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Function, Understanding, and Assessment

A Functionalist Interpretation of the Assessment of Art

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Matthew Lionel Anderson

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a functionalist interpretation of the assessment of art. In the following chapters I will explore the idea that we can assess the value of art works in terms of the various *functions* that they serve. Rejecting the idea that the value of art works lies in some kind of metaphysical value, I suggest that art works are valuable because we *value* them. We value them, I argue, on account of the various artistic functions that they perform. The purpose of chapter one is to set the scene philosophically, by explaining in greater detail what is involved in a functionalist interpretation of the assessment of art. In this chapter I suggest that the primary objections to my framework of assessment derive from the idea that only *aesthetic* considerations are relevant to assessment. In response I argue that this idea, which is central to both modernism, aestheticism and formalism, is based upon an unacceptably narrow conception of the nature and purpose of art, and should be rejected. In chapters two to six, I discuss in detail five of the more important non-aesthetic functions of art, providing examples which help to illustrate their contribution to the value of art works. Together these functions help to show that the idea that only aesthetic considerations are relevant to the assessment of art is unacceptably restrictive.

Chapter two is a discussion of the idea that a central function of art is to *represent* the objects of reality. I argue that the concept of representation as ordinarily construed has serious difficulties, and is based upon assumptions which we are better off abandoning. I suggest that it would be better to conceive of art as a vehicle in which we can *present* ideas, depictions, and conceptualizations of various aspects of our understanding and experience. Such 'presentations', I argue, can be valued for the way in which they provide insights into different aspects of the world, and thus contribute to our understanding. In chapter three, I show that an important dimension of the value of art can be the way in which art works function to express cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. In chapter four, I discuss the way in which art can function to act as a

vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas. In chapter five, I show how the moral significance of an art work can contribute importantly to its value, and in chapter six, I discuss the relevance of the expression and arousal of emotion to the value of art works. In chapter seven, I return to discuss the importance of *aesthetic* considerations to the assessment of art. I suggest that although it would be difficult to sustain the argument that aesthetic merit is a *necessary* component of artistic value, it is nevertheless true that aesthetic considerations play a particularly important role in the assessment of art works.

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CHAPTER ONE

Function and Assessment: An Introduction

It is the purpose of this thesis to develop an interpretation of art and its assessment in terms of the various functions which we can identify art works to be serving. In this introductory section I wish to explain what is involved in the idea that we can assess works of art in terms of the various functions or ends which they serve. Art works serve numerous different functions, and have the potential to be evaluated in a multitude of different ways. For the purpose of formulating a workable framework of evaluation, I have classified what I see to be six particularly important functions of art. It is important at this stage to stress that the classification presented does not purport to be the last word, or even a fully comprehensive account, of the various functions served by works of art qua works of art. There is no doubt that many other functions could be added to such a classification. My purpose is rather to show that art works *do* perform a variety of significant functions, and that if we are to assess the full potential of a work of art, it is often necessary to take a variety of these functions into consideration. It should be noted that the focus of this thesis is not just upon the visual arts, but upon the arts in general. I shall thus be drawing upon examples from music, from painting, from poetry, from fiction, and from sculpture.

The functions which I have identified as being central to our understanding of art and its purpose are as follows:

- 1) Art can function to 'represent' the world around us. By presenting reflections and conceptualizations of various aspects of the world, art can alert us to new ways of seeing the familiar, and in doing so contribute to our understanding.
- 2) Art can function to reflect and promote the cultural and religious beliefs and values that are central to the world-view and identity of different groups of people.

- 3) Art can function to reflect and comment upon the social and political conditions of society. Art can convey social and political ideas, and criticize existing norms and practises. In this capacity, art often assumes a subversive role.
- 4) Art can act as a vehicle for the portrayal of morally significant situations and concerns. In doing so, art can encourage a greater understanding of morality, and perhaps even influence our behaviour as moral beings.
- 5) Art can be a medium for the expression and arousal of emotional feeling and depth.
- 6) Art can function to provide specifically *aesthetic* experience and contemplation. That is, art can be the object of appreciation when we look to the surface (formal) aspects alone.

As I have indicated, this classification is by no means final, and does not pretend to provide an exhaustive account of the possible functions of art. It is rather an attempt to give some kind of workable classification and order to several of the more significant functions served by works of art, especially as these functions may relate to a framework of assessment.

