



## THE EVOLUTION OF AESTHETIC THEORY: GREEK TO EXISTENTIAL THINKERS

Dr. Subhankar Mandal <sup>1</sup>  & Amrita Mandal Mukherjee <sup>2</sup>

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



#### Author Details:

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Rammohan College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India;

<sup>2</sup> Independent Researcher, West Bengal, India

#### Corresponding Author:

Amrita Mandal Mukherjee

#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250305013>

#### Abstract

Between ancient times and the postmodern era, aesthetic thought has seen significant changes. Aesthetic thought reflects changes in philosophy, culture, and the place of art in society, starting with the metaphysical questions of Plato and Aristotle and continuing through the romantic revolt of the 18th and 19th centuries, the rationality of the Enlightenment, and the humanism of the Renaissance. With an emphasis on influential philosophers and creative movements, this article explores how aesthetic theory has changed throughout time. It draws attention to the shift in aesthetic thought from an objective definition of beauty to a postmodern perspective that is pluralistic, subjective, and frequently cynical. The study comes to the conclusion that human interaction with beauty, meaning, and representation is becoming increasingly complicated, as revealed by the development of aesthetic theory.

**Keywords:** *Beauty, Art, Plato, Modernism, Postmodernism, Representation*

### Introduction

The study of aesthetics is among the oldest and most persistent intellectual endeavors. It has focused on some of the most important and persistent issues in human history: What does beauty mean? What does art serve as? Is the evaluation of aesthetics objective or subjective? Does art create reality or does it mimic it? Despite their seeming abstraction, these questions have influenced not just theoretical discussion but also creative creation, cultural advancement, and social ideals. From Plato's skepticism of art as an imitation of imitation to the postmodern embracing of variety and irony, the evolution of aesthetic theory is interwoven with the broader intellectual history of the West.

The realm of aesthetics is dynamic. The philosophical, technical, social, and political conditions of each age influence how its aesthetic sensibility is reconfigured. Aesthetics was associated with moral principles and philosophical goals in ancient Greece. During the Middle Ages, beauty was linked to divine order and religious concord. Immanuel Kant's writings serve as an example of the more analytical and subjective knowledge of aesthetic experience that the Enlightenment brought. The Romantic movement elevated passion and the sublime while rejecting reason. The emergence of modernism and postmodernism in the twentieth century further shattered aesthetic theory by challenging the function and nature of art in a society that was becoming more and more reliant on technology.

This essay aims to provide a thorough intellectual history of aesthetic theory, starting with Plato and Aristotle's classical frameworks and progressing through medieval and Renaissance works until arriving at postmodern thought's radical relativism and skepticism. In doing so, it will examine how changing ideas of truth, selfhood, and society have influenced ideas of beauty, shape, representation, and artistic worth. We may get a deeper understanding of both contemporary and historical art as well as the conceptual and cultural frameworks that influence our sensory perceptions and critical interactions by looking at the philosophical roots of aesthetics.

### Classical Aesthetics: Plato and Aristotle

#### Plato (c. 428–348 BCE)

Plato established fundamental ideas that would influence later discussions in Western philosophy, making his contributions to aesthetic theory fundamental. Plato expresses a strong mistrust of art in conversations like "The Republic" and "Ion," especially poetry and painting, which he considers to be corrupting and imitative. According to Plato, the material world is a defective mirror image of the everlasting Forms or Ideas, and art is a duplication of a copy, imitating that reality. As a result, creative depictions are three times farther from reality and truth.

According to Plato's metaphysical system, reason and philosophical reflection on the Forms – which are flawless and unchangeable – are the sources of genuine knowledge. According to Plato, one such Form is beauty, which is timeless and pure. He views physical beauty as a stepping stone to the understanding of greater, intellectual beauty, even if he admits its attractiveness. According to Plato, ethics and epistemology are inextricably linked to aesthetics: the good and the truth are also the beautiful.

