X. THE POSSIBILITY OF AESTHETICS
Before bringing the present discussion to a close, it will be useful to look into the possible avenues open to aesthetics in its understanding of the problems of art.

For a long time aesthetics has earned the bad reputation of harping upon trivialities, of being extremely subjectivistic, dreary and dull; so much so that often it has been excluded from the field of philosophy. This reputation is largely because the domain of aesthetics has not been clearly marked out. It is only from the last few decades that serious attempts are being made to analyse and re-define the nature and domain of the concepts of aesthetics.

To begin with a workable definition of aesthetics, it may be stated that aesthetics is the study that sets out to answer the question: "What is art?" The history of aesthetics is replete with a variety of answers to this question, though no single answer is exhaustive. It is either too wide and includes in its domain, even things that are not art or it is too limited and thus being applicable to very few artistic creations. This can be clearly seen from the preceding chapters where an attempt was made to elucidate the aesthetic theories of Sartre, Croce, Freud and Spengler. All of them have aimed to answer the question, 'What is art'? For Sartre art is the conscious creation of
the unreal in terms of a sensuous form, for Croce the expression of impressions, for Freud the intended dream that in disguise fulfills the inhibited desires, and for Spengler a manifestation of the cultural prime-symbol. All these attempts, in their own way, highlight important aspects of art but none of them can be taken as absolute. For neither of them exhausts all the possible dimensions of art. This incompleteness and insufficiency of the answers given in the history of aesthetics, led W.H. Kennick⁠¹ and Morris Weitz⁠² to think that the traditional aesthetics rests on a mistake — it attempts to define art in terms of one essence or another.⁠³ We have already seen in Chapter VIII that there is no criterion (or criteria) of meaningfulness that runs through all art-symbols. This denial of the

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Criticising Weitz, Kahler holds that the concept of 'family resemblance' is not applicable to art since art works are not organically grown beings, but created products and thus they are not related merely because of their origins. Laying down the criterion of a valid definition, Kahler emphasizes its specificity. And unlike Weitz he holds that its distinguishing feature is not its "boundary" but its "center" Kahler concludes by the following definition of
essence of meaning, implies also the repudiation of any essential definition of art-works. Thus Weitz's analysis, based on the Wittgensteinean notion of family resemblance, becomes relevant here. Analysing the logic of the concept of art Weitz says:

"Art, as the logic of the concept shows, has no set of necessary and sufficient properties, hence a theory of it is logically impossible and not merely factually difficult."

Weitz goes on to elucidate his point with the help of the example of Wittgenstein's analysis of the word 'game'. The word 'game' cannot be defined, for no single definition exhausts all its properties. One can show what a game is by demonstrating the various games like Badminton, Chess, Tennis and so on. But the moment an attempt is made to discover a common element in all these games, one realizes that it is not possible. For between one game and another there are only

art, "... Art is a human activity which explores, and hereby creates, new reality in a supra-rational, visional manner and presents it symbolically or metaphorically, as a micro-cosmic whole signifying a macro-cosmic whole."

(p. 171).

Vouching for specificity, Kahler himself (unfortunately) includes in his definition of art, terms like "new reality", "Supra-rational" and "visional". These terms do not have any specific connotation and thus whatever its persuasive value, Kahler's definition does not seem to adequately fulfil his own norms of a proper definition.

4Morris Weitz, op. cit., p. 49.
'family resemblances' or 'strands of similarities'. The concept of 'family resemblance' has been very well illustrated through examples by J.R. Bambrough. Bambrough has given the example of 'Churchill Face'; all the ten members of the Churchill family possess certain similarities in their facial features and thus are said to belong to the same family. For the purpose of analysis Bambrough limits these similarities in facial features to ten: "(high forehead, bushy eyebrows, blue eyes, Roman nose, high cheekbones, cleft chin, dark hair, dimpled cheeks, pointed ears and ruddy complexion)." Now Bambrough conceives a peculiar relation amongst the ten members of Churchill family: each one of the members has one such similar feature missing in his face which is present in the other. Thus the missing feature is different in each Churchill face. Bambrough has also explained this peculiar relation in terms of symbols; he conceives of five objects e d c b and a that are marked by five qualities ABCDE, each one of the objects has four qualities and the fifth one missing; the missing quality is different in each. This relation has been illustrated as follows:—

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\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{e} & \text{d} & \text{c} & \text{b} & \text{a} \\
\text{ABCD} & \text{ABCE} & \text{ABDE} & \text{ACDE} & \text{BCDE}
\end{array}
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These examples of Bambrough go to show that there can be relations of similarity where there is no single common feature uniting all the elements. The word "game" manifests such a relation where the various games have no common feature and yet are similar. Weitz holds that the word "art" is similar to the word "game". He says that,

'The problem of the nature of art is like that of the nature of games, at least in these respects: If we actually look and see what it is that we call "art", we will also find no common properties — only strands of similarities. Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call "art" in virtue of these similarities.'

