Cases for Kids: Using Puzzles to Teach Aesthetics to Children

MARGARET P. BATTIN

Aesthetics for Kids

Nothing stupefies kids (I have in mind young people, though the same is true of many adults) as quickly as long-winded, jargon-filled, highly abstract theoretical discourse, especially when it seems to have no immediate utility. Kids like fun. They like play; they like games; they like challenges and puzzles; and they detest pompous academic abstractions. But if this is so, then it is easy to understand why aesthetics—this most abstract, theoretical, and sometimes pompous field of the art-related academic disciplines—would seem completely unsuitable for teaching to children. After all, just picture yourself lecturing, say, on the aesthetics of Kant (skirting, of course, the full scholarly complexity of the *Critique of Judgment*), or on Santayana, or on Clive Bell, or any other major figure in the history of aesthetics—even if you try to buy relevance by jazzing it up with a couple of references to comic-book art or rap tunes—and you see a roomful of squirming, restless, utterly bored kids, eager for you to quit. Perhaps all you do is try to explain how some people think that art is the expression of feelings or that beauty is "really real"—but you still may get the same apathetic response. "So what," the kids will say, "who cares?"

But now picture a child faced with a genuine puzzle—a puzzle that does not depend on abstract terminology, scholarly tradition, or extensive background information, but a puzzle that presents a real problem, here and now. If you can get the child to see the puzzle so that it makes him or her think, you are in effect home free. With a bit of adroit guidance in the form of further, prodding questions, the child will do the rest—that is, try to figure the puzzle out.

It is this conception of young people and their intellectual capacities and interests that invites a new way of teaching aesthetics to children. The

Margaret P. Battin, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah, is the senior author of *Puzzles about Art* and the author of such recent books as *Ethics in the Sanctuary* and *The Least Worst Death* as well as of numerous articles and essays in the fields of ethics, bioethics, and aesthetics. She has also published several works of fiction.

Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 28, No. 3, Fall 1994
©1994 Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

conception is a consummately simple one: *kids like puzzles*, though they are often bored by history, scholarship, and theory; and hence an approach to aesthetics that presents its essential elements in puzzle form will be best-adapted to teaching them. This is the central feature of the approach explored here: the use of puzzle cases. It makes aesthetics for young people, well, fun.

Consider, for example, a puzzle case that might be presented in a children's art or art theory class, or any other class where aesthetics may be the topic:

Case 1. *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*

Al Meinbart paints a portrait of art dealer Daffodil Glurt. The resulting canvas is a single solid color, chartreuse. Meinbart hangs the canvas in the Museum of Modern Art, labelled "Portrait of Daffodil Glurt." Daffodil is not amused. But has she actually been insulted?[1]

Now the sly thing about a puzzle case like this, of course, is that the puzzles in it are all aesthetic ones. Will the kids think Daffodil Glurt has actually been insulted by Meinbart's all-chartreuse portrait? If so, how, exactly, was she insulted? The answer depends in part on whether they think nonobjective art can make assertions (e.g., "Daffodil Glurt is a prissy, sour woman") or not, though they are unlikely to use this terminology; and if they do think nonobjective art can make assertions, how can we know what these assertions are? The kids may think that a solid-color patch cannot portray or say anything. On the other hand, if they think it can say something—for instance, that Daffodil is prissy and sour—they may also wonder why it couldn't equally well say that she is a woman with the bursting energies of early spring, like yellow-green forsythia buds just as they break into bloom. Or that she has the intoxicating, pungent sweetness of a certain liqueur. And so on. Children are wizards at inventing things a solid patch of chartreuse might say, but in doing so they also see that it is difficult to say which one is right, or for that matter whether a solid patch of chartreuse says anything at all. At best, they may say, viewers may have varying emotional reactions to the alleged portrait, depending on whether they like the color chartreuse and how their moods are running that day, but these have nothing to do with any alleged claim about Daffodil Glurt that the artist might have made.

Imagine how the dialogue between teacher and student in the classroom might go; it will probably have a gently Socratic, argumentative flavor:

Teacher: (having just described *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*) . . . there, has Daffodil been insulted?
Student: You bet. That's an awful color. Daffodil's not chartreuse.
Teacher: Do you mean, you'd make her green, or orange, or some other color?