At this stage it will be useful to say something more about how a functionalist interpretation of art will fit into a theory of assessment. It must first be stated that I do not intend to provide a narrowly normative functionalist interpretation of assessment, according to which all art works must fulfil one or even a specific set of functions before they can be regarded as good art works (or even as works of art at all).¹ Thus I do not wish to claim that there is a single function or rigid set of functions which all art works must or should perform. I wish instead to develop a more flexible and pluralistic

1. The normative functionalist will argue that there is a certain function (or group of functions) which all art works ought to serve. Only if an artwork serves this function (or group of functions) can a favourable assessment be given. Reciprocally, when an art work fails to serve its designated function, it is considered a failure as a work of art. (Novitz in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, p. 163)

interpretation of art and its assessment, according to which there are a *number* of significant functions which can be exhibited by works of art, any one of which may contribute importantly to the value of a work of art.

Although I have referred to the various aspects on account of which artistic merit may be awarded as the different *functions* of art, it would be possible to construe these functions alternatively as the different *strengths* or *facets* or *areas of excellence* of art. The purpose of the assessment of art, as we shall see, is to take an individual work of art and focus upon the various ways in which that work can stimulate and provoke contemplation and enjoyment.² We want to say that 'these are its strengths', or 'these are its areas of excellence'. 'In virtue of its excellence in performing *this* function, or *these* particular functions, this is a good work of art'.

The functions of art discussed in the following chapters are also closely related to the various *roles* which art works can play in our lives. As we shall see, art intersects with our lives in many significant and important ways.

While there is no single function which a work of art must fulfil in order to be a good work of art, it seems reasonable to hold that an art work would have to fulfil *some* of the functions which are considered in a particular society to be central to the nature and purpose of art if it is to be awarded a favourable assessment.³ It may not be necessary to specify exactly which ones, but it seems plausible to claim that a work would have to excel in at least one or two of the 'functions of art' if it were to be considered a good work of art. Indeed, if an 'art work' fails to perform *any* of the functions which we

2. 'Contemplation' in this context does not refer exclusively to the contemplation provoked by the *intellectual* dimension of art. Works of art may also stimulate *aesthetic* and *emotional* contemplation, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters.

3. As we will see in chapter seven, although there are no artistic functions which we can rightly consider to be *necessary* to the value of art, it is nevertheless the case that one particular function is particularly important. As I will argue in chapter seven, the capacity to provoke a degree of *aesthetic satisfaction* is of particular importance to the value of a work of art.

hold to be central to our conception of art, we will hardly be able to call it a work of art at all. A functionalist account of assessment thus goes hand in hand with a functionalist account of the definition of art. In order for an entity to be included in the class of art works at all, it must exhibit (with at least a minimal degree of merit) at least some of the functions which we generally associate with art. For if it did not, it is doubtful that we would have any way of recognizing its artistic merit, or even its status as an art work, at all.

Objections to Functionalism in Evaluation

The most significant attacks against the idea that art works should be evaluated in terms of the various functions that they serve derive from the nineteenth century movement known as 'art for art's sake', or 'aestheticism'. They are based upon the idea that functionalism with respect to evaluation poses a threat to the aesthetic autonomy of art. In this section I wish to show that although it is possible to identify two distinct objections which have been levelled against various interpretations of functionalism, (each involving a different sense of 'autonomy'), neither of these objections need be considered a serious threat to the functionalist framework presented in this thesis.

1. The first objection from autonomy

The first objection 'from autonomy' is based upon a characteristic presupposition of art for art's sake, which is the belief that the *institution of art* is autonomous in the sense that artists are under no obligation to cater to the social, moral, political, religious, or economic demands of society.⁴ This stance was adopted by proponents of the art for art's sake movement in part 'as a reaction to the utilitarian and materialistic values of the new industrial age'

4. See Goran Hermeren, "The Autonomy of Art", for a discussion of the various senses in which a work of art may be thought to be *autonomous*.

(Whewell, p. 6).⁵ Three of the central advocates of this view were Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater in England, and Theophile Gautier in France.

