Aesthetics, we could say, is the philosophy of art (including poetry and literature), and philosophy can be defined as a way of reflecting and clarifying ordinary, everyday thoughts and feelings that we find hard to put into words. One such ordinary thought is the well-known fact that words have a larger, more expansive meaning in poetry than they do in daily life. When Robert Burns says his “love is like a red, red rose,” we do not imagine that she suffers from a bad sunburn; we think of all the other meanings (connotations, associations, and implications) of the words “red” and “rose” that seem to apply to love or someone whom we love. In the enlarged meaning of words used in poetry, all kinds of secondary meanings of the words spontaneously spring to mind. By itself (in isolation from the other words in the poem), “red” will suggest to most people who speak English a fairly standard range of associations or connotations—including passion, sexual attraction, life, anger, danger, warfare, excitement, and so forth. Although this list of possible connotations (or secondary meanings) will not be identical for everyone, it will be very similar from person to person.

This is an example of a very common understanding that we all have about the words used in poetry. When we try to express this or explain it clearly, however, most of us find we simply cannot do it. We might begin by saying, as is often said, that words in poetry “symbolize” other things not literally meant by the word (so, for example, “red” symbolizes excitement or danger). If we think of the way in which the red traffic light symbolizes stop, however, we can see that “symbols” in poetry do not work that way at all. The words used in poetry do not symbolize one thing to the exclusion of others but, rather, an indefinite range of related notions (all the way from life to love to excitement to war). So symbolism does not seem a very good way to articulate or explain this well-known but complex notion.

One of the most important aestheticians in “modern” times (that is, roughly from 1500 to 2000) is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and it is precisely to clarify, articulate, and explain the expansive meanings of words used in poetry that Kant set as a major goal of his aesthetic theory. Kant was a professor of philosophy who lived and wrote during the second half of the eighteenth century. He is best known in aesthetics for his distinction of “aesthetic experience” from other sorts of human experience as being “disinterested” and for his theory of taste.

When we look at or listen to something—not for any practical benefit we may get from it but simply for the sheer delight we take in the experience itself—that experience, Kant said, whether of objects of nature or of works of fine art, is an “aesthetic experience.” In his theory of taste, Kant argues that our judgments of beauty are neither completely subjective nor completely objective, but enjoy a kind of “subjective universality” in which we acknowledge that the way we talk about works of art and objects of natural beauty presupposes a kind of objectivity not found in other sorts of value judgments.

Judgments of sensibility, that Pepsi tastes better than Coke for example, on the other hand, are based simply on how the soda strikes one. Furthermore, since such judgments merely record the sensible effect of the soft drink on our respective palates, they are not meant to be value judgments about the soft drink itself but are simply psychological statements about the impression this kind of beverage makes on you or me (for example, if I happen to prefer Pepsi while you prefer Coke). As such, judgments of this
kind make no pretense to have anymore than a personal, subjective validity. Since there is no contradiction involved between the fact that you like it and I do not (both of which could be true at the same time), there is nothing to dispute about, or, to put it another way, disputes about such matters cannot be genuine.

When Kant turns to aesthetic judgments, however (for example, "this is a good painting," or "this painting is beautiful"), he notes that such judgments are about objects (for example, the painting) and not about the experiences that people have. He would add that such judgments are meant to enjoy, or claim, an objective validity, unlike the “Pepsi tastes good” statement. This means that, if you and I disagree, we believe that only one of us can be right, and we each begin constructing arguments accordingly which, it is reasonable to suppose, will convince the other. We may be unable to decide, by mutual consent, which argument is right, but we at least agree that only one of them can be right and this is enough to motivate and to justify the practice of constructing arguments, counterarguments, listening to reasons, refuting reasons, and so forth. To put it another way, we find it hard to dismiss this kind of disagreement; our natural desire is to try to resolve the dispute. In short, we experience it as a genuine disagreement that can and ought to be resolved by proving the one and disproving the other.

You might think this is just a psychological weakness of human beings, something we should just get over. Nevertheless, think about other cases where we can neither agree nor “get over it”—abortion, capital punishment, vegetarianism, to name just a few. The fact that we cannot, as a society, reach agreement does not end the debate; in these sorts of cases we “can’t get over it” and the debate goes on. Similarly, analyzing our own behavior and attitudes, we see that objective standards in art criticism are presumed, demanded, claimed, and sought—but unfortunately cannot be obtained to everyone’s satisfaction. At any rate, this is what Kant argued for in his theory of taste.

