

# Philosophy, Art, Philosophy of Art, and Aesthetics

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This course is about the practice of art and the practice of philosophy. We begin the semester with some very fundamental distinctions and questions. First of all, the name. Our course is called “Introduction to Philosophy of Art”. If you look briefly at the schedule of topics and readings you’ll notice that the course is organized both **historically** and **thematically**. Art has a long history and one of the central themes we confront has to do with **the nature of art** and **what it means for art to have a history**. Those are abstract, philosophical concerns. The first one deals with the fundamental character of art — what makes it the thing it is. Philosophers call this an **ontological** question.<sup>1</sup> And to understand **what** a thing is, we also need to know **where** it comes from — what it has **been**, and what it has **become**.

Art historians study the history of **artworks**. Art history is a practical and empirical, rather than a theoretical, approach to art. Philosophy, on the other hand, deals with the more abstract principles, definitions, and concepts of art. But before we turn our attention exclusively to the philosophical study of the arts and artistic experience, I should say a bit more about the nature of philosophy itself.

## What is Philosophy?

Western philosophy, as it’s understood today, began in ancient Greece prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. To say that philosophy emerged with the ancient Greeks does not suggest that the Greeks were the only people to think about the nature of things and their relation to human experience. To ask where we come from, why we are here, and how we should live is a natural part of human life. Philosophical reflection and understanding goes into our deepest and most basic beliefs. It can be extremely helpful both in understanding our everyday lives, and even more so in times of adversity and in the face of great loss. Too often it’s only then that people tend to ask such questions and search for answers. But if that’s the only time we reflect philosophically, we may find that it’s “too little, too late” to give us the insight and resources we need to live a good life.



Praxiteles, Hermes with the Infant Dionysus, 4th C. BC

The search for answers and insight takes many forms. In some cases, it’s formulated in systems of religious beliefs that posit the existence of a god or gods responsible for events that occur in the natural world. In those cases, we’re appealing to supernatural or cosmic forces to make sense of our experience.

But philosophy in the West is not the same as the practice of religion or theology — those doctrines or systems of belief that attempt to unify the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and profane. Philosophy begins in **wonder**, raises questions, and offers a **practice** for pursuing these questions **independent of an inherited system of beliefs**. Whereas the fundamental assumption of most **religious** practices is that we, or some group of people, **know** how things stand with us and the world, the basic presupposition of **philosophy** is that knowledge about how things stand and how we should live our lives is not simply and directly **given** from outside human experience. Rather, to get closer to the philosophical truths we seek, we must keep asking these questions and continue looking for ways to think about them.

In other words, it’s the practice of **questioning** and **thinking** that lies at the heart of philosophy. It’s not the same as religion or theology. Nor is it the same as science. The systematic practices and methods of **science** emerged out of this spirit of independent

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<sup>1</sup> “Ontology” comes from two Greek words *ontos* and *logos*, meaning roughly “the study (*logos*) of what there is (*ontos*)”.

thinking and questioning, but ultimately broke away from philosophy as **empirical** methods for exploring questions and formulating explanations based on quantifiable laws of nature were established and passed on to others.

So the **claim** that philosophy originates and characterizes a practice in “western civilization” is not itself philosophical, but rather a **social, cultural, and historical** claim. To leave the words “in the West” out of our course title “Introduction to Philosophy of Art” is to raise an **empirical** question, which is open to argument and debate — a debate that turns on the very meaning and use of the term “philosophy”.

### What is Philosophy of Art?



Romare Bearden, Card Players, 1982

What is art? That is a philosophical question. Is art **one** thing or **many**? Is it **historically** and **culturally** specific, or is it **ahistorical, cross-cultural, and universal**? Sociologists and anthropologists may attempt to answer those questions with the concepts and tools of the social sciences. And to the extent they do, we have “sociology of art” and “anthropology of art”. But what distinguishes them from “philosophy of art”?

One response is that philosophy of art takes on the questions that cannot be answered, or effectively studied, using the empirical methods of the social sciences.

Another way to distinguish the scientific and the philosophical approach is in terms of the **goal**. If the aim is to provide a set of related **concepts** and a **mechanism** — a theoretical model — that **explains** how a thing “works” in terms of its material causes and effects, then the approach is **scientific**. Science is in the business of providing **explanations**. Philosophy is concerned more with the **questions** and how to think about them in ways that open up new or at least helpful **understandings** and **perspectives**.

If this way of distinguishing science and philosophy makes sense, it helps us see how the very same questions can be approached in different ways and with respect to different goals. Keep this in mind as we reflect on art this semester and try to **distinguish** the philosophical from the historical, social, cultural, and psychological ways of thinking about art.

Having tried to be as precise as possible, I have to admit that these distinctions between philosophy and the social sciences are not **absolute**. The philosopher may learn a great deal from the **historical** account of art, from the **sociology** of art, from the **psychological** explanations of our experience of art and will often borrow concepts and insights from the social

scientist. And the scientist may well use the clarifications and problems that arise from the philosopher's investigations. But if there is a difference between philosophy and science, we should be able to see it and in this course, at least, try to stay as much as possible on the path of questioning and understanding that's characteristic of philosophy.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze said that science is concerned above all with a certain kind of **truth** — one that leads to accurate measurement, prediction, and description of the physical universe. Philosophy, Deleuze claimed, is concerned less with truth in the scientific sense than it is with inventing concepts that help us **think** more effectively, or in new ways, about things. This may be a somewhat controversial way to define scientific and philosophical pursuits, but since the question “What is philosophy?” is itself a philosophical question, Deleuze's way of distinguishing philosophy and science may be helpful, if only as a starting point.

And what about “**aesthetics**”? That's a term that's too often used synonymously with “philosophy of art”. This conflation of terms is unfortunate. “Philosophy of Art” and “Aesthetics” do not mean the same thing. They refer to different things. “Philosophy of Art” is a more general term for philosophical investigations of art as a practice, of art works generated by the practice, and of the important issues and problems they raise. “Aesthetics” as a distinct area of study emerged in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. It is often described as the study of our **experience** of art, the beautiful, and the sublime. Aesthetics is one very particular aspect of the philosophy of art, and one which takes on great significance in the modern world. It's also an important aspect of experience in other non-western societies, although not necessarily conceptualized in the same way as it is “in the West”. We'll come back to the concept of **aesthetics** and **aesthetic experience** when we discuss Kant, in whose philosophy it plays a central role.

I hope this gives you a reasonably clear overview of our approach in this course. It will become clearer as the semester goes on. Hearing someone else describe philosophy and art in such a general way and with abstract concepts can really only point you in the right direction. We will ultimately come to understand these distinctions by engaging with the phenomena directly and on our own terms. So let's begin with our first philosophical exercise in part two of this introduction — “Art and Philosophy: Some Essential Distinctions”.

Timothy Quigley, revised 30 July 16