Although the idea that the institution of art is fully autonomous in the sense that artists are under no obligation to invest their works with any social, moral, emotional, or didactic purpose may be incompatible with the kind of utilitarian conceptions of art against which *art for art's sake* reacted, it is not incompatible with the functionalist framework presented in this thesis. Indeed, one of the most significant features of my framework of evaluation is that it *does* respect the autonomy of the artist to produce works which serve no purpose but to provide aesthetic stimulation. In other words, the framework of assessment presented in this thesis does not attach any *normative* value to the various non-aesthetic functions of art.⁶ Although I acknowledge that works of art *can* perform certain non-aesthetic functions, and that the performance of these functions can contribute importantly to the value of an art work, I do not hold that it is *necessary* for a work to perform any of these functions before it can be considered either to be a work of art or a good work of art. In terms of my framework of evaluation, the purpose of articulating the various functions of art is rather to describe the various things that art can be, and to identify the various areas in which a work of art can provide stimulation and interest. The purpose of a functionalist interpretation of art is to elucidate the various perspectives from which a work of art may be appreciated. It is not, however, the purpose of a functionalist theory to specify the various functions which a work of art *ought* to perform.

5. The idea that art works *ought* to serve certain functions was not confined to this period alone, however. Throughout the middle ages, for example, it was expected that art works ought serve an explicitly *religious* function. According to Tolstoy, art ought to be an instrument of *moral* instruction, and according to Marx, art ought to serve specific *social* ends.

6. In this thesis I refer to the functions described in chapters two to six as the 'non-aesthetic' functions of art. They are referred to as non-aesthetic because they would all be excluded from the purely formal aesthetic dimension of art, which the formalist holds to be the only relevant dimension of an art work. (Incorrectly, I believe.)

2. The second objection from autonomy.

The second objection from autonomy, also based upon a central tenet of aestheticism, involves a different sense of the 'autonomy' of art. This sense involves the belief that what is of central importance about art is its ability to provide an experience which is peculiarly *aesthetic*. Proponents of aestheticism hold that it is the aesthetic quality of art which gives it its special identity and autonomy, and which marks off art as constitutive of an independent and autonomous domain. They believe that in making an assessment of an art work's worth we should focus exclusively on the aesthetic (formal) qualities of that work, and purposely disregard any non-aesthetic functions which that work may happen to serve. A necessary condition of valuing a work of art 'for its own sake', according to the aesthete, is that it be valued on account of its intrinsic (aesthetic) properties, and not on account of anything external, such as moral or political systems, or emotional impact. Perhaps the most extreme advocate of this position was Gautier, who argued in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* that 'nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing; whichever is useful is ugly'. The aesthete would like to believe that it is never necessary to draw upon anything from *outside* a work of art to appreciate it. All that is relevant to the interpretation and the appreciation of art is right before us in the formal features of the work itself. Roger Scruton describes what it is to view something as an 'aesthetic object' in *Art and Imagination*, as follows:

In viewing something aesthetically, it is said, I am viewing it as it is in itself, divorced from any practical interest, and from all comparison with other things. I see the object as an isolated, unique occurrence, and to the extent that I appreciate it aesthetically I neither bring it under concepts nor relate it to any practical end. (Scruton, 1974, p. 15)

The second objection is based upon the belief that it is only *aesthetic* features which are relevant to an assessment of the value of a work of art. According to the objection, any non-aesthetic functions which an art work may serve are irrelevant, and to focus on them would be to overshadow the importance of the autonomous (aesthetic) quality of art. Functionalist interpretations of art are seen by the aesthete to usurp the autonomy of art, by attempting to

provide a heteronomous interpretation, in terms of the various non-aesthetic functions which works of art may serve. Advocates of aestheticism insist that art works stand aloof from any attempt to provide an interpretation in terms of the various non-aesthetic functions which art works provide for human beings. The parameters of interpretation, according to the aesthete, are fixed by the formal features of the work of art. Any moral, social, intellectual, emotional, or other non-aesthetic feature must thus be discarded as irrelevant.

In response to the second objection from autonomy I wish first to point out that the idea that aesthetic considerations are of central importance to the evaluation of an art work is not at all incompatible with my functionalist account of the assessment of art. Indeed, I have already stated that it is an important function of art to communicate at this peculiarly aesthetic level. As I will argue in the chapter seven, one of the most important dimensions of the value of art is the capacity of art to provide aesthetic stimulation when we concentrate upon the formal aspects alone. It is thus certainly not my purpose here to dispute the importance of the 'aesthetic' in an account of evaluation.