Student:	No. She shouldn't be just a color at all.
Teacher:	Is that because a portrait should look like the person it's a portrait of?
Student:	Yup.
Teacher:	How much like a person does a portrait have to be?
Student:	A lot. It has to look just like the person.
Teacher:	Would it have to be made of the same thing, flesh and blood?
Student:	Of course not. Then it would not be a portrait, but another person.
Teacher:	Would a photograph do?
Student:	Sure.
Teacher:	But a photograph is a flat surface, like the chartreuse patch. So is a painting. Will a painting do?
Student:	Of course. But it has to look like the person.
Teacher:	Suppose the face looks like the person, but she's wearing different clothes, say a costume? [Perhaps the teacher is thinking of some of Rembrandt's self-portraits]
Student:	Sure, that's a portrait.
Teacher:	Suppose the face looks sort of like the person, but it's distorted? [Now the teacher is thinking of Modigliani or Picasso, and perhaps showing slides of these works]
Student:	Well, those are still portraits, sort of . . .
Teacher:	Suppose it describes a person, but not in pictures, like a novel?
Student:	Yes, I guess you could call that a portrait of a person too. A novel sort of captures the flavor of a person . . .
Teacher:	Could a chartreuse patch capture as much of the flavor of a person as a description in words could?
	(and so on)

Or the dialogue might instead go like this:

Teacher:	(having presented the case) . . . there, has Daffodil been insulted?
Student:	Nope. How can that even be a picture of her? It's just a plain color patch.
Teacher:	Is chartreuse a color you like? How does it make you feel?
Student:	Ugh. I don't like it.
Teacher:	But if it's a color you don't like, it probably makes you feel bad when you look at this canvas.
Student:	Yeah, I spose so.
Teacher:	But if it makes you feel bad, then won't you be a little more likely to feel the same way about Daffodil when you think about her, since it's labelled "Portrait of Daffodil Glurt"?
Student:	Hmm.
Teacher:	Does it make any difference that the artist named it "Portrait of Daffodil Glurt?" That he thought of it as a portrait, and so did she?
	(and so on)

When a child explores these issues in this way, even with the help of a teacher, he or she is doing precisely what full-grown, adult aestheticians with Ph.D.s and university appointments do. Of course, full-grown aestheticians for the most part do it with an elaborate conceptual apparatus of abstract terminology, but the underlying issues are the same: the nature of representation, the identification of the artist's intentions, the possibilities of assertion in art. These are all issues central to aesthetics.

The Background Problems in Aesthetics

(If you're interested only in kids, skip this section; it's about aesthetics for grownups.) The case method presented here was originally developed for adult aestheticians and their students, not for children, though it appears to be particularly effective with children. The method was developed not primarily for pedagogical but for methodological reasons, to meet a problem that affects both the teaching and doing of aesthetics at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels. The problem, endemic in the field of aesthetics, is this: most of the time, when conventional aestheticians set out to work, either teaching in the classroom or exploring aesthetic issues, they begin in one of two ways. Either they begin with a theory—often a theory about what art or beauty is—and then they attempt to apply it to a specific, individual case. Or, on the other hand, they begin with specific, individual instances of art or beauty and attempt to subsume them under a theory. For example—to pick the very simplest sort of example—one can "do aesthetics" by beginning with expression theory (the view that art is the expression and transmission of emotion) and by then showing how the theory applies to poetry or painting or music—say, a Byron poem or one of the Van Gogh sunflowers or a symphony of Brahms. "See how effectively these works convey the artists' emotions," one might say, "you weep when you feel Byron's anguish in his poetry; you are made uneasy by the jarring, crazy tensions in Van Gogh's sunflowers; and you are tossed from despair to exultation and back again by the symphonies of Brahms!" Alternatively, in doing aesthetics, one could begin with a Byron poem or a Van Gogh sunflower or a Brahms symphony and then show how aesthetic theory illuminates what we read or see or hear. When we perceive Byron's or Van Gogh's or Brahms' work under the tutelage of expression theory, it might be said, we interpret these works as expressing and conveying their creators' emotions directly to us, and we perceive them much more sensitively and fully.

