

ART AND MORALITY

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What is the relation of art to morality? We could spend a great deal of time at the outset trying to define the words "art" and "morality". Instead, however, we shall evade these trying questions, and assume that we already attach some common meaning to these terms. Paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, poems, plays, and novels can all be works of art; we shall not stop to argue which works in these media succeed in being works of art. We shall be concerned to discover what the effect of these works is on the moral conduct of the persons who see, hear, or read them—whether, for example, it leads them to violate any of the Ten Commandments or other rules that would generally be called moral; and what is to be done when aesthetic values, which we experience primarily through works of art, conflict with moral values.

I

Let us consider first the most prevalent conception of the relation between art and morality—what we may call the moralistic conception. According to this, art is, at least, a harmless interlude in the serious business of life, and at worst, a menace to society and morality. Art is so considered because it gives people unorthodox ideas; it disturbs them; it emphasizes individuality rather than conformity; and it may be dangerous in undermining beliefs on which (it is thought) our society rests. Art is a kind of gadfly stinging at the body of established beliefs, often at precisely those places where custom does not wish to be disturbed; art is always at work, breeding discontent, rebellion, individual difference, conformism—and it seems as if art is always being directed against the established mores of the day, never in their favor. Witness the complaints of *Life* magazine and others about twentieth-century American writers, who for the most part make heroes out of rebels and emotionally "maladjusted"

people, and refuse to sing the praises of the solid citizens without whom industry and technology could not progress. Because of this, art is looked upon with suspicion by the Guardians of Custom. When art does not affect people much, it is considered a harmless pleasure, an escape, a luxury, something which is unfortunately there and has to be put up with because some people seem to want it — but which may become, at any moment, insidious and dangerous, gnawing at the substructure of our most cherished beliefs and attitudes.

The most famous historical representatives of this view were Plato and Tolstoy ; and this is the more surprising since both of them were great artists. Plato was no moralist in his less famous works in which he discussed art — in the *Ion*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*. But in his most renowned work, the *Republic*, Plato takes a highly moralistic view of art. There he is concerned to set up an ideal state, or republic. Everything hinges on the kind of ruler that is at the helm of the ship of state, for the rulers are all-powerful and not subject to popular vote. Plato spends many pages describing in detail the training of these rulers-to-be. If their morality is to be pure and undefiled, they must be kept away from all undermining influences, however subtle. They must not be permitted to listen to sensuous music, or to witness stage presentations in which bad people triumph, or in any way exposed to art which would loosen the moral fiber of the impressionably growing child or cause him to swerve from the path of austerity which must be his if he is to remain incorruptible in his future position of state. We could spend considerable time, if we had it, debating whether or not Plato's stricture upon art, in the interests of the future rulers of state, would (if adopted) make the rulers more capable or less so than they would otherwise have been. Personally I find this extremely dubious : a ruler-to-be should know the full facts of life as early as possible ; and it would seem that the only way to combat evil is first to know something about it. But whatever we may decide about this, we should note that all these strictures are imposed for a reason ; the delights of art are sacrificed, reluctantly but firmly, not because Plato had no respect or love for art, but because he was convinced that the most important thing of all, even more than art, was the welfare of the entire state — a state in utter chaos or corruption could produce nothing, including art itself. Where the welfare of the state was involved, even so great a price as that of art was not too great a one to pay. For no lesser reason would so great a thing be sacrificed. And for the masses of humanity, where the education of future rulers was not concerned, there was to be no limitation of art at all.

Tolstoy's condemnation of art was more sweeping. After he had written *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and almost all of his great fictions, he underwent a religious conversion which caused him to condemn all art except that which, as he put it, "tends to deepen the religious perceptions of the people". Art which did not have a religious theme was still acceptable as long as it tended to unite mankind into one great Christian community. But art which concerned itself with the political squabbles of a particular time or place, or sexual conflicts and disturbances, or with the life of the upper classes and its ensuring triviality and boredom, all this Tolstoy condemned without further ado. Even more sweeping, all art which was not simple enough to be understood and enjoyed at once by all people, even the simplest peasant, was given the axe. Thus Shakespeare, Milton, Beethoven, Wagner, and countless others, together with almost the entire corpus of nineteenth century literature including Tolstoy's own great novels, were all, at one stroke, thrown into the trash heap. One cannot accuse Tolstoy on inconsistency, or of shrinking from the task of applying his own principles. One can, however, question the principles that implied such a wholesale condemnation as this. But to do so here would require a detailed critique of that form of early and rather primitive Christianity which Tolstoy embraces at this period of his life; and that is far removed from our subject here. Tolstoy, like Plato, condemned art for reasons of morality, being convinced that when it comes to a conflict between them, it is art that must go. From the point of view of morality, art is The Enemy, and this enemy must be utterly squelched. For Tolstoy, art is not merely the harmless pleasure of an idle moment — art (most art, at any rate) is a disturber and uprooter of the True Morality. Art, in order to be permissible at all, must be used completely and utterly in the service of morality.

