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An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Art

Richard Thomas Eldridge

Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

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1 The situation and tasks of the philosophy of art

Who needs a theory of art?

For almost all people in almost all cultures, either the fact (as in dance) or the product (as in painting) of some commanding performance that is both somehow significant and yet absorbing in its own right (rather than as an immediate instrument of knowledge or work) has raised strong emotions. The dramatic rhapsode Ion, in Plato's dialogue, reports that when in performance he looks "down at [the audience] from the stage above, I see them, every time, weeping, casting terrible glances, stricken with amazement at the deeds recounted."¹ Richard Wagner finds nothing less than salvation in the experience of art.

I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven... I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art... I believe that through this Art all men are saved, and therefore each may die of hunger for Her... I believe... that true disciples of high Art will be transfigured in a heavenly veil of sun-drenched fragrance and sweet sound, and united for eternity with the divine fount of all Harmony. May mine be the sentence of grace! Amen!²

Yet such commanding performances, their products, and their effects in their audiences are puzzling. They often seem to come into being, so Socrates claims, "not by skill [*techne*] but by lot divine."³ Mysteriously, poets and dancers and composers "are not in their senses" when they do their work and "reason is no longer in [them]."⁴ Whatever considerable thought is involved in making art, it seems to be not exactly the same kind

¹ Plato, *Ion*, trans. Lane Cooper, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 535e, p. 221.

² Richard Wagner, "Ein Ende in Paris," *Sämtliche Schriften* 1:135, cited in Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ *ibid.*, 536d, p. 222. ⁴ *ibid.*, 534a, 534b, p. 220.

of thought that is involved in solving standard problems of trade, manufacture, or knowledge. Different audiences, moreover, respond to very different performances and works. The temple of Athena on the Acropolis, John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and J. M. W. Turner's *Sunrise with a Boat between Headlands* do not, on the face of it, seem to have very much to do with one another. They were produced in strikingly different media, for different audiences, in different cultural circumstances. Do they or can they or should they all matter to larger audiences in the same or similar ways? What about such further efforts as the body-performance art of Karen Finley or art student Matthew Hand's flipping and catching of a beer coaster 129 times in a row, a "human installation" intended to explore "our perceptions of success and our desire to be recognized as achievers"?⁵ What about woven baskets, video art, and sports? Is art then a matter centrally of more or less local interests and effects? Perhaps art is, as the English philosopher Stuart Hampshire once remarked, "gratuitous,"⁶ in being connected with no central problems or interests that attach to humanity as such. And yet, again, works of art – products of human performance with powerfully absorbing effects – are there in all human cultures, and some of them have seemed to some of their audiences to be as important in life as anything can be.

In response to these facts, it is natural – for a variety of reasons – to wish for a theory of art, or at least for some kind of organizing account of the nature and value of artistic performances and products. Aristotle, in one of the earliest systematic accounts of the nature and value of works of art in different media, seems to have been motivated by curiosity about his own experience. His remarks on tragic drama in the *Poetics* are presented as an account, developed by abstracting from his own experience of plays, of how the trick of engaging and moving an audience is done and of its value. He suggests that similar accounts can be developed for the other media of art. In contrast, Plato in the *Republic* seems to be motivated centrally by a combination of fear and envy of the seductive power of the arts, together with a wish to displace the narrative art of Homer in the job of orienting

⁵ Matthew Hand's work, "part of his final studies in contemporary art" at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom, is reported in David Cohen, "Pop Art," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47, 41 (June 22, 2001), p. A8.

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," *World Review* (October 1952), reprinted in *Art and Philosophy*, ed. W. E. Kennick, 2nd edn (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 652.

fourth-century BCE Greek culture. Barnett Newman's famous quip that "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds"⁷ suggests that active artists have all too often found definitions of art in the Platonic style to be irrelevant and obtuse at best and envious and hostile at worst. It is true that some philosophers and theorists of art – perhaps preeminently Plato, in his pursuit of stability and order, both personal and cultural, above all other values – have been motivated by envy and fear of art's contingency, of the wayward creativity of artists, and of the powerful but unruly emotions that works of art can induce. Yet it is equally difficult for work in the arts simply to go "its own way," for what that way is or ought to be is desperately unclear. Artists typically find themselves sometimes wanting to say something general about the meanings and values of their works, so as to cast these works as of more than merely personal interest, thence falling themselves into theory.

One might further hope that an account of the nature and value of art would provide principles of criticism that we might use to identify, understand, and evaluate art. If we could establish that all centrally successful works of art necessarily possessed some valuable and significant defining feature *F*, then, it seems, the task of criticism and the justification of critical judgments would be clear. The critic would need only to determine the presence or absence of *F* in a given work and its status and significance would be settled. In talking about such things as significant form, artistic expressiveness, having a critical perspective on culture, or originality, critics (and artists) seem often to draw on some such conception of a defining feature of art.