Much of the teaching of aesthetics is of the first form: it begins with the theory and then points to artworks that illustrate the theory (though when it is taught it is usually dressed in more sophisticated terminology). A good deal of art criticism within aesthetics, in contrast, is of the second form: it

begins with the artworks and then uses theory to understand and interpret these works. But, at least in principle, doing aesthetics in these two ways is *boring* (or, as John Passmore used to put it, "dreary").[2] It is boring not so much because the theories are often long winded and jargon stuffed (on the contrary, some aesthetic theories are quite exciting) or because the artworks selected are somehow deficient, but for a much more significant methodological reason. Operating in these ways risks being intellectually hollow, because neither strategy can really tell you very much. The root problem is that, in either approach, aesthetics tends to be *theory driven* rather than *driven to theory*; the issues with which it is concerned are a product of the demands and deficiencies of its theoretical constructions, not issues made pressing by the subject matter itself. To expound a theory and then illustrate it by pointing to one or another work of art may, indeed, illuminate the theory, but it does little to tell you whether the theory is true: this is because the works selected to illustrate the theory are not selected at random, but are chosen *because* they seem to embody the theory's concerns. Yes, the Van Gogh sunflowers or the Brahms symphony or maybe Picasso's *Blue Bathers* will seem nicely to illustrate the expression theory of art, but you'd never pick a Mondrian canvas or a John Cage score to explore what expression theory claims art is. Conversely, to critique a work of art by appealing to a theory runs afoul of the same charge of selectivity: one picks a theory that seems "suitable" to the artwork in question, rather than any of the other available theories, and then wonders why the work seems somehow a bit tritely explained. One wouldn't engage in critical discourse, except for the most perverse reasons, by using, say, expression theory to interpret a Mondrian or Cage work; here formalist theories seem to have much more pull. But if we can pick and choose our theories as is convenient, what, exactly, have we learned from them about the works we use them to explore? Thus, aesthetics risks becoming boring, intellectually empty, and dreary, because the ways in which it connects theory and artwork don't really tell us anything new.

But there's another, more challenging way of doing aesthetics. Things change if we start with puzzle cases, cases that involve problems or dilemmas or quandaries, cases where we are not sure what to say or how to decide, or, more importantly, where we are not sure what theory to use. We cannot begin with theory; nor can we appeal to theory to "explain" works of art; instead, we have to get there the hard way, by teasing out the issues a puzzle case presents. These puzzle cases have much in common with the puzzle cases now very widely used in bioethics, legal ethics, business ethics, and other areas of applied professional ethics, and they share a feature in common: they don't come with easy solutions. This, of course, is just what makes them nonboring, intellectually full, and alive. (And, for those

skipping the discussion for adults, this is what makes them interesting to kids too.)

The Range of Puzzle Cases for Teaching Aesthetics

In addition to Case 1, *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*, consider several other cases that might be used in teaching aesthetics—either to adults or to children. Cases can be drawn from any area of the arts—painting, sculpture, photography, music, dance, poetry, fiction, drama, film, and so on, including areas often considered peripheral, such as gardens. But they will tend to fall into six general groups: cases about the nature of art; about beauty and aesthetic experience; about the meaning and interpretation of art; about creativity and fidelity in performance, replication, and reading; about the intersection of art and other values; and about the evaluation of art. Here is a sampler of cases in each of these areas, drawn from our casebook *Puzzles about Art*,[3] as they might be presented to children:

Group I: The Nature of Art

These cases all ask the question What is art? Is it representation? Is it the expression and communication of emotion, as expression theory insists? Is it the embodiment of a certain set of formal properties? Or is art just what is recognized as art by those who play roles in the world of art? For example:

Case 2. *Pile of Bricks*

Consider the following possibility, based on an exhibit at the Tate Gallery in 1976. A person already known, perhaps even famous, as a "minimalist" sculptor buys 120 bricks and, on the floor of a well-known art museum, arranges them in a rectangular pile, 2 bricks high, 6 across, and 10 lengthwise. He labels it *Pile of Bricks*. Across town, a bricklayer's assistant at a building site takes 120 bricks of the very same kind and arranges them in the very same way, wholly unaware of what has happened in the museum—he is just a tidy bricklayer's assistant. Can the first pile of bricks be a work of art while the second pile is not, even though the two piles are seemingly identical in all observable respects? Why, or why not?[4]

Group II. Cases about Beauty and Aesthetic Experience

Group II includes cases about beauty and whether beauty is "really real" or whether it is simply something "in the eye of the beholder," a function of the way a particular person sees something. The same questions can be raised about beauty's opposite, ugliness, as well as about the sublime, the fearsome, and other forms of aesthetic experience. For example:

Case 3: *Beautiful Plumage*

In many species of birds, the male has brilliant plumage, which

attracts females of the same species: think of the peacock, the China pheasant, the many varieties of parrot, and so on.

