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Introduction

Why "Classic" and for Whom?

This book is an introduction to and commentary on a series of classics in the philosophy of art, specifically in the philosophy of art in the West. These books, or excerpts from them, often appear as the primary readings in introductory courses in the philosophy of art, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Thus, this text can be viewed as a companion to such courses. It is designed to be a resource for both the students and instructors of such courses.

As such, it does not presuppose any previous knowledge of the philosophy of art on the part of its readers. But in addition to covering the elementary nuts and bolts of the readings it canvasses, I have also tried to pursue certain selected topics more deeply in order to give more sophisticated readers the opportunity to further ponder various subjects. Although some readers may find parts of the book familiar, I hope they will find other parts that explore new ground.

In addition to introducing various texts, this book also is designed to introduce readers to various tools and techniques of philosophical analysis through their application in the interpretation and criticism of the works under review. Moreover, although I have suggested so far that the readership for this book is primarily academic, I have attempted to write it in such a way that it will also be accessible to serious art lovers who are curious about the philosophy of art, especially in terms of the ways in which it can augment their appreciation of art.

Beginning with Plato, the book examines seminal works by Aristotle, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Leo Tolstoy, and Clive Bell. One reason that these books belong together is that they talk to each other. Aristotle answers Plato, Kant engages ideas associated with Hutcheson and Hume, Hegel responds to Kant, while drawing upon Aristotle; whereas Schopenhauer borrows freely from Kant as well as from Plato. Moreover, Tolstoy comments on Kant and Hegel, while arguably being influenced by the latter, and, as I shall argue, Bell can be best understood as "Schopenhauer-without-Wagner."

Of course, there are classic writings on the philosophy of art from non-Western cultures. They are not included in this survey because they are not part of this conversation and not because they are not worthy of philosophical discussion. They are. As the philosophy of art as practiced in the English-speaking world becomes more cosmopolitan, as it will inevitably become, works such as the ones reviewed here will come into conversation with the classics of other cultures. The result will

be a new conversation that embraces an enlarged canon and that will mandate the need for a new introduction.[1]

One way in which these texts are classic is that they have raised what have become, undoubtedly through their influence, perennial topics in the philosophy of art, especially for the Anglophone tradition. Plato challenges the intellectual and moral credentials of art, a challenge to which in effect Aristotle replies, though it is an issue that remains hotly contested by living philosophers into our own times. Hutcheson counters the ancient conception of beauty with a subjectivist account, popularizing the notion of "disinterestedness" that will mutate via Kant and his successors into the most highly influential view of aesthetic experience embraced by contemporary philosophers. Hume attempts to clarify the problem of aesthetic disagreement that is still with us, as does Kant. Contemporary philosophers, notably Arthur Danto, have returned to Hegel for inspiration, while George Dickie has focused attention on the evolution of modern aesthetic attitude theory from the contributions of Hutcheson, Kant, and Schopenhauer. Tolstoy is a pioneer in the development of the expression theory of art, while Bell performs a comparable service in terms of the competing tradition of formalism. Both Tolstoy and Bell explicitly take up the task of defining art, thereby initiating one of the dominant programs in the philosophy of art in the twentieth century and beyond.

Thus, these works are classics in the sense that they are touchstones for some of the major debates that continue to embroil contemporary philosophers of art, especially in the Anglophone tradition. Indeed, they are more than that. They are continuing resources. That is, they are still part of the conversation.

Moreover, as is probably evident, a number of the aforesaid issues are concerns not only for the meager audience of professional philosophers; they are important for the culture at large. These issues include questions concerning the ethical and cognitive status of art initiated by Plato and echoed in various ways throughout succeeding classics as well as the problem of aesthetic disagreement wrestled with by Hume and Kant. John Maynard Keynes once observed that every time you hear some businessman hawking some idea about the economy, he is probably spouting the views of some dead economist. A similar point can be made about the many of "assumptions" that are frequently taken on board in statements about art; they echo the views of dead philosophers of art, often the ones being explored in this text. This trickle-down effect is another reason to study these philosophers. Forewarned is forearmed.

