On at least one significant and widespread view of aesthetics, the claim expressed by my title must appear paradoxical. If aesthetics is held to be a distinctively Enlightenment development in philosophy, if the subject and not just the name is believed to have been an invention of the 18th century, then ancient philosophers can hardly occupy positions of direct importance in the field (though they may, for the purposes of an aesthetician such as Croce, provide negatively defining examples). To argue otherwise, as I propose to do, is therefore to face necessarily interrelated issues regarding the nature and the history of aesthetics. My response to this task will broach considerations bearing equally on certain ancient texts and on the cardinal question of whether and how the domain of aesthetics might, or should, be delimited. For in the process of suggesting that some of the ideas and procedures of Plato and Aristotle do deserve to hold salient positions within a coherent history of aesthetics, I shall also contend that they are of specific relevance to the problems identifying and demarcating a history of aesthetics at all. It will become clear, consequently, that I regard the topic of (self-)definition, which for disciplines as for individuals must in part be historical definition, as something which should be a factor in any substantial enterprise in aesthetics.

If perceptions of the shape of aesthetics in the past, and conceptions of its possibilities in the present, are actively interdependent, it might initially look as though there is no alternative to ideologically framed histories which presuppose adoption of some particular angle of vision on the subject and its values. A parallel prompts itself with

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ethics, where we appear to meet equivalent difficulties over the relationship between the history of ethical thought (and practice) and the business of ethics in the present. It is no coincidence that the 18th century seems to some moral philosophers to have a significance for their subject and its boundaries which is comparable to the view of aesthetics as an Enlightenment invention. Moral thought and aesthetics both acquired many of their peculiarly modern lineaments during this same period, and it is a critical fact for my argument that this process, perhaps above all enshrined in the classical formulations of Kant, should have followed a pattern of deliberate exclusion: it is a common element in many subsequently prevailing approaches to aesthetics and to ethics that the concerns of each are allowed to constitute self-sufficient spheres, whose separation from one another, as well as from other areas of human activity and value, can be confidently maintained. And while relatively few moral philosophers have been tempted to regard the whole of their subject's ancestry from the point of view of, say, the categorical imperative, a vision of just this restrictive kind has become familiar in aesthetics.

The focus of such vision, as it affects my own themes, can be conveniently illustrated by an observation of Paul Kristeller's. "We have," he writes, "to admit the conclusion, distasteful to many historians of aesthetics, but grudgingly admitted by almost all of them, that ancient writers and thinkers... were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of... works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content..." The notion of "aesthetic quality," which ought in some sense to be "detached" from other major dimensions of human meaning, is not of course a universally accepted premiss in our time: aesthetics would, I think, be in a morbid condition if it were. And it is certainly possible to adduce the fact to which Kristeller himself alludes (as does Alexander Nehamas in his commentary below), that textbook histories and anthologies of aesthetics customarily give Plato and Aristotle, as well as other pre-Enlightenment figures, an honorary place in the story of the subject. But such acknowledgement is generally outweighed, in the philosophical literature and the mentality of aesthetics as a whole, by precisely the grounding conviction of aesthetic autonomy which Kristeller's remark representatively presupposes.

1. The Critique of Judgment §§1-9. §§48-53 are a significantly different matter.