

The Aspects of Art and Morality: A Philosophical Understanding

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Abstract

The highest common factor that defines art is beauty, even in modernist aesthetic of ugliness, such as Duchamp's "Urinal Sculpture" or James Joyce's description of Dublin in "Araby" about which Hugh Kenner, a Canadian literary scholar, critic and professor, opines: "an echoing and empty humiliation". The common feature of all moralities, of all communities, religions, age-groups and other forms of heterogeneities is to better oneself, and if possible, others. This simple definition of 'Art' and 'Morality' makes it clear that art beautifies something and morality ennoble something. Hence the coalition of art and morality is expected to be natural, spontaneous and assured. Yet, critical anomalies can be felt, heard or seen in the mutual relationship between art and morality. This paper attempts to look at the intersections of art and morality from a philosophical standpoint.

KEYWORDS: Art, Morality, Philosophy, Beauty, Ethics, Aesthetics

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

- John Keats, "Ode on a

Grecian Urn"

"But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

- William Shakespeare, "Sonnet

No. 18"

"Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder."

Plato

The highest common factor that defines art is beauty, even in modernist aesthetic of ugliness, such as Duchamp's "Urinal Sculpture" in the context of which philosopher Stephen Hicks comments:

"The artist is a not great creator—Duchamp went shopping at a plumbing store. The artwork is not a special object—it was mass-produced in a factory. The experience of art is not exciting and ennobling—at best it is puzzling and mostly leaves one with a sense of distaste. But over and above that, Duchamp did not select just any ready-made object to display. In selecting the urinal, his message was clear: Art is something you piss on."

James Joyce's description of Dublin in "Araby" about which Hugh Kenner, a Canadian literary scholar, critic and professor, opines: "an echoing and empty humiliation". The common feature of all moralities, of all communities, religions, age-groups and other forms of heterogenies is to better oneself, and if possible, others. This simple definition of 'Art' and 'Morality' makes it clear that art beautifies something and morality ennobles something. Hence the coalition of art and morality is expected to be natural, spontaneous and assured. Yet, critical anomalies can be felt, heard or seen in the mutual relationship between art and morality. Such as:

- i. Morality acts in real world, but art is a representing version, an enclosed copy, and hence their domains are separate.
- ii. The morality of art is often contradictory to the morality insisted in society.
- iii. There are numerous examples of art forms and art-product which are generally regarded as amoral or immoral.
- iv. Often artist indulge themselves into works of art going beyond the sensibility of morality.

Because of these and other tensional areas between art and morality, the logic that art betters reality in its output and morality betters self, cannot alone demand a doubtless cooperation between art and morality. Besides, both these themes are highly contextualized – time, place, situation etcetera inflict radical variation in both. For example, a particular kind of folk art may not be deemed artistic enough in a city and vice versa. Similarly, the morality of compulsory child marriage in eighteenth and early nineteenth century India and the minimum age of marriage in today's India are directly contradictory. Due to this lack of absolute standard, the relationship between art and morality is all the more difficult and complex. German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche observes, in his *Human, All Too Human*, "Section Two: On the History of Moral Feelings - Aphorism # 42", in the context of morality:

"Morality and the ordering of the good. The accepted hierarchy of the good, based on how a low, higher, or a most high egoism desires that thing or the other, decides today about morality or immorality. To prefer a low good (sensual pleasure, for example) to one esteemed higher (health, for example) is taken for immoral, likewise to prefer comfort to freedom. The hierarchy of the good, however, is not fixed and identical at all times. If someone prefers revenge to justice, he is moral by the standard of an earlier culture, yet by the standard of the present culture he is immoral. "Immoral" then indicates that someone has not felt, or not felt strongly enough, the higher, finer,

more spiritual motives which the new culture of the time has brought with it. It indicates a backward nature, but only in degree.

The hierarchy itself is not established or changed from the point of view of morality; nevertheless an action is judged moral or immoral according to the prevailing determination.”