1. A similar observation should be registered with regard to race and gender. All the authors I discuss herein are white and male. As historians of philosophy survey the past and identify women and nonwhite thinkers who engaged issues of art and aesthetics in the past, the conversation will need to be reconceived, enlarged, and revised. In that respect, this anthology, it is to be hoped, is at best an interim report.

Finally, these texts are also classics of the philosophy of art because they are part of the self-understanding of the Anglophone tradition. As already mentioned, they are frequently anthologized in the textbooks that are used to introduce students to the discussion; articles about them frequently appear in leading scholarly journals in the field such as the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*; and they are recurring topics of dissertations. Anglophone philosophers of art are expected to be familiar at least to the ideas of these authors, although admittedly to varying degrees. Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and perhaps Tolstoy and Bell are probably referred to more often than Hegel and Schopenhauer.[2] Nevertheless, all these philosophers and their views comprise something like the shared "vocabulary" or "memory" of contemporary, Anglophone philosophers of art.[3]

In that respect, this book can be regarded as an invitation to join that conversation.

Chapter Overview

The earliest systematic theoretical writing that we have on art in the West is found in the works of Plato. This writing concerns poetry, primarily dramatic poetry, but Plato also suggests approaches to the visual arts and music. What, of course, is ironic about considering Plato to be the first philosopher of art is that he comes not to praise art, but to bury it. He is extremely critical of what we call art and artists. He is especially worried about whether art can serve the needs of society, and he suspects instead that art will disrupt it. Thus, many of Plato's concerns have to do with regulating or censoring art. The first philosopher of art, then, is a censor. Plato is interested in determining the nature of dramatic poetry, painting, and art not for the abstract academic pursuit of pure knowledge, but in order to show that they should be subject to social control.

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2. One important philosopher of art who does not have a chapter in this book is Nietzsche, although he is briefly discussed in the chapter on Schopenhauer. The reason for this omission is that I do not think that he fits into the ongoing conversation of the philosophy of art as neatly as do the other authors. Similarly, I have vaulted over the medieval period in Europe altogether because I do not think it is immediately relevant to the tradition of the philosophy of art as currently practiced. Both Nietzsche and medieval aesthetics are worthwhile topics for philosophical research. But they are not part of the story that I am telling.

For the record, in terms of the contrast drawn between artistic autonomy and heteronomy in this book, Nietzsche is on the side of heteronomy.

3. As I hope this paragraph signals, in this book, I am primarily interested in the way these texts figure in the history of the philosophy of art, and I am less concerned with reading them in their cultural context or in fitting them into overarching oeuvres of the authors in question.

One of the first dialogues by Plato that we consider is called *Ion*. Ion is the name of a rhapsode. A rhapsode is a kind of singer—a person who recites and interprets poetry in public. Ion is a rhapsode who specializes in reciting Homer. He is rather like a rock star in ancient Athens. Plato, however, is as suspicious of Ion as many present-day political commentators are suspicious of the rock stars, rap artists, and movie actors who presume to make pronouncements about current affairs.

Plato believes that the authority they have in society is ill founded, and in this particular dialogue Plato, through the character of Socrates, is out to show that the rhapsode is an exceptionally ignorant and mindless sort of person who does not deserve a hearing on matters of substance. Indeed, Plato not only attacks the rhapsode—the singer or performer of poetic texts—but he also extends his assault to the authors of those texts, including Homer. Poets in Greek society were often regarded as educators, and in his *Ion*, Plato is at pains to argue that poets should not be accepted as teachers because they have nothing to teach anyone.

In his *Republic*, Plato continues his assault on poetry and the arts. Having established in his *Hippias Major*, the first Platonic dialogue that we will examine, that beauty is beneficial pleasure, in his *Republic*, Plato demands to be shown what benefit poetry, and by extension the arts, can provide for the commonwealth. In his *Republic*, his arguments heat up, surpassing the intensity of his *Ion*. In the *Republic*, Plato goes further than merely alleging that poets have nothing to teach; he charges that what they pretend to teach and the way they present it are literally dangerous to the well-being of society. Thus, he says in Book 10 of his *Republic* that unless the friends of poetry can rebut the charges he has leveled at it, we have grounds to censor artists and even to banish some of them from society.

