

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetics* (1750–58)

Abstract

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762), a professor first in Halle and then in Frankfurt/Oder, is credited with coining the term “aesthetics” as the philosophy (or science) of art and beauty. Writing in the philosophical tradition of Christian Wolff, Baumgarten defends the philosophical treatment of the “lower” faculties of the senses. The science of aesthetics, he proclaims in this excerpt, should be theoretically informed, geared toward rules for interpretation (heuristical), and methodological. This work would become a major touchstone for the philosophers and critics of his own century, including Lessing, Winckelmann, Goethe, and Kant.

Source

§ 1 AESTHETICS (the theoretical aspect of liberal arts; lower gnoseology; the discipline of thinking with beauty; the discipline of analogical reasoning) is the systematic knowledge of sensorial cognition.

§ 2 The natural degree of the lower faculties of knowledge, which is nurtured only by practice and before any formal instruction, can rightly be called NATURAL AESTHETICS, and as is often the case with natural logic, it can be divided into innate (a beautiful innate talent) and acquired (which is in turn divided into speculative and practical).

§ 3 The practical application of artificial aesthetics (§1), when added to the natural one, will be worthier than others, 1) by providing a good subject matter for those fields of study which are known primarily through the intellect; 2) by adapting the cognitions derived from formal study to the understanding of any person; 3) by extending the verification of cognition beyond the familiar limits of things which require distinct apprehension; 4) by providing good principles to all the more civilized occupations and to the liberal arts; 5) in the life of the community, when other factors are indifferent, by improving everything that is to be accomplished.

§ 4 Aside from the above, there are also the following special practical applications: 1) philological, 2) hermeneutical, 3) exegetical, 4) rhetorical, 5) homiletic, 6) poetical, 5) musical, etc.

§ 5 It can be objected about this knowledge of ours (§1) that: 1) it extends far too widely for it to be sufficiently treated in one small volume or in one lecture — I reply: Yes, but something is better than nothing; 2) it is the same thing as rhetoric and poetics — I reply: a) that it extends far wider, and b) that it comprises these two disciplines and others, and also what lies between them, in such a way that all points of view are brought to one single place and may be seen at once, and so the bottom of any discipline can be discerned successfully without useless repetitions; 3) it is the same thing as methodical critique — I reply: a) that there exists also a logical critique, b) that a certain kind of critique is a part of aesthetics, c) that this kind of critique also needs a preconception of the remaining parts of aesthetics, unless it will be limited to mere taste disputations when deciding matters which are thought over, expressed, and set in writing with attention to beauty.

§ 6 It can be objected about this knowledge of ours 4) that the manifest sensorial input, imaginings, stories, and perturbations of the mind, etc. are unworthy of the philosophers and below their horizon — I reply: a) that the philosopher is a man among men, and that he would not rightly consider foreign to him such a major part of

human cognition. b) The general theory of matters thought with beauty is being conflated with individual praxis and performance.

§ 7 Objection 5) that conflation is the mother of error — I reply: a) but also an indispensable condition of finding the truth, since nature does not leap directly from obscurity into clear distinction; after the night, midday is attained by going through the dawn twilight. b) This is why attention must be paid to conflation, in order to avoid the many and significant errors afflicting those who are inattentive. c) It is not that conflation be embellished, but that cognition is improved to the extent that it may be lacking and receives the addition of some conflation.

§ 8 Objection 6) that distinct cognition is better — I reply: a) only for narrow spirits in matters of grave importance. b) The assertion of one is not the exclusion of the other, c) hence that we approach first, directly and according to distinctly recognized rules, the things that are to be known with beauty, from which only eventually a more perfect distinction will arise (§§3, 7).

§ 9 Objection 7) there is a risk that by cultivating the analogical in reason, there may be harm to the domain of reason and the concrete — I reply: a) this argument is among the most commendatory, for whenever a composite perfection is sought, the risk itself encourages us to be cautious, by persuading us not to neglect the true perfection. b) When uncultivated and corrupted, the analogical faculty of reason is no lesser hindrance to reasoning and to a strict sense of the concrete.

§ 10 Objection 8) Aesthetics is a craft, not a theoretical discipline — I reply: these are not contradictory approaches. How many of the ancient crafts are now also at the same time theoretical disciplines? b) That our craft can be explicated theoretically will be shown by experience and is evident a priori; and since psychology and other disciplines provide firm principles, it deserves being elevated to the status of a theoretical discipline, a *scientia*, as shown by its practical applications mentioned above §§3, 4.

§ 11 Objection 9) like poets, aesthetes are not made but born — I reply: See Horace, *Ars poetica*, v. 408; Cicero, *De oratore*, II, 60; Bilfinger, *Dilucidationes philosophicae*, §268; Breiting, *Kritische Abhandlung von der Natur, den Absichten und dem Gebrauche der Gleichnisse*, p. 6. The born aesthetician is made whole by a theoretical study which is more complete, more commendable thanks to the authority of reason, more exact, less jumbled, more reliable, less wavering, §3.

§ 12 Objection 10) the inferior faculties, the flesh, should rather be conquered and subdued than provoked and fortified — I reply: a) that what is required is the command of the lower faculties, not a tyranny above them. b) Towards this end, and in the measure that it can be achieved within nature, aesthetics guides us as if with a gentle touch. c) When the lower faculties are corrupted, they are not provoked and fortified by the aestheticians, but are instead guided by them, to prevent them from further corruption in improper actions, and to avoid being deprived of the use of a divinely granted talent by the lazy pretext of preventing its abuse.

§ 13 Our Aesthetics (§1), like Logic, its older sister, is I) THEORETICAL, because it instructs generally [Part I], and it prescribes 1) HEURISTICALLY about actual and abstract matters [Chapter I]; 2) as METHODOLOGY on matters of clear structure [Chapter II]; 3) as SEMIOTICS on those signifiers which are beautifully conceived and arranged [Chapter III]; II) PRACTICAL, applied, specific [Part II], and on both these counts,

*Neither eloquence nor a clear structure
shall lack the man who chose his subject matter
according to his powers.*

(Horace, *Ars poetica*, 40)

Let *subject matter* be your foremost care;
a *clear structure* second;
and only thirdly and in the last place
concern yourself about the *signifiers*.

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