



PHI 345:  
Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Art  
with Dr. Sarah Vincent



Course Description

The advertised course description is as follows: “What makes something ‘art’? Is everyone’s interpretation of an artwork’s meaning equally plausible, or is expertise important? Why do some of us appreciate a particular work of art, but others don’t connect to it? Can art have ethical value? Throughout this course, we’ll consider questions like these, bringing major philosophical figures as well as more contemporary philosophical theories into conversation with various artworks.”

To elaborate on the general description above, we will begin this course with a quick overview of contemporary responses to two major questions: what is art, and why does art matter? With responses to these overarching questions sketched, we will then begin our journey through the history of aesthetics, at first focusing on five major figures in philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche. Themes in the first half of the course include censorship, taste, beauty, and community. As the semester progresses, we will discuss more contemporary readings from Bullough, Danto, Hirsch, Eaton, and Saito. Themes in this second half of the course include appreciation, expertise, interpretation, morality, and artification.

Structure-wise, for each reading, there will be a class session dedicated to ‘zooming out’ on the topic at hand, during which I will provide some useful framework for the upcoming reading; another to ‘zooming in’ on the position in the assigned reading, during which you will come to class having completed an assigned reading from which I will help you navigate important themes; and a third to in-class question/response activities. On zooming in and zooming out days, classes will be a mix of lecture and discussion – a blend of ‘I (the professor) do’ and ‘we (all of us) do.’ Activity days that follow that preparation gives students the responsibility for completing tasks and sharing their answers – ‘you (groups of students) do.’ I find that most students truly benefit from this scaffolded ‘I do, we do, you do’ approach to our time together; I hope you too will find the structure helpful.