It becomes very interesting for a modern reader of classical as well as English Renaissance literature to find out the elements of ‘revenge and justice’ inexorably linked with morality of that given cultural tradition. If we look back to the classical antiquity, what might fascinate as well as bewilder us, is the abundance of revenge motif laden with the concept of justice and often aiming to trigger a cathartic florescence in the audience, as the very foundations of Greco-Roman Drama is based on the notion of providing instructions to its observers. Aeschylus’ The Oresteia Trilogy substantiates this point at its best. Even, the development that took place in English Renaissance literature from the tragedies of Seneca is remarkable. On one hand, Senecan tragedy gave birth to the academic tragedies in Elizabethan age as represented in Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton’s *Gorboduc* (1562), and on the other hand, it also gave birth to the popular dramatic form, i.e. the Revenge Tragedy. This very form of tragedy gave birth to one of the most exemplary plays of Elizabethan theatre that were and are celebrated for their dramatic as well as thematic excellence ranging from Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586) to Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1592), from Shakespeare’s early play *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1590) to one of his great tragedies *Hamlet* (c. 1599 – 1602), as well as tragedies of John Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) and *The White Devil* (1613). All these tragedies, critically as well as popularly successful, are connected through one single thread: revenge. But, even beyond the very codes of revenge and vengeance, these plays are morally and ethically justified. That makes the case of Morality and Art even more volatile, as they lack any definite standards and often are defined and redefined as per the contemporary normative codes of a socio-cultural as well as political vogue of the day. Friedrich Nietzsche’s observations become prominent in the academic as well as practical discussions as they shed light over the fissure that palpably portrays this problem of situating the titled discourse into definitive standards.

Plato in his *The Republic* insisted that poets should be banished from the ‘Ideal City’ because they copy from objects which themselves were copies of ideas. Therefore, in the vision, art cannot be moral because it is “twice away” from “ideal reality”. Aristotle, however, counter-argued that art cannot imitate blindly or neutrally or flatly, it has a moral function of purgation [Catharsis]. This Aristotelian defence of art is continued in the final couplet of the Shakespearean sonnets as we find Shakespeare eternalizing his love in a world of transience and flux, in Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* where in responding to Stephen Gosson’s *School of Abuse* containing a pleasant invective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and such like Caterpillars of the Commonwealth (1579), a Puritanical pamphlet slandering the very art of poetry, Sidney tries to find recourse in the wisdom of Aristotle as he defends the fourth charge brought up against poetry that it is the mother of all lies, and Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, which also tries to defend poetry from the views of Thomas Love Peacock as expressed in his essay *Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). Although a poet himself, a pungent critic of contemporary late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century poetry, he labels his own age of poetry or the fourth, of brass. Although Plato

saw immorality in art, the Western tradition of aesthetics found the purpose of art to be very moral. But what stigmatises the very process of generating opinion in this context is the fact that almost all the works of ‘art’ mentioned above satirizes other works of ‘art’ in the process of defending ‘art’ itself. It only brings fresh questions in the discussion of art and its connection to morality, other than giving answer to. Even questions like “is satire a legitimate form of ‘art’?” stumbles forth in the discussion. Prominent critics of note opine that if the ultimate end of ‘satire’ is to mock social conventions, norms or even ‘morality’ of a given cultural tradition to ‘correct’ its vices, follies and frivolities, the ultimate aim of satire should be moral as well as aesthetic. As we often find in the works of Alexander Pope who used the weapon of ‘mock heroic poems’ from his arsenal to teach the correct code of morality through a critique of contemporary English society which he considered immoral and frivolous; best example of which might be his *The Rape of the Lock* (1714). But then who gets to decide what morality should be – whether the author or the reader – becomes an even larger question that problematizes the very domain of art and morality. For example, Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel *Pamela*; or, the *Virtue Rewarded* (1740) was burlesqued by his contemporary novelist Henry Fielding in his *Joseph Andrews*, or *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742) on the grounds that the morality taught by Richardson in his novel was distorted from and disproportionate to the very doctrines of Christian Morality, and what Fielding tried to achieve in his burlesque was to portray a more genuine form of commonplace morality. The virtue for which *Pamela* is rewarded results in Joseph’s losing his job as he defies the sexual advances of Lady Booby. Even modern criticism has viewed and dealt with Richardson’s idea of morality adversely. The “virtue” which is rewarded at the end of the novel by materialistic gain and social upliftment for *Pamela*, that “virtue” argue critics, becomes commodified, and hence, immoral. The single ‘theological meaning’ as the ultimate ‘message’ of the Author-God conceiving the very core of a text is ultimately ‘challenged’ not only because of the metaphorical “Death of the Author” but also because the very subjective opinions of the author that colours dogmatically the very tendencies in art and literature, and morality from the social axis is diminished into the ‘biased’ terrains of personal axis, which we follow “like a sinking star” that ever-eludes definition alluding to the never-ending voyage of human psyche to constrain the unconstrainable and fathoming the unfathomable.