What I do wish to dispute, however, is the claim that formal considerations are the *only* significant or allowable considerations in the assessment of a work of art. As I will argue in the following chapters, there are a number of important non-aesthetic functions of art which *do* play an important role in our appreciation of art works, and thus that *are* relevant to our assessment of the value of a work of art. As will be made clear by the various 'non-aesthetic' artistic functions which are discussed and demonstrated in chapters two to six, the second objection from autonomy must fail because it is based upon an unnecessarily narrow conception of what art can be. Providing aesthetic stimulation is but one of the functions on account of which we value works of art.

The doctrine of aestheticism represents an unacceptable puritanism with respect to the appreciation of art. In restricting its focus to a purely formal interpretation, aestheticism fails to acknowledge the potential of art to function in many other important ways. In its attempt to persuade us to look exclusively to the surface features of a work of art, aestheticism encourages an unnecessarily

two-dimensional view of art. I wish to show that such an interpretation is inadequate, and that there are many different legitimate perspectives from which we can access the value of art.

To use as an illustration one of J.L. Austin's insights into the nature of language, there is a similarity between an assessment of art that focuses exclusively on the formal features of art works, and an assessment of language which focuses exclusively upon the accuracy with which sentences describes states of affairs. As Austin points out in *How to Do Things with Words*, the straightforward description of states of affairs is but one function of sentences. Sentences have many functions besides description. They can be used to question, to frighten, to emphasize, to impress, to make a promise, and so on. To think that words function simply to describe or simply to refer would clearly be to have one's focus unnecessarily restricted upon but one of the many important functions of words. In a similar way, to think that the function of art is simply to provide aesthetic stimulation would be to take an unnecessarily narrow view of the nature and purpose of art. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, works of art perform a number of non-aesthetic functions which contribute in important ways to their value as works of art. If we are to exploit the full potential of art, we must get beyond the idea that art works serve only to stimulate the senses.

Having criticized the idea central to aestheticism that we ought to assess art works exclusively in terms of *aesthetic* merit, I wish now to question the related idea that we could ever really assess an art work 'in itself', or 'on its own terms'. The insistence that we must respond to the art work *itself* seems to be to suggest that any attempt to bring non-aesthetic aspects of art into evaluation is to give an unacceptably instrumentalist and heteronomous interpretation of the art work. In response to such a claim by the aesthete, I would say that surely *any* system of interpretation involves heteronomous elements, reflecting human values, preferences, and assumptions. Even when we respond exclusively to the *aesthetic* qualities of art, we are assessing our own reaction to certain patterns of sound and light. It is surely a mistake to think that we could ever respond to a work of art 'in itself'. Art is made by and for people, so it is hardly surprising that we should respond to art in terms of the various

functions which we perceive it to be performing. The idea that an art work should exist entirely for itself, in an 'aesthetic vacuum', is bizarre to say the least.

Art and Interpretation

In the preceding section I argued that it is a mistake to assume, as the aesthete assumes, that there is only one correct way to look at art. As I have explained, there are *many* ways or perspectives from which we can legitimately look at art. What I wish to argue briefly in this section, is that it would be a further mistake to assume that there can only ever be one correct assessment or interpretation of an art work. The legacy of simplistic objectivist theories about art has left us with the mistaken notion that there must be some unique correct authoritative judgement of an art work, which once intuited, ought to command the agreement of all parties engaged with the work. It is possible that such a notion arises partly from the expectation that judgements about art will be subject to an interpretation in terms of the same kind of black and white bivalent logic which straightforward descriptive sentences are subject to. Objectivist theories seem to imply misleadingly that just as it is relatively simple to discover the truth value of simple descriptive sentences, such as 'the cat is on the mat', so is it relatively simple to determine the truth value of judgements about artistic value, such as the statement 'Picasso's *Guernica* is a good work of art'.

Such an interpretation of aesthetic judgement is quite mistaken, however, for it gives an erroneous impression of the simplicity of artistic value. Artistic value does not happily conform to an interpretation in terms of a narrow either/or bivalent logic. The task of determining the value of art is complicated by a number of factors. Not only are there many different *facets* to the value of art (demarcated in this thesis by the various different *functions* of art), but there are also many *levels* of value. The contribution which the performance of a particular function makes to the value of a work of art is a matter of degree. It may be a significant component of artistic value, or it may make little impact. (It may of course even *detract* from the value of a work of art.) Another consideration which

complicates aesthetic judgement is that there are certain dimensions of artistic value which are particularly prone to conflicting assessment.⁷ Works of art are at once far more ambiguous and provocative than straightforward descriptive sentences, and will resist any narrow framework of interpretation. Their meaning is not nearly so transparent.

