

Cambridge University Press  
0521780659 - The German Aesthetic Tradition  
Kai Hammermeister  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

PART I

THE AGE OF PARADIGMS

## 1

## Baumgarten, Mendelssohn

## Alexander Baumgarten

Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) towering presence at the end of the eighteenth century tends to throw a shadow backward in history, eclipsing many of the less forceful and original thinkers. The situation is no different in philosophical aesthetics. Although Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment* – unlike the 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* that received little friendly attention until Reinhold's *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (Letters on the Kantian philosophy) of 1786–7<sup>1</sup> – created a fanfare on the philosophical scene (some slight delay in reception notwithstanding), it did not emerge from out of the blue. Kant had already reacted against previous, albeit more modest attempts to ground a philosophical aesthetics – attempts, however, that ultimately failed to establish an aesthetic paradigm to serve as a starting point for productive elaborations or dissent for future generations.

The pre-Kantian philosophical aesthetics were not meant to be a break with the dominant philosophical system, namely, that of Leibniz and Wolff. Instead, they should be considered elaborations of it that *volens, volens* helped to undermine the foundations that they labored to strengthen.<sup>2</sup> When Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) introduced the plan for aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline with its own name, he did so in order to prop up the traditional rationalist metaphysics by making it more encompassing. Yet Baumgarten's attempt to consolidate rationalism turned, under his hands, into a critical

endeavor. Aesthetics, intended to be an extension of a rationalist worldview, became more and more independent, until finally the rationalist metaphysics were discredited and aesthetics remained behind as a survivor. Therefore, in order to understand Baumgarten's and Mendelssohn's projects, it is necessary to briefly outline that philosophical system that they adhered to and planned to amend by their writings on aesthetics.

In 1735, the young Alexander Baumgarten published his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Philosophical meditations on some requirements of the poem), which appeared in Latin, as did almost all of his writings, and in which he identified a theory of sensibility labeled aesthetics as a desideratum. Here we find for the first time in the history of philosophy the notion of aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline. Yet the meaning of the term is far from our understanding of aesthetics as a philosophical investigation of art and a theory of beauty and ugliness. Baumgarten's aesthetics refers to a theory of sensibility as a gnoseological faculty, that is, a faculty that produces a certain type of knowledge. Aesthetics is taken very literally as a defense of the relevance of sensual perception. Philosophical aesthetics originated as advocacy of sensibility, not as a theory of art. Yet without a positive valuation of the senses and their objects, art could not have achieved philosophical dignity but would have remained with the lesser ontological status that traditional metaphysics had assigned to it, compared to rationality.

The aesthetics of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn can be considered an undertaking to claim epistemological relevance for sensual perception. This was no small task, since Descartes (1596–1650) had just renewed the Platonic devaluation of the objects of the senses in favor of a rationality cleansed of sensibility.<sup>3</sup> The Cartesian mathematization and rationalization of cognition entailed a certain impoverishment of reality by excluding the evidence of sensual perception that could not be elevated to a general principle. Descartes had explained his rejection of aesthetic cognition by claiming that it consists of value judgments that are not methodical but merely subjective. Sensibility's epistemic force was considered weak after Descartes, although Leibniz (1646–1716) took the first step away from purely mathematical cognition. Moreover, that part of the Christian tradition that insisted on the mortification of the flesh was still largely unchallenged and received new vigor in the eighteenth century in the form of Protestant Pietism.

Leibniz rested his philosophical system on a theological basis, namely, the assumption of the world as *creatio Dei*, a creation of God. Therefore, the world can be nothing but a well-ordered unity in which the structures of reality are identical with the laws of rationality, as they are predominantly expressed in logic, physics, and mathematics. This logico-ontological equivalence, as it is sometimes called, is not a simple mirroring of reality in cognition. Instead, Leibniz assumes a hierarchy of cognitive levels that range from largely unconscious perceptions to complete comprehension. He develops this system of cognitive differentiation in several of his writings that provide the foil for the aesthetic attempts of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn.<sup>4</sup> Leibniz distinguishes on a first level between cognitions that are obscure and those that are clear. Obscure cognitions are such that do not become fully conscious and of which we therefore have no concept. They are so-called *petites perceptions*, too obscure to allow for the recognition of their object. Leibniz mentions the noise of the ocean as an example, since we cannot attribute the overall noise to the breaking of the individual waves. Clear cognition, however, is conscious and allows for the recognition of the object. But clear cognition subsumes under it a whole spectrum of cognitive achievements that become ever more complete. The lowest level of clear cognition divides itself into confused and distinct cognitive insight. We call a cognition clear and confused if the object possesses a multitude of (sensible) features, but we cannot list them separately. We do know they exist, but we would fail in an attempt to list them one by one. In opposition to this level, a clear and distinct cognition is able to enumerate all features of the object and give a complete definition of it. Leibniz splits the distinct cognition again into adequate and inadequate, as well as into symbolic and intuitive. Somewhat simplified, we can take him to say that these higher levels of cognition are purely rational, most of them are rare achievements for human beings, and the very highest level, adequate and intuitive knowledge, is reserved for God who possesses a complete and instantaneous knowledge of all features of the object.