One way of understanding Aristotle's *Poetics* is to regard it as taking up Plato's challenge to meet the objections against poetry that he so forcefully advanced in his *Republic*. In order to do this, Aristotle argues that poetry, or at least tragic poetry, does have something to teach its audiences. Narrative, Aristotle argues, is an instrument for obtaining knowledge about human affairs. In order to sustain this claim, Aristotle embarks on a penetrating analysis of the nature of narrative—indeed, one of the most important and foundational discussions of narrative in the Western tradition. Furthermore, in opposition to Plato, through this discussion, Aristotle, in effect, justifies the narratives of the poets by connecting them to knowledge.

One of Plato's most striking objections to poetry is that it excites the emotions, arousing them to a pitch that is bad for society in general. The emotional intensity of poetry, like the emotional intensity of rock music according to some contemporary commentators, threatens social stability and for that reason, Plato maintains, it should be regulated, if not suppressed. Aristotle, in contrast, contends that there is a positive way in which the emotions are engaged by tragic poetry. For, according to Aristotle, poetry not only arouses emotions but also leads to the *catharsis* thereof, a process that putatively has an altogether good effect on audiences.

Thus, Aristotle, the student of Plato, agrees in part with his mentor—that is, he belongs to the school of Plato—in that he believes that poetry incites the emotions. *But* he argues that Plato's analysis is incomplete since poetry does something salutary to the emotions in addition to exciting them. Consequently, for Aristotle, it would appear, Plato's argument for the suppression of poetry in particular and art in general is too hasty a conclusion. For poetry not only arouses the passions but also causes catharsis in audiences—that is to say, it purges or purifies or clarifies the emotion that it ignites and this is to the good of society in general. So, Aristotle's argument implicitly rejects Plato's brief for the repression of poetry and the arts.

After discussing Plato and Aristotle, we turn to the philosophy of art in the modern period. One thing that is striking about the discussion of art in the ancient period is the emphasis that the ancients place on the relation of art to knowledge. Their debate, in large measure, is over whether art yields knowledge. In this, their preoccupations may strike you as missing something important. They do not seem overly concerned with the aesthetic pleasure to be had from artworks. They are primarily concerned with the utilitarian value of art. So obsessed with the use value of art are they that they pay scant attention to its aesthetic value.

That focus, however, changes dramatically as we shift our attention to the modern period. For questions of aesthetic pleasure are central to the writings of Hutcheson, Hume, and Kant. Hutcheson and Hume address it in terms of the notion of beauty, whereas Kant adds the broader concept of the aesthetic to the conversation.

The first modern philosopher in our review is Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson is interested in the nature of beauty which he claims is really sensation of disinterested pleasure that we undergo when we are moved by what he calls the compound ratio of unity in diversity in stimuli that range from artworks to landscapes to mathematical formulae. The notion of *disinterestedness* that Hutcheson defends remains a bone of contention into the present. Many politically disposed artists regard this idea as it figures in contemporary calls for a return to beauty for its own sake as a repudiation of socially engaged art.

Hume doesn't spend so much time analyzing beauty. He agrees that beauty is connected with subjectively felt pleasure. But he is vexed by the implications of this. He worries about a problem that is related to the kind of subjective characterization of beauty that had been articulated by people like Hutcheson. Namely, if beauty is reducible to a sensation (of pleasure) that we feel as a result of encountering an object—if it has grounds in nothing more than our feelings—how can our judgments that this or that object is beautiful be in any way objective? That in which each of us takes or feels pleasure is highly variable, isn't it? Our taste appears very subjective—don't people say that there is no disputing judgments of taste? And yet, on the other hand, we do *argue* about our judgments of taste, and that suggests that we think that there are objective standards of taste—objective

standards that we can use to adjudicate our diverging and often conflicting judgments about beauty.