Not all of us would go along with the special twists given the moralistic theory by Plato and Tolstoy, but many people, including perhaps the majority of Americans, tend to accept the general position of Moralism. They may not think that art and morality conflict as readily or as often as Plato and Tolstoy believed but they think that art is a servant of morality, and that in cases of conflict between art and morality it should always be morality that is the victor.

II

Let us, however, turn to an exactly opposite kind of view, which often goes by the name of aestheticism. According to this view, art is above all other things of significance in this world and nothing should interfere with

its freedom to do whatever it pleases. If morality disagrees, so much the worse for morality. If the masses fail to understand art or to appreciate its enormous power to receive the sublime experiences it can give, at least to the select few, well then, so much the worse for the masses. As an extreme example of this, let us listen to the poet George Moore :

“What care I that some millions of wretched Israelites died under Pharaoh’s lash or Egypt’s sun? It was well that they died that I might have the pyramid to look on, or to fill a musing hour with wonderment. Is there one among us who would exchange them for the lives of the ignominious slaves that died? What care I that the virtue of some 16 year-old maid was the price paid for Ingres’ *La Source*? That the model died of drink and disease in the hospital is nothing when compared with the essential that I should have *La Source*, that exquisite dream of innocence.....”

We may also remember Mussolini’s son-in-law waxing lyrical in his description of a bomb exploding among a crowd of unarmed Ethiopians.

Most of us would feel revolted at such an extreme version of the Aestheticist’s hypothesis. And, of course, we need not go so far. But before attempting to dilute the force of such remarks as those of George Moore, let us see wherein lies the power and the peculiar force of the Aesthetician’s position. What is the goal of life, the Aestheticist asks, if it is not to be as fully, as richly, as intensely alive as we can possibly become — or in Walter Pater’s words, “to burn with a hard gemlike flame”? or

“to choose one crowded hour of glorious life, to seize experience at its greatest magnitude? And this is precisely our experience of art; it is living in the best way we know how. Far from being a handmaiden to other goals, art gives us immediately, and richly, the best there is in life, intense awareness — it gives us what life itself aims at becoming, but seldom achieves outside of art.”

(Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p, 563.)

So if there are any morally undesirable side-effects of art, they do not really matter beside this all-important experience that art can give us and nothing else can. Art and art alone can make us really alive; art and art alone can give us an experience of unmatched richness, unity, intensity, complexity — all at the same time. Art and art alone can give us in miniature, in capsule form, the characteristic values of existence, all concentrated in one aesthetic object, it can draw all the loose and varied strands of human experience into a sharp and vivid focus. Great works of art alone are capable of giving us

this experience, which can be at once sublime and ecstatic in its beauty and shattering in its intensity. Only in art do we really come alive ; in all the rest of life the waters of experience run sluggishly and turgidly, but in art we find them pure and distilled. What can compare with the value of this experience ? What is even fit to be mentioned in the same breath with it ?

I think we can shorten our discussion by granting everything that the Aestheticist claims here about the nature of the aesthetic experience and the value of the aesthetic object, except the last sentence. Aesthetic experiences are very worth-while indeed, as only those who have had them can know ; perhaps they are the most worth-while of all experiences in this neither world, but they are not the only experiences there are. Even though the skyscrapers of New York are the tallest buildings in the world, they are not the only buildings in the world, and we do have to consider the others. Aesthetic values, though far greater than most people are aware, are still just a few among many. This being the case, we can hardly behave as if the others did not exist. We must examine the relation of the aesthetic values in life to all the other values that life has to offer.

III

So let us turn to a third possible position — not that art is the servant of morality, or that morality is the servant of art, but that the two are co-inhabitants of the same world, each with its specific function in that world, but neither fulfilling its function in independence of the other. We must try to see what the relation is between them, and this will take us to the heart of our problem.