Yet a dilemma troubles this hope. Either the defining feature that is proposed seems abstract and "metaphysical" (significant form; productive of the harmonious free play of the cognitive faculties; artistically expressive), so that it could, with just a bit of background elucidation, be discerned in nearly anything, or the defining feature seems clear and specific enough (sonata form in music; triangular composition in painting; the unities of time, place, and action in drama), but inflexible, parochial, and insensitive to the genuine varieties of art. As a result, the prospects for working criticism that is clearly guided by a settled definition of art do not

⁷ Barnett Newman, August 23, 1952. As a speaker at the Woodstock Art Conference in Woodstock, New York, according to Barnett Newman Chronology, archived at www.philamuseum-newman.org/artist/chronology.shtml

seem bright. At worst, for example in Heidegger's talk of art as "the truth of beings setting itself to work,"⁸ the proposed definition seems both metaphysical and parochial, here part of Heidegger's own efforts (like Plato's in a different direction) to urge on us quite specific forms of art and life at the expense of others.

Hence theories of art seem likely not to be of immediate use in criticism. They are sometimes motivated by fear, envy, and a wish for cultural mastery. They can seem strikingly irrelevant, and even hostile, to the specific work of both artists and critics. Yet they also arise out of natural curiosity about the nature of a powerful experience, and they seem unavoidable in attempting to say anything – to oneself or to others – about the nature and value of that experience. What, then, are we really doing when we are theorizing about art?

Philosophy as articulation

Instead of thinking of the philosophy of art as issuing in a settled theory – the job of definition done once and for all – we might think of various conceptions of art as successful partial articulations of the nature, meaning, and value of a certain kind of experience. These articulations, albeit that each of them may be in one way or another one-sided, may help us to become clearer about several things that we do in making and responding to art, and they may help us to connect these artistic doings with other fundamental human interests: for example, cognitive interests, moral interests, and interests in self-display and performance. Iris Murdoch, writing about goodness in general in many domains, offers a useful characterization of how a metaphysical conception of the Good, including the Good of Art, can be, as she puts it, "deep."

Our emotions and desires are as good as their objects and are constantly being modified in relation to their objects... There is no unattached will as a prime source of value. There is only the working of the human spirit in the morass of existence in which it always and at every moment finds itself immersed. We live in an "intermediate" world... We experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being... The

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 36.

Form of the Good... may be seen as enlightening particular scenes and setting the specialized moral virtues and insights into their required particular patterns. This is how the phenomena are saved and the particulars redeemed, in this *light*... This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word “deep,” or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal.⁹

As we live within the morass of existence – surrounded by and caught up in various artistic and critical practices; uncertain of the proper direction for personal and cultural development; and in all this feeling ourselves distinctively, yet variously, moved by different works that seem inchoately to intimate a fuller value that they embody only in part – we might hope at least to become clearer and more articulate about our experiences and commitments: more deep. We might hope to see the many phenomena of art “in a certain light.” Carried out in this hope, the philosophy of art will itself then be a kind of neighbor to the activity of art itself, in that it will seek (without clear end) – albeit more via abstract thought, explicit comparison, and discursive reasoning – both clarity *about* and further realization *of* our natural interest in what is good within the morass of existence.

Art as a natural social practice

In beginning to try to be articulate about what in various works of art distinctly moves us, it is important to remember that making and responding to works of art, in many media, are *social* practices. It is inconceivable that these practices are the invention of any distinct individual. Any intention on the part of an individual to make art would be empty, were there no already going practices of artistic production and response. If there are no shared criteria for artistic success, then the word *art* cannot be used objectively, as a descriptive term. If I have only myself to go on, then “whatever is going to seem right to me [to call art] is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right.’”¹⁰

⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 507.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §258, p. 92e; interjection added.

In fact works of art – objects and performances singled out for special attention to their significances fused with their forms – are present in all cultures (and not clearly among other animals). Children typically delight in the activities of play, gesture, and imitation out of which art making emerges. Learning to recognize and make representations – to pretend, to imagine, to draw – goes together with learning to talk. Succeeding in representation, in forming and articulating one’s experience, involves a sense of accomplishment and liberation, overcoming frustration and difficulty.

Without offering any scientific account of the material basis of their emergence, Nietzsche usefully speculates in *The Birth of Tragedy* on the motives and experiences that may have figured in some of the historically earliest distinctively artistic makings. Artistic making, Nietzsche proposes, stems from the interfusion of two tendencies. The Apollinian tendency is the tendency to delight in representations, appearances, preeminently dreams at first, *as appearances*, including “the sensation that [the dream] is *mere appearance*,”¹¹ something I entertain that, however intense, does not immediately threaten or touch me. I can delight in contemplating these appearances as mine. The Dionysian tendency is the tendency, affiliated with intoxication, to abandon one’s individuality so as both to reaffirm “the union between man and man” and to “celebrate . . . reconciliation” with otherwise “alienated, hostile, or subjugated” nature.¹² These tendencies emerge at first “as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*,”¹³ as people find themselves both dreaming, talking, and representing, on the one hand, and engaging in rituals (as forms of “intoxicated reality”¹⁴), on the other. When these two tendencies are somehow merged – when the Dionysian orgies are taken over by the Greeks, who in them are aware of themselves *as performing and representing* (and not simply and utterly abandoning individuality), then art exists and “the destruction of the *principium individuationis* for the first time becomes an artistic phenomenon.”¹⁵ Individually and collectively, human beings come to *represent* their world and experiences not simply for the sake of private fantasy, not simply for the sake of instrumental communication about immediate threats and problems,

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 34.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 37. ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 38. ¹⁴ *ibid.* ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 40.

but as an expression of a common selfhood, “as the complement and consummation of [the] existence”¹⁶ of human subjectivity, “seducing one to a continuation of life”¹⁷ as a subject.