If we supplement Bambrough's discussion of the relation of 'family resemblance' with Weitz' analysis of the concept of art we can get certain valuable hints for a further analysis of the concept of "art". It appears that the various arts too, like the objects edcba are constitutive of varied features that do not have any single feature in common. Let us draw a paradigm to explain this relation. However, it may be remembered that none of the following categories that are constructed can be taken as rigid and absolute. It is always possible to construct another paradigm with another set of categories. Thus the paradigm is extremely limited and does not exhaust the

7Morris Weitz, op. cit., p. 53.
constituents of art. Furthermore, care has been taken to select those categories that manifest the qualities of the various artistic media.

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Now if a comparison is made between the above paradigm and Bambrough's example of the relation of objects edcba, it seems clear that the two cannot be held analogous. For, like the object edcba, arts do not constitute permutations and combinations of a single set of properties. Thus in the field of art it is extremely difficult to construct an artificial paradigm. Further, in this paradigm we have not taken into account such arts like architecture, drama, novel and film because the greater the number of arts, the more complicated the relations would become. The above paradigm is merely an instance and thus is not exhaustive. Here an attempt has been made to over-simplify matters by assuming the various arts to be homogeneous. Even these various arts like painting and sculpture cannot be defined in terms of any essence but they manifest strands of similarities between the various paintings and sculptures. Apart from
this there is another puzzling side of art works — they are capable of multiple interpretations. This has already been discussed in the preceding chapter. Thus, it is evident that no single essential definition of art can be possible because of the very nature of the concept of art. For "art", like "meaning", is an open concept, no single definition can do justice to all its possible and actual applications.

But a doubt arises in this context: if there is no common feature, no essence that can define art, then how do we know that this is art and that is not? Here it may be once again beneficial to turn to Bambrough's analysis. Bambrough has contrasted the general words like "game" to arbitrarily chosen words like "alpha". While one can learn the use of general words one cannot do so in the case of arbitrarily chosen words. And to be able to learn the use

8 If I choose to give the name "alpha" to each of a number of miscellaneous objects (the star Sirius, my fountain-pen, the Parthenon, the colour red, the number five, and the letter Z) then I may well succeed in choosing the objects so arbitrarily that I shall succeed in preventing them from having any feature in common, other than that I call them by the name "alpha"... In giving a list of chairs I cannot just mention anything that happens to come into my head, while this is exactly what I do in giving my list of alphas.... I cannot teach the use of the word "alpha" except by specifically attaching it to each of the objects in my arbitrarily chosen list. No observer can conclude anything from watching me attach the label to this, that, or the other object, or to any number of objects however large, about the nature of the object or objects, if any, to which I shall later attach it. The use of the word "alpha" cannot be learned or taught as the use of a general word can be learned or taught.' J.R. Bambrough, op. cit., pp. 218-19.
of a general word, requires an awareness of the objects and instances to which it applies against those to which it does not apply.

Applying what is said about general concepts to art, it is evident that one important role of aesthetics is to show how the word 'art' is used. And to do this it must discover and analyse the family resemblances between the various arts. This implies that in order to save criticism from being a mere play of words, the evaluative propositions in aesthetics must ultimately be reducible to the elementary propositions descriptive of the properties of an individual artifact. Reverting this process, one finds that from these propositions stating the structurally definable properties of the art object, there would be a movement towards higher and higher abstraction manifested through the properties of these properties; and so on; till the interpretation and evaluation exhausts its possibilities. Thus there would be a hierarchy of such propositions, starting from the structure and technically discernible elements of an art work to interpretative and evaluative judgements that seek to classify and grade these structurally definable properties in terms of 'aesthetic concepts'. But not all aesthetic

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9. The phrase 'aesthetic concepts' owes its currency to Frank Sibley's article of the same title.

concepts can be equally reduced to structural properties of an artifact. Like the propositions in aesthetics, aesthetic concepts also manifest various orders. Take for instance, aesthetic concepts like 'cadence' and 'symmetry' on the one hand and 'monotony', 'unity' and 'coherence' on the other. While the first two can be defined in terms of the structural aspect of the art works, it is difficult to demonstrate structurally the concepts like "monotony", "unity" and "coherence". They have only an indirect reference to the structural aspect of the artifact. Thus the attempts to reduce evaluative judgements to elementary empirical propositions can be only partially successful. For, between these concepts and any set of structural conditions, there is no definable relation. In one work of art a particular set of elements creates coherence and in another they may create discord.\textsuperscript{10} However, the first kind of aesthetic

