



Empirical Judgment and Self-Expression: A Discourse on Art Ethics

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Abstract: Art, in its simplest form, has traditionally been defined as a thing that which provides an aesthetic gratification. Appealing to the senses, it penetrates in such a way that it incites emotions in us, prompting us to give a reaction as the audience. With this power of art in mind though comes the question of ethics and its role in the world of aesthetics. Because art is predisposed by certain norms to be either pleasurable or harmful, the notion of censorship is put into display, with its premise of suppressing anything that is considered unacceptable in societal standards. This issue regarding the integration of art and ethics raises the question of free speech and self-expression. In this paper, I talk about the premises of art as a form of self-expression and how this plays in ethics. I also discuss about the specific picture of art ethics and the foundations that cause its relevance in society. Lastly, I argue that censorship of art is not a prudent course of action in that it doesn't directly address the issues concerning what is deemed as unethical art. It ignores the underlying roots of the debate and fails to question its bases of morality, instead opting to resort to a default line of reasoning that closes all room for discussion. An artist without liberty is not an artist.

Key Words: a posteriori; art; censorship; ethics; self-expression

1. INTRODUCTION

A long debate could be made regarding the formal definition of art. Even more points of dispute arise when we question the purpose of art, especially with regard to everyday life. We can begin our search for the meaning of art by going back to the Renaissance era. Breaking away from the medieval and scholastic Middle Ages, the new wave of individualistic philosophy that followed and sprouted out of Renaissance humanism was perhaps the best catalyst for widespread popularity

of what we know today as art. While art wasn't an original product of this era—with many objects throughout history that prove otherwise—it is the first time that art was viewed in the creative sense. People adopted the concept of ultimate freedom, a kind of existence that isn't purely for adhering to God and revolving one's life around religion (Gaarder, 1994). This led to an explosion of human activity; art flourished, science evolved, and philosophy gave birth to the empiricist way of thinking. A renewed emphasis on sense and perception emerged, with nature viewed in a much



more positive light. Many people also started to dabble in pantheism, the idea that God was present in all of his creations—nature as best example. The notion of an all-powerful God existing in everything that came about from his powers is something we mere humans lack. I'd say the closest we can get to 'existing' in the form of a thing is through creative art.

2. ART AS THE SELF

Before everything else, it's best to first deconstruct the very subject of this paper's content. As such though, art doesn't have a concrete, universal description to encapsulate what it encompasses. But we can certainly infer that one way or another, our five human senses have a direct involvement in the matter. It's difficult to deny art's aesthetic character; often, we coin the term *art* on an object we deem pleasing to at least one of our senses, most usually the sight or the hearing. Perception, in the realm of interpretation, is a term of pure subjectivity, and hence the quest for searching for an *a priori* definition of art crumbles right from the start. The only logical meaning we can assign to art is that it is a thing that which is deliberately designed to incite or provoke the senses, in such a way that it's meant to capture people's attention just in itself. Simply put, on its own, art has no mechanical utility. It's only for admiration's sake, though definitely not without its own critics also.

It is then we move on to the next portion of our essay, which is the reason for art's existence. It being a medium of creativity was a gift from the Renaissance years when the emphasis was on human beings' individualism and unique faculties that are separate from a higher being or a god. Art was a way for people to discover themselves, to make use of their talents in different fields. It became a medium of self-expression, a representation of one's subconscious ideals, desires, passions. It is by this that art figuratively became

the face of humanities. As Wilson (1998) puts it, creativity is humanistic in the fullest sense. But while this seems to put art into a good light, it's important to remember that the world isn't the epitome of perfection and goodness. When referring to art, we also but split our focus to the ugly side of humanity. For the truth of the matter is that each artist is imperfect in such a way that sometimes their worse qualities are reflected on their artwork.