Whatever their accuracy in detail, Nietzsche’s speculations are surely apt in proposing the emergence of artistic making and responding as cultural rather than distinctly individual, as more or less coeval with the emergence of distinctively human culture and self-conscious subjectivity as such, as driven by deep, transpersonal needs and tendencies, and as serving a significant interest of subjectivity in its own articulate life. Their aptness is confirmed both in the presence of art in all cultures and in the ontogenetic development of children into full self-conscious subjectivity in and through play, imitation, representation, expression, and art.

Action, gesture, and expressive freedom

Both personal development and cultural development are freighted with frustration and difficulty. The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin suggested in an early essay, in a line of thought both latent in Judaeo-Christian primeval history and later developed by Freud among others, that we become distinctly aware of ourselves as subjects only through transgression. Our first awareness of our responsibility as subjects for what we do, Hölderlin proposes, appears through the experience of punishment: through coming actively to understand that one has done one thing when one could and ought to have done something else. “The origin of all our virtue occurs in evil.”¹⁸ Likewise, it is scarcely possible that we would be aware of ourselves as having and participating in culture, as opposed to mere persistent and automatic routine, were there no experiences of antagonism and negotiation over what is to be done: over how to cook or hunt or build, or how to sing, decorate the body, or form kinship relations. Any distinctly human cultural life has alternatives, antagonisms, and taboos everywhere woven through it.

Suppose, then, that one finds oneself caught up in a difficult and obscure course of personal and cultural development. One might well seek

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43. ¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Friedrich Hölderlin, “On the Law of Freedom,” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), pp. 33–34 at p. 34.

full investment in a worthwhile activity of performance or making. One might seek to have the performance or product that results from this activity be one's own – concretely infused with one's particular sense of embodiment, attitude, interest, sensibility, and personal history – and yet also be meaningful to others, rather than emptily idiosyncratic. In this way, one might hope to have achieved through this activity, and in its performance or product, a widely ratifiable exemplification of the possibilities of human subjectivity and action as such, thereby establishing for oneself a more secure place as a subject amidst transgressions and antagonisms.

In different but closely related ways, both John Dewey and Theodor Adorno pose this – the achievement of the most concrete and fullest possibilities of human communicative action as such – as the task of art. For Dewey, “Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse, and action characteristic of the live creature.”¹⁹ For Adorno, art is “the image of what is beyond exchange”;²⁰ that is, the genuine work of art, unlike the fungible manufactured commodity, is specifically and concretely meaningful, as the result (whether as performance or product) of the activity of discovering, through the formative exploration of materials, what can be done with paint, sound, stone, the body, words, or light.

This idea of the concrete and specifically meaningful product or performance, formed through explorative activity, makes it clear that the antithesis that is sometimes posed – is art a (physical) product or thing, or is it an (experienced) idea or meaning? – is a false one. Dewey usefully observes that “the actual work of art is what the product [whether performance or physical object] does with and in experience.”²¹ That is, there must be a product, whether performance or physical object or document or text, but in order to function as art this product must matter specifically and concretely within human experience. Even found art, supposing it to be successful, is experienced as the result of the selecting activity of governing intentionality, put before us in order to *be* experienced. Dewey

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1934), p. 25.

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 83.

²¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 3.

distinguishes between the art product (the vehicle *of* the artistic experience) and the work of art (the vehicle *as* it is actually experienced), and he argues that product and work are essentially interrelated.²² Perhaps the importance of the product-of-activity-as-experienced is what Heidegger had in mind in speaking of “the work-being of the work”²³ and of how “the happening of truth is at work”²⁴ in it.

Dewey goes on to note that the media in which art activity can successfully occur – in which concretely and specifically communicative artistic products can be achieved – are not fixed. “If art is the quality of an activity, we cannot divide and subdivide it. We can only follow the differentiation of the activity into different modes as it impinges on different materials and employs different media.”²⁵ *Some* materials and media, and some art products or vehicles (whether performances or texts or physical things) achieved through formative activity exercised in relation to materials and media, are necessary in order for there to be art. But there is no way of fixing in advance of explorative activity which materials and media can be successfully explored in which ways. There is, rather, what Dewey calls “a continuum, a spectrum”²⁶ of an inexhaustible variety of available media running roughly from the “automatic” or performance-related arts, using “the mind-body of the artist as their medium,” to the “shaping” arts, issuing in a distinctly formed physical product.²⁷ Along this rough and variable spectrum, which successes are available in which media – in basket making or whistling, in painting, in song, or in the movies – is not predictable in advance of explorative activity and aptly attentive experience. To suppose otherwise is to attempt – as Plato attempted – vainly to erect a regnant classicism to constrain the efforts of human subjects to achieve concretely and specifically meaningful actions and vehicles (performances or products) in an exemplary way.

It is useful here to compare works of art with gestures (which may themselves be both components of fine art and independent vehicles of social art). Gestures (such as attentively following a conversation, or making an unexpected gift, or brushing a crumb from someone’s shoulder) stem from intelligence addressing a problem in context. They are “saturated” with intentionality, which has both an individual aspect and a cultural background always present as part of its content. They essentially involve

²² *ibid.*, p. 162. ²³ Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 55.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 60. ²⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 214. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 227. ²⁷ *ibid.*

bodily activity or doing one among a great variety of possible things in a specific way. They involve the balancing or adjustment of social relations. They carry a message or significance, but often one that it is difficult wholly to “decode” or paraphrase, involving as it does specific bodily posture and ongoing nuances of relationship. They exist, in different forms, in all cultures.