Another reason for resisting the idea that judgements about art are subject to the same kind of bivalent logical interpretation as simple descriptive sentences, is that such an interpretation encourages a misconception of the purpose of the evaluation of art. The idea that the evaluation of art is a matter which can be cut and dried, as the objectivist supposes, suggests that the purpose of evaluation is to come up with some kind of objectively correct verdict about the value of an art work. I believe that such a conception is unnecessarily limited, and makes for a narrow, static and inflexible account of the purpose of assessment. What I propose in this thesis, is that we should view evaluation as a process in which we acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of art, and encourage an assessment which draws attention to the variety of ways in which we can appreciate a work of art, in terms of the various aesthetic and non-aesthetic functions which works of art can be seen to perform. Such an interpretation acknowledges that there is a diversity of perspectives from which we can evaluate art, and that different people will legitimately derive different interpretations of the value of the same works, by privileging different artistic functions or criteria.

Context and Evaluation

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein claims that in order to fully understand the meaning of a word, we must understand its

7. I refer in particular to the 'aesthetic dimension' of art. Although there is some room for disagreement over the value of the *non-aesthetic* functions of art, we can usually come to a reasonable level of agreement as to how well an art work expresses a particular emotion or expresses a particular cultural value. It is the *aesthetic* value of a work of art which admits the most scope for subjective disagreement.

use. What is meant here is that if we are to understand a word's meaning, we must look beyond the word *itself* (and its immediate referent), and focus on the various *contexts* in which that word is used in language (Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 43). The meaning of a word is thus importantly determined by the uses to which it happens to be put in the public and communal world of language and communication. In an important sense, the meaning of a word is determined by factors which are *external*, and set up intersubjectively by a community of language users. In a similar way, the meaning of a work of art can also be importantly dependent upon conventions and beliefs which are essentially public, and external to the work itself. The full meaning of Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*, for example, can only be understood in the context of the beliefs and values which constitute the Maori world-view. And to provide an example from the graphic arts, the full meaning of Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Delights* can only be understood in the context of the fearful Christian ontology of fifteenth century Europe.

The extent to which the 'meaning' or 'identity' of an art work is dependent upon factors external to the work itself becomes evident when we examine the language with which we describe art. A great many of the words with which we commonly describe works of art, while grammatically predicates, are logically relations.⁸ In order explain how such words are predicable of art works, we must 'unpack' the meaning of the word, so that we can identify the relations that are being implied to hold between the art work itself and various aspects of its environment. The words with which we describe art relate art works to many diverse aspects of the external world. When we call an art work original, for example, we do not mean that that work is original 'in itself'. We are rather asserting that that work, in relation to *other* art works, is in some respect innovative or new. Or when we call a performance in a play convincing, we are likely to be claiming that it is convincing in virtue of the degree to which it accurately reflects the realities of human relations, or accurately portrays some human character trait, such as jealousy or forgiveness. And when we call an art work moving, joyful,

8. I owe this point to John Patterson, my supervisor.

or frightening, we are tacitly making a reference to the characteristic effect that that work has on its observer. In this respect the meaning of the evaluative word can be related directly to the 'perlocutionary' effect that the work has on its audience.⁹

It is clear that the evaluation of art is a heavily context dependent activity. Much evaluative language implicitly relates art works to external features in a variety of ways. And as we have seen, the value which we bestow on an art work is determined by such contextual factors as the degree to which we are moved emotionally by the work, the effectiveness of the work's portrayal of the values and concerns with which we identify as social beings, and the degree to which an art work promotes intellectual stimulation.