\textsuperscript{10}This point has been very well discussed by Frank Sibley. Sibley holds that "... there are no non-aesthetic features which serve in any circumstances as logically sufficient conditions for applying aesthetic terms. Aesthetic concepts are not in this respect condition-governed at all. There is little temptation to suppose that aesthetic terms resemble words which, like 'square', are applied in accordance with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. For whereas each square is square in virtue of the same set of conditions, four equal sides and four right angles, aesthetic terms apply to widely varied objects; onething is graceful because of these features, another because of those, and so on." Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts", in Collected Papers on Aesthetics, ed. Cyrill Barrett, p. 64.
concepts can be governed by conditions and it may be said that all aesthetic concepts that directly concern the technical aspect of the art work can be determined by conditions. But one thing must be marked that no aesthetic concept can be purely descriptive, for even the concepts like "symmetry" and "cadence" do not merely serve to describe the particular relation between the elements of an art work but they also have emotive overtones of laudatory and derogatory character. The emotive overtone primarily depends upon the context and cannot be predictable: that given the properties a, b, c the laudatory emotive attitude would result. Thus with reference to a certain painting if it is said that it embodies a complete symmetry of lines and colours, this may not only describe the type of colours and lines in the painting but may also involve a derogatory emotive overtone of being monotonous because of this symmetry. This shows that the criterion of empirical verifiability, though extremely valuable for assessing the significance of aesthetic propositions yet has only an indirect application. For even the most descriptive aesthetic concepts cannot be treated on the level of the concepts of the sciences and mathematics. For, as it has already been seen, apart from being descriptive they are also expressive of approval and disapproval. This is reflected very well when one hears someone saying "X is a good sculpture, but I do not like it." Here one finds almost a sense of guilt at not liking X even
though it is a good sculpture. It seems then an implicit link is assumed between the two statements "X is a good sculpture" and "I like X". However, this does not imply that the statement "X is a good sculpture" can be inferred from "I like X". Contrary to this, when the significance of a scientific theory is discussed, there is no emotive involvement of approval or disapproval.¹¹ This shows that aesthetic concepts cannot be completely defined in terms of natural categories (facts about the structure of the art object, analysed and interpreted), any such attempts would suffer from the 'naturalistic fallacy'. In this context Stevenson says:

¹¹Stevenson, through his distinction of the two uses of language (descriptive and emotive) has tried to show that contrary to factual statements of the sciences, the descriptive content of ethical judgements is dominated by an emotive content. Cf. C.L. Stevenson, Ethics & Language (Yale, 1965).

¹²C.L. Stevenson, "On the Reasons that can be given for the Interpretation of a Poem", in Philosophy looks at the Arts, ed. Joseph Margolis, p. 138.

I have said nothing to imply, then, that interpretive criticism is a "science"... and wish only to show that it need not, on that account, turn away from a use of science. A normative conception can speak of a "science of interpretation" only if it goes on to analyse normative judgements naturalistically — i.e., in a manner that reduces them to factual statements. And the latter view, though it still has respectable adherents, is one that I myself consider implausible.¹²

The implausibility of any naturalistic analysis of aesthetic concepts is particularly apparent when one finds
varied interpretations of a single work of art. If naturalistic interpretation is absolutely possible, there would be then no disputes about the interpretation and evaluation of art works. Furthermore, in that case at least in the individual arts it would be possible to lay down rules for evaluation and there would be no difficulty in applying these rules to individual works of art. But this is not the case. Even if an interpretation of an art work is based upon its structural properties, one cannot deny the possibility of an alternative interpretation; and this is not merely a logical possibility but an empirical one. It is evident if one looks carefully into the history of art criticism, particularly literary criticism. Now, taking for instance the case of two rival interpretations of a poem both equally consistent and relevant to the context, one evidently ponders which of the two interpretations is preferable. All other things being equal, it is often suggested that one may take the help from the author himself as to what actually his intention was.

The aesthetic relevance of intention is a tricky problem. While it is true that an awareness of the artist's

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13 Opinions are divided on this problem. While the formalists regard any discussion of artist's intentions a transgression into the extra-aesthetic realm and hence not relevant to aesthetics, contrasted to these there are others who hold it as an important guiding line for aesthetic interpretation and evaluation. For contemporary discussion of the problem see the following papers:
intention many a time saves criticism from an indulgence in impertinent interpretations, it is on the other hand, difficult to decide where and when and to what extent the author's intention ought to guide criticism. Perhaps the relevance of intention may be decided if the tools of criticism are sharpened. Here aesthetics has another major task to fulfil: to analyse extensively the nature, domain and status of evaluative concepts applied in criticism and to discuss the logic of aesthetic reasoning. Strictly speaking the last one of these is a second-order problem and may be classified under the domain of meta-aesthetics. But if aesthetics is to become self-conscious — aware of its own domain of inquiry and aware of its mistakes, it must take into account the second-order questions as well.