Works of art may, however, be unlike gestures in the range and depth of the claims that they exert upon our attention. Anyone unable to follow and to produce a certain range of gestures appropriate to occasions within a specific culture would be a kind of social idiot. Yet we do not have practices of formal training in social gestures, as we instead leave such matters to elders, normal family life, and the occasional etiquette book. There is no curriculum in gestures anything like the one that runs in the arts from the music lessons and art classes of young childhood into conservatories and schools of art. Some ability to participate in or to follow intelligently the activities of making and understanding art, including forms of this activity outside one’s immediate cultural context, and some interest in doing so are typically thought to be a mark of an educated person. One who lacked this ability and interest altogether would be thought to be a philistine or in some way not deep. The study and practice of painting or music or literature is thought to be a fit central occupation for some lives, whereas the study and practice of manners is a simple requirement of ordinary sociality. To be sure, these differences may not be sharp everywhere. A certain cosmopolitanism in manners may require certain forms of study, and there may be highly ritualized patterns of social gesture, such as Japanese tea ceremonies, which themselves verge on fine art. Yet broadly speaking these differences in range and depth of claim on us seem to be widely accepted. For all their importance, manners seem – it seems natural to say – in their specific patterns to be significantly relative to specific cultures.

In contrast, works of art, though they vary widely in specific form both across and within cultures, seem somehow more “objective” in the claims they make on us. *If this is indeed so, then it must be because, as Richard Wollheim elegantly puts it, the making and understanding of art somehow involve “the realization of deep, indeed the very deepest, properties of human nature.”*²⁸ It is, however, desperately difficult to say, clearly and

²⁸ Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 234.

convincingly, both what these deep properties or interests of human nature that are realized in art might be and how, specifically, different works achieve this realization. The variety of works of art must be faced. Perhaps there is no single central function or functions that different works of art variously fulfill, so that they are in the end thoroughly like gestures and manners in being relative to culture and individual taste. Further, many of the works that it seems reasonable to regard as art are not particularly successful: they are preparatory studies, or failed attempts, or children's first efforts to take up a region of practice. Not everything that it is reasonable to call art will clearly and distinctly fulfill a central function. Any function that works of art might be taken centrally to aim at fulfilling (with some of them actually fulfilling it in an exemplary way) must both accommodate present varieties of art and leave room for further innovative explorations of new media.

Despite these real difficulties, however, many works of art – and not always either from one's own culture or to one's individual immediate liking – seem to make a claim on us. We think it worthwhile to teach them formally, to train people formally in the activities of making and understanding such works, and to encourage further explorations of possibilities of artistic success. Those who achieve artistic success can sometimes strike us, as Stanley Cavell puts it in describing an ambition of philosophical writing, as having achieved “freedom of consciousness, the beginning of freedom . . . freedom of language, having the run of it, as if successfully claimed from it, as of a birthright.”²⁹ It has already been suggested that such an achievement involves a widely ratifiable exemplification of the possibilities of human subjectivity and action as such, or the restoration of “the union of sense, need, impulse, and action characteristic of the live creature” (Dewey), or an embodiment of “the image of what is beyond exchange” (Adorno). A common theme in these summary formulas is that artistic activity aims at the achievement of *expressive freedom*:³⁰ originality blended with sense; unburdening and clarification blended with representation.

Whatever their interest, such summary formulas nonetheless raise considerable problems. Exactly what is meant by *expressive freedom* or

²⁹ Stanley Cavell, *This New yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), p. 55.

³⁰ For a partial elucidation of the notion of expressive freedom, see Richard Eldridge, *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), *passim* but especially pp. 6–7 and 32–33.

*original sense*³¹ or *what is beyond exchange or unburdening or the union of sense, need, impulse, and action?* How are such ends achievable through different kinds of artistic formative activity? Why does the achievement of such ends matter? Is their achievement genuinely a deep human interest? Can such achievements be accomplished in ways that admit of and even command wide, perhaps universal, endorsement among attentive audiences? Or are they always to some degree partial and parochial?

These questions and related ones have been central to the most fruitful work in the philosophy of art. In treating them, the philosophy of art must draw all at once on the philosophy of mind, social theory, metaphysics, ethics, and the history and criticism of particular arts. Accounts of specific artistic achievements in specific styles must be interwoven with accounts of cultural developments, in order to show how specific achievements may advance deep and general human interests. Nor does work in the philosophy of art leave work in the philosophy of mind, social theory, metaphysics, ethics, and criticism unaltered. Given that engagements with some specific forms of art is a normal and significant human activity, theories of mind should take account of the powers and interests that are embodied in these engagements, just as the philosophy of art must take account of how human powers and interests are engaged in other domains.

Schiller on art, life, and modernity

Friedrich Schiller's philosophy of art offers a particularly clear illustration of the difficulties involved in addressing the problems of human powers and interests in art and in other regions of life. Schiller notoriously contradicts himself in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. He argues first that engagement with artistic achievements is instrumental to the further ends of political freedom and individual moral autonomy. "If we are to solve [the] political problem [of freedom] in practice, [then] follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty that we arrive at freedom."³² "There

³¹ On original sense as Kant and Wordsworth theorized about it, see Timothy Gould, "The Audience of Originality: Kant and Wordsworth on the Reception of Genius," in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 179–93.

³² Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), second letter, p. 27.

is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic."³³ But Schiller also argues, second, that artistic activity is an end itself, in both incorporating and transcending mere morality and politics.

Beauty alone can confer on [Man] a *social character*. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide a man, because they are exclusively based either on the sensuous or on the intellectual part of his being; only the perception of the Beautiful makes something whole of him, because both his [sensuous and rational-moral] natures must accord with it... Beauty alone makes all the world happy, and every being forgets its limitations as long as it experiences her enchantment.³⁴

This contradiction is not a simple mistake on Schiller's part. Instead it displays the difficulty of establishing the usefulness and significance of art, in the relation of artistic activity to central, shared human problems, on the one hand, and of respecting the autonomy of art, including its ability to deepen and transform our conceptions of our problems and interests, on the other.

Schiller's sense of art's divided roles – as instrument for social-moral good and as end in itself – further embodies his wider sense of the nature of human culture, particularly of human culture in modernity. There is no human culture without some distinct social roles and some division of labor. Peoples in different places develop different customs and sets of social roles. Social roles and the division of labor develop as cognitive and technological mastery of nature increase, in ways that do not happen in other species. Human life becomes increasingly dominated by what is done within one or another cultural role, rather than by naked necessities of immediate survival. As this development takes place, those occupying distinct social roles can become more opaque to one another. Manufacturers and those predominantly bound up in immediate social reproduction (historically, typically women) can misunderstand and scorn one another, as can manual workers and intellectuals, farmers and warriors, traders and politicians. At the same time, however, as social roles increase in number, complexity, and opacity to one another, social boundaries also become to some extent more permeable. As the requirements for playing a

³³ *ibid.*, twenty-third letter, p. 108. ³⁴ *ibid.*, twenty-seventh letter, pp. 138–39.

distinct social role come to depend more on knowledge and less on immediate biological or familial inheritance, people come to be able to take up new social roles somewhat more freely, though severe constraints stemming from inequalities in background social, economic, and cognitive capital remain in place.

The result of all these developments, in Schiller's perception, is a combination of development toward civilization and what he calls *antagonism*: a mixture of mutual opacity, envy, vanity, and contestation that pervades the playing of developed social roles. Development and antagonism set for us a problem to be solved, the problem of the free and fit, reharmonized development of culture, so as to lift ourselves out of mere one-sidedness and vanity.

There was no other way of developing the manifold capacities of Man than by placing them in opposition to each other. This antagonism of powers is the great instrument of culture, but it is only the instrument; for as long as it persists, we are only on the way towards culture.

...Partiality in the exercise of powers, it is true, inevitably leads the individual into error, but the race to truth. Only by concentrating the whole energy of our spirit in one single focus, and drawing together our whole being into one single power, do we attach wings, so to say, to this individual power and lead it artificially beyond the bounds which Nature seems to have imposed upon it.³⁵

Schiller imagines, almost certainly erroneously, that once upon a time Greek life formed a beautiful whole in which religion, art, ethical life, politics, and economic life were all one. "At that time, in that lovely awakening of the intellectual powers, the senses and the mind had still no strictly separate individualities, for no dissension had yet constrained them to make hostile partition with each other and determine their boundaries."³⁶

³⁵ *ibid.*, sixth letter, pp. 43, 44. Schiller's remarks on antagonism as both the instrument of civilization and as a problem to be overcome are a transcription of Kant's remarks on antagonism in his essay "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 11–26, especially pp. 15–16. Compare also Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 179–260, especially pp. 249–50.

³⁶ *ibid.*, sixth letter, p. 38.

Abstract thought and sensation, art and religion, politics and farming were all, Schiller imagines, in harmony with one another. In work, in civic life, in religion, in science, and in art the Greeks could, Schiller supposes, exchange roles and understand one another.

Schiller's fantasy seems very likely to underestimate genuine divisions and antagonisms that were present in Greek life. Yet as a fantasy it has two further functions. First, it offers a diagnosis of our current situation, problems, and prospects. Selfhood within culture, in involving taking up one among a number of opposed, available social roles, is experienced as a problem. One comes to be unsure of the meaning or significance of what one does and who one is. One's actions feel motivated by coercion – either immediate or stemming from the necessity of instrumentally satisfying desires in oneself that are mysterious – rather than by expressive intelligence. Or, as Schiller describes modern life,

That zoophyte character of the Greek states, where every individual enjoyed an independent life and, when need arose, could become a whole in himself, now gave place to an ingenious piece of machinery, in which out of the botching together of a vast number of lifeless parts a collective mechanical life results. State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of imprinting humanity upon his nature he becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science.³⁷

However it may have been with the Greeks, this diagnosis of the experience of selfhood and action in modern culture as an experience of fragmentariness, lack of harmony, and lack of evident significance is likely to resonate with many. Given the nature of modern divided labor, it is very difficult to see how this experience might be transformed.

Second, Schiller's fantasy of Greek life leads him to identify art – particularly art as manifested in Greek sculpture and epic, now to be taken up by us as a model, in relation to modern needs – as the proper

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 40.

instrument of the transformation of experience and the achievement of meaningfulness.