Is it correct to say that the male plumage is *beautiful* or that the female birds *find the plumage beautiful*? Can birds appreciate beauty? How would we go about trying to answer this question, if the only observation we can make is that the females are indeed attracted by the plumage? Is there human beauty versus bird beauty? If so, should all our references to beauty be of the form, beautiful to whom? Or are only human beings able to appreciate beauty and if so, what is it about human beings that gives them this distinction?[5]

Case 4. *Martian Marsks*

Let us suppose that we discover on Mars remnants of a culture that died long ago. Most of the things we find are completely alien to us; we cannot even guess how they were used. We have not deciphered the Martian language, and we know nothing about the physical appearance of the Martians, whose bodies must have completely disintegrated millions of years ago. One set of objects, however, is strikingly familiar to us: we find numerous items that look exactly like African masks. We name them Marsks. Again, we have no idea how these objects were made by the Martians and for what purpose.

Are the Marsks works of art? Are they beautiful? Are they meaningful? If yes, how? If not, are African masks works of art? Are they beautiful? Are they meaningful to us? After all, we know very little of the culture that produced them.[6]

Group III: Cases Concerning the Interpretation of Art

Among cases concerning the interpretation of art, a variety of issues arise: issues about the instructional and cognitive value of art (especially pressing in historical and descriptive works); about whether nonpictorial and nonverbal works, such as music and dance (as well as the *Chartreuse Portrait*) can have meaning or make statements; about the content of symbolic representations, and about truth.

Case 5. *Winterbranch*

The dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham describes the reactions of different audiences to his piece *Winterbranch*: "We did the piece . . . some years ago in many different countries. In Sweden they said it was about race riots, in Germany they thought of concentration camps, in London they spoke of bombed cities, in Tokyo they said it was the atom bomb. A lady with us took care of the two children who were on the trip. She was the wife of a sea captain and said it looked like a shipwreck to her. Of course, it's about all of those and not about any of them, because I didn't have any of those experiences, but everybody was drawing on his experience, whereas I had simply made a piece which was involved with *falls*, the idea of bodies falling."

Is *Winterbranch* about race riots, concentration camps, bombed cities, shipwrecks, and the other human catastrophes in terms of which people see it?

Is it only about falls? Or is it not *about* anything? Is Cunningham's intention when he made the piece relevant to legitimate interpretation of the piece?[7]

Group IV. Cases about Creativity and Fidelity in Performance, Replication, and Reading

These cases, arising in those arts in which there is a model, script, or score for performance or where some other form of replication takes place, all focus on the relationship between the artist's actual product and the way it is actualized in performance or presentation. To what degree, if at all, may the singer "interpret" and thus alter the opera's score? What constitutes a conductor's "reading" of a work, and what is a "change," "liberty," "mistake," or other unwarranted departure in the symphony? What counts as a forgery? What exactly may/should a performing artist do and not do with and to the work being performed? Are these answers different for an actor, a dancer, a musician? What about a restorer of artworks that have been damaged? And so on.

Case 6. *Exact Replication*

As a result of advanced experimentation in molecular physics, a small manufacturing company announces that it has perfected a process by which any work of visual art can be replicated on a molecule-for-molecule basis. In painting, this process makes possible replication of an entire work, including canvas, frame, and all lower as well as exposed layers of pigment. No human guesswork (or error) is involved, and the finished replica is indistinguishable from the original to the most sophisticated visual, physical, and chemical analyses.
1. The company applies for a permit to produce one replica each of the *Mona Lisa* and ten other very well-known works at the Louvre as insurance, it says, against "natural disaster." The replicas are to be stored in a permanent underground vault and are not to be removed (or viewed) unless the originals are destroyed by calamities such as earthquake, vandalism, or nuclear war.
2. The company applies for a permit to produce 100 replicas of each of the above works to establish satellite museums in major cities and regional capitals throughout the world.
3. The company applies for a permit to produce unlimited replicas of the works, and announces that it plans to market the replicas in sundry and department store outlets for $14.95 each.