So, according to Hume, we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, we think that our judgments of taste are subjective and yet on the other hand, we behave as though we think they are objective. Hume tries to resolve this paradox; he tries to explain how our judgments of taste—our judgments that such and such is beautiful—can be objectively grounded at the same time that they are rooted in subjective feelings of pleasure.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant returns to this problem from a different direction. Exploiting the concept of disinterestedness that we encountered in Hutcheson, Kant proposes an ingenious theory of the way in which we can make judgments that this or that is beautiful in what he calls a universal voice—that is, in a way that our pronouncement commands the assent or agreement of everyone. For Hume, the objectivity of aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste is grounded in the joint verdicts of what he calls Ideal Critics. That is, when you and I disagree about whether a particular painting is beautiful, what we need to do is to compare our judgments with the verdict that these Ideal Critics endorse. If your judgment more closely approximates the verdicts of the Ideal Critics, you are right; if my judgment converges on the views of the Ideal Critics, then I am right.

But on Kant's theory, we have no need for recourse to critics, ideal or otherwise. Kant maintains that we can issue objective judgments of taste—aesthetic judgments—without adverting to Ideal Critics. Instead, under the appropriate conditions, aesthetic judgments can be objectively grounded in our own experience. But how can one be justified objectively in alleging that something is beautiful solely on the basis of a single response, namely my own? We certainly cannot make objective empirical judgments on the basis of a single case. So, the burden of Kant's enormously elaborate *Critique of Judgment* is to show how on the basis of my experience of a sunrise, I am entitled to say that the sunrise is beautiful, not just for me, but for everyone else as well.

Hegel is a successor of Kant's in the tradition of German philosophy. He rejects the Kantian approach for reasons that many contemporaries find sympathetic. For, whereas Kant appears to de-emphasize the relation of aesthetics to ideas and concepts, Hegel takes the relationships between these factors to be central. Hegel develops a conception of art that considers art to be the sensuous embodiment or manifestation of ideas and concepts. In this, Hegel considers art—or at least art of certain periods—to be on a par with religion and philosophy in terms of the communication of knowledge, whereas Kant tends to set off pure aesthetic experience as a realm apart.

For Hegel, art is a matter of sensuous or concrete universals—ideas and concepts embodied in sensuous forms. In this way art contributes to cognition whereas Kant seems to contrast pure aesthetic experience with cognition properly so called.

Whereas on the Kantian-derived approach, especially as it has been traditionally developed, art is compartmentalized—set off from other precincts of society—the Hegelian approach attempts to situate art as an integrated, functional contribution to the life of the culture.

Hegel's most determined but unsuccessful rival was Arthur Schopenhauer. Returning to the Kantian perspective and mixing it with ideas drawn from Plato and various traditions of Indian philosophy, Schopenhauer argues that art is important because it lifts us out of everyday life and mundane human affairs. Art is not valuable because of its contribution to social life but as an avenue of escape from all-too-human concerns and desires. Indeed, in Schopenhauer we find articulated the notion that the point of art is to afford aesthetic experience understood as something valuable in itself, divorced from the claims of life.

Schopenhauer's emphasis on art as a means to transcend the realm of utility and desire—Schopenhauer's psychologized version of Kant's notion of disinterestedness—moreover, had profound influence on twentieth-century aesthetics, particularly on the development of formalism. Clive Bell's book *Art* is perhaps the clearest statement of this tendency.[4] Combining Kant's suggestion that the aesthetic response is primarily one to the form of the work with Schopenhauer's claim that such a response lifts us out of the flow of life, Bell hypothesizes that in virtue of its form—what he calls its significant form—an artwork engenders a specific emotion in percipients, namely, the aesthetic emotion which itself is valuable for its own sake in a way that transcends mundane preoccupations by transporting us to an ecstatic realm.

For Bell, the essence of art is form, or, as he puts it, significant form. This feature of artworks raises an aesthetic emotion in spectators, an emotion, as Hutcheson and Kant would have agreed, is marked by disinterestedness. For Bell, art of necessity stands outside the nexus of utilitarian or use value. Artworks are valuable in virtue of their form and for the disinterested aesthetic emotion or experience the form is said to provoke. Bell's position amounts to a powerful statement of the view that is sometimes referred to as *art for art's sake*. That is, art is not valuable because it produces knowledge, or because it provides moral education, or because it purges, releases, or purifies ordinary emotions. Rather it is valuable for its own sake and for the uniquely aesthetic feelings it is believed to engender.