We must be at liberty to restore by means of a higher Art this wholeness in our nature which Art has destroyed... Humanity has lost its dignity, but Art has rescued and preserved it in significant stone; Truth lives on in the midst of deception, and from the copy the original will once again be restored.³⁸

This too may be a fantasy. Schiller is himself all too aware of the depth of the

rather remarkable antagonism between people in a century in the process of civilizing itself. Because this antagonism is radical and is based on the internal form of the mind, it establishes a breach among people much worse than the occasional conflict of interests could ever produce. It is an antagonism that robs the artist and poet of any hope of pleasing and touching people generally, which remains, after all, his task.³⁹

If there is deep and standing rather than occasional conflict of interest, arising out of divided social roles, and if the artist has no hope of pleasing universally, then perhaps art cannot do its job, and perhaps fully significant action and selfhood are not quite possible.

Schiller's fantasy about art nonetheless continues to be felt by many people in modern culture, though almost surely not by everyone. Though earlier cultures were perhaps more unified in certain respects than modern western culture, this fantasy may nonetheless have been distinctly felt by those who in those cultures devoted themselves to painting, drama, lyric, epic, or dance. They were surely aware of themselves as doing something quite different from what many or most people did in the courses of economic and social life. The idea or hope or fantasy that in and through artistic activity one might achieve fully significant action and selfhood – achieve a kind of restoration and wholeness of sensation, meaning, and activity in the face of present dividing antagonisms – has deep sociopsychological roots, ancient and modern, and it does not easily go away. Yet the social differences that provoke this idea and make it seem necessary

³⁸ *ibid.*, sixth letter, p. 45; ninth letter, p. 52.

³⁹ Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," p. 249.

do not go away either. The hoped-for redemption never quite comes completely, and some remain untouched by or even hostile to each particular form of artistic activity.

Identification versus elucidation

In this situation the task of the philosophy of art involves balancing the *identification* of distinct works of art against the critical *elucidation* of the function and significance of art, as they are displayed in particular cases. Theories of art that focus preeminently on the task of *identification* include Hume's theory of expert taste, institutional theories of art such as that of George Dickie, and so-called historical theories of art such as that of Jerrold Levinson. Theories of this kind tend at bottom to have more empiricist and materialist epistemological and metaphysical commitments. The central task of theory is taken to be that of *picking out* from among the physical things in the universe the wide variety of things that count as art. Hume appeals to the judgment of expert critics to do this job;⁴⁰ Dickie invokes the institutions of art and the idea of presentation to an art world;⁴¹ Levinson appeals to presentation of an object at time *t* under the intention that it be regarded "in any way (or ways) artworks existing prior to *t* are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded."⁴²

These different but related definitions of art have considerable merits. They address the question of identification directly and sharply. They specify that things are works of art not, as it were, "in themselves," but rather only in relation to human sensibility and to historical human practices and institutions. They accommodate well the enormous variety of things that are commonly counted as art. Yet they also have an air of both circularity and disappointment. How can expert judges, relevant institutions, and appropriate manners of regard be specified without *first* specifying the nature of the works to which attention is to be directed? As Monroe Beardsley usefully objects to Levinson, if "correctly (or standardly)" in

⁴⁰ See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 255–68. Hume's theory of taste will be discussed at length in chapter 7 below.

⁴¹ See George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974) and his *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984).

⁴² Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979); reprinted in *Philosophy of Art*, ed. Neill and Ridley, pp. 223–39 at p. 230.

Levinson's definition is to mean more than merely "habitually" (since there may be bad habits of regard), then something more will have to be said about the values and functions that correct regard discerns.⁴³ If we cannot say how and why we are supposed to regard works in order correctly to discern their value, then reference to regarding-as-art will seem both circular and empty. Theories that highlight the variety of objects that are historically identified as art, without offering general accounts of the value and meaning of art, run risks of triviality and emptiness. Similar objections can be made against both Hume's and Dickie's theories of artistic identification.

Levinson is, however, well aware of these problems. For him, any critical elucidation of *the* functions and values of art will be both dogmatically inflexible, in the face of the legitimate varieties of art, and insensitive to the details of the historical evolution of artistic practices. Hence Levinson frankly concedes that his theory "does *not* explain the sense of 'artwork'",⁴⁴ that is, he offers only a theory of identification procedures, not a theory of *the* value and significance of works of art in general, for works of art have many, incommensurable values, significances, and historical modes of appearance. "There are," he rightly observes, "no clear limits to the sorts of things people may seriously intend us to regard-as-a-work-of-art."⁴⁵ This is not a purely sociological or "external" theory of art, since success and failure in presentation for such regarding *are* possible, but contrary to centrally functional theories of art there is no single account on offer of what all works of art should or must do, of what values or significances they should or must carry. Historically, art is too variable for that. Despite the airs of circularity and disappointment that they carry, it is impossible not to feel the force of such stances. Art *is* for us an evolving and unsettled matter.

Theories of art that focus preeminently on the task of *elucidation* include such widely differing theories as Aristotle's theory of artistic representation, Kant's theory of artistic value, and R. G. Collingwood's theory of expression. These theories all propose to tell us in some detail how and why art does and should matter for us. They undertake to specify a function for art in solving a fundamental human problem or in

⁴³ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), p. xxii.