Out of the Romantic poetry, it was Keats, the most aesthetic, was strangely the most moral, although heavily sensuous, and most frequently seeking rapture, and although devoid of any of the overtly revolutionary ethics of Shelley and pantheistic morality of Wordsworth. In “*Ode on a Grecian Urn*”, Keats conceptualises art as an eternal and un-degradable phenomenon. Life lacks the morality of the absolute scale and also the durability for a real something to become a moral something; art has long durability and because it is frozen, it is unpolluted and uncontaminated. At the same time, Keats does not escape into the consolations of artistic eternity by shrugging off the responsibilities and culpabilities of real life which is full of suffering, because he correctly diagnoses that the Grecian Urn or the art object is cold [“cold pastoral”] and dead – undead as dead – it lacks vitality, spontaneity and the unique warmth of life. Hence, the chiasmus, providing us with the intercourse between art and morality: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is not a biased one because this line itself has the beauty of a figure of speech, the morality of a proverb and an equilibrium between the

two in the reception of Keats as a spectator in Lord Holland's collection called the Elgin Marbles – a situation of art and a situation of morality.

From the domain of purely literary art, another striking example of the ambivalent relationship between art and morality is the poetry of Hopkins. As a practicing Christian priest, the telos of his poems was Episcopal, theological, and moral; however, the execution is passionate, energetic and enthusiastic. And all his Christological poems carry an alternative possibility of either a heavily Pagan Shamanism or exuberant homosexuality. In the twisted lines, occluded thoughts passionately knotted symbols and locked and tight verses, Hopkins conjugated the raw and the cooked, the sacred and the profane, the beautiful and the moral. In Hopkins' poems, we find the telling of 'Sturdy Dick' and 'Felix Randal', of "lovely lads" and naked boys swimming in "fairyland", Harry Ploughman with "scooped flank", "liquid waist" and "cheek crimsons", "limber liquid youth" and his "mansex fine" and expressions like "lay a lion lamb against me". Hopkins only could fold the delicious sensuality of love and man-lust in lines of celebrating pure divinity.

Susan Sontag, in her "Against Interpretations" insists that art is not an object for criticism and analysis but is an experience:

"In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."

The idea that art is not a technique or a skill but an inspiration or an experience dates back to the Platonic Gardens. Plato insists that artist should not create by "techne" but by spontaneous stimulations. Henceforth, the artist cannot be primarily didactic nor primarily aesthetic, but an instrument in a circuit of inspiration.

Keeping aside the domain of purely literary art, in visual arts, specifically if we look onto cinematic art, we encounter other several instances, where the tangible domains or art and morality verge on the ambivalent. Margot Robbie plays the role of Naomi Lapaglia, in *Wolf of the Wall Street* and has become a sensation for her streaming erotic scene in the movie, which includes graphic frontal nudity, seducing Leonardo DiCaprio in the most youtubed section of the film. As opposed to the common history of film-making, there is a difference: the director, Martin Scorsese, insisted Margot to put a flimsy robe on while the actress refused to put on any. The logic Margot Robbie gave to the director was:

1. The girl on the screen is playing all her cards for success in life and hence partial clothing would be her partial incapacity to do so.
2. Partial clothing would be pornographic with the assumption of "nakedness", while she has to be projected in "nudity"

So, in the end, the nude scenes in the film are justified morally not despite the portrayal of it, but because of it. The Freudian notion of "Scopophilia" or "the love of look" in this film does not become fetishitic but universal.