#### **Aristotle (384–322 BCE)**

In his groundbreaking book *Poetics*, Aristotle – Plato's most well-known pupil – provided a radically different explanation of art and aesthetics. Aristotle saw art as an important and enlightening aspect of the human experience, in contrast to Plato, who saw it as a perilous delusion. Aristotle kept the idea of mimesis (imitation), but he reinterpreted it as a natural human tendency rather than as a dishonest practice. He asserts that humans are naturally mimetic beings that learn and develop understanding of their surroundings through imitation. The primary focus of Aristotle's *Poetics* is tragedy, which he characterizes as an imitation of a serious, all-encompassing, and important action.

He lists story (mythos), character (ethos), diction (lexis), thinking (dianoia), spectacle (opsis), and melody (melos) as the components of a good tragic drama. Plot, which he views as the essence of tragedy, is the most important of them.

Aristotle's idea of catharsis is among his most enduring contributions to aesthetic philosophy. Aristotle argues that tragedy evokes feelings of dread and sorrow in its audience before releasing them through a cathartic process. By assisting the audience in facing human pain and moral quandaries within a regulated artistic framework, this emotional purification has a moral and educational purpose in addition to being therapeutic.

A more methodical and factual approach to aesthetics was brought about by Aristotle's focus on the structural and functional elements of art. He was curious about how art functions, how viewers are impacted, and what qualities make a work of art morally or effectively compelling. Aristotle praised the poet's ability to convey universal truths via specific examples, in contrast to Plato, who exiled the poet from his republic. Aristotle believed that poetry was more philosophical than history because it discusses what may or ought to be rather than what is.

#### **Medieval Aesthetics: Beauty as Divine Order**

The philosophical heritage of classical antiquity and Christian theology had a significant influence on aesthetic thought during the Middle Ages. Boethius, Augustine of Hippo, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Thomas Aquinas were among the thinkers who reinterpreted Aristotelian and Platonic concepts in light of Christian philosophy. Within this perspective, beauty was viewed as an objective attribute derived from divine order, goodness, and truth rather than as a subjective pleasure.

#### **St. Augustine (354–430 CE)**

One of the most important Church Fathers, St. Augustine, had a crucial role in the evolution of aesthetic philosophy. His thoughts on beauty and the arts are interwoven throughout his philosophical and theological writings, particularly in works like *Confessions*, *On Music* (*De Musica*), and *The City of God*, despite the fact that he did not develop a systematic theory of aesthetics in the contemporary sense. Drawing from Plotinus and fusing Christian teaching with Platonic metaphysics, Augustine's Christian Neoplatonism is the foundation of his aesthetics.

##### *Beauty as a Reflection of Divine Order*

According to Augustine, God's creation is inextricably linked to beauty, which is ultimately an expression of God's harmony and order. Insofar as they reflect or partake in timeless truths, all that is lovely in the corporeal world is beautiful. Augustine holds that transcendent beauty exists in God's intellect and that natural beauty is but a faint reflection of that heavenly ideal, much like Plato did with his theory of the Forms.

##### *In Confessions, he writes:*

The earth said, "I am not He," in response to my question; the sea, the deeps, and crawling creatures said, "We are not your God." Aim higher than us.

This paragraph demonstrates Augustine's belief that material beauty refers beyond itself to the source of all beauty, which is God, rather than being a goal in and of itself.

#### **St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)**

The renowned Scholastic philosopher and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas developed a strong and methodical medieval theory of aesthetics by drawing heavily on the theories of Augustine and Aristotle. His integration of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian teaching resulted in a theocentric framework that placed a fresh focus on reason, natural law, and the objective characteristics of beauty.

##### *Beauty as a Transcendental Property*

According to Aquinas, one of the transcendentals – qualities of being that cut beyond categories and are applicable to all that exists – is beauty. According to him, kindness and truth are inextricably related to beauty, creating a trio of celestial perfections that represent the essence of God.

*The renowned definition of beauty given by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologica is:*

*"Pulchritudo est id quod visum placet" — "Beauty is that which pleases when seen."*

The instantaneous pleasure that results from vision is the foundation of beauty, according to this brief definition, but Aquinas contends that this pleasure is not just arbitrary or subjective. Rather, beauty is based on the essence of the item itself and is objective.