Would you grant any or all of the above permits? If you would grant (1) or (2), why not (3)?[8]

Group V. Cases about Conflicts between Art and Other Values

These cases involve conflicts between aesthetic and other values, including historical values, ethical values, religious values, economic values, and many others. Each poses what seems to be a quintessential apples-and-oranges problem, weighing the value of art against other important values,

where it is not clear there is any common scale by which they can be assessed.

Case 7. *The Fire in the Louvre*

The Louvre is on fire. You can save either the *Mona Lisa* or the injured guard who had been standing next to it—but not both.
    What should you do?[9]

Case 8. *Clothing Nudes*

Joe Brown, a noted sculptor of athletes who lived in Princeton, New Jersey, did a larger-than-life bronze of two gymnasts for the campus of Temple University, in Philadelphia. The male figure, dressed in shorts, both feet on the pedestal, holds the unclothed female high over his head in a dramatic handstand. Mr. Brown, in response to feminist complaints that the sexes are not treated equally in his work, replied that he had at first intended both figures to be unclothed, but a nude male at street level in a city would invite vandals to spray paint or decorate it in various ways, so he added the shorts.
    Should such issues affect the aesthetic qualities of artworks? Should the sculptor have left both figures unclothed? Both clothed? Clothed the female and left the male unclothed? Or do what he did? Are the shorts an artistic mistake?[10]

Case 9. *Photographing the Civil War*

Civil War photographer Matthew Brady frequently repositioned and rearranged bodies of dead soldiers and other objects in composing war scenes to be photographed. Is there anything about Brady's practice that should disturb us?[11]

Group VI. The Evaluation of Art

These cases all focus on critical judgment: the assessment of the valued properties of art and their relative worth. Noteworthy here are many disputes about public policies affecting art, including which works may be publicly displayed, supported, staged, and so on, as well as the critical judgments made by teachers, reviewers, program directors, funding agencies, and many others. Are critical judgments in any way objective, or are they (merely) expressions of individual taste?

Case 10. *Oh, No, Not that Same Story Again!*

Lord Byron criticized Shakespeare as follows: "Shakespeare's name, you may depend on it, stands absurdly too high and will go down. . . . He took all his plots from old novels, and threw their stories into dramatic shape, at as little expense of thought, as you or I could turn his plays back again into prose tales."[12]
    Is Shakespeare's use of familiar stories an aesthetic defect? Is Byron an undependable critic because his own poetic style and aesthetic values appear to be so different from Shakespeare's?[13]

Case 11. *Shooting Clay Pigeons*

Paul Ziff says that the sport of clay pigeon shooting is of "no aesthetic interest." The same is true, he says, of tiddlywinks, shuffleboard, archery, baseball, basketball, bicycling, bowling, canoeing, curling, golf, and fishing. But some sports do have distinct aesthetic aspects: gymnastics, ski-jumping, figure skating, high-diving, and bullfighting. He explains: "The relevant difference between the first and second group is this: form is a grading factor only for the second. How one does it counts in the second group of sports but not in the first. Sink the ball hit the target: that's what counts in the first group. Form doesn't. Hold the club any way one likes, look like a duffer: if one manages somehow to sink the ball expeditiously enough one may end up a champion."[14]

Is Ziff right in dividing sports up in this way? Should the judging of all sports be revised to take aesthetic aspects into account? Does a sport remain a sport when it is judged on aesthetic grounds?[15]

A Sample Discussion (for Adults and Older Children)[16]

To be sure, the discussion of such cases can be quite elaborate. Consider, for example, the following real-life case, based on an incident in the Vatican on May 21, 1972. A deranged young Hungarian-born Australian, claiming to be Jesus Christ, attacked Michelangelo's *Pietà* with a hammer, striking the statue fifteen times before he was dragged away.