An important implication of the relation between evaluation and context is that particular evaluations, to the extent that they relate art works to external features, will be highly contextualized, and will exhibit a dependency on the particular contextual environments in which they are made. If we consider a particular work to be a good work, for example, on account of its biting satirical portrayal of an unpopular person or attitude, and we then take this work and give it to a critic in Tokyo, who is unaware of the of the localized satirical significance of the work, it will be highly unlikely that this work will continue to be rated as favourably in its new environment. (It is of course possible that the work will come to be admired on account of some entirely *different* feature.) In a similar way, it would not be possible for a person who is completely ignorant of Aboriginal culture and values to understand the full meaning and significance of Aboriginal graphic art. It is important that we realize that the evaluation of art works can be bound in this way to a certain place or time. Correspondingly, the criteria with which we evaluate an art work will vary over time, and also from community to community.

9. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin refers to the effect that a word has on its audience (such as to cause embarrassment) as its 'perlocutionary force'. In a similar way, the effect that a work of art has upon its audience (such as to evoke sorrow or to make us laugh) can be thought of as the perlocutionary force of that work of art.

If we wish to access the full potential of a work of art, it is clear that we must be prepared to examine the work from a broad perspective, taking into consideration the relations which obtain between the work itself and various aspects of the wider 'context' in which it appears. A significant implication of the dependence of the meaning and value of art on contextual factors is that the aesthete's idea that we could evaluate art works by focussing exclusively on the internal features of the art work itself comes to look less and less plausible.

Art and Value

As we have seen, the values which we attach to art are dependent in part upon contextual factors which are external to art works themselves. That this is so indicates that the value of a work of art is not determined solely by internal features. In this section I wish to turn more directly to the issue of aesthetic value, and argue that we do indeed have reason to resist the idea that the values which attach to art works derive entirely from the works themselves. As an introduction to this discussion, I believe that it is profitable to test our intuitions regarding the nature of artistic value by conducting a thought experiment based upon the well known 'last person' example often cited in environmental philosophy.¹⁰

In the ordinarily construed 'last person' example, we are encouraged to imagine a world in which there is only one person remaining. How would we feel, we are asked, if this last person began to destroy shrubs and trees, pollute rivers, and generally abuse the environment? If our intuitions tell us that such behaviour is simply unacceptable, and that the last person has no right to damage the environment in such a disrespectful manner, we can supposedly conclude, if our intuitions are correct, that trees and rivers actually have value *in themselves*. In other words, we can suppose that the value of the natural environment is not contingent upon there being a

10. See Mannison, Routley, and McRobbie (eds.) *Environmental Philosophy*, pp. 121-123.

class of valuers. Even if there were no people left to value it, the natural environment would continue to have value in itself. The last person, in destroying a plant or polluting a river, would be damaging the integrity and undermining the value of something which is intrinsically valuable. Given that the natural environment is indeed valuable in itself, as the thought experiment suggests, we can assume that it would be morally wrong for the last person to consider the environment as simply there for the plundering. The natural environment should rather be conceived of as being *intrinsically valuable*, and be respected and protected, even by the last person alive on Earth.

Having explained how the last person experiment is presented in the literature on environmental philosophy, and outlined the conclusion which we are expected to draw from this thought experiment (namely that the natural environment has intrinsic value, and thus should be respected and protected), it is now time to perform our own thought experiment. What happens when we substitute works of art for plants and trees in the last person experiment? Imagine a second scenario, in which the last person left on earth walks through the front door of Wellington's City Art Gallery, and proceeds to wantonly smash and destroy every sculpture and painting in the gallery. What do our intuitions tell us about the value of works of art in this thought experiment? Funnily enough, my intuition here is that it somehow *would not matter* if the last person left on earth destroyed works of art for pleasure. For if there is only one person left on earth, and this person has no regard or respect for works of art, then what difference does it make if remaining art works are destroyed? Since it makes no difference to the art work *itself* if it is destroyed, and since art works make no significant contribution to the environment at large, it would seem implausible to assert that art works continue to have any value at all when there is nobody left to appreciate them.