What concerns us in the present context is the level of clear and confused cognition. If this sounds paradoxical, it is important to remember that a clear cognition achieves only the recognition of an object, but that it does not exhaust its elements in an analytic procedure. We are aware of the complexity of the object, although we cannot separate and enumerate its elements. This cognition is rich,

multifaceted, lively, even emotionally charged. It involves responses of like and dislike, and Leibniz locates both art and beauty on this level of cognition. But aesthetic judgments necessarily have to remain unjustifiable statements of emotional response. In a famous pronouncement on art, Leibniz states: “We sometimes comprehend in a clear manner without any doubt whether a poem or a picture is well made or not, because there is an I-don’t-know-what (*je ne sais quoi*) that satisfies or repels us.”<sup>5</sup> It is not only that a vague *je ne sais quoi*—a phrase that was to become very important in British eighteenth-century aesthetics, as can be found for example in William Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty* in which several references are listed<sup>6</sup>—is responsible for our liking or disliking of works or art; beauty in general exists solely for the incomplete human cognition. It is a precondition for our valuation of an object as beautiful to have a merely confused idea of it and to be unable to transform it into a distinct idea. Beauty therefore is a by-product of flawed human cognition; in God’s mind beauty is absent. God’s cognition is instantaneous, that is, without sensible elements and, thus, devoid of the category of beauty. This is the point where Baumgarten’s reevaluation sets in. His aim is to convince us that confusion of perception is not exclusively negative and privative but, rather, a unique mode of cognition that carries its own richness, complexity, and necessity.

As we have seen, Baumgarten is the philosopher who in the middle of the eighteenth century begins to advocate aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline and who coins the name that soon was to designate it as an independent field of inquiry. After Baumgarten concluded his treatise on the philosophical requirements of the poem with the call for aesthetics, he continued to lay the groundwork for his publications on aesthetics of the 1750s. In his book on metaphysics of 1739, he devotes a noticeable amount of attention to what he calls sensual or aesthetic cognition, and he also takes up this cause in a series of letters published as a kind of philosophical journal under the title *Aletheophilus* (Friend of the truth). In 1742, Baumgarten became the first philosophical teacher ever to lecture on aesthetics, and out of these academic courses grew his two-volume *Aesthetica* of 1750 and 1758. Partly because these publications were written in somewhat forbidding Latin, his direct influence on contemporary philosophy and literary theory remained limited. Indirectly, however, his ideas soon acquired a certain influence. This was due to a publication of Baumgarten’s student G. F. Meier, who in 1748 printed his German

treatise *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (Foundations of all liberal arts) that was based largely on his teacher's lectures and quickly popularized Baumgarten's ideas.

Alexander Baumgarten defines aesthetics in the first paragraph of his *Aesthetica* as follows: "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thinking analogous to reason) is the science of sensual cognition."<sup>7</sup> Baumgarten packages quite a few things into this definition, and he basically spends the rest of the *Aesthetica* elaborating on the different elements of this opening statement. The most important thing to be noted is that his aesthetics is the combination of a twofold approach to the subject. Aesthetics is considered to be a science of sensual cognition, as well as a theory of art. The general aim for Baumgarten is to establish the latter by means of the former, although the relation of the two moments is not always as clear as Baumgarten thinks it might be. It should also be mentioned that both in respect to terminology and in terms of structure, the *Aesthetica* is committed to the traditional rhetorical system that it frequently challenges but that is nevertheless taken to be the common horizon of author and readers. That is to say that Baumgarten's elaboration on the stages and elements of aesthetic truth is modeled on the production stages of a public speech (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio*) as taught by rhetorical treatises. And yet in Baumgarten's view, the rhetorical model, as was recently renewed by the Swiss literary critics Bodmer, Breitinger, and others, stands in need of expansion since it is limited to the linguistic arts and can provide no direct assistance for composers and painters.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its emphasis on the senses and their cognitive value, Baumgarten's aesthetics must not be regarded as an intentional break with, or even an intentional critique of, the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff. Its primary interest seems to be the strengthening of the rationalist system by including neglected elements that should ultimately serve to further the cause of rational cognition. Baumgarten argues that sensual cognition is essential for rational cognition: "The major inferior faculties of cognition, namely the naturally developed ones, are required for beautiful thinking. They are not only simultaneously possible with the higher natural ones, but they are required for them as a precondition (*sine qua non*)" (*Aesthetica*, §41). In anonymously published lecture notes, a student reports Baumgarten stating that in order to improve reason, aesthetics must aid logic.<sup>9</sup> With