### *Three Essential Properties of Beauty*

*Aquinas outlines three key criteria for an object to be considered beautiful:*

1. Integrity (completeness or wholeness)  
The item must be entire and whole, devoid of any flaws or irregularities. A flawless unity of components that work together to form a coherent whole is implied by wholeness.
2. Concordia (Proportion or Harmony)  
The object's components need to be harmoniously proportioned to one another. The ancient Greek term "symmetric," which describes harmonic and balanced connections between elements, is suggestive of this.
3. Claritas, or Radiance or Brightness  
The thing needs to be clear or "bright" enough to be noticeable and understandable. The spectator can clearly grasp the object's form because of this radiance, which is not just physical light but also cerebral illumination.

Together, these properties create a holistic notion of beauty as order, clarity, and perfection that pleases both the senses and the intellect.

## **Renaissance and Enlightenment Aesthetics: Humanism and Rationalism**

### **Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Century)**

Humanism, proportion, symmetry, and the dignity of the human form were all celebrated throughout the Renaissance, which brought back classical principles. The combination of artistic form and intellectual inquiry was personified by artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

During this time, there was a trend toward secular aesthetics, where beauty might be discovered in human ingenuity and scientific observation in addition to heavenly order.

### **Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)**

In his landmark book, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant, one of the key thinkers of contemporary philosophy, introduced a critical, transcendental framework that transformed aesthetic theory. Kant laid the foundation for contemporary aesthetics by shifting the emphasis from the metaphysical or religious underpinnings of beauty to the function of human intellect and judgment.

### *Aesthetic Judgment as Disinterested Pleasure*

According to Kant's well-known definition, an aesthetic experience is a "disinterested pleasure," which implies that genuine aesthetic enjoyment is unencumbered by wants, pragmatic interests, or self-interest. The pleasure that comes from beauty is entirely meditative, universal, and subjective, in contrast to other pleasures that are connected to usefulness or emotion.

According to Kant, when we declare something to be lovely, we are asserting universal validity rather than just expressing our own preferences; we anticipate that others would concur, despite the fact that the judgment is not based on ideas or definitive knowledge.

## **Romantic and Modern Aesthetics: Emotion, Genius, and Autonomy**

### **Romanticism (late 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Century)**

William Wordsworth, Friedrich Schiller, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were among the romantic philosophers who placed a strong emphasis on the sublime, passion, and the human imagination. Art was seen as an uncontrollable outpouring of strong emotions, and nature emerged as the primary theme of beauty.

The idea of the artist as genius – a lone individual expressing inner truth in opposition to societal conformity – was first proposed during the Romantic era.

### **Hegel (1770–1831)**

One of the most important individuals in the development of aesthetic theory is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel provides a profoundly historical and methodical philosophy of art in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*), which is collected from his lectures at the University of Berlin and is based on his larger metaphysical framework. He views art as a crucial stage in the development of human consciousness, expressing the absolute spirit in material form. For Hegel, aesthetics is not merely about beauty or pleasure, but about the manifestation of truth through sensuous means.

Art, history, and metaphysics are all monumentally synthesized in Hegel's aesthetic philosophy. He places art in the larger context of human self-realization by viewing it as the sensual presentation of the Idea, elevating it above simple beauty or emotional effect. His thoughts on the "end of art" continue to influence and challenge modern thinkers, and his dialectical model of symbolic, classical, and romantic art offers a potent prism through which to see the development of art.

Hegel's vision reminds us that art is not only a cultural artifact or aesthetic experience but a philosophical expression of freedom, spirit, and truth.

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century and Postmodern Aesthetics: Crisis and Critique**

### **Modernism**

Modernism challenged conventional ideas of form and beauty. Modernist painters challenged representational conventions, embraced abstraction, and fractured perspective as a result of their exposure to Freud, Marx, and industrialization. Mimetic realism was rejected by movements such as Dada, Surrealism, and Cubism. Self-reflection and the independence of art became crucial. Aesthetic negativity – the notion that art should defy commercialization and provide a utopian criticism of society – was highlighted by philosophers such as Theodor Adorno.

### **John Dewey (1859–1952)**

By firmly establishing aesthetic theory in experience, democracy, and daily life, renowned American philosopher, psychologist, and educator John Dewey brought about a major change in aesthetic theory at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The notion that art is a rarefied, aristocratic item apart from everyday human activity was challenged by Dewey in his seminal essay *Art as Experience* (1934). Rather, he maintained that all kinds of meaningful engagement with the environment include aesthetic experience, which is a natural and essential aspect of human life.