How does this apply to Kant’s theory of the expansive meaning of words used in poetry? What Kant said is that in criticizing a poem (making what he called “aesthetic judgments of taste”) all of our mental faculties are awakened and interact with one another in a “playful” and enjoyable way. When we are looking for a missing red sock we need to get dressed for school, we use what Kant called “determinate” judgments—that is, we are simply asking whether this item under the bed is a sock and if so whether it is red. We already have these mental categories fixed in our minds (of socks and red things), and all that we are doing is classifying items in our room as a sock or not a sock and red or not red. Similarly, if our parents ask us to see if snow has fallen during the night, all we are doing is classifying what we see on the ground outside as snow or not snow. We already have the idea of what snow is, and we are simply considering whether to classify what we see outside as snow. Here, there is just one right answer and once we have got that answer this kind of thinking abruptly stops.

On our way home from school later that day, however, we may look at the snow in a different way; this is what Kant and others call “aesthetic experience”; we let our minds roam freely (playfully and enjoyably) over a wide range of secondary meanings associated with snow—how pure the new snow is, and perhaps how lifeless everything looks in such a winter landscape. Kant called this a “reflective judgment of taste,” where we start with an individual thing (newly fallen snow) and let our minds roam freely over an indefinite range of possible connotations associated with that thing—without having or needing to have an already formed concept of what all this really is.

This is what Kant called an “aesthetic idea” (from his Critique of Judgment—an admittedly difficult work, as you can see from this excerpt):

By an aesthetical idea I understand that representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e., any concept, being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language. . . . If now we place under a concept a representation of the imagination belonging to its presentation, but which occasions in itself more thought than can ever be comprehended in a definite concept and which consequently aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbound ed fashion, the imagination is here creative, and it brings the faculty of intellectual ideas (the reason) into movement, i.e., by a representation more thought (which belongs to the concept of the object) is occasioned than can in it be grasped or made clear.1

Let us see how Kant’s theory works in reading one of the most famous American poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Here, the rider stops to view newly fallen snow—not for any practical reason but simply for the “aesthetic” pleasure of it. Although snow itself suggests a wide range of connotations, from purity, to quiet, to peaceful, to clean, to pure, to lifeless, the other words and images in the poem seem to reinforce the peaceful and lifeless aspect, especially the line repeated at the end of the poem, “And miles to go before I sleep.” Outside of a poem we would probably understand these words quite literally; the rider needs to get to town before nightfall so he can take care of business, get some supper, and turn in for the night. Within a poem, however, the enlarged, secondary meanings of these words are released and become opera-
- we often think of our lives as a journey from birth to death, and among the many secondary meanings of sleep (peaceful, serene, free of stress) is also death. So, putting these secondary meanings together, our thoughts circle freely about the ideas of a peaceful, serene, quiet death.

When people asked Robert Frost if his poem was about death, he always said no. Among the reasons is surely the idea that we get from Kant that this does not involve a “determinate” judgment in which snow symbolizes death in the cut and dried way that a red traffic light signifies stop. As Kant tells us, in poetry the mind roams freely and enjoyably among an indefinite range of associated meanings. It is not a puzzle that has to be answered correctly one way or the other but something to be experienced and enjoyed.

Many interesting and fruitful classroom discussions could emerge from Kant’s theories. One is the question of whether or not our interest in art is really or always or completely “disinterested.” What about Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 or Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ? Another question is whether “aesthetic judgments of taste” really enjoy a kind of objectivity not enjoyed by judgments of sensibility. If there is no way to reach final agreement, what sense does it make to call aesthetic judgments of taste “objective”? Finally Kant’s theory of “aesthetic ideas” gives us a very useful tool for analyzing all sorts of works of art, as I did with the Frost poem above. Looking at a particular work of art, can a class agree on an expanding list of associations or connotations of shapes, colors, and words? Why do we consider these associations and connotations in enjoying, talking, and thinking about art in ways we do not apart from art? Might this have something to do with the “disinterestedness” of “aesthetic experience”? And if so, how exactly?

More generally, introducing Kant to K–12 school students raises important art education policy issues concerning the feasibility of philosophical aesthetics in the school art curriculum. Although conceptually challenging (and Kant can certainly claim top honors in that respect), philosophy of art can and should be a regular part of art education. The problem, of course, is how to make this work in an actual classroom situation. Philosophers of art, like myself, who typically teach in a university setting, should be invited (and if invited, should accept the invitation) to develop specific class plans, and these individual class plans should be collated and made available to anyone that is teaching art in the schools.

Note


H. Gene Blocker teaches philosophy at Ohio University.
The Hernandez family found a way out of poverty – it started by coming in to a family literacy program. No surprise, given that a majority of adults who learn with their kids improve in everything from language skills to getting their GED. Together, they learn “literacy” isn’t just about reading and writing, it’s about developing skills – skills they use for a better life. Know a family we can help? Or would you like to help? Call 1-877-FAMLIT-1, or visit us at www.famlit.org.

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