⁴⁴ Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," p. 236. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 239.

answering to a fundamental human interest. In thus focusing primarily on human problems and interests, described in terms that are not immediately physical, such theories tend at bottom to have more rationalist and functionalist epistemological and metaphysical commitments. For each of them, making and attending to art are centrally important to getting on well with human life: for example, to knowing what human life is like and to training the passions, to achieving a kind of felt harmony with one's natural and cultural worlds, and to overcoming repressiveness and rigidity of mind and action.

These different but more value- and function-oriented theories of art likewise have considerable merits. They offer articulate accounts of how and why art matters for us. Thus they immediately suggest why we do and should have formal practices of training in the arts and their criticism. They offer prospects of engaging in the practices of art and criticism with more alert critical awareness of what these enterprises are all about. Yet they too run considerable risks. They tend toward somewhat speculative, not clearly empirically verifiable, accounts of human interests. Not everyone will immediately feel the presence and force of the supposedly "deep" human problems that art is taken to address. When they attend to individual works of art at all, they tend to focus on a narrower range of centrally exemplary cases, ignoring the great variety of things that have been historically regarded as art. Hence in both their accounts of art's functions and in the identifications that flow from them, they tend toward one-sidedness and tendentiousness. Critical power is purchased at the cost of flexibility.

Kant and Collingwood, in particular, each have some awareness of this problem. Hence they seek to make their functional definitions of art abstract enough to accommodate significant differences in successful works, and they each resist limiting success in artistic making to any fixed media of art. As their definitions become more abstract and flexible, however, they tend sometimes to lose the very critical and elucidatory content that they were intended to provide. Moreover, the application of such definitions seems to require the very kind of creative, perceptive critical work that is carried out by the kinds of experts, representatives of institutions, and historical varieties of audiences that are highlighted in centrally identificatory theories of art. Yet despite their risks of one-sidedness and tendentiousness, it is impossible too not to feel the force of such stances. Art, and especially art as it is instanced in some central

cases, does seem centrally to matter for us, in ways about which we might hope to become more articulate.

The tension between accounts of art that focus on identification of the varieties of art and those that focus on the critical elucidation of art's functions and values is a real one. It reflects the deeper tension in human life generally, and especially in modernity, between the idea that humanity has a function,⁴⁶ or at least a set of human interests to be fully realized in a "free" human cultural life that is richer and more self-conscious than are the lives of other animals, and the idea that human beings are nothing more than elements of a meaningless, functionless physical nature, wherein accommodation, coping, and compromise are the best outcomes for which they can hope. As Dewey penetratingly remarks,

The opposition that now exists between the spiritual and ideal elements of our historic heritage [stemming from Greek teleology and medieval Christian theology] and the structure of physical nature that is disclosed by [modern, physical] science, is the ultimate source of the dualisms formulated by philosophy since Descartes and Locke. These formulations in turn reflect a conflict that is everywhere active in modern civilization. From one point of view the problem of recovering an organic place for art in civilization is like the problem of reorganizing our heritage from the past and the insights of present knowledge into a coherent and integrated imaginative union.⁴⁷

Both art and the theory of art are everywhere contested within this pervasive opposition and conflict. What counts as artistic success is unclear. Human interests in general are not coherently and transparently realized in social life. New media can be explored in the attempt to fulfill the functions of art, and the functions of art can themselves be rearticulated, in the effort to bring them into clearer alignment and affiliation with the pursuit of other interests. Hence the philosophy of art – involving both its identification and the elucidation of art's function and value – is

⁴⁶ The classical locus for the ineliminability of the idea that human consciousness, including openness to the force of reasons, has the function of determining human life and culture as a free product in accordance with reason is Kant's discussion of the fact of reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For a rehearsal of Kant's development of this idea, see Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 13–19.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 338.

likewise contested and unclear. While it is logically possible to have both agreement in the application of the term *art* but disagreement about the functions of art *and* agreement about functions but disagreement about application, in fact disagreements about both application (identification) and functions (meaning) are pervasive, and this is because of the background in (modern) social life of pervasive unclarity about and contestation of common human functions, problems, and interests in general.

What may we hope for from the philosophy of art?

This social situation of art and of the theory of art explains both the rise, fall, and yet continuing appeal of so-called antiessentialism about art and the current largely antagonistic relations between the normative philosophy of art and “advanced” (poststructuralist and materialist) critical theory and practice. Beginning in the late 1950s, inspired by a certain reading (arguably a misreading) of Wittgenstein,⁴⁸ Morris Weitz⁴⁹ and W. E. Kennick,⁵⁰ among others, argued that art has no essence, fulfills no single function, solves no single common problem. Yet we know perfectly well, they further claimed, which individual works count as art. Art and criticism have neither need of nor use for theory. (“Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.”) Maurice Mandelbaum replied that it might be possible to formulate an abstract, relational, functional generalization about the nature and value of art,⁵¹ and Guy Sircello added that in proposing various defining functions for art theorists were – reasonably but contestably – expressing their particular senses of central human problems to which art might answer. Here the stance of Weitz and Kennick embodies a certain conservatism about high culture coupled with respect

⁴⁸ For a general survey of so-called Wittgensteinian antiessentialism, see Richard Eldridge, “Problems and Prospects of Wittgensteinian Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45, 3 (spring 1987), pp. 251–61.

⁴⁹ See Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956); reprinted in *Philosophy of Art*, ed. Neill and Ridley, pp. 183–92.