According to Bell, that which makes something art is its possession of form or, at least, of significant form. Significant form is a feature that anything must have

4. Some might object to the inclusion of Bell in a book like this. I have several reasons for including him. First, he is typically among the readings assigned in introductory courses in the philosophy of art where those readings constitute something like the memory and, in that sense, the subconscious of Anglophone philosophers of art. One of the reasons for that is that he gives twentieth-century philosophers one of their primary directives: define art. Moreover, as I will argue, Bell represents an important turning point; through his adaptation of certain of Schopenhauer's ideas, he paves the way for the theory of art's autonomy.

if it is to count as an artwork rather than something else. In technical language, significant form provides a necessary and sufficient condition for the status of artwork. But this conception of art, generally called formalism, has never gone uncontested. Even in the early twentieth century, there were dissenters.

One line of dissent notes that formalism does not appear to capture what is arresting about much art. For what seems essential to most, if not all, art is not its display of form, but what it expresses. Art, on this view, is not merely a vehicle for exhibiting formal properties; rather, it is primarily a vehicle for expression. But what gets expressed? The most common candidates on this view are emotions, feelings, points of view, and the inner experiences of the artists.

Because of its emphasis on expression, this philosophical persuasion gets called the expression theory of art. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, these theories were probably the most popular ones. Indeed, it is probably still the most commonly held view of art among most people. Certainly, the images of the artist that we most frequently encounter in popular fictions like movies are underwritten by variations on the expression theory of art.

Most often artists are portrayed as trying to get in touch with and then expressing their own unique feelings, emotions, and visions. These popular images of the artist are arguably the residue of expression theories of art and the romantic philosophies that presaged them. They are an example of the trickle-down effect mentioned earlier, whereby philosophical ideas seep into the common understanding.

Expression theories of art are rivals to formalist theories. We will examine expression theories before we explore Bell's *Art* because historically, they arrive on the scene earlier.

The expression theory of art that we will discuss in the penultimate chapter of this volume is the one developed by the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy in his book *What Is Art?*[5] Tolstoy locates the essence of art in the artist's expression of his or her own feelings, emotions, and points of view. But Tolstoy requires that the artist not only express her emotions, but also that she arouse the self-same feeling she has undergone in her audience. Tolstoy argues that a genuine work of art not only articulates the artist's emotional experience but also transfers or communicates a comparable affective experience to its audiences. For Tolstoy, art properly so called communicates feeling. Moreover, good art is that which communicates the very best or most progressive feelings to its audiences. Thus, where we began

5. Some may object to the inclusion of Tolstoy in this survey on the grounds that he is not a philosopher. This seems unjust to me. If you read his book, you are struck by his comprehensive command of the relevant philosophical literature and of the penetration of some of his criticism of it. Moreover, he is a representative of a major type of art theory, the expression theory, which remains extremely popular, especially among art lovers. Indeed, I will argue even something like his version of the expression may still have resonance among political progressives. And finally, like Bell, he appears regularly on introductory reading lists and merits interrogation for that reason.

with Plato, who suspects that all art is a detriment to society because it arouses the emotions, we find a contrasting view in Tolstoy, who, insofar as he is committed to the existence of socially progressive feelings, endorses art as a good that contributes to forging a bond of solidarity between people, exactly the sort of worldly function rejected by Bell.

Thus, the book ends with a face-off between Tolstoy and Bell, between expressionism and formalism, or, more broadly speaking, between the view that art is heteronomous—that is, an altogether embedded and inseparable part of its environing culture—versus the view that art is autonomous—utterly separate and distinct from every other social practice.