Morality is not, on the whole, particularly enjoyable. Moral codes are devised in order that people may be able to live in peace and security with one another. Morality is required because people often trespass upon one another's rights. As for art, it has a different role to play ; it has much more to do with pleasure and enjoyment — that very which civilized life (indispensable without a certain degree of morality) makes possible. But "pleasure" and "enjoyment" are pallid words ; I would prefer to say that art gives us (in accordance with our description of a while ago) in a highly concentrated form an experience of great richness and intensity — an experience which we may well enjoy but which may also simply move us, or prick us, or shock us, or change our whole outlook upon the world around us ; it may simply please us, or it may shatter us by its power. This great potency of art is felt because art does not deal merely with a fantasy-world, it is not simply an amusement to while away an idle hour : it deals with the world of everyday experience,

the same world over which morality legislates. The very experience which we treasure in art draws its significance from the world and life outside of art. Thus already we see that they are related. We shall try now to examine some of the strands of that relation.

1. First, then, art sometimes does teach us lessons that we need to learn if life is to be nobly, or even tolerably, lived ; and thus it may enter directly, at times, into the service of morality. Art can sometimes be didactic ; even great art can be didactic, as Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Areopagetica* will show.

I do not wish to deny this value to art ; it undoubtedly exists. Sir Philip Sidney devoted a long essay to extolling this value of art. But I fear that it is all too easy to overemphasize it ; and those who place much emphasis upon it are apt to be those who do not see the other things which art is in a far better position to give us — even to morality itself. Those who praise art because it teaches or preaches or edifies by its message, or because works of art sometimes have a moral or a lesson, do not speak falsely, but if this is all they have to say about the value of art for morality, they are using art for far less than it is able to give. To use a figure that Clive Bell employed in another connection, the didacticists in art are like people who use a telescope for reading the news, or who try to chop blocks with a razor. A telescope can, with some difficulty, be used for reading the news, but this is not what a telescope is built for, and if they use it for this purpose alone they are using it to do jobs that far less subtle and valuable things could do much better. High School teachers of Shakespeare who tell their pupils that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to prove that crime doesn't pay, are unwittingly putting *Macbeth* on the same level with the most ordinary cops-and-robbers movie. It is no wonder that after a year or two of literature courses taught in this way, the pupils come to hate Shakespeare for life, and would almost rather perish than approach his works again.

Art does teach us, but not by explicit preachment. As John Dewey once put it, art teaches as friends and life teach — not by preaching but simply by being. The variety of situations presented, the human characterizations, the crises and struggles and other experiences through which these characters pass, these alone, when set before us by the writer, are sufficient to produce a moral effect. Why do we need preachment as well, a moral tagged on at the end ? If the tag were all that was needed, the author might have done better to write an essay or a tract instead.

2. But how then does art achieve a moral effect, if it does not state its moral ? Literature, at least, does so by presenting us with characters in situations, usually

situations of moral conflict or moral crisis, in which we can enrich our own moral perspectives by deliberating on their problems and conflicts, which usually have a complexity and a richness which our own moral situations seldom possess. We can learn from them, in the school of experience, without ourselves having to undergo in our personal lives all the moral conflicts, or make the moral decisions, which they (the characters) must do ; for we can view their situations with a detachment which we can seldom achieve in daily life, when we are immersed in the stream of action. And by viewing these situations and reflecting on them, we are enabled to make our own moral decisions more wisely when Life calls upon us in turn to make them.

It is difficult, for example, to see how one could read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Othello* or *Macbeth* without the exercise of his own powers of moral reflection. We see these characters in situations of moral crisis in which they must make important and often agonizing decisions; and we can hardly follow their careers without ourselves going through some of the processes of moral reflection which are required of them. And in doing this we surely grow ourselves in moral insight. It happens when we follow Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, or Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's novel or Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to name but a few. Literature is often a stimulus to moral reflection, and one not equalled by any other, for it presents the moral situation in its total context, with nothing of relevance omitted and nothing less than this is required, of course, in making a moral decision.