The topic at hand begs the question regarding the unconsciousness. We have stated that art is a platform for people to input their ideas. Art is a conglomeration of one's deepest internal or mental world. But this prompts us to ask the alternative: can the art be separated from the artist? Before getting into a discussion of ethics, it is of significance that we try to decide if art can simply a thing void of humanity. For this, I find it fit to provide some examples in order to provide a clearer example. Say, an artist was commissioned to create a painting or a sculpture that follows the client's requirements. While this artist has to provide an artwork based on their client's wants, it's impossible for the artist to create something without consulting their own plethora of ideas. If asked to paint a forest in abstract form, each artist will have their own interpretations of the forest, which will then reflect on their painting. A person has to have an idea beforehand of what they're required to create. Hence, an art will always have a part of its artist's *soul*.

3. PRINCIPLES OF ART ETHICS

The mention of ethics when it comes to art signifies that there are certain norms or regulations to be followed in this creative field. In this paper, we try to determine the premises that shape the foundation of these ethics and the principles that led to the notion of evil art as opposed to good art. As the embodiment of art is *a posteriori* in nature, we take into account the aesthetic experience of people that which only happens on the instance that the individual is

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exposed to art. From this event, a multitude of possibilities arise in the psychological aspect. Nietzsche believes that the goodness of an artwork is proven when it 'moves' us in what he probably deemed as a cathartic experience in a sense (1984). But not all art can be good by nature, especially if art is but a representation of human individuality. Some art can be a pleasure to our senses indeed, but some art can also provoke more negative emotions in someone. As to why this is so, the answer can only be also subjective, for judgment could only be formed after having developed impressions, that is, perception of why this art is deemed so unethical that it incited such a bad reaction.

Art has no main function other than appealing to the five senses. But before being deemed acceptable, social constructs make it so that art has to abide by a few norms in order to be privileged with public visibility. First thing to consider is the very content of the art, what it portrays, how it portrays said thing, and why it is portrayed as such. Whatever an individual sees from an art work, they base it from what they've perceived before. Judgment can only be made *a posteriori* because art is fundamentally subjective by nature. Hence, trying to create a rational set of moral rules for art is but a futile attempt. As per this moment, there's no doubt we've established that art is capable of inciting negative reactions from its audience, depending upon its content. Let us examine some examples of this kind of content. We've stated that art is based on experience. So art, especially the ones portraying realistic scenes and images, showcases a part of humanity that we know of in the form of sense and perception. It would not be sufficient if I didn't talk about the explosion of nudity that happened in the West. Amongst other things, there were sculptures and paintings that displayed the human body in its entirety, once again the influence of the individualistic philosophy coming from the Renaissance period. During that time, the human being was revered, and everything that comes with

one, including the physical body. Nudity wasn't considered contentious or controversial.

Suppose we give a more extreme example. Say, a painting depicts an individual sexually stimulating their self with their body situated in such a way that their body and actions are completely visible to an onlooker. I imagine, and I don't doubt, that the more conservative part of society would not want this art to be out in the public. Some might argue that this art is 'obscene', 'unacceptable' or 'disrespectful', among other negatively laced words. On the other hand, others might argue that this art can be disseminated to the public, just as long as it's in a place deemed safe from children or any individual unsuited for seeing adult themes. Either way, we can't deny that today there is quite a stigma regarding sexuality, and simply not all countries are as progressive enough to warrant their own kind of Renaissance. There are definitely many more examples that I unfortunately cannot include all in this paper, but I shall pick a few to deconstruct for our discourse on art ethics.

Let us now examine why the above example of a sexually provocative individual would count as bad art, regardless of the part of the society who thinks otherwise. In fact, I expect this kind of art to incite heavy debates among the masses, but that's always to be expected for ethical matters. To make my argument easier to digest, we shall provide stronger examples. If artworks depicting images of murder, blood, rape, pedophilia or whatnots are causes of societal uproar, the main reason would be a deeply ingrained culture that which has formed strong judgments against the above things. I don't think I need to explain why those words I mentioned are considered taboo in today's world, but the thing we have to distinguish here is the separation between art and the real world.