What is suggested by such a response to the destruction of art works by the last person is that art works do *not* derive their value from any intrinsic or internal merit-conferring properties or qualities. They rather derive their value by *being valued* by a class of valuers who admire and appreciate their various features. Art works

are valuable because we value them. We value them on account of the various ways in which they can provide stimulation, 'enlightenment', pleasure, and understanding. (Hence the appropriateness of a functionalist account of evaluation.) If my intuition about the value of art is correct, and it is indeed the case that works of art do not have value 'in themselves', then it makes no sense to invoke any metaphysical account of value in terms of the kind of objective intrinsic value often talked about by realist philosophers.¹¹

In denying that art works have objective intrinsic value, I am denying that they have intrinsic value in the sense that they possess qualities which would guarantee a favourable assessment by anybody with the 'capacity' or 'intuition' to realize their 'true worth'. The value of an art work is not somehow fixed or built in to the work itself, existing all along for us to find out. It is not the case that works of art possess some kind of in-built core of value which ought to be intuited by any attentive observer, from any cultural or artistic background. As I have stressed already, an art work is good because it possesses features which we happen to hold to be valuable, not because it possesses features which are valuable 'in themselves', independent of human judgement. That this is so, however, does not force a radical 'anything goes' subjectivism, where any judgement is held to be as good as any other.

Although I wish to assert that works of art do not possess properties which are intrinsically merit-conferring, in the sense that these properties generate an aesthetic *ought*, and as it were *demand* an honorific assessment, it is not contradictory to hold that the value of an art work is objective in the sense that we value it on account of features exhibited by the work itself, and not just on account of our own subjective experience of the work. When we judge that a play by Shakespeare is an excellent work of art, for example, we can give as our reason for esteeming its value the shrewd and masterful characterization, or the eloquent and witty dialogue, say. The 'goodness' of Shakespeare's play can be seen to be objective insofar as our reason for valuing the work stems from the good-making features

11. See for example the value theory articulated by Richard Sylvan in *On The Value Core of Deep-Green Theory*.

of the work itself (the features on account of which we value it). The goodness of the play is not objective, however, in the sense that the features on account of which we value it ought to *guarantee* an honorific assessment. On the contrary, the way is fully open for somebody else to come along and find the work to be objectionable on account of these very same features. What we would expect, however, is that when someone wishes to contradict our judgement that a particular characterization or portrayal is especially good, they would be prepared to somehow justify or defend their opposing evaluation.

To reiterate, a work of art is objectively valuable only in the sense that it possesses certain features which we hold to be valuable. It may exhibit, for example, a subtle and shrewd insight into human psychology, or a strikingly beautiful representation of a familiar landscape. These features are only valuable, however, because we value them. In the absence of a class of valuers, they cease to have artistic value at all. To give an illustration of another class of entities whose value is contingent upon a class of valuers, consider medicines. Medicine, like art, only has value with respect to a class of people who benefit from its effects. Although the value of a medical drug is objective in the sense that its healing qualities derive from the chemical constitution of the drug itself, we needn't claim that the drug has *intrinsic* value. Although the chemical constitution of an asthma drug would remain unchanged, and a Shakespearian play would retain its subtle characterization and shrewd insights into human behaviour, neither of these entities could be said to remain valuable in the absence of a class of valuers. Evaluation is to be construed as an inescapably human activity. We value art works on account of the things that they do.

The aim of a functionalist account of evaluation is to specify the various ways in which art can have value to its audience. The following quote from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, although referring to the division of words into kinds, captures the essential flavour of the 'functionalist' account of the assessment of art presented in this thesis.

how we group words into kinds will depend on the aim of classification, and on our own inclination. (Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 17)

In summary, the purpose of this thesis is to present a 'functionalist' interpretation of the assessment of art. As I have explained in this chapter, a functionalist framework of evaluation concentrates upon the various aesthetic and non-aesthetic functions which we perceive art works to be performing, in virtue of which we award artistic merit.

In the following chapters I shall outline what I see to be six important functions of art, and discuss how the performance of each of these functions can contribute to the value of an art work. In chapter two, I will discuss the concept of representation, according to which it is a defining function of art to represent or depict features of the world around us. Although I will not agree entirely with the presuppositions that often underlie the concept of representation, I will show that the presentation in art of familiar aspects of the world and of aspects of human experience can indeed be an important function of artistic value. In chapter three, I shall concentrate upon the way in which the reflection of *cultural* and *spiritual* beliefs and values can contribute to the value of a work of art. In chapter four, I will concentrate on the way in which art can function to reflect and express *social* and *political* insights and concerns. In chapter five, I will focus on the way in which art can be the vehicle for the presentation of ideas and situations of *moral* significance, and in chapter six, I will illustrate how the expression of *emotion* can contribute to the value of art. Finally, in chapter seven, I shall demonstrate how the capacity to provide *aesthetic stimulation* is a central dimension of the value of a work of art.