Case 12. *The Damage to the Pietà*

A hammer-wielding attacker has damaged Michelangelo's *Pietà*, destroying the Madonna's nose, shattering her left arm, and chipping her eyelid and veil. You, as director of the Vatican Museum, must choose whether to preserve the sculpture as is or attempt to restore it. Suppose the options open to you are:
1. Do not alter the statue; do nothing to repair the damage other than clear away the rubble from the base of the statue.
2. Restore the nose, arm, eyelid, and veil as nearly as possible to their original appearance. You have available to you and your staff photographs and drawings of the *Pietà* made before the incident, as well as a plaster cast of the statue made forty years ago, and you can use a polyester resin to reaffix any salvageable fragments and to form a ground-marble plaster where fragments are too small to be used. If your work is successful, the new parts will look just like the old, and viewers will be unable to tell which parts have been restored.[17]

Forced to choose between these options, readers may find themselves torn. Those who pick option 1 will usually think that it would be wrong to substitute anything that wasn't Michelangelo's work, even if it might look a lot like the original, and that what is important is the authenticity of the piece: the fact that it is Michelangelo's work. They will point out that the

areas of damage could have been still larger and that if attempts were made to restore the work, there would be no limit in theory to replacing virtually the whole thing. But the statue would then be of no greater value than the plaster cast made forty years ago—an informative likeness, perhaps, but not Michelangelo's work.

Those who defend attempting to restore the *Piéta* (option 2) insist that the appearance of the work would suffer if it lacked the nose, parts of the eyelid and veil, and especially the left arm, which had been extended in a way integral to the balance of the composition, and that viewing it in this damaged state would interfere with one's aesthetic experience of the whole.[18] To be sure, they would admit, some important works, like the *Venus de Milo*, cannot be restored because we have no way of knowing what the original was like; but where we know the original and can replicate its appearance, it is imperative that we do so. They will grant that the restoration might be of poor quality, but claim that unless the job is botched, the statue will be of more profound aesthetic impact if some of its parts are not quite as they were than if they remain broken off.

In forced-choice puzzle cases such as this, what the reader must do, in analyzing and defending an answer to the practical problem the case poses, is to give a reasoned argument for the course of action he or she thinks appropriate. To be persuasive, reasons for a course of action must be based not just on immediate feelings, but must appeal to a more general principle. Thus a puzzle case like this requires articulation of the principle or principles that are held to make a given answer correct. Those who favor the purist policy 1, for instance, appeal to a principle of authenticity in art, that principle which is also appealed to when labelling forgeries and replicas inferior to their originals: this principle holds that it makes a difference whose work it is. Those who favor the integralist restoration policy 2 appeal to aestheticist principles about the appearance of an artwork and the importance of aesthetic experience: what is significant about a work of art is not so much who made it but how it looks.

Of course, many professional aestheticians would assent to *both* a principle of authenticity and a principle of aestheticism. This is what makes these puzzle cases dilemmatic: we want to have it not just one way or the other, but both ways at once. Yet a case like *The Damage to the Piéta* makes it clear that one cannot always have it both ways. This is so even if the case is revised to offer more sophisticated options that take account of both principles involved. Suppose, for instance, that there were two additional possibilities open to the museum director who must decide what to do with the damaged *Piéta*:

3. Working from photographs, drawings, and the plaster cast of the *Piéta* made prior to the incident, restore the nose, arm, eyelid, and veil to their original contours, but use a resin lighter (or darker) in

color than the original marble so that the viewer knows which portions have been restored.

4. Restore the damaged portions with a material that is visually indistinguishable from the original (i.e., follow option 2), but incorporate a tracer dye into the resin to permit X-ray identification of the restored portions.

If offered these two possibilities, many readers will again find themselves torn, though since both options 3 and 4 represent compromises, their discomfort may not be as intense as when they were faced with the choice between options 1 and 2. Nevertheless, the reasons they give for preferring 3 will still appeal primarily to the principle of authenticity and for 4 to aestheticist considerations. No solution permits them to have it both ways; either the statue no longer looks like the statue Michelangelo created, or some portions of what looks like the work are no longer his.

To resolve this case, then, one is forced not only to identify the principles to which appeal is made—these are usually stated as reasons in the explanations of why one course of action is to be preferred to another—but also to prioritize the principles that have been identified. Either authenticity gives way to aestheticist principles, or the other way around. The difference between those who pick 1 or 3 and those who pick 2 or 4 can be said to consist in a difference in the way they rank principles that are accepted by all. They feel the pull of both authenticity and of aestheticism as principles important in response to art, but assign them different weights relative to each other.

