely reduces man to a machine, a robot that is content with just existing. We do agree with Abraham Maslow's analysis of man's desires. That man is first concerned with the bare necessities of survival, yet he has never considered the mere continuation of existence a sufficient goal. Aristotle describes man as a rational animal who thinks and makes decisions, but man also feels, thinks and possesses a wide range of responses.

Aesthetics has a great significance for the society at large. In recent times, a lot of attention is being brought to bear on the importance of beauty. According to Virginia Postrel,

All around, conflicts are brewing on aesthetics. Instead of tolerating sights they don't like...from tacky parch furniture to innovative architecture...more and more Americans are demanding a world free of "visual pollution". Appearance is getting the sort of regulatory scrutiny once reserved for public health and safety.<sup>16</sup>

Even the subject of beauty is being discussed in the sciences especially at the level of scientific theory. According to physicist and science philosopher, Paul Davis, "it is widely believed among scientists that beauty is a reliable guide to truth, and many advances in

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<sup>16</sup>Virginia Postrel, "In enforcing taste, it's better to tread lightly". *New York Times*. July 13, 2000

theoretical physics have been made by the theorists demanding mathematical elegance of a new theory”.<sup>17</sup>

Since beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of what significance is aesthetics to society, especially since there is no particular yardstick for judging the beautiful? Well, as we have said earlier, it is in the nature of man to appreciate the beautiful. The only category of human that might not appreciate nature is perhaps the mentally deranged person. Now, it is another matter entirely if we begin to probe the psychological state of the deranged that creates a rubbish dump, which he calls his home. Because there is this nature inherent in man, it is therefore not out of place that man would seek and crave for beauty around him. He searches for it when he clamours for “appropriate living conditions”, “conducive environment”, “good music”, “tarty food” and what have you! It is pleasing to his soul and helpful to his health.

Sigmund Freud for example believed that the value of aesthetics lies in the *therapeutic use*. It is by this means that both the artist and the public can reveal hidden conflicts and discharge tensions. Fantasies and daydreams, as they enter into the art forms are transformed from escape from life into ways of entering it.<sup>18</sup> However, more importantly, if we consider the functions of art as explained above, apart from the therapeutic effects of aesthetics experience, there is also the *revolutionary, educational and representational significance*. Expounding on the revolutionary importance of aesthetics, Herbart Marcuse is quoted by F.P.A. Demetrio as saying:

A work of art can be called revolutionary if by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and rebelling forces, thus

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<sup>17</sup>Paula. Davis, in “Quantum Aesthetics: Overview”. @<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu>

<sup>18</sup> A. Danto, [Aesthetics.@http://encarta.msn.com](http://encarta.msn.com) 2001

breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation).<sup>19</sup>

For Plato and Aristotle, aesthetics was inseparable from morality and politics. Aristotle argues in his *Politics* that music or art generally affects human character and therefore, social order. This is not surprising. Aristotle indeed believed that happiness is the aim of life. He also believed that the major function of art is to provide human satisfaction.

Plotinus, a third century philosopher, born in Egypt and trained at Alexandria, gave a *mystical importance* to Aesthetics. In his view, art reveals a form of an object more than experience does. He argues that art raises the soul to contemplation of the universals. Being a monist, Plotinus argues also that art enables the soul to unite with “the one”. Thus, one loses oneself while contemplating beauty. The German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte saw beauty as a *moral virtue*. He equated beauty with truth and argued that the artist creates a world in which beauty, as much as truth is an end. For Fichte also, art is individual and not social but it fulfils a human purpose.

Overall, traditional aesthetics assumes that art objects are not only beautiful but also useful. Paintings can commemorate historical events or encourage morality. Music might inspire piety or patriotism. Drama could also serve to criticize society and therefore lead to reform.

### 5.12.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

For Plato and Aristotle, what is Aesthetics inseparable from?

### 5.12.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Morality and Politics

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<sup>19</sup> F.P.A. Demetrio, Diwatao, vol.1. @<http://www.geocities.com> 2001



## 5.13



### Summary of Study Session 5

In this study session, you have learnt what ethics is as a theory of value, as well as the place of aesthetics in philosophy. You have been acquainted with what ethics means in itself, its shared relationship with morality and the extent to which ethics holds value in relation to moral issues and, decisions and judgement. This study session has also helped you understand what aesthetics means, calling to mind its origin, evolution, theories and social significance.

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