Benare's second song, in Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is heard:

"The grass is green

The rose is red

This book is mine

Till I am dead.”

This is taken from a nursery rhyme. Apparently, the song neither has any artistic beauty nor any moral content – it first sounds like childish babbles. However, within the context of the theatre, it addresses the morality of natural rights – the right to environmental sanctity, the right to love, the right to epistemology and the right to the dignity of life. Theatrical and dramaturgical art can retrieve this song into a character of human rights.

In my perception, one of the aims of all art-form is to address the sublime. The interior of St. Paul’s Cathedral instils a sense of awe; King Lear’s dying speech fills the auditorium with lofty emotions; art of various disciplines link us with the idea of infinity beyond words.

In “Psalms” of Holy Bible, divine knowledge is called “too wonderful . . . it is high, [one] cannot attain to it.” Such majesty can only be approximated by art. What religions cannot do, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* could attain – to illuminate mankind about everything from the beginning through entertainment and easy understanding. Standing in front of the Elgin Marbles, Keats uttered “a shadow of a magnitude”. Zizek, in his article, “Not a Desire to Have Him, But to Be Like Him” comments that in art, the spiritual and the material spheres are intertwined; the spiritual emerges when the material presence of that art stops being an object. For example, in a scene from David Lynch’s film *The Straight Story*, the camera focuses on the view from a suburban window frame; the indifference of the scene is disturbed by the entrance of an orange ball rolling from right to left. The filmmaker makes no attempt to explain the event, but in my opinion, it is indeed a spiritual moment to stir, at the moment when the world is already shown to be blank and mute – it may convey some spiritual vitality, as the ball is an object beyond reason, within representation but exceeding representation, almost like a Hebrew God. The orange ball is a moral alarm, which is ‘immanent’ rather than ‘transcendent’.

In romantic thought, the main difference between Kantian and Schellingian metaphysics rests on the distinction between knowledge and aesthetics. Schelling argues, that art; unlike philosophy, bring the whole man to the knowledge of that highest of all, while Kant insists, that sublimation is only an aesthetic idea without any ontology. In other words, art can imagine symbols of wholeness, infinity, God which according to Schelling is both moral and real, while according to Kant, just an aesthetic idea and not truth. Wordsworth suffers from this dilemma in the second and third stages of the growth of the poet’s mind in “Tintern Abbey”, but in the fourth stage of the poem, he dissolves it. If the same spirit integrates God with Nature, and Nature with Man, and Man with God, then connective tissues through which such linkage can be comprehended, achieved and then expressed must be both moral and real.

French literary and cultural theorist René Girard in his book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* regards artistic mimesis as a primordial tendency in human life and morality, which Plato profoundly misinterpreted. For Girard mimesis is a dynamic social force that lies at the origins of religions, cultures and morality. Both internal and external mediation make every desire mimetic. If human beings suddenly stopped imitating, all forms of culture would vanish and instead of cultural desires,

we would become creatures of unresolved, ‘un-catharsis-ed’ animals of violence and without mimesis, neither catharsis nor community is possible.

However, the paradigm of Platonism, that is art as mimesis, has come to a radical, complex, predicament, in post-modern art and post-modern ethics. In his dialogue, *The Sophist*, Plato names two species of images:

Eikastic

Phantastic

Eikastic art confirms the original reality, but Phantastic art produces simulacrum. Simulacrum is not an illegitimate distortion of the true original, but an autonomous image created and sustained by purely aesthetic signifiers, which does not copy the original but rather originates the copy. The simulacrum is not fake but false, not a bad imitation but a new and strange hyper-real. Unveiling the truth in hyper-real art is not possible because it does not copy a sub-state but produces true symptoms of sub-state. The morality involved in such a situation is an intriguing issue, like asking whether Native American Shamanism is moral or not, or the magic kingdom of Disneyland has any economic morality or not. In the post modern art, world itself has become hyper-real and therefore the ethics has become ad hoc after vanishing of the enduring reference.

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