In turn, the way weights are assigned to competing aesthetic principles indicates basic allegiances to background aesthetic theories. Expression-based theories will give higher priority to authenticity, while formalist theories will give greater importance to the perceptual properties of the work. But different expression and formalist theories will try to tread this line in different ways, and it is here that prodding with a specific, forced-choice puzzle case makes the background aesthetic theory display, as it were, its true colors. Some theories even insist that there can be no intermediate principles at all. But if a theory is complete and consistent as an account of art, it should eventually decide hard cases such as these in one way or another, and if it is inadequate to do so, the theory will thus reveal itself to be in need of extension or repair. By using cases, then, we can identify and address difficulties within aesthetic theory itself and thus reveal the sources of confusion as well as illumination in what we think about art.

While the discussion here is conducted at a seemingly sophisticated academic level, virtually all the points brought out in the discussion of *The Damage to the Piéta* could be make in the slightly Socratic dialogue form used to explore issues in *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*. Alternatively, they could be presented in lecture format, in staged dialogue, or—perhaps best for classroom use—live discussion and debate among groups of children.

Adjusting Puzzle Cases to Age Levels

Older children may bring a substantial amount of background knowledge to the discussion of puzzle cases and may be fully capable of exploring all the cases presented here in their current form. For example, among the points of background knowledge they will probably bring to *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*, they will at least know something about portraiture, they will know what the Museum of Modern Art is, they will know that a painting (usually) has a title, they will know that paintings are painted by an artist, and so on. This is just to say that they have some familiarity with the world of art.

But for very young children, it may be that very little of this background knowledge of the art world is available. A young child, say, a kindergartner, first- or second-grader, may know only a few—or none—of the facts that are presupposed in *The Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*, for example, and yet still be able to see the puzzle in it. What the teacher does is to rephrase it, adjusting it to the appropriate age or grade level, by deleting any specialized background knowledge:

Case 1a. *The Case of the Chartreuse Picture*

One day, Billy, your teacher says she wants to draw a picture of you. She takes a sheet of paper and covers the whole thing with chartreuse crayon (you know, that yellow-green color), and then she tacks it up on the board. Under it she writes, "This is a picture of Billy G." Would you be mad?

Nothing has changed in this case except that external references have been deleted; the case now fits entirely within the familiar world of the child. But the aesthetic issues are the same: What is a picture? How do you know what the person who drew the picture meant? and What can a picture say about something? Big language and elevated jargon aren't necessary to discuss these issues; even a kid can do it.

Adjusting cases to age levels in this way raises an additional issue that does not arise as clearly when such cases are presented to adults: this is the issue of developmental cognitive maturity. For example—though I know of no specific experimental data on which to base this claim—it's my hunch that children, especially younger ones, will at least initially gravitate toward certain sides in an issue, rather than others. For example, I'd guess that in Case 12, *The Damage to the Piéta*, a younger child would be more likely to adopt the formalist position (the view that however you put the sculpture back together, what's important is how it looks), rather than the purist position (the view that you mustn't add anything to the sculpture that isn't actually the work of Michelangelo). Perhaps (if this turns out to be true) a younger child's preference for the formalist view has to do with childhood experiences of breaking objects and having his or her parents

glue them back together ("now it's as good as new," the parents always say); or perhaps it betrays an innocence of the commercial art world that lionizes great artists; or perhaps other factors. Whatever the case, it may be that a teacher will have to work a little harder to get children at younger stages of cognitive maturity to see some sides of certain issues. This is still true, I think, even at the college level, where different types of students may gravitate toward different initial positions. For example, I notice in college-level discussions of Case 7, *The Fire in the Louvre,* that many older, often "nontraditional" students and many art majors want to rescue the *Mona Lisa,* while younger undergraduates and those who are not art majors are more likely to want to rescue the guard. But they are all capable of seeing the issue, once it is suggested to them, and they will work doggedly and argue vigorously with each other to try to figure it out.

Of course, puzzle cases can be adapted to higher levels as well. For instance, some more advanced students will respond to a reformulation of a case in the language of rights and obligations, or as issues at law:

Case 1b. *Suing over Chartreuse*

Al Meinbart paints the solid-chartreuse portrait of Daffodil Glurt and hangs it in the Museum of Modern Art. Have Daffodil's rights been violated? Ought she be able to sue for defamation of character? For violation of contract in sitting for a *portrait*? To what, exactly, did she agree when she decided to sit for the portrait, and what weight do her expectations have? Or are they outweighed by Meinbart's rights of expression, especially expression as an artist? Whose portrait is this, anyway?