3. We have already expanded our notion of the moral impact of literature considerably beyond the rather crude didacticism with which we begin. But we can go still further. I want to bring out an aspect of art and morality that we have not yet touched upon, though perhaps it is implicit in which has already been said. The chief moral effect of art, I would like to say, lies in its unique power to stimulate and develop that most important human faculty, the imagination. This answer to the problem of the moral potency of art was given more than a hundred years ago by Shelley in his essay, "A Defense of Poesy", and it stands unchallenged to this day. Shelley said, "The imagination is the great instrument of moral good, and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the causes." Through great literature we are carried far beyond the confines of our narrow provincial world of daily life, into a world of thought and feeling more profound, more varied, than our own, and in which we can enter directly the experiences, the thoughts, and feelings, of people far removed from us in space and time, and we are enabled to share these feelings in a

way that no other medium enables us to do. It is not science, but art, that engenders in us a universal human sympathy and understanding for it enables us to enter directly into the affective processes of other human beings, often with mores and cultures far different from our own. Once having lived in the world of Dostoyevsky's characters, we can no longer condemn or dismiss in toto a large segment of humanity as foreigners or strangers who are therefore wicked or beneath us ; we can no longer use the customary slogan-thinking on them and treat "Russians" or "wastrels" simply as a mass, for they live before us now as individuals, animated by the same passions as we are, facing the same conflicts, and tried in the same crucible of bitter experience. Through such an exercise of sympathetic imagination, art draws all men together in mutual respect and togetherness. Far more than preachment or moralizing, even more than descriptive and scientific discourses of psychology and sociology, art tends to unite mankind and reveals the common human nature which exists in all of us behind the facade of our divisive doctrines, political ideologies, and religious beliefs. We realize that to condemn those depicted in novels is to condemn ourselves also. And from this, if nothing else, we learn the lesson of tolerance.

This is not to say, of course, that those who read great works of literature are always tolerant or sympathetic human beings. Reading literature alone is not a cure for human ills, and people who are neurotically grasping or selfish in their private lives will hardly cease to be so as a result of reading works of literature. Still, there is an undeniable effect of a wide and serious reading of literature : people who do it, no matter what their other characteristics may be, are more understanding of other people's conflicts, have more sympathy with their problems, can empathize more with them as human beings, than people who have never broadened their horizons by reading literature at all. No one who has read great literature widely and for a considerable period, so as to make it an integral part of his life, can any longer share the same provincialism, and be dominated by the same stupid prejudices which unfortunately seem to characterize most people most of the time. Literature, more than anything else, is a leavening influence on the bread of morality. It loosens us from the bonds of our own position in space and time, it releases us from exclusive involvement with our struggles from day to day, it enables us to see our own local problems and trials (in Spinoza's phrase) under the aspect of eternity ; we can now view it all as if from afar off, or from an enormous height. And through this exercise of the imagination, art enables us to do these things more than anything else does.

To have moral effects, it is not necessary that a work of art presents us with a system of morality, much less a true system of morality. It need not present us with any system at all ; in fact its moral potency is greatest when it presents us, not with systems, but with people and situations, preferably those quite different from our own, so that through the imagination we can see our own customs and philosophies as we see theirs, as one among many of the endless proliferations of adjustments and solutions to human problems which varying circumstances and our endlessly varied and resourceful human nature have produced.

Works of art, then, develop more than anything else the human faculty of the imagination. And, as Shelly says, the Imagination is the greatest single instrument of moral good. Perhaps this sounds like an absurd overstatement. But let us consider. Consider what morality is like without the imagination. Consider the average morality of a small community, relatively isolated from centers of culture and unacquainted with any artistic tradition. Their morality is rigid and circumscribed ; the details of a person's life are hedged about with constant tiny annoyances, and everyone's life is open to the prying eyes of the others who are unfailingly quick to judge with or without evidence. Outsiders are looked upon askance ; people of a different religion, a different race, or different culture are looked upon with suspicion and distrust ; and anyone who does not subscribe to the last details of whatever moral code and religious belief is dominant in the particular community is condemned and ostracized. No doubt these people are all very sincere ; they are dreadfully sincere, deadly sincere, killingly sincere. That is just the trouble ; sincerity without enlightenment can be as bad as intelligence without wisdom by political leaders playing around with hydrogen bombs. These people have not known the leavening influence of art. Their morality is rigid, cramped, and arid. What is needed in their lives is not more morality and more religion — they are surfeited with that already — but the fresh breath of art. If these same people had been exposed from early youth, in the right way, to great masterpieces of human literature, and learned through them to appreciate the tremendous diversity of human mores and human beliefs that go along with the same degree of sincerity that they possess, plus the complex workings of the inner heart as portrayed by a Tolstoy or a Henry James, they surely could not find it in them to be as harsh, as intolerant, and as ungenerous as they are.

Such is the nature of morality without art. Art alone may seem like a meager influence — that we are making too much of it in the moral life.