Leibniz, Baumgarten assumes that some of our cognition is obscure while some is distinct; that is, cognition at one end of the spectrum is entirely without concepts and thus without rational justification, while at the other end it rests on complete conceptual knowledge. Between these two extreme forms of cognition some mediation must be found, for there is no direct way from the obscurity of the unconscious *petites perceptions* to rational cognition. The connecting link between the two Baumgarten claims to have found in the confused cognition of sensuality:

[It is said that] confusion is the mother of error. My answer to this is: it is a necessary condition for the discovery of truth, because nature does not make leaps from obscure to distinct thought [*ubi natura non facit saltum ex obscuritate in distinctionem*]. Out of the night dawn leads to daylight. We must concern ourselves with confused cognition so as to avoid errors in large numbers and to a large extent that befall those who ignore it. We do not commend confusion, but rather the emendation of cognition insofar as a necessary moment of confused cognition is mixed into it. (*Aesthetica*, §7)

It is the primary aim of the science of sensual cognition to aid the faculties of logical cognition. In order to do so, the unique modes of sensual cognition need to be investigated. But to claim relevance for sensual perception as an unavoidable element of all cognitive procedures was not an easy task. Not only did Baumgarten have to struggle against the devaluation of sensuality that runs through the history of Western philosophy from Plato onward and is a dominant motive in the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz, but he was also moving against the headwind of religion. Protestant Pietism gained more and more influence during Baumgarten's lifetime and argued for a break with the Catholic medieval tradition according to which the glory of God shines forth from the splendor of the world. For Pietism, one's relation to God was to be purely inward and nonsensual. Yet Baumgarten's new science of sensual cognition was determined not to regard sense data merely as stimuli for higher and more advanced processes of cognition but, rather, to consider it an independent form of cognition itself.

In fact, the logician who neglected sensory moments was considered a philosopher manqué, an incompletely developed human being who lacks the fullness of existence. Baumgarten (and even more so his

student G. F. Meier) pitched against the dry logician the *felix aestheticus*, the successful aesthetician, who combines attention to and love for the sensory world with the faculty of rational cognition.

Sensual cognition must not be seen as a faulty or incomplete rational cognition but, rather, as an independent faculty. Baumgarten argues that to comprehend an object obscurely, confusedly, or indistinctly is not a failure, and must thus be considered a specific achievement of the soul (*Metaphysica*, §520). If a representation is not distinct, it can only be sensual for Baumgarten. Therefore, the inferior cognition is a sensual mode of cognition (*Metaphysica*, §521). Although it is not rational itself, the fact that it is a faculty of cognition makes it analogous to rational procedures. Baumgarten thus defines aesthetics as the art of thinking analogous to rationality (*ars analogi rationis*). This mode comes to human beings as part of their instinctive heritage, and as such it is something that does not yet set us apart from animals. This so-called natural aesthetics, however, needs practice in order to develop its potential. Properly trained, natural aesthetics can be transformed into the art of beautiful thinking, a term that we shall have to return to (*Aesthetica*, §47). Such training for the *felix aestheticus* depends as much on repeated exercises, as prescribed by the rhetorical system, as on familiarity with aesthetic theory. Baumgarten concludes that practical exercises need to be supplemented by theory, and theory in turn must be brought down to a practical level by means of exercises (*Aesthetica*, §62).