And puzzle cases can be adapted to other audiences as well. The authors of *Puzzles about Art* have been particularly gratified by a couple of reports that using puzzle cases is especially effective in classroom situations with learning-disabled children who, though they may have difficulty with many verbal tasks, can readily see the puzzles at the core of these cases.

Regardless of the age or grade level of the students, it is clear what the challenge to the teacher is: once the case has been adapted to the appropriate age level and it is evident which way the student's initial response to the case runs, the teacher must then push and probe the puzzle by pointing out questions that highlight the other sides of the issue—or better still, invite open discussion among diverse students to explore it. The basic idea is to exacerbate the difficulty of the puzzle and then get the students to think it through as they try to resolve it. Which way particular discussions go depends, of course, on which direction the student initially takes; and this means, of course, that conversations with different students may be different, if they begin with differing intuitions about the case. The best conversations are the ones in which the teacher is able to respond to the students in a way that leads them along a path opposite to the one they initially took, or

lets them see that different students see the issue differently and, in doing so, reinforces the puzzle nature of the problem: how can a chartreuse patch *insult* someone, even if it certainly seems to do so? The ultimate objective is to make the students feel the tension inherent in the problem; they should want to have the *Pietà both* repaired *and* as Michelangelo carved it; they should want to rescue *both* the *Mona Lisa and* the guard. If they respond to these tensions, they will be doing the crucial intellectual work.

Of course, as in any area of philosophy, aesthetics is often a good deal more successful in posing questions than in reaching answers, and the child's simple world may be disturbed by leading him or her to ask questions neither he, she, nor the teacher can answer. But, of course, this discomfort is part of genuine education: aesthetic issues are not easy ones. After all, it is just this sort of questioning which may, ultimately, have profound effect on the way in which a future adult views, creates, and values art.

Finally, for dessert, since kids especially like things that are real, one can always serve them the actual version of the *Case of the Chartreuse Portrait*, the one on which the variations presented here are originally based:

Case 1c. *The Case of the Black-on-Black Portrait*

In 1957, the abstract expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt painted a portrait of Paris art dealer Iris Clert. The portrait is black on black, and it is titled "Portrait of Iris Clert." Clert was flattered. Should she have been?

This, of course, will serve as an exercise for both student and teacher.

NOTES

1. This case and some of the surrounding text come from my short piece "The Contributions of Aesthetics," in *Research Readings for Discipline-Based Art Education*, ed. Stephen Mark Dobbs (Reston, Va.: National Art Education Association, 1988), p. 27.
2. J. A. Passmore, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," *Mind* 60, no. 239 (1951). Passmore denounced aesthetics' dullness, its pretentiousness, and the fact that it was "peculiarly unilluminating"; he had in mind the vapid abstractions and metaphysical hyperbole involved in "saying nothing in the most pretentious possible way." He also thought aesthetics wasn't in touch enough with the real world of the specific, different arts. Thus what he meant by "dreary" isn't all that I mean by "boring," but close.
3. All the cases provided in this section are from *Puzzles about Art: An Aesthetics Casebook*, by Margaret P. Battin, John Fisher, Ronald Moore, and Anita Silvers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
4. *Pile of Bricks* is based on Robert J. Semple, Jr., "Tate Gallery Buys Pile of Bricks—Or Is It Art?" *New York Times*, 20 February 1976, p. 31, and was contributed to *Puzzles about Art* by W. E. Kennick.
5. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by M. P. Battin.
6. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by Eddy Zemach.
7. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by Annette Barnes.
8. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by M. P. Battin.

9.   Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by M. P. Battin.
10. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by John Fisher.
11. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by M. P. Battin.
12. Bill Henderson, *Rotten Reviews: A Literary Companion* (Wainscott, N.Y.: Pushcart Press, 1986).
13. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by Anita Silvers.
14. Paul Ziff, *Antiaesthetics: An Appreciation of the Cow with the Subtile Nose* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1984), pp. 62-63.
15. Case from *Puzzles about Art*, contributed by M. P. Battin.
16. The following section is taken from the Preface to *Puzzles about Art*, pp. vi-ix.
17. The *Piéta* case, from *Puzzles about Art*, is based on one by Mark Sagoff. He provides a defense of the purist response in "On Restoring and Reproducing Art," *Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 9 (1978): 453-70.
18. A defense of the integralist response to the *Piéta* case is given by Michael Wreen, "The Restoration and Reproduction of Works of Art," *Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (1985): 91-100.