A significant shift in art theory toward the living, democratic, and experiencing aspects of human existence may be seen in John Dewey's aesthetics. Dewey bridges the gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary by focusing on art as experience, arguing that beauty, creativity, and significance come from our interactions with the world rather than just the things we love.

Dewey's contribution reminds us that art is a process, a participation, a communication, and most importantly, a human requirement in a philosophical tradition that is sometimes preoccupied with abstract formalism or metaphysical ideals.

### **Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)**

One of the most influential and contentious intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Heidegger, did not write substantially in the conventional aesthetics paradigm. But beyond the boundaries of formal analysis or aesthetic judgment, his reflections on art, existence, and truth – especially in his seminal essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935–36) – represent a fundamental reassessment of the nature and purpose of art. Heidegger proposed a concept of art as a location of ontological revelation – a place where truth occurs – and questioned the fundamental premises of Western metaphysics. By transcending aesthetics and finding the essence of art in its ability to open a world and expose truth, Martin Heidegger reinterpreted the function of art in philosophy. His ontological approach emphasizes the depth, mystery, and historicity of the artwork, shifting our understanding of art from mere visual pleasure to a transformative encounter with Being itself.

Heidegger questions contemporary formalist or representational methods as well as conventional philosophical aesthetics by viewing art as a location of disclosure. Through lyrical presence rather than explanation, his work challenges us to consider more carefully how art influences how we perceive the world, history, and ourselves.

### **Conclusion**

A deep and continuous discussion concerning the essence of beauty, art, and the human experience may be seen in the development of aesthetic theory from Plato to postmodernism. Aesthetics was first defined in a moral and epistemological framework, starting with Plato's philosophical worries about imitation and the ideal Forms. Art was examined for its veracity and ethical significance. The foundation for the later integration of art, morality, and human psychology was laid by Aristotle's more empirical approach, which also brought the idea of catharsis and an understanding of the emotional and structural aspects of art.

By integrating beauty within a Christian theocentric worldview – where beauty became a mirror of divine order, unity, and moral goodness – the medieval era, particularly via the works of intellectuals like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, revolutionized aesthetics. In addition to influencing intellectual discussion, these medieval ideas, which placed an emphasis on harmony, balance, and spiritual elevation, also influenced the period's creative and architectural legacy.

Immanuel Kant had a pivotal role in the paradigm shift that was modernity. By emphasizing the subjective experience of beauty as disinterested pleasure and establishing the sublime as a key category, Kant moved aesthetic inquiry to the human senses and judgment. By challenging earlier religious and objective ideas, this critical movement elevated aesthetics to a field that studies the circumstances in which the human mind perceives and appreciates beauty and art.

Traditional ideas of beauty, meaning, and representation are still being questioned, expanded upon, and frequently dismantled by post-Kantian aesthetic trends, which include Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Reflecting the complexity of modern creative creation and reception, these latter theories place an emphasis on pluralism, relativism, cultural context, and the relationship between art and power.

A recurring element throughout this historical voyage is that aesthetics is dynamically entwined with human subjectivity, philosophy, culture, and ethics. Art and beauty act as mediators and reflections of societal realities, existential issues, and human ideals. The development of aesthetic theory emphasizes that our perception of art encompasses both the things or acts that we find attractive and the evolving human condition.

All things considered, the path from Plato's ideal Forms to postmodern skepticism shows how important aesthetic theory is for examining the connections between morality, culture, perception, and meaning. Philosophies that attempt to explain the timeless force and significance of art will change along with it in our global and digital era.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** Dr. Subhankar Mandal: Methodology, Drafting, Referencing; Amrita Mandal Mukherjee: Data Collection, Literature Review, Analysis, Drafting

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** All the authors have given consent for the publication.

**Competing Interest:** No

## References

1. Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1991.
2. Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics, 1996.
3. Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Christian Classics, 1981.
4. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, 1987.
5. Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press, 1975.
6. Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Minton, Balch & Company, 1934.
7. Heidegger, Martin. *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper & Row, 1971.
8. Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
9. Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester University Press, 1984.
10. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

## Publisher's Note

*The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

## ©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>