An Underling Narrative

Previously, I suggested a series of different ways in which various of the texts under consideration were in conversation with certain other texts in my canon of classics. But there is also a larger conversation that I think echoes throughout the volume. It concerns the just mentioned dialectic between the heteronomy versus the autonomy of art. Virtually every philosopher in the West from Plato through the early modern period, including Hume, thinks of art as connected to cultural interests like ethics. What begins to emerge gradually in the early modern period—with the appearance of what has been called the Modern System of the Arts[6] and the notion of aesthetics[7]—is a view that art is a realm unto itself, apart from the claims of utility, morality, politics, religion and so forth, a realm of art for its own sake.

This view comes together in stages. The notion that aesthetic pleasure is disinterested is championed by Hutcheson and Kant, who believe that disinterestedness is a condition for aesthetic pleasure. That is, in order to judge an artwork as a source of free beauty, one has to have a disinterested attitude toward it. However, in the hands of various subsequent commentators, like Schopenhauer and Bell, disinterestedness becomes the very purpose for experiencing art, not merely a condition for experiencing it as beautiful. That is, the purpose of art is to free us—to liberate us—from the practical and moral demands of everyday life.

So, there is a narrative that underpins this book. The beginning of the book charts a time from when it went virtually without saying that art was embedded in social life to the time of the emergence of the view that art is autonomous. The complications that take shape as the story moves forward then take note of the

6. Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951): 496–527.

7. J. Colin McQuillan, *Early Modern Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

appearance of resistance to the rise of the affirmation of autonomy in the work of Hegel and Tolstoy.

Nevertheless, I conclude this telling of the tale with Bell not because the kind of autonomism he defends, namely formalism, has conquered but because I think it sets the stage for what will be one of the most important debates in the philosophy of art in our own day, the debate between the autonomists and the heteronomists of which autonomism has, so to speak, a head start.

To a certain extent, this book is a history of the philosophy of art. However, it should not be mistaken as having the same aim as Paul Guyer's recent, magisterial *A History of Modern Aesthetics*.[8] For one thing, this book discusses the ancients, not only the moderns. Furthermore, Guyer's book is far more comprehensive. If he doesn't cover every modern philosopher of art, there aren't many he misses. My account is far more selective. Also, a different dialectic underlies Guyer's narrative than underlies mine. He contrasts philosophers who place the value of art in cognition with those who place it in play. I emphasize the contest between autonomy and heteronomy. I do this not only because I find Guyer's use of the antipode of play a bit too broad, slippery, and sometimes strained, but also because there is a moral to my story: that by the time Bell publishes *Art*, Anglophone philosophy is on the brink of what will become the continuing debate over the value of art—that of whether it is autonomous or enmeshed in the cognitive, moral, historical, spiritual, and political life of society.

My Agenda

This book is a selective history of the philosophy of art in the West.

History, it goes without saying, is retrospective. We write about the past from the perspective of the present, which, of course, was in the future of the historical figures we go on about. We know something they did not, namely how their contributions would impact what was to come—the future us. So, when we write about the past, we typically emphasize those aspects that are relevant to our own present situation. We weave a narrative of how things have evolved to get us to where we are now. Thus, we choose episodes that we think belong to our narrative in terms of what we think got us to where we are now.

And that is how this book was constructed.

As I see it, two major issues in the philosophy of art in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century are (1) determining whether art is an autonomous practice or a heteronomous practice, and

8. Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

(2) answering the question "What is art?" Moreover, these two questions are often interrelated.[9]

Autonomism, as articulated by Bell, is one way of getting a particularly tidy theory of what art is. For autonomism separates art from everything else by definition. Thus, autonomism has been a constant source of temptation for subsequent philosophers interested in finding a theory of art that would cleave art from every other social practice. One way of reading the narrative in this book is as an archaeology of the emergence of autonomism. However, that would be an incomplete reading, inasmuch as the alternative view, including coverage of resistance to autonomism, is also chronicled. In that respect, what I have excavated are the earliest strata of the major debates now pressing philosophers of art in the Anglophone tradition—not only the question of what constitutes art, but the relation, if any, between art, cognition, morality, politics, history, and so on.

The works canvassed in this book have been elevated to the status of classics in virtue of their formative influence on philosophical discourse today. They have not only set the stage for our debates. They contain insights that may even help us resolve them.

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9. See my "Beauty and the Genealogy of Art Theory," in Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20–40.