Inferior cognition does entail a lack of rationality, but it does not entail a lack of truth. In a rather bold fashion, Baumgarten states that aesthetic cognition does indeed have its own truth claim. He argues that there are several levels of truth that coincide with the levels of cognition. A metaphysical truth seems the equivalent of an intuitive and adequate cognition, that is, something that is restricted to God. As far as man is concerned, his rational insights produce a truth that Baumgarten labels logical. The third truth is the result of confused cognition, namely, aesthetic truth (*Aesthetica*, §423). Baumgarten elaborates on how he understands aesthetic truth by situating it between falsehood and the certainty we achieve through correct employment of our rational faculties. Aesthetic truth for Baumgarten seems to come rather close to the rhetorical conception of truth, namely, probability. In the rhetorical tradition, an argument was true if it was convincing,



probable, or more likely to be true than other contenders for truth, but it did not have to agree with the substance of the object as the philosophical *adaequatio*-theory demanded. An argument would be deemed probable if we hold something to be true without having any logical proof for this belief. The object of aesthetic truth, Baumgarten writes, “is neither certain nor is its truth perceived in full light” (*Aesthetica*, §483). This kind of truth strays a good way from the traditional philosophical conception of truth as correspondence of mind and reality as the system of Leibniz advocates it and to which Baumgarten clearly subscribes at other times.

Although logical truth, and logical truth only, can provide us with certainty, it pays a high price for it. Much like Nietzsche, Baumgarten regards logical truth to be an impoverished abstraction, that is, a movement from concrete instances to a general concept. The multitude of concrete sensual experiences carries with it a sense of fullness, vibrancy, and liveliness that gets lost in abstraction. Therefore, Baumgarten famously concludes: “But what is abstraction if not a loss?” (*Aesthetica*, §560). We are to think of abstract logical truth as somewhat pale and somewhat lifeless in comparison to the probability that the aesthetic faculty provides. Aesthetic truth, in opposition, celebrates “richness, chaos and matter” (*Aesthetica*, §564). The term chaos, however, does not indicate that Baumgarten considers aesthetic truth to be unstructured, devoid of recurring elements or without necessary conditions. Instead, he proposes three criteria according to which the unique perfection of sensual cognition can be judged. The first of these moments is richness of imagination, which means that an aesthetic idea is the more perfect the more individual elements it contains. Complexity of content becomes elevated to a characteristic of aesthetic perfection. In Leibniz, confused cognition had little value attached to it, but in Baumgarten it encompasses a redeeming fullness and complexity that we find pleasurable. An aesthetic idea, though, does not merely have to be complex to be perfect. Baumgarten defines the second characteristic of aesthetic perfection as magnitude of imagination. In this, the mere sensual complexity is linked with the notion of relevance and, thus, to a form of judgment that is no longer purely sensual. Rather traditionally, Baumgarten argues that aesthetic ideas are more satisfying for us if they pertain to more relevant matters, that is, if a narrative tells about the lot of humans instead of that of animals or if pictorial representations depict historical scenes instead of flowers. The third

and final element in Baumgarten's list is that of clarity of presentation, which is a traditional rhetorical ideal.

The most interesting of these characteristics is certainly that of richness of imagination. We can understand it to express the fact that aesthetic perception and aesthetic truth consist of an ever-renewed contemplation of the multitude of elements contained in the aesthetic object without our being able or willing to unify them under a concept. But what remains confused also remains rich. Baumgarten, with this elevation of confused richness, obviously points forward toward Kant and his important notion of the aesthetic idea.

As has been pointed out, the aim of an aesthetic theory for Baumgarten is to aid in the perfection of sensual cognition. Perfection of sensual cognition, however, is defined as beauty. Conversely, imperfection of aesthetic cognition is ugliness. Art as the manifestation of the beautiful therefore aims to represent the purposeful unity and harmony of the world. In this, Baumgarten subscribes to the classical *pulchrum* theory that regards the universe as a beautiful creation and every beautiful object as a mirroring instance of the whole. Representation in the form of mirroring is an idea that Baumgarten takes from Leibniz's *Monadology* that rests on the assumption of a coherence of subject and object, that is, the logico-ontological equivalence. Later we will see that the notion of the aesthetic monad also recurs in the writings of Adorno. The aesthetic representation of the larger unity in one beautiful object is what Baumgarten labels "thinking beautifully" (*pulchre cogitare*).

With this definition we have come full circle and find ourselves again at the point where we started the analysis, namely Paragraph One of the *Aesthetica*. Aesthetics, as we recall, was defined not only as the science of sensual cognition but also as the theory of liberal arts, an inferior cognition, the art of thinking beautifully, and the art that is analogous to rationality. Thus, the opening sentence contains, in the form of brief parenthetical definitions, the arguments that the many hundreds of paragraphs that follow elaborate. Some of the definitions, as has become clear, are obliged to the traditional rhetorical system and to the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff, whereas others break away from these traditions and open new paths of inquiry into the unique status of aesthetics as a philosophical project.

As has been demonstrated, Baumgarten's aesthetics takes a double approach to its subject matter, namely, as a theory of sensual perception