⁵⁰ See W. E. Kennick, “Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?,” *Mind* 67, 267 (July 1958); reprinted in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. M. Philipson and P. J. Gudel (New York: New American Library, 1980), pp. 459–76.

⁵¹ Maurice Mandelbaum, “Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, 3 (1965); reprinted in *Philosophy of Art*, ed. Neill and Ridley, pp. 193–201.

for art's diversities and suspicion of the tendentiousness of theory, while Mandelbaum and Sircello are attracted by functional explanations of art, yet tentative about asserting any one explanation definitely. In retrospect, we can now recognize this debate as a reflection of the social situation of art, against the background of unclarity about and contestation of functions in human life more generally.

Contemporary advanced "materialist" criticism of art and literature, stemming from such late Marxist figures as Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Pierre Bourdieu, and Fredric Jameson, emphasizes that all so-called works of art are produced by people with certain material, social backgrounds (certain places in a network of economic and cultural capital) and for audiences with certain material, social backgrounds and consequent expectations about art.⁵² Since the material social world is always saturated with multiple inequalities in economic and cultural capital (worker vs. owner; white collar vs. industrial worker; modern individualist vs. traditionalist, etc.), no work of art can "succeed" for everyone, and the efforts of traditional art theory to specify a central function for art in general for people in general are misbegotten. The best we can aspire to is "critical" self-consciousness about who produces what for whom. At some level of description, such accounts are surely illuminating. Against this kind of cultural materialist theory and criticism, more traditional, normative theorists object that there are unpredictable works that transcend standard class affiliations, transfiguring the experience and perception of significantly diverse audiences. In Tom Huhn's apt phrase, there is sometimes an "opacity of success"⁵³ in the arts – an unpredictable success in realizing artistic value in a way that holds diverse attentions – that cultural materialist theorists such as Bourdieu sometimes neglect or underarticulate. Why should we not theorize about that (including theorizing about cultural conditions under which various achievements of this kind are managed)? Here, too, we can recognize in this debate the social situation of art and its theory. Art seems both to have a function, sometimes exemplarily realized, in relation to deep human problems and interests, and it

⁵² For a general survey of this kind of late or post-Marxist work, see Richard Eldridge, "Althusser and Ideological Criticism of the Arts," in *Explanation and Value in the Arts*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Salim Kemal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 190–214; reprinted in Eldridge, *Persistence of Romanticism*, pp. 165–88.

⁵³ Tom Huhn, book review, "The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature by Pierre Bourdieu," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, 1 (winter 1996), p. 88B.

seems also in every particular case to be by and for particular makers and audiences, responding to problems and pressures that are not universal.

In this situation, reasonable argument about both the elucidatory definition of art and the identification of particular works remains possible. Yet argument here must remain motivated not by any methodological assurance of conclusiveness, but rather by the hope of agreement, to be achieved in and through arriving at a more transparent, shared culture, in which it is clearer than it is now which practices fulfill which functions and serve which reasonable interests. The hope of agreement is here supported by partial successes in the identification of particular works, in critical commentary on them, and in the elucidation of the nature of art. With regard to some particular works, there are deep, unpredictable and yet to some extent articulable resonances of response among widely varying audiences, and criticism and theory have managed in many cases to arrive at compelling articulations of artistic achievements, in particular and in general, even where disagreements also remain. A standing human interest in art, as that interest has been realized in some exemplary cases, has been given some articulate shape by criticism in conjunction with the theory of art.

Roger Scruton has suggested that our response to art involves the engagement of what he calls our sense of the appropriate. This sense can come into play throughout human life: in social relations, in games, in business, in sports, and in jokes, among many other places, as we are struck by the internal coherence of a performance and its aptness to an occasion. Scruton suggests that it is especially freely and powerfully engaged by art. "Our sense of the appropriate, once aroused, entirely penetrates our response to art, dominating not only our awareness of form, diction, structure, and harmony, but also our interest in action, character, and feeling."⁵⁴

The most compelling and significant developed philosophies of art – the theories of imitation and representation, of form and artistic beauty, and of expression – that are the subjects of the next three chapters – can best be understood as focusing on various aspects of the artistic achievement of appropriateness. Representation, form, and expression are all, one might say, interrelated *aspects* of artistic achievement. (Note that Scruton claims that the sense of the appropriate includes awareness all at once of

⁵⁴ Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 248.

what is represented [action and character], of form, and of what is expressed [feeling].) The major theorists of representation, form, and expression – Aristotle, Kant, and Collingwood, and their contemporary inheritors and revisers, such as Walton, Beardsley, and Goodman – each highlight for us a particular dimension of the artistic engagement of our sense of appropriateness, and, as we shall see, in doing so they further begin to acknowledge the interrelations of these dimensions of artistic success. Without representation and expression, in some sense, there is no artistic form, but only decoration; without artistic form, there is no artistic representation or artistic expression, but only declamation and psychic discharge. By following closely and critically major theories of artistic representation, artistic form, and artistic expression, and then by considering artistic originality, critical understanding, evaluation, emotional response, art and morality, and art and society in the light of these theories, we may hope to make some progress in becoming more articulate about the nature of art and its distinctive roles in human life. To recall Murdoch's picture of metaphysics, we might hope from within the morass of existence in which we find ourselves immersed to set up a picture of the nature and function of art as a kind of appeal – to ourselves above all, and without any assured termination – to see if we can find just *this* in our deepest experiences of art and of ourselves.