4. THE IDEA BEHIND CENSORSHIP

There are multiple reasons as to why some art are deemed unethical art. Not only art but also its artist receives the backlash for obvious reasons. The artist is solely responsible for producing their work, and it is their responsibility to take their market's character into account. Nevertheless, common folks' judgment is not always the wisest every time, especially when it comes to the field of ethics, which often has the risk of relying to the topic of relativism when it comes to philosophical discussions. While Kant attempted to construct an objective morality that is *a priori* in nature in his book, the *Groundwork* (1964), I cannot credit his ideas on the topic of art for art is but a product of culture and therefore purely subjective by nature. Nevertheless, it's the choice of the artist to create art in such a way that they can will it to become a universally acceptable art. I shall deepen my stance on that statement in the next section.

Going back to the idea about unethical art, an important factor here is the effect of art on people. Art almost functions as catharsis, in that it brings out the subconscious in people. Including in this subconscious though are one's biases and art certainly isn't safe from judgment. We specify two main reasons as to what makes an individual abhor a certain artwork. Firstly, the person feels some kind of disagreement with the artwork their senses are exposed to. This is because when viewing art, they're at the same time creating impressions in their mind and comparing it with their stored empirical knowledge. Art has this innate ability to move us; certain shades and styles can create different kinds of images—images that communicate a message to their onlookers. And with that in mind, the second reason why certain art are deemed unethical is exactly because it's believed to practice bad ethics. Perhaps a painting of a homosexual couple lovingly looking at each other is looked down upon because homosexuality

is not an accepted idea in a certain place and there's this fear that people would be exposed to 'evil ideas' and be influenced by temptation.

Perhaps another thing to consider when talking about art, regardless of whether it's unethical or not, is the idea of romanticization. As art is a manifestation of human ideals, it is said to portray an individual's biggest, deepest desires that are deeply rooted in the subconscious. A topic of concern would be the romanticization of taboos such as pedophilia and suicide in art. This begs the question regarding the artist's accountability. Their artwork would be considered unacceptable to the public eye, but as a person and a human being, should they be jailed for portraying such a taboo in their art? If art is an extension of the human soul, then art could be said to be a part of the person themselves. The idea to factor in also is the artist's intentions when creating their artwork. Besides expressing the self, art could also be used as a medium of communication, to send a message hidden in its design. Regardless of this though, should the artist be punished for producing such art which otherwise doesn't cause direct harm?

The next question is if art that which is deemed unethical should warrant lawful intervention. It is with this that we introduce the concept of censorship. Simply put, to censor is to block information. When the government imposes censorship, they're preventing the specified thing from being seen, read, touched or accessed in any way by the public. In the context of the artist, their art gets rejected from being allowed in visible eye because it doesn't conform with higher officials' idea of good. With this kind of concept, there is the assumption that art is restricted to certain kinds. However, this contradicts with the idea that art is a free method of creativity. Mill (1956), a philosopher known for his liberal ideas, argued for the freedom of thought and expression. If art is considered a mode of creative self-expression, it is not our right to take away that basic right. Art is severely

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limited when such restrictions like censorship are demanded of it (Nietzsche, 1984).

5. AN ARTIST'S LIBERTY

To sum up our main argument, censorship is not a viable solution because it goes against the very ideals of art itself. That said, we've put forth the conclusion that despite the objectives of censorship, it doesn't prove to be efficient in controlling the flow of society ethics. By censoring what is conceived as unethical art, we are not solving the problem but rather covering it up with a temporary blanket. Putting obscene depictions of art on the side, away from sight, doesn't directly address the biases imbued in society's minds about the notion of obscenity. In simpler terms, censorship only fuels the fire it's trying to extinguish. First of all, the fact that there are some art deemed unethical or evil in the first place should be reevaluated because as art is subjective, what is deemed bad may not be as bad as it actually is, and there are many examples in history regarding this—of course, there's the example regarding nudity. On the other hand, if the art

actually portrays something so appalling, censoring it or banning it from the public eye is not as good a solution as people play it out to be. Following Mill's harm principle (1956), art doesn't directly harm people; therefore, it has no reason to be tampered with by the government. Without freedom